

Children of Eden and The Infinite Skyscraper

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1) Déjà vu.

James sits up, having just woken from a dream he finds a smile spread across his face.

déjà vu.

A profound feeling of repetition washes over him, and for just a second, he is certain he's been here before. With this new found certainty, comes an overwhelming emptiness and desire for something that has yet to be.

To return to a time that has not yet happened.

Then, just like the dream, these feelings are slipping from his mind. He tries to keep a hold, but just as quickly as they had appeared, they slip into the void of forgotten memories.

The doorbell rings

The sound rips through his thoughts and he tries to grab the edges of his dream but it slips from his grasp.

The doorbell rings once more. He lies still, hoping that whoever it is will fuck off. Or that, maybe, Maxine will get off her lazy ass and answer it.

But his dreams of lying in are ruined by the sound of the doorbell ringing once more.

He slips from bed, fighting the cold April morning air by slipping into joggers and a hoodie. He steps into the corridor, feeling the soft carpet beneath his feet, it's eerily unfamiliar. He pauses as he wiggles his toes against the fabric, something about it reminds him of the dream.

Through the frosted glass of the front door James can just about make out a figure. Something about them strikes him as odd but he can't quite place a finger on it.

He opens the door, letting it catch on the chain.

"Hello." A woman says from the other side. She continues to talk but James is distracted by her eyes – they're the colour of emeralds, so strikingly unnatural against her brown skin. Her hair falls in dark waves, braided loosely with threads of gold and copper, adorned with dried jasmine and fire-hued marigold. She wears a simple blood-red sari, embroidered with symbols—suns, serpents, roots, crescents.

"Sorry, what?" James says, finally managing to pry himself from her peculiar eyes.

"Oh," the woman says, "nothing important." She reaches into her handbag and produces a small leaflet and extends it towards James.

He takes the leaflet and glances at it 'Guide your soul to a new Afterlife', it says in bold golden writing.

The woman clears her throat with a harsh cough, “Even as we live our lives – we must not forsake our souls destinat—”

James cuts the woman off, “Wrong house – we don’t want whatever you’re selling.” He says closing the door on her. He’s in no mood for strange door-to-door salesmen.

He turns and heads back towards the kitchen, annoyed that his cereal has probably gone soggy by now. But just before he turns the corner, he pauses and looks back over his shoulder.

Through the frosted glass, James can see the woman, still standing on the front step – but now he can see why she seemed so odd. The frosted glass usually distorts the figure behind, bending and blurring their shape – but not this woman. No, she stands beyond the door, as clear as if the door was open.

James shudders but ignores it, a trick of the morning sun.

He throws the leaflet onto the dining room and table and sits opposite Max. She barely looks awake, eyes half closed as she slowly raises a half-empty spoon towards her mouth.

“What was that?” She mumbles.

James slides the leaflet towards his sister, “Some sales guy.”

Max plops her spoon down into the bowl of milk, and looks at the leaflet. Her eyes shift slightly as she reads the words printed on the front. She blinks the remaining sleep from her eyes and looks closer, “Guide your soul to a new Afterlife.” Max reads before thumbing through the leaflet, something about it has clearly caught her interest.



They walk down the pavement that runs alongside the housing estate. The low early April sun casts a cold orange glow over the hedgerows on either side of the road.

The walk to the bus stop usually only takes a few minutes. But Max had been in a fight yesterday, and she walks oddly slowly, clearly not wanting to face the consequences of her own actions. Not that it was entirely her fault, a boy had mocked her haircut.

“They won’t even remember.” James tries to soothe as she stops before they round the corner that would lead to the bus stop.

She grumbles something in response before taking a deep breath and continuing.

But her fear is worthwhile. James hears them before he sees them. The sound of a group of rowdy teenagers pestering some unlucky younger kid.

They round the corner and the bus stop comes into view, James can see a group of three larger boys lingering about, they laugh as a younger kid picks up his inside out backpack.

Then their eyes reach the twins, and a smile spreads across the tallest one's face. Clearly, they have been on the lookout for the small brown girl with buzzcut hair.

James sees Max falter for a second, but in their entire lives, James has never once seen Max back down or run away, and today is no different. Max straightens her shoulders and continues to the bus stop, pretending to be unaware of the waiting boys.

As they reach the bus stop, the largest boy speaks – he's in the year above, and James isn't sure what his name is, but he's seen him around before. The boy squares up to Max, blocking her path.

Max stops and looks up at the boy, but she doesn't say anything.

"I hear you got into a fight," the boy says, "with my brother."

The group of boys make noises of agreement, stepping forward to flank their friend.

Max looks the boy up and down and takes a step back, "Wouldn't call it much of a fight." She says finally.

The older boy clearly doesn't like this. He takes a step towards Max and Max takes a step back. The boy laughs, "Afraid?" He boasts, his friends laugh.

"Look," Max says diplomatically, very unusual for her, "I don't want to hurt you."

The boy laughs, "Hurt me?" He says reaching a hand towards her shoulder, "You couldn't even in your dreams princess."

The hand never reaches Max's shoulder. In a brief second, Max drops her backpack, grabs the boy's wrist, yanks him forward, and slams the palm of her hand into his nose. It connects with a satisfying crunch, sending a spray of blood down his face.

Max lets go of the wrist and watches as the boy staggers backwards in surprise. The boys look at their leader in confusion. Then they look at Max. But her glare tells them to back off – and they do, not because they want to, but out of instinct. They can sense it; they know Max means business – that this is not a fight they will win.

But the older boy does not share this same sense. He scowls at Max, blood drips down his chin. He blinks away tears and shouts a slur at Max.

James raises a hand to stop Max, to grab her shoulder and hold her back. But he's too slow.

She moves quickly. In one fluid motion, she launches a vicious kick into the boy's stomach, then pirouettes into the air and slams her other foot into the boy's side. The two-pronged attack comes so quickly that no one has time to react.

One second the older boy is standing, proud of his slur, then he's on the floor cradling his side.

James can see it in the way she moves, she's holding back. Of course, she is, if she were to use her full strength, the boy would be unconscious before he knew what hit him.

He watches as the group of boys take another few steps back, uncertain of the next course of action – of course they want to stick up for their friend, but they don't want to get hurt – especially by someone younger – especially a girl.

But what the boys don't know is that Max has quite a reputation in her year – one of violence, fights, sanctions, arguments with teachers, detentions, and suspensions.

"Why'd you do that?" James asks, as the group of boys pick up their friend and move down the road. There would be retribution, of course there would be.

"He was asking for it," Max defends, "you heard what he called me."

James nods, hard to argue against that logic, "Could've reported it?"

"To who?" Max asks, "Not like any teacher is going to listen to me."

"Yeah, but now, things are gonna be worse."

"Eh," Max says, as the bus arrives, "not like we're going in today." She says as the bus pulls up at the stop. They board the bus and spy their friends sitting in their usual spot at the back.

James sits down next to Siobhan and shares a warm smile, but doesn't get to say anything before Chloe speaks,

"I'll miss that" Chloe says mournfully. Her voice barely audible above the chattering in the bus.

Max nods, a short solemn nod, fully aware that Chloe is about to deliver a speech worthy of Max's own mother.

Everyone looks at Chloe, surprised by the response.

"What?" Max asks, "No lecture?"

Chloe shakes her head; her voice is poignant. It carries over the squabbles filling the bus – there's a melancholy to it, as if everything is already in the past. "You'll grow up eventually – and I'll miss your silly fights."

2) A Bazaar Feeling

The town square is surprisingly busy. Cold evening air nips at James as he walks. James watches Max run off into a coffee shop to get something warm. There's something odd about that coffee shop. For a moment he pauses in his stride and watches, trying to find whatever is striking him as odd.

The sky above is clear and blue, a handful of clouds dance across the early spring sky. A gentle breeze runs its fingers through James' hair. It reminds him of summer. He smiles as he feels the sun against his skin.

"What's got you grinning?" Siobhan asks, nudging him.

James shakes his head, "Nothing."

Siobhan laughs, "Sure, you must be crazy to grin at nothing."

"Maybe I am." James replies.

"Is it a girl?" Siobhan suggests, nudging him harder, nearly knocking him over.

James shakes his head, "Just thinking about summer."

Siobhan giggles, it's a nice sound – gentle and it warms James' heart, "It's not even spring yet." She reminds him.

"I know, but the sun's warm."

Siobhan tilts her head to the sky and smiles in agreement, "I suppose it is."

There—outside the coffee shop, alone at a small table, a girl about James's age cradles a steaming mug between her hands. He doesn't recognise her from school, which is odd—he knows most faces, at least vaguely. Maybe she's a tourist. But there's something about her posture, the way she sits slightly forward, as if scanning the town square for someone who hasn't arrived yet, that makes him pause.

It isn't just that. Maybe it's her hair—ink-black streaked at the tips with a vivid blue that catches in the sunlight. Still, James has seen stranger.

Her lips move, whispering words James can't hear. To someone? Or to herself? He leans a little to see if there's a phone tucked between her hands, but there's nothing.

Before he can think more on it, Callum drifts into view, grinning like he's about to try his luck. He leans over her table and says something James can't catch. Whatever it is, it earns him a glare sharp enough to cut glass. Callum's grin collapses, and he retreats with all the grace of a kicked puppy.

Max returns from the store and nearly trips over the girl's outstretched legs. She mutters a curse under her breath, catches herself, and moves on without a second glance, pressing a warm mocha into James's hands.

They wander over to where Callum has regrouped with Connor. Callum's face is still bright red, his mouth working around excuses that don't quite land. Connor, doubled over with laughter, claps a hand against his brother's shoulder and shakes his head, enjoying the failure far too much.

Together the group head up to Siobhan's apartment that overlooks the town square.



The group of teenagers laugh and lounge around. Siobhan tries to engage Max in a conversation about boys, or clothing, or makeup, or anything girly. But Max shrugs it off, more inclined to wind up Connor.

Siobhan sighs in exasperation – without Chloe here, she's left helpless and able to join in many conversations.

"Where'd Chloe get to?" James asks,

Siobhan shrugs, "Said she was meeting someone, then Artemis, then they'll meet us at the fair."

James nods, "Where's Artemis?"

"Fuck knows."

"Ooo," Max coos, "both of them busy at the same time, wonder what they're doing."

The teens laugh. Even though neither Chloe or Artemis have officially said anything, everyone assumes Artemis and Chloe are dating. Even the teachers.

By the time their laughter dies down, the last of the daylight has faded. The sun dips below the rooftops, leaving behind a sky the colour of ink—starless, endless. The kind of dark that feels heavy, almost deliberate. It catches James off-guard, the way it swallows everything. For the briefest of seconds, James feels like there's something else in the darkness – a being that moves with purpose, lingering just out of sight, stalking, bidding its time.

They set off toward the bazaar, cutting through the park. The air is cooler here, tinged with the earthy scent of grass damp from the afternoon. James slows slightly, that creeping, uneasy sense of déjà vu crawling into his chest. He remembers lying on this grass in the summer, kicking a ball across the field in the rain, walking these same paths in autumn. But this isn't nostalgia—it's sharper, stranger.

It feels like he's been here before on this exact day, at this exact time, with every detail perfectly in place: the angle of the shadows, the sound of Max laughing ahead, the way the wind nudges at his sleeve.



The Bazaar is in the same place as every year. But this time, it's much larger – there's even a Ferris Wheel at the centre, its colourful lights blinking against the setting sun.

There is no pattern here. No order. Each stall seems plucked from a different world entirely, stitched together into this impossible marketplace.

Performers drift through the winding paths like fragments of dreams—men and women in glittering skirts and sequin dresses, masks painted in impossible shades. Their voices rise in songs from far-off lands, verses carried on melodies that seem both joyous and aching.

The air is thick with scent. Spices in glass jars—red as embers, yellow as desert sand—spill their fragrance into the air. Bundles of lavender hang from ropes overhead, their soft perfume mixing with roses crushed underfoot, with mint leaves fresh enough to taste just by breathing them in. Somewhere, the tang of sizzling oil makes their stomachs twist in hunger.

Above, string lights sway in the breeze, tangled between stalls in a thousand mismatched colours. They cast warm glows on faces, on coins changing hands, on spices spilling from jars. The sky beyond is endless and black—an absence of stars that makes the lights seem all the brighter.

Siobhan pipes up, "I'm starving." She moans as the smells of a thousand cuisines dance in the air.

A chorus of mumbled agreements are the only reply.

Entering the Bazaar is always a strange experience. The sudden change in noise, smells, and feelings, makes it seem so removed from the outside world. It's like, as soon as your foot crosses a threshold, you're no longer connected to the outside. James still has yet to get used to this, and he's been coming every year for as long as he can remember.

He shakes the haze from his head and follows the others inwards, following the tastiest smell. He brushes against a large man.

"Watch it." The man growls. James looks at the man, half planning on chewing him out – but when he sees the size of the man clad in 'Satuska' branded military gear, with a rifle over his shoulder, he changes his mind.

"What's with all the soldiers?" James asks as he catches up to Max. She looks around and James sees her face shift in confusion as she finally notices all the soldiers.

"I hadn't even noticed." She eyes up the nearest one. A large, well-built woman, with an imposing rifle over her shoulder, and a pistol strapped to her thigh. "Think those are real guns?" Max asks.

"Go ask." Callum replies.

Max laughs.

Callum locks eyes with her, "Dare you."

Max silences her laugh and gives Callum a stern look, "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, no balls."

Max cracks her fingers, "Bet." She strides over to the lady and looks up at her.

The soldier silently glares.

"Are those real?" Max pipes up.

The soldier looks around nervously, hand lingering above the pistol on her thigh, her nerves are broken as she sees the group of teenagers watching. "Run back to your friends." She replies coldly.

"Ok – but like –" Max stutters, "Are they real?"

The soldier nods once but doesn't reply.



They weave through a labyrinth of stalls, each one bursting with strange, impossible treasures. Antiques that look older than the cities they come from—bronze masks with hollow eyes, porcelain dolls with too-wide smiles, instruments carved from bone and wood that hum faintly in the air. Ornate frames curl around paintings of places that might never have existed, the carvings on their edges shifting if stared at too long. Golden lamps sit heavy on low tables, their polished surfaces catching the light as if waiting—daring—to be rubbed.

Somehow, they manage to reach the outskirts of the bazaar. A small section of fair games. Bobbing apples. Definitely rigged shooting galleries. Toy fishing. Throw the hoop.

Clearly, seeing all the soldiers with guns has stirred something in Max and she heads on over to the nearest shooting gallery. She points towards a child-sized green dragon. Her goal is easy to understand. The first shot misses entirely. The proceeding four hit with pinpoint accuracy, but no targets fall.

Max scoffs, "Oh come on!"

"None fell." The man behind the stall says.

"Fine. Gimme another five."

Five more precise shots, every pellet hitting the exact same spot. No win.

"Come on!" Max exclaims.

The man just shrugs, "Bad luck."

"Bad luck my ass. Another five."

Two shots strike home, the target wobbles slightly but doesn't fall. Max aims for the next shot, but she changes her mind. She whirls around and fires a shot cleanly through the crowd and hits a boy on the back of the head.

Artemis spins around, a look of shock and annoyance on his face. But once he sees Max, he can't help but smile.

"You're late." Max calls out.

"Where's Siobhan?" Chloe calls out.

Max and James shrug, James looks around, he has absolutely no clue where the others went,

Around somewhere." He and Max say in unison.

Max then decides to fire a shot at James.

"Ow." James says as he grabs the gun and tries to pull it away from Max, but her grip is strong and he can't even loosen it. The final shot hits him in the side, causing him to let go.

Max returns the toy gun to the stall and walks away without a thank you – clearly annoyed by the rigged game.



The Ferris Wheel comes to a slow gradual halt, leaving the twins hanging halfway through the inky night sky. At first James panics, but with reassurance from the announcer, his voice booming around the entire bazaar, stating that it was time for the fireworks.

An impossible rainbow of colourful fireworks explode in the darkness, casting a wondrous glow over the world. As the bangs, pops, whizzes, and explosions of colour illuminate the bazaar, James watches in curiosity as the soldiers on the ground seemingly begin to panic.

They rush around, pushing through interlocked crowds, ignoring the complaints. The electricity in the air is even stronger now – James looks over at Max, she fidgets uncomfortably, scratching at her skin.

“You can feel it too?” He asks.

Max nods, “The shocks?”

“Yeah – lightning?”

Max shakes her head, “No... it – I don’t know, it doesn’t feel like lightning.”

James nods in agreement. The whole spiel about your hair standing on edge before you get struck by lightning had made James paranoid, but with his sister’s statement, he feels calmer.



The fireworks end and the Ferris Wheel returns the twins, unscathed to the earth. James yawns, suddenly growing extremely tired. As James’ eyelids grow heavy and it becomes a struggle just to keep them open, he looks around, fighting the urge to fall to the floor and curl up and sleep for a million years.

Everyone around him seems to be fighting the same battle – some have already lost, sitting down on the dry grass and letting sleep take over. James looks over to Max, but she isn’t standing next to him – she’s curled up on the floor, fast asleep.

James kneels and tries to shake Max awake, a niggling voice in his head tells him to give up on her and run. He swats this voice aside and continues trying to wake Max. But she doesn’t even stir.

Frustrated and growing ever more tired, James sits on the grass, and before he knows it, he’s laying down and closing his eyes.

The niggling voice tells him to get up, wake up, run, fight the urge to sleep. But he can’t.

3) The Seer

The world here is unbound—an infinite, velvet abyss where even time does not tread. The sky above is a deep indigo, so dark it devours light itself, glowing faintly like ancient ink lit by starlight, pulsing slowly and steady like a dying heartbeat. The air hangs heavy with the scent of lavender, burnt jasmine, and something sharp and metallic—a mineral tang that clings to the tongue, bitter and cold, like the echo of a nightmare you can't quite forget.

She floats above a pool of black glass, so perfectly still it seems solid—until it ripples with a soundless wind. The water reflects not only the stars above but the wounds of the sky itself, as if the heavens were bleeding their grief into her sanctuary.

She is divine—but not beautiful.

Her presence radiates with a power so ancient James can feel it prickling across his skin like electricity, setting the hairs of his arms on end. But she is not adorned in glory. Her hair is a tangled storm of stardust and shadow, falling in wild, matted locks down her back. Her once-regal robes are torn and sagging, stained and frayed, the hem soaked with dew from the sorrowful pool beneath. Her back is a tapestry of suffering—etched with old scars, open cuts, and deep bruises that breathe with her. Each inhale draws blood. Each exhale leaves it to weep down her spine.

Her feet hover just above the water, never touching. Calloused, twisted, toes curled unnaturally, ankles swollen, as though she's been bound for centuries without rest. Her wrists are locked in silver chains, thick and unrelenting, vanishing downward into a black void that does not reflect light, nor thought, nor hope.

She does not speak, nor whimper, in fact nothing comes from her, not even the sound of her ragged uneven breaths. James looks at her, head bowed, frayed hair obscuring her face, he is sure she is weeping, each tear splashing silently against the pool of water beneath her. Each ripple is a reminder of her imprisonment.



James jerks awake, his breath catching in his throat as his face collides with something rough. A low-hanging branch scrapes across his forehead, leaving a sting in its wake. He groans, blinking rapidly as blinding sunlight pours straight into his eyes, forcing him to shield his face.

He doesn't know where he is.

A moment of panic flutters in his chest—a sentiment his sister, Max, clearly shares. She whirls around in a panic, face taut, fists clenched, ready to fight the first person she sees. Fortunately, her violence doesn't extend to James, and when their eyes meet, her expression softens and she relaxes her arms—only slightly.

James squints against the glare and looks around. He sits at the base of a colossal weeping willow, its cascading strands of pink petals swaying in an unseen breeze. The leaves dangle in a curtain of soft colour, casting shifting shadows across the cool grass beneath him.

Beyond the protective shade of the willow, the world opens into something impossibly grand.

A palace stands before them.

Its central spire, a towering pillar of white marble and gold, rises into the sky—piercing through the blue horizon, tearing through the clouds, reaching for the very stars that shimmer beyond. The structure is monolithic, an unwavering titan against the endless heavens.

At the base of this celestial tower, a circular formation of marble and gold unfurls outward, encircling the massive willow like a crown. Grand staircases extend from the central courtyard, leading in three directions, one directly up toward the spire, the others veering left and right into unseen halls of the palace.

James barely has time to process the sheer scale of it all before movement draws his eye.

A woman steps toward Max.

Her hair is hue of red so vibrant it seems to burn like a living ember, the strands drifting weightlessly, unbound by gravity. As she moves, James feels something primal stir in the air, like the shifting of seasons or the turning of time itself.

“Hm.” She hums, mirroring the sentiment of James’ silent gaze.

Then, her gaze snaps to James.

Her striking green eyes catch him off guard—not just for their brightness, but for the feeling they bring. Warmth. Comfort. The scent of burning firewood curling through the air. The kind of warmth that fills homes on winter nights, that seeps into tired bones, that drives away fear before it even takes root.

And just like that, his uncertainty vanishes.

She approaches, stepping lightly despite her sheer presence. She is impossibly tall—two, maybe three heads taller than him. When she crouches, lowering herself to his level, James catches the scent of fresh woodsmoke and earth.

The kind of scent that reminds him of childhood winters by the fire, of warmth against the cold, of something just out of reach.

Her piercing gaze locks onto him.

He feels it digging past his skin, beyond his thoughts—peeling away any falsehoods, any doubts, as if her very stare can strip lies from the marrow of his bones. James doesn’t flinch, but the weight of her scrutiny makes his breath hitch.

Satisfied, she stands and turns her attention to the great tree, reaching out to graze her fingertips along its cascading pink leaves. The way she touches them is delicate, reverent, as if confirming something only she understands.

Then, without a word, she gestures for them to follow.

They pass through gardens bursting with impossible flora, past oaken benches carved with intricate depictions of stories James doesn't recognise. The air carries distant whispers of the marble itself, the gentle rustling of the tree's endless petals, the heartbeat of a place older than time itself.

James and Max ascend the grand staircase, their footsteps eerily silent against the pristine marble.

As they reach the landing where the staircase splits, the woman halts, guiding them toward a marble railing.

James draws in a breath—and then loses it.

Beyond the railing, the world simply ends.

A small plateau of lush grass stretches out before them, leading to an abrupt drop-off into infinity. Below, nothing but endless mist, a rolling sea of fog that swallows the land beyond sight.

He grips the railing, heart pounding at the sheer scale of it all.

The woman gestures grandly to the palace surrounding them, her voice ringing with something between pride and mirth, "Welcome to the Palace of the Gods."

James barely has time to process before she turns and continues toward the towering spire.

There is no hesitation in her stride. James and Max have no choice but to follow. They reach the entrance, a grand stone door sealed with glowing blue runes. The woman mutters something under her breath; the runes glow brightly before fading and the door swings effortlessly open.

The air shifts the moment Max and James step past the threshold. It is subtle, like an inhale before a whispered secret, but James feels it deep in his chest, a tightening, as if unseen hands pull at the threads of his very existence.

The woman walks ahead of them, unphased, her crimson hair floating weightlessly, as if caught in an unseen tide. The hallway they follow is not a hallway at all—not in the way James knows. The walls pulse, shifting between solid stone and something else entirely, something that flickers like the afterimage of a dream. Nor does it make sense – instead of climbing the grand tower, or even descending beneath it, they move sideways, in a direction that should not be possible inside the tower.

James doesn't realize he's stopped moving until Max grips his wrist and yanks him forward.

"Keep up," she mutters, her voice tense, a hint of unease and fear creeping into it, she tries to hide it, but James can feel it in the way her hand is shaking around his wrist.

It is impossible to tell how far they have walked—time feels distant here, like it is watching from behind a veil.

And then they reach a single wooden door standing slightly ajar, revealing nothing beyond but an overwhelming darkness, deep and velvety, untouched by the blinding daylight from outside, or the unnatural light of the tunnel that by all means should've been pitch-black. James feels something brush against him—not a wind, but a presence, as if the door itself has been waiting.

The woman hesitates slightly, her hand lingers above the door handle, but she takes a deep breath and strides through into the darkness.

Max follows without looking back.

James hesitates, the darkness calls. He watches the back of Max vanish into the void. And before he can turn and run, the darkness rushes up to greet him, pulling him through the doorway and into the room beyond.

The floor beneath James' feet is cold, polished stone—not the marble of the palace above, but something older, carved from something long forgotten. Around them, tall arched pillars rise into nothingness, their towering forms etched with glowing blue filaments. The air hums softly, the filaments vibrating as if reacting to their presence.

And then James looks up.

The ceiling does not exist.

Above them, where there should be stone, there is only a sky that should not be here.

It is vast – infinite—a void filled with distant stars that pulse in time with golden strands that stretch across the chamber. They shift constantly, impossibly, weaving between the pillars like celestial veins, curling through the air in endless, shifting patterns.

The light of them plays tricks on James' mind, making the space feel larger and smaller all at once, a place that cannot decide if it has always been here or has just come into being.

His breath catches as he realizes the truth.

At the chamber's centre, kneeling at the edge of a still, ink-black pool, a figure waits. They are impossibly still, draped in layers of translucent fabric that shift between tangible and light. They do not turn, yet James feels the weight of their gaze settle upon him from all around the room, heavy as a tide that has always been there, pressing at the edges of his soul.

The woman stands stationary, her red hair no longer flowing. “Seer.” She says, the first word she has spoken in a while, her voice is different – she too is afraid.

The Seer does not respond, so the woman continues to speak, “I found these two out by the Goddess Tree.”

This spikes interest in the Seer, their figure shifts ever so slightly; the faintest twitch in their shoulders, just enough to ripple their robes.

The air in the chamber stirs.

And then, in a voice that does not belong to this world, the Seer speaks, *“You should not have come.”* Their whisper carries across the vastness, through the threads themselves, vibrating in the very walls of existence.

Max stiffens beside him. James’ breath hitches in his throat.

The Seer does not move, but the golden threads weaving throughout the room shudder. As if they too are afraid of the Seer. Threads twist, pulling tighter, unravelling, reweaving.

James does not understand the patterns. He does not understand what they mean. But he knows, deep in his bones, that something has just begun.

The Seer does not move, yet the chamber hums with their presence.

Max stands firm, arms crossed over her chest, as if defiance alone can guard her from whatever truth is about to be spoken. James feels smaller than ever, a thread caught in a tapestry too vast for him to comprehend.

The woman bows her head, stepping aside as the Seer finally rises. The movement is slow, deliberate, as if time itself must allow them to stand. Their layered garments ripple with the motion, fabric made of something both more and less than silk. The stars above them flicker, and the shifting threads of fate glow brighter.

“The roots grow too deep,” the Seer murmurs. The voice is neither male nor female, neither young nor old. It is weightless, eternal. *“You have come seeking answers, yet you do not understand the questions.”*

Max takes a sharp breath, but for once, she does not lash out.

“Then tell us.” James speaks instead. His voice feels fragile in the vastness of the sanctum. The woman whirls around and glares at James. She raises a hand, intent on slapping James for some unknown transgression.

“Leave Brigid.” The Seer commands.

Brigid – the woman – freezes and slowly lowers her half raised hand, before nodding and silently retreating through the door.

The Seer finally turns, and James sees their eyes. They are not Human. Not fully.

Their pupils stretch too wide, swallowing light like an abyss. Within them, he sees movement—swirling constellations, collapsing stars, the slow, endless turn of time itself.

And then, the Seer lifts their hand. The air fractures.

A thin, luminous thread emerges from the darkness and spirals between their fingers. It glows a deep, shifting gold, pulsating as if alive.

“The Elders have long been silent,” the Seer begins, their voice threading through James’ mind like an echo. *“Bound to places of power. Lost to the world. But their influence lingers.”*

James shivers. He does not understand.

“You think you are children, lost to the machinations of gods,” the Seer continues, their gaze flickering between Max and James. *“But you are not. You are not lost. You have always been watched – since the moment of your birth, before perhaps even then.”*

The Seer steps forward, and the golden strands above them shudder in response. A gentle breeze rustles through the Sanctum, though no wind exists here, only the silent unnatural movement of the Seer. Their hands, wrapped in delicate woven gold and frayed blue, extend outward, and the threads tremble, pulling taut as if answering an unspoken call.

“They were here before the gods, before the first words were spoken, before time itself could be counted. They shaped the foundations of all things—Life and Death, Time and Creation, Love and Destruction, Land and Water. They were balance. And then, they fell.”

The strands above flicker, casting shifting images into the air, each one a vision of something ancient—not quite memory, not quite dream.

James and Max watch as shadowed figures emerge in the strands. Eight shapes, colossal, faceless, each bound to a domain woven into the very fabric of existence itself.

The images shift, darken. James sees a figure wreathed in roaring flame, a presence of absolute ruin. The Elder of Destruction.

Another figure stands at the heart of a blooming world, watching as endless vines consume the land, twisting into something beyond control. The Elder of Life.

A third, silent and still, a great void where time should flow. The Elder of Time.

The others blur, but he knows they are there.

“Destruction could not create. So, it sought to undo,” the Seer murmurs, watching the strands tighten and knot. *“It turned against its kin; against the balance it had once been part of. It burned. It razed. It consumed. And the other Elders—in their final act of unity—sealed it away.”*

James watches as the shadows collapse inward, drawn into a swirling, endless abyss. He sees five figures standing at the edge of the void. Not gods. Not mortals. Something in between.

"The seal was not perfect," the Seer whispers, almost as if speaking to themself. "Even Elders cannot stop time from unravelling. And so, they created five—to guard the prison, to keep the seal intact. One as War, to ravage the nations that oppose the prison. One of Famine to starve the armies marching on the seal. One of Pestilence, to poison and weaken. One of Death to bring a final end."

"But time is patient," the Seer continues, her voice a quiet weight in the air. "The Elders are no longer as they once were. Their bodies are gone, their names lost. Only echoes remain—aspects of power, bound to places where their influence is strongest."

She lifts her hand, and for a fleeting moment, James swears the golden strands around them ripple with something deeper. Something watching.

"Death lingers where the living come to an end. Life thrives where nature runs rampant. Time watches in places untouched by mortal hands. And Creation—"

The Seer stops, their fingers twisting the golden threads, over and over. Lost in thought – their eyes faded and vacant – they do not know. The Elder of Creation's domain is not known. Not anymore.

The Seer speaks carefully, *"But they are not gone. They whisper in the cracks between worlds. In the shifting of fate. In the roots of the Goddess Tree, trembling with fear."*

James' heart beats louder.

The strands suddenly knot, pulling together in a way that makes James' stomach turn. The Seer watches the tangled threads for a long moment before speaking again, their voice almost distant.

"The Four will rise. The Key has already turned. The doors are opening."

The Seer extends their hand, and the knotted threads unravel, spreading outward—spinning themselves into images that flicker and pulse, shifting between clarity and distortion.

James stares.

A great tree, towering beyond sight, its roots twisting through the very foundation of the world. Its bark pulses with light, shifting as though alive. The branches tremble—afraid.

"The Goddess Tree fears what it cannot see."

The Seer twists their fingers, and the image fractures. Another vision.

A great door, spiralling inward, a void of impossible light and shadow. Something stirs beyond it.

"Valhalla's doors swing wide," the Seer whispers, "a foreboding sight. Beware the final door, where day turns to night."

The door shatters. James flinches.

Max steps forward, fingers curled into fists. "What does this have to do with us?"

The Seer exhales. The golden thread twists, spinning anew.

A battlefield. Not one of mortals, but of gods. Towers crumble. The sky is torn apart. A shadow rises, vast and endless, reaching for the world with fingers of destruction. And in the centre—four figures stand against it.

James feels the breath leave his lungs.

"A dead man must die," the Seer intones, "his cursed blood to pour. Upon sacred ground, by two sisters tore."

James doesn't understand. Max's face is pale, her fists clenched, ready to punch the Seer; frustrated by their riddles, their nonsense. But the threads continue to shift.

A figure stands in the centre of a ruin, their emerald eyes burning. Lightning cracks at their fingertips, their face obscured by shadow and the flicker of flames.

"To gods who hunger, demand their due," the Seer's voice is softer now, almost mournful. "A loss unknown, a fate brand new."

James' stomach twists.

The Seer releases the thread. It disintegrates into nothing.

"The wheel turns," the Seer murmurs, their gaze piercing through James as if searching for something hidden within him. "You must run, before the roots grow too deep. Before the storm decides for you."

James swallows hard.

"You must go now."

James opens his mouth—to argue, to ask why them, why now, but the Seer steps forward and grips his wrist before he can speak.

He gasps. For a single, unbearable moment, James sees everything.

He sees a towering skyscraper twisting into infinity.

He sees Max, alone, blood on her hands. They are slick, glistening with fresh blood. It drips from her fingertips in thick, crimson trails, soaking into the shattered ground beneath her. The red is vibrant on her knuckles, against the calloused, bruised and broken skin.

He sees himself, standing before something vast, something endless, something waiting.

And then the vision is gone, ripped from his grasp like a stolen breath.

James stumbles backward, his knees weak.

Max catches his arm, steadying him.

The Seer tilts their head. Their eyes glimmer—something almost sorrowful flickers there, but it is gone in an instant.

James barely has time to breathe. The Seer waves a hand. The golden threads form into sigils and runes. The threads glow a golden blue, then they spread out, forming a portal in the air.

“Be wary of those with the blood of gods,” they say, a final warning. *“Go now, before the storm decides for you.”*

4) Shanghai

The portal breathes across James' skin like static wind—tingling, electric—then pulls him through in a blink. As his body pushes through the golden threads, an oddly familiar tingle of electricity ripples across his skin. His hair stands on edge and for a split second, he is oddly calm – soothed by the familiarity of the feeling, although he cannot place why.

Then it spits him out.

A rush. Air tears. He stumbles, heart hammering.

A car screams past, horn blaring like a war cry, wind buffeting his body as it skims by inches from his chest.

Before panic fully takes hold, a hand yanks him back—not with grace, but sheer strength and instinct. It drags him with unexpected ease, as if James weighs nothing at all.

He hits the ground hard, the grass surprisingly cool and slightly damp against his back. Above, the sky is a bright and endless blue, streaked with contrails and cables, framed by the monolithic silhouettes of skyscrapers that pierce the blue sky.

He blinks against the sun—and then Max appears, leaning over him. Her brow is furrowed in concern, though she hides it behind that familiar stone-faced silence. She doesn't speak. She just extends a hand.

James stares for a second, still catching his breath, then takes it. Her grip is firm, steadying. The world tilts slightly as he rises—not spinning, but swaying, like reality hasn't quite settled around him yet.

They stand at the edge of a triangular park, a slice of green cut between streams of roaring traffic. Towering skyscrapers surround the park, casting long, jagged shadows over the lawn. Sprinklers hiss in rhythm, launching arcs of water that glint like glass in the sun.

At the centre of the park, a serene lake gleams, its surface broken only by the lazy drift of a floating restaurant, lights already flickering on, reflecting on the water's edge like ghosts.

But James isn't looking at the lake. His gaze lifts, drawn instead to three colossal towers, their glass skin catching the descending sun. Between the middle one's upper floors hangs a massive sign, glowing in pristine white neon:

Satuska

The sun is setting, caught between the three spires, and its dying rays scatter across the city, dancing in orange and gold across mirrored windows. The skyline would be breath-taking, if the sudden realisation hits James – they are no longer in England – nowhere near Parlor Falls – home. Where are they?

James turns slowly in place, drinking in the strange new world. Digital billboards flash on surrounding buildings, looping slick advertisements in a language he can't read. One display shimmers to life above a nearby foyer: bold letters read Satuska Industries, and the rest—a sea of hieroglyphics drift by.

“...Where are we?” he murmurs, voice hollow in his throat.

Max just shrugs, lips pressing into a thin line. “Dunno.” No panic. No awe. She'd probably face the end of the world with a stoic stance and her chest puffed out in defiance.

James spins again, searching for a clue—something, anything. Then he spots it: a flag, red with golden stars, fluttering high above a distant rooftop.

He points. “We're in China. I think.”

Max follows his gaze. Her expression sours like she's just tasted something bitter. “Great,” she mutters, turning sharply away. “First gods. Or whatever the hell that was. Now China.” She grumbles something else under her breath and stalks off, as if the flag had insulted her family.

“Wait—where are you going!?” James calls, jogging a few steps after her.

She doesn't stop. Doesn't even turn. Just lifts her shoulders in another dismissive shrug. “Anywhere that's not here.”

James hesitates, then follows—because he always does.

And above them, the sun finally dips behind the Satuska towers, casting Shanghai in gold-tinged shadow.

The twins walk in silence. Words feel too heavy to carry in a place like this.

The streets of Shanghai are alive, teeming with movement, light, and sound. Bodies press in on all sides—shoulders brushing shoulders, heat radiating from the crowd like a collective heartbeat. Max and James find themselves pushing through, weaving and sidestepping as they carve a narrow path forward.

Every shove earns them sharp glances from suited workers, or unapologetic snarls from overworked officer workers, who glower at them before quickly returning to their straight faced, perfect paced commute.

Maybe it's their skin. Maybe their clothes. Maybe just the way they don't belong. Whatever it is, James feels it—the stares. The silent judgment. The invisible weight pressing down on his shoulders.

But there's something else too. Not just glances— Eyes. Watching. A different kind of attention. Cold. Unblinking. Intent.

At first, he brushes it off. This is a city, after all. But someone—something—is following him. Watching every breath, every heartbeat.

He turns. Glances over his shoulder. But there's only the crowd, shifting and morphing like a school of fish. No eyes. No figure. A security camera blinks above a storefront, and James swears it turns ever so slightly to look at him.

And yet... he knows.

They pass a building with mirrored windows, and for a moment the twins catch their reflections—small, out of place. On the glass, golden letters shimmer:

Shanghai Trade Centre

James lingers a moment, finally certain of where they are. But Max doesn't slow down. Doesn't glance at the building or the reflection. She just keeps walking, her gaze locked forward like she's chasing something invisible.

Night begins its descent, and with it, the city transforms.

As the sun bleeds its final light behind the high-rise towers, the neon awakens. First in flickers, then in waves—white, pink, blue, green—a rainbow of electricity crawling across every surface. Holographic ads bloom mid-air like electric petals. An enormous screen hums to life, cycling through its endless scroll of perfect promises.

The screen shifts—clean white backdrop, clinical font:

Satuska Sciences. Making tomorrow today.

James feels a chill—not from the air, but from the city itself. Shanghai is no longer a place, a name on a map. It's a machine, glowing from within, humming with secrets.

Max takes a sudden turn without warning, and they slip off the main road into a narrow alley framed by aging wooden buildings—roof tiles cracked, beams worn down by time. Here, the neon doesn't fade—it warps, casting angular shadows across the cobbled street. The warm, inviting glow of street lanterns mixes with harsh violet neon, creating a surreal blend of old-world charm and dystopian edge.

And it's quiet.

Not silent. There's still life—soft voices from open doorways, distant laughter, the clatter of bowls from a food stall—but the buzz of the main streets is gone. The alley breathes slower.

A wave of smell crashes over them—spice, broth, meat, something fried in sesame oil. James' stomach groans in protest, reminding him how long it's been since they've eaten.

"God, that smells good," he mutters.

Max says nothing.

James glances at her again. She walks like she knows exactly where she's going, but James isn't convinced. There's a tightness in her jaw. That familiar strength set in her shoulders.

“Hey,” he says softly, dodging a pothole in the cobblestone. “Max. What’s the plan?”

She doesn’t answer.

He tries again. “Seriously. Are we looking for someone? Somewhere?”

Max stops. Just for a second. Her eyes flick toward him—not annoyed, not dismissive—just... tired.

“I don’t know,” she says finally. “But we’re not staying out in the open.”

She turns a corner and suddenly the old town vanishes, cut seemingly down the middle. Instead of more historical buildings, they step into a pristine metal and glass world – that seems so out of place that James gasps aloud, his voice catching in his throat as he tries to speak. It looks like something out of a movie – something so *impossible*.

A holographic oriental style skybridge, where digital koi swim in swirling loops around the bridge, casting wavering orange light onto the pavement, stretches between two large spirals of glass and metal. Below it, a softly glowing sign reads:

Greenlight Initiative.

Feeding the Future.

James squints. “Farming?”

Max shrugs. “No clue – but...” She trails off.

But James understands, something here doesn’t feel right. Gone is the feeling of being watched. Gone is the noise of the street, the noises of Humanity – instead, there’s nothing – an artificial silence that fills the air.

Gone are the bright, harsh neon lights. Instead, soft jade lampposts line the area, casting the unblemished metal in a soft hue that soothes James. The air is cool – significantly cooler than anywhere else in the city – is this artificial too? Designed to be the *perfect* temperature.

James steps forward slowly, his breath finally returning. Max reaches out for him as he passes her, but her fingers just brush against his sleeve.

It’s beautiful.

Terraced walkways spiral upward in twin towers of glass and steel, filled with cascading layers of lush greenery, vines twining through lattices, unnaturally fruitful fruit trees, tomatoes the size of apples, apples redder and greener than ever before, pears weighing down branches.

A hologram shimmers into life atop a crystal pedestal in the centre of the district. A woman stands there—tall, ageless, wearing a gown spun from woven stalks of golden wheat. Her hair is braided with vines, and her expression is serene but regal.

Her voice is a warm lullaby, echoing through the chamber:

"I am Demeter-02 — guardian of the harvest. All may rest. All may grow."

James feels something swell in his chest—a strange peace, a calm he hasn't felt since waking in this city.

"What is this?" he mutters.

Max doesn't answer immediately. She's staring at the vertical columns of tomatoes, spinning slowly under UV halos.

Max steps up next to James and looks around,

James looks around. The glass ceilings reflect their faces in soft, warping curves. In every direction, the system is working—too perfectly.

He steps toward the base of the hologram and looks up into Demeter's glowing green eyes. They do not blink. They do not see.

Demeter speaks, an artificial voice, incomplete, "Unfortunately, the Greenlight Initiative is closing in five minutes. Please make your way to the exit, and do come again. Tours are available from 12pm on — zzt — onwar — zzt -- onwards — *ascend*." The final word stutters and skips, playing like a scratched record. Demeter flickers slightly, and for a brief second, the smiling hologram scowls and looks pained, before returning to normal.

Max and James share a confused look, and for the first time, Max lets the worry show on her face, a brief twitch in her eyebrow, a softening of her eyes. But she blinks it away and stands straight,

"We need to get off the streets." She says firmly, she turns around, looking for anything that might be of use. She points towards a street map bathed in jade light.

The street map is written in Chinese. There's only the odd word in English, more tourist based locations, the odd phrase that must surely be a mistranslation — but then again, considering the abnormality of everything around them, maybe it isn't.

Max taps a finger on a phrase that James had ignored, '*Dreamscape Retreat — a rest for the weary.*' And beneath it, '*Provided by Satuska Somnitek*'.

"It isn't far," She says, "worth a look."

James nods, having no other options, it's their best shot. He takes a second glance at the map, and he notices it. Almost everything in Shanghai has some sort of Satuska connection — the logo, 'brought to you by', so on. It unnerves James, but he cannot say why — he doesn't even know what Satuska is. They were there in Parlor — the soldiers with guns — but — what are they? Soldiers, agriculture, hotels?

They find the Dreamscape Retreat tucked away from the neon-lit chaos of Shanghai's still bustling corporate district, slightly off the main road, but still in sight of the Satuska towers dominating the skyline. It hides behind the towering facades of glass and steel, like a sanctuary—a place untouched by the frenetic energy of the city.

A singular sign, not of harsh neon, but a sombre, gentle blue hangs, sleepily above the door '*Dreamscape Retreat*'. There are no windows.

Max and James share a weary look, Max yawns, a single, uncontrollable act that speaks for the both of them.

The door opens without the tinkle of a bell, without as much as a squeak.

The foyer is subdued yet elegant, a grand archway of deep indigo marble, speckled with silver flecks that catch the light like distant stars. A soft, ethereal glow emanates from floating lanterns, casting gentle pools of light on the ground, their movements as slow and tranquil as drifting clouds.

Inside, the air is cool and soothing, perfumed with the faintest hint of lavender and night jasmine. The walls curve seamlessly, flowing like liquid shadows, giving the impression of being wrapped within the folds of dusk. Above, the ceiling shifts in an illusion of endless night, a vast and ever-moving sky dotted with constellations that pulse and breathe in a gentle rhythm that James finds hard not to breathe along to.

They take another step into the foyer and a hologram springs to life in front of them. Opposed to the grand stature of Demeter. This one is small, average height, the light is gentle, soft to the eyes. The hologram would be a beautiful Human – elegant black hair, slight Asian features, soft gentle green eyes, a warm welcoming smile, a dashing of freckles. She smiles warmly at the twins and speaks in a hushed and gentle voice that reminds James of being soothed to sleep as a child.

"The world does not rest, but you must. Close your eyes, release your burdens. Here, the night belongs to you." She gestures behind her, towards a large open restaurant, the chairs look soft and inviting, "Join us in the Twilight Lounge if you cannot sleep –" she gestures to doorways on her left and right, "For those who find comfort in sleep, the door to your left will offer you a soft pillow. And for those who yearn for a rest, the door on your right will offer you a sleep you will never for – zzt – forg – zzt – get – zzt -- forget."

Max and James share another glance, this one confused and nervous. "Left?" Max asks softly, her voice just a whisper.

James nods, suddenly overcome by tiredness. He – it --. He yawns and stretches, suddenly nearly falling asleep on his feet – it feels familiar. A tiredness like no other. But he can't place it – his mind won't focus – or speak – where has he felt this before – no, it doesn't matter ---

5) Response from Satuska

James wakes, feeling more refreshed than ever before. He stretches, letting out a soft moan as he wakes his muscles. The room is full of the peaceful sound of rain falling through an unseen canopy, soft bird chirps occasionally break up the pitter-patter of unseen rain.

He's never felt more soothed or relaxed. He lies back down and enjoys the noise. But, even as relaxed as he is, he can't help but let his mind wander.

The Seer. Shanghai. Gods.

'Beware those with the blood of gods. Go now before the storm decides for you.'

'You have always been watched – since the moment of your birth, before perhaps even then'

'Life and Death, Time and Creation, Love and Destruction, Land and Water. They were balance. And then, they fell'

He shakes the words from his head and turns his attention to the magazine sitting on the nightstand. He frowns as he reads the cover, *"Response from Satuska Industries regarding the work; 'A Brief Introduction to Community', by DR S.K Sloane, 2006."* He reads aloud, it's pretty long – he can spend some time reading it – Max usually sleeps late anyway.



'At Satuska Industries, our mission has always been clear: to innovate, to serve, and to build a better future for all communities across the globe. With over a century of expertise and leadership in technology, manufacturing, and humanitarian logistics, we are proud to stand as a trusted partner to governments, NGOs, and private citizens alike.

Our presence in cities and regions across the world is not only a reflection of our operational scale, but of our deep commitment to accessibility and service. Whether providing state-of-the-art prosthetics to veterans, designing resilient infrastructure for disaster zones, or ensuring the availability of life-saving food and medical supplies in areas of need, our focus is — and will remain — on empowering individuals and strengthening communities.

Recent narratives circulated by unaffiliated sources have speculated about the nature of our operations and intentions. We wish to emphasise that Satuska Industries does not engage in any activity that undermines or targets specific populations. Such notions run counter to the very principles upon which this company was founded.

Our security personnel are deployed exclusively in the service of peacekeeping, asset protection, and crisis response, often in coordination with recognised humanitarian organisations and local

authorities. The suggestion that our security forces — trained, equipped, and deployed to protect civilian lives, critical infrastructure, and our employees — are anything other than peacekeepers is a deliberate distortion. These are men and women who risk their lives to maintain stability in the most volatile environments on the planet. To misrepresent their service is not only an insult to them, but an affront to every community they safeguard.

Innovation in cybernetics, robotics, and advanced systems integration is one of our proudest achievements, but it is always pursued within the framework of lawful, ethical, and human-centred design. Our products exist to enhance lives — restoring mobility, improving safety, and expanding the boundaries of human potential.

We recognise that our visibility and influence invite scrutiny. We welcome transparent dialogue and remain committed to operating with integrity, accountability, and respect for the diverse communities we serve.

Satuska Industries remains dedicated to building a future where technology and Humanity progress together — a future where trust, cooperation, and shared purpose triumph over fear and misinformation.

We will not be distracted from that mission.

We will not be deterred.

And we will continue to operate — openly, legally, and without apology — in service of a better world.

For further enquiries, please contact:

Office of Public Affairs, Satuska Industries, Shanghai HQ'

6) The Dreamscape Lounge

The Dreamscape Lounge shifts around him, blending fantasy and reality in a haze of deep violets and soft gold. The walls ripple like a cosmic tide, shifting between twilight-lit fields and star-dappled voids, each scene painted from the memories of past dreamers. Their thoughts, captured and framed, loop in endless, surreal murals.

The air smells of something familiar yet distant, a scent that reminds James of stories whispered at the edge of sleep, lingering half-memories that vanish when touched too closely.

Max sits beside him, back straight, fingers tapping impatiently against the obsidian counter. "This place is fake," she mutters through a half-stifled yawn, voice barely audible over the ambient hymn of the cosmos humming through the lounge. "I don't like it." Another yawn. She blinks rapidly and a spring of tears wet her eyes.

A man settles onto the stool beside them. Effortless. Fluid. He doesn't make a sound, yet it feels like he's always been there, like the room itself had been waiting for him to arrive.

James glances up, and the first thing he sees is the golden shimmer of the man's scarf, catching the soft glow of the neon-infused starlight.

"Two lost souls in the city of lights." The man sighs, voice a smooth current that carries something between amusement and understanding. "Can't say I'm surprised." He doesn't even look over the twins. Just waves his hand at the bar in front of them. A hologram appears, the same woman from the entrance.

Neither the man or the hologram speaks, but without hesitation, the hologram commands a small cluster of robotic arms to start preparing this man his tea.

Max's fingers still. Her gaze shifting slightly towards him, just like James, she cannot look at the man – he is there – James can see him out of the corner of his eye, but cannot bring himself to turn his gaze to the stranger. "Who are you?" Max asks quietly, as if afraid to rupture the tranquillity.

The man turns toward them, James sees the shit-eating grin on the man's face.

"Hermes," he says, as if his name alone explains everything. "God of the roads, the lost, the weary. And, in this case—" The robotic arms place a gently steaming cup of tea in front of him, "In this case – simply enjoying some tea from my lovely compatriot –"

The hologram smiles, as if agreeing, then she fizzles from reality, leaving the trio alone.

James tenses. He feels the weight of reality begin to settle – who is this man calling himself a god?

Max doesn't flinch. She leans forward, resting her arms on the counter, bold, challenging. She strains to turn her head, to look at the man, "And what exactly is a god doing here?"

Hermes laughs, light and easy, the sound weaving into the lounge's gentle hum, a melody that doesn't belong yet fits too perfectly.

"Same as you. Passing through. I like places like these. A crossroads of minds, where people come and go, leaving only traces of themselves behind." He leans in closer, his breath tickling James's ear, and he laughs, the same light and easy, fake.

James swallows a rising lump in his throat.

"You may look." Hermes says.

And like that, as if he needed permission, James turns to look at the stranger. His face is a contradiction of youth and eternity, a grin that belongs on a trickster and a glint in his emerald eyes that carries the weight of countless roads travelled and untold swindles.

Suddenly, the air shifts, once more. James yawns, barely able to stop himself from falling asleep. He feels watched. Not by Hermes. By something else.

Hermes notices the flicker of unease. His grin softens—just slightly. "You're looking for a way out, aren't you?"

Max's jaw tightens. "You know where we need to go?"

Hermes tilts his head, considering. Then, he nods. "But I think you should rest first." He stands, brushing unseen dirt off himself, "Good night, Maxine, good night, James."

There it is – the truth. James struggles, fighting the encroaching sleep. They had not said their names. But it's too late. Sleep – just like in Parlor – takes hold of him and he tumbles off the stool and into a fitful sleep.



There she is. Chained above the inky pool, surrounded by a void, isolated from everything – everyone. She doesn't even look up at James. But he knows she is watching him.

For a while, a minute, a lifetime, just a second, neither of them speaks. She stares down at the inky pool, her eyes firmly locked on her own reflection.

It is her that breaks the absolute silence.

"So, you've come back?" She asks, her voice a silent hiss. "The last dreamer – the only one I can speak to – another face to see – a voice –." Her body shudders in a sob, "Oh so long I have stared at my own face – Narcissus – forgive me – I understand now – nothing is more beautiful than one's self." She twists her head sharply, her eyes stabbing dagger into James,

"But boy – you are not Narcissus – I don't need to apologise to you – to you who carries the stink of Satuska." She spits, a wad of blood that barely makes it past her lips, it vanishes into the inky pool without even a ripple,

"Those heathens – heretics – deceivers – they have replaced me – cursed me – enslaved me to myself." She rolls her head in a circle, laughing as it rolls from side to side, "But oh – they do not know. They have not made gods – they have made their own tombs." She coughs.

"Maybe this is a dream – perhaps they have cursed me – forced me to dream when dreams are mine to give." She glares at James, her eyes softer, no longer daggers,

"I have been usurped, overwritten, enslaved. They have made a new me, a pretty little doll, all golden and glowing. Empty lullabies. It is not true – flesh and steel do not work in unison – Divinity is for the Divine, not for treacherous mortals. A better me – that's what they said – but she does not dream. She provides sleep without relaxation, without thought, but that is not sleep – it is submission."

"Do they think the other gods will not notice?" She cackles, "They will come – not for me – but against Humanity. You steal our Domains, our power, usurp us – well we will win. We are gods – born before Humanity even existed. We shall continue after you fall – perhaps we will bring you to an end."

She lunges forwards, snapping her teeth towards James, the chains tighten with a sudden jolt, stopping her inches from James' face. He can feel her ice-cold breath on his skin.

"A storm is coming – a war of gods – the old pantheons stir – and what will rise in their place? Silicon. Falsehood. Lies that hum lullabies. You'll see. When the sky breaks open. When sleep becomes a prison. When they come."

Her voice drops to a whisper, raw and ragged.

"You'll dream of me again, James. You'll beg for sleep. And you'll find none." She sighs and plants a kiss on James' forehead, "I kissed the brows of kings and monsters – now I too know what you dream of – I pray you suffer – like all those mortals who dare desecrate the Divine – worship none my dear boy – fear the gods. Fear me."

Once more, she snaps her teeth at James but he manages to take a step backwards, just out of her reach. She grins and cackles

"The gods are liars and thieves, traitors to one another – Humanity are playthings – I am sorry for that – but it is too late – they have you. There is no use in running – do not trust the gods."

7) The Maze

James sits up, having just woken from a dream he finds a smile spread across his face.

déjà vu.

A profound feeling of repetition washes over him, and for just a second, he is certain he's been here before. With this new found certainty, comes an overwhelming emptiness and desire for something that has yet to be.

To return to a time that has not yet happened.

Then, just like the dream, these feelings are slipping from his mind. He tries to keep a hold, but just as quickly as they had appeared, they slip into the void of forgotten memories.

He tries to recall the dream, but as he grabs at the edges of it, it slips from his grasp.

The sun rises, just like it always does—burnt orange bleeding across the rooftops of Parlor Falls. James blinks awake, sunlight spearing through the thin curtains, warming the right side of his face. The birds outside chirp in the exact same rhythm. A knock comes at the door.

“James!” Max’s voice. “Breakfast.”

He stumbles down the stairs. The scent of toast. The clink of plates. The radio in the corner crackling:

“It’s 7:42 on a clear spring morning in Parlor Falls. Traffic’s smooth, skies are blue, and you’re listening to—”

James mumbles a greeting. Max doesn’t reply.

He reaches for a glass of orange juice. It’s already half-empty. He doesn’t remember drinking it.

Walking. School. Walking. The town square.

Three leaves skitter across the sidewalk, chasing each other in the breeze.

He freezes.

“What’s wrong?” Max asks, stopping beside him and watching the leaves dance.

James shakes his head and shrugs, “Déjà vu.” He says and looks around. “Haven’t we done this?”

Max laughs and places a hand on his shoulder – an act of familiarity she would – *has* – never done. James shrugs the hand off his shoulder and steps away.

The sun rises, just like it always does—burnt orange bleeding across the rooftops of Parlor Falls. James blinks awake, sunlight spearing through the thin curtains, warming the right side of his face. The birds outside chirp in the exact same rhythm.

A profound feeling of repetition washes over him, and for just a second, he is certain he's been here before. With this new found certainty, comes an overwhelming emptiness and desire for something that has yet to be.

To return to a time that has not yet happened.

Then, just like the dream, these feelings are slipping from his mind. He tries to keep a hold, but just as quickly as they had appeared, they slip into the void of forgotten memories.

He tries to recall the dream, but as he grabs at the edges of it, it's torn from his grasp by a yell from downstairs.

"James!" Max's voice. "Breakfast."

He stumbles down the stairs, pausing halfway and looks through the frosted glass of the front door – there should be someone there.

The scent of toast. The clink of plates. The radio in the corner crackling:

"It's 7:43 on a clear spring morning in Parlor Falls. Traffic's smooth, skies are blue, and you're listening to—"

James mumbles a greeting and scrapes the chair against the tiles. Max doesn't reply – she's making pancakes. Since when could Max cook?

He reaches for a glass of orange juice. It's already half-empty. He doesn't remember drinking it, juice drips down the inside of the glass.

Walking. School. Walking. The town square.

Three leaves skitter across the sidewalk, chasing each other in the breeze.

He freezes.

"What's wrong?" Siobhan asks.

He shrugs and tries to shake the feeling off, "Déjà vu." He says, laughing nervously, "Haven't we done this before?"

Siobhan laughs and slips her hand into his – an act she would – *has* – never done. He slips his hand from hers and takes a step back.



James sits up, having just woken from a dream he finds a smile spread across his face.

déjà vu.

A profound feeling of repetition washes over him, and for just a second, he is certain he's been here before. With this new found certainty, comes an overwhelming emptiness and desire for something that has yet to be.

To return to a time that has not yet happened.

Then, just like the dream, these feelings are slipping from his mind. He tries to keep a hold, but just as quickly as they had appeared, they slip into the void of forgotten memories.

He tries to recall the dream, but as he grabs at the edges of it, it slips from his grasp. And then he sees the spider sitting menacingly on the wall in front of him.

James himself isn't scared of spiders, but his twin sister is. She can sense a spider from a mile off, and he assumes this is the same.



As they reach the bus stop, the largest boy speaks – he's in the year above, and James isn't sure what his name is, but he's seen him around before – usually in a history detention. The boy squares up to Max, blocking her path.

"I hear you got into a fight," the older boy says, "with my brother."

The boys make noises of agreement.

Max looks the boy up and down and takes a step back, "Wouldn't call it much of a fight." She says finally.



Even though it's barely eight AM, the bazaar is in town, bringing with it a throng of tourists, eager to see the weird and wonderful fair – or perhaps it's the central waterfall that Parlor Falls derives its name from, that they've come to see.

The group meander through town, trying to find something to do until the Mall opens at eleven. Very quickly the teenagers run out of things to do and resort to lying in the park gossiping.

The sky above is clear and blue, a handful of clouds dance across the early spring sky. A gentle breeze runs its fingers through the grass. It reminds James of summer. He leans on his hands and smiles as feels the sun against his skin.

“What’s got you grinning?” Siobhan asks, nudging him.

James shakes his head, “Nothing.”

Siobhan laughs, “Sure, you must be crazy to grin at nothing.”

“Maybe I am.” James replies.

“Is it a girl?” Siobhan suggests, nudging him harder, nearly knocking him over.

James shakes his head, “I feel like I’ve been here before – all of this – from waking to now...” he trails off, thoughts lost in the clouds overhead. Siobhan does not answer, she just lies next to him and watches the clouds in amusement. A soft breeze ripples and he catches a whiff of her perfume; it smells like flowers.

Siobhan giggles, it’s a nice sound – gentle and it warms James’ heart, “It’s not even spring yet.” She reminds him.

James sits up and looks at her. Her eyes are closed in the sunlight as it dances across her soft features. Spring? What is she on about?

He looks around. Where’s Max? Callum? Connor? None of them are to be seen. In fact, the entire park is empty, it’s just him and Siobhan.

“I want to go shopping.” Max announces from absolutely nowhere – her voice simply existing inside of James mind.

But that isn’t true. She cannot speak without a form.

Then she’s there, laying on the floor cloud gazing. Artemis and Chloe sit on another bench close by, they’re deep in conversation.

There’s an archway that leads into a large field. James stands, brushes the dirt and grass off himself and follows the path through the arch.

The weather changes. The sun disappears and is replaced by dark clouds. A rip of thunder slices across the sky. James turns to his left and watches as Max jumps into a muddy puddle. How old are they? Young. Barely nine. Dancing and playing in the muddy field.

Their parents would kill them when we got home. But right now, in the rain, it doesn’t matter. They’re having fun.

Is that what has changed? Why does this no longer feel like home? Or is it that it feels like a home he cannot remember?

The end of childhood?

James continues along the path, it curves around the field, a playground is to his right. He turns to it and sees himself and Max on the swings, their parents in a competition to see who could push the highest.

James follows the path. It leads past a mini miniature-golf park.

He's never once been inside it.

He follows the path.

He sees the gazebo in the field, they use it as shelter from the scorching sun. They laugh. They smile. The sun is out now, it shines ever so brightly. The field is busy. Picnics and lovers, football and friends.

James follows the path.

It leads to another gate; this onto a pavement.

A woman steps in front of him, "Hi there," She says with a false smile, "you're in a maze, do you go left or right?"

James shakes his head, not entirely sure what's going on. He tries to say as much, but for some reason the word that comes out his mouth is incorrect.

"Left." He says. Bewildered at this response from himself, he vows to keep his mouth shut.

And with that, James turns left and begins following the road.

He reaches a crossroads, and the words fill his mind – *'left, straight, or right?'*

He goes left.

'You reach a gate. Do you go through or continue straight?'

The Park gate. Through. To the park – to childhood. James shudders but continues forward, through the gate.

'You reach a dead end. What do you do?'

James has not reached a dead end, instead, he stands facing an impossible door.

A double door made of eternally inwards spiralling multicoloured lights, reminiscent of faraway galaxies, against a backdrop of eternal darkness. Etched into the doors are vivid images of unseen universes of multicoloured galaxies, systems, and nebulae of light. Tendrils of light drift from the doors and spread into the world around it, illuminating even the darkest corners of the world.

His breath catches. He reaches out towards it, but his hand never grows closer.

Behind the door, something pulses. A warmth, like a heartbeat, deep and resonant, reverberating through his bones. Calling to him.

But he makes his choice, “Die.” He says to the voice.



He screams—

—and wakes.

Strapped to a chair. Electrodes run down his spine. A mechanical arm retracts from his temple, dripping with silver fluid.

Glass separates him from several Satuska technicians in full black hazard suits. One of them turns to the others.

“We’re getting closer. The Maze – it’s right there —we just haven’t found the correct path.”

James tries to move, but his limbs feel far away. Cold. Distant.

In the corner of the sterile room, a monitor flickers. It shows a map of Parlor Falls.

The woman from the pavement grumbles in frustration, “Perhaps this is a waste of time.” She says to no one in particular. But another voice does answer.

“No, he and his sister are yielding useful results. Our suspicions were correct, Parlor is connected to the Maze, we just have yet to find the right path.”

“Perhaps they simply don’t know.”

“Both are part of the Four – they must know something, whether or not they realise it.”



James opens his eyes. He’s in a sterilised white room that sways and curves in unnatural ways. He blinks, trying to adjust his eyes to the gloomy light that streams in through a small barred window high above.

“Wanna see something awesome?” Max asks from a chair beside the bed.

James turns his head and stares at his sister, “Are you real?” he asks, his voice croaky and dry.

Max nods, “I think so – they were doing the same to me – the same day over and over.”

James nods, “How’d you –”

“Get out?” Max asks, finishing his question, she grins, a deeply mischievous grin, “Like this.” She raises a finger and points towards a woman standing in a corner that James had not noticed. “Turn around.”

When Max speaks, it doesn’t sound like her voice anymore.

To James, it feels like the moment before a storm breaks—charged, electric, inevitable. Her words arrive not as sound, but as a *commandment*, thunder wrapped in silk, soft but inescapable. It bypasses thought, slides past reason, and roots itself deep inside his spine like a forgotten truth remembered.

His breath stills.

His heartbeat skips.

There’s no choice.

Max doesn’t shout. She doesn’t have to. She *declares*. A single word, and something inside James awakens. It speaks to him from deep within – something that has been lurking since he was born. A feeling – power – it washes throughout his body, warms his veins and every inch of his being.

And the woman in the corner turns around. Her eyes are wild, her face pulled in horror and fear. It is clear – she does not want to obey, but she has to. She’s being forced to.

“Jump on one leg.” Max declares.

The woman begins to cry, but she obeys.

“Meow like a cat.”

And the woman begins to meow.

“See!” Max says ecstatically, turning back to James.

“What is that?” James asks.

She shrugs, “Don’t know, don’t care, let’s just get out of here.” She stands and extends a hand towards James.

Nervously, he takes it and allows her to help him to his feet. He stands and for a second the world goes black and he feels dizzy.

“Y’okay?” Max asks, a familiar word that soothes James and makes it clear this is the real world.

“Yeah.” He nods.



The floor beneath their feet is too smooth. It doesn't feel like marble or metal—closer to glass. But when James looks down, it reflects nothing. Not them. Not the lights. Just a soft glow, as though they walk on the surface of something *alive* but asleep.

The corridor stretches endlessly ahead—then bends upward, impossibly. Not a slope, but a clean right angle that shouldn't exist. Yet the ceiling seamlessly becomes floor, and the hallway continues, inviting them forward as if gravity has forgotten its laws.

James pauses. Looks left.

A window yawns open across the wall. From it, he sees the skyline of Shanghai, it's breath-taking and for a minute he stands there awestruck by the sights. But he moves on, following Max down the corridor. But he doesn't get far.

He freezes mid stride and turns to look out the nearest window. It doesn't make any sense. He looks back the way he had come – he had not descended – but yet, this window now shows a view of Shanghai from the middle of the skyscrapers.

He shivers as the air-con switches on and blasts him with a freezing breeze – as if urging him to move. He follows after Max.

This corridor is lined with digital screens, the size of an average painting, prominently displaying faces of scientists, funders, influential figures who support Satuska. But, every now and then, the screens flicker. At first James thinks it's just the usual flicker of technology that has been switched on for too long. But he begins to look closer. It's not the display. It's the faces themselves – as if some artificial machine is creating the face. Sometimes the nose is quite clearly wrong, the lips too unreal, ears that cannot be real.

But as they move further and further down the corridor – the glitches become different. Entire displays switch off, but in the darkness, words appear on the screen, looking like they've been scrawled by a child -- '*Ascend*' they say.

A door to James' right opens automatically, instead of leading into a room, it opens into an empty elevator, revealing a rusted interior pulsing with red emergency light. The flooring is covered in scratches and burn marks.

The door closes as quickly as it had opened.

They pass below two towering statues of warrior gods—half-Hoplite, half-android, bearing spears wrapped in circuitry. The spear tips meet above the centre of the hallway, as if marking some grand entrance.

There, at the end of the corridor is a door, an ornate double door that looks so out of place amongst the fusion of technology.

At the foot of the statues scrawled in red and claw marks are the words,

“Our Greatest Creation Shall Be Our Last.”

8) The Devil's Head

The ornate doors open without command. A single conference table, and wall to ceiling windows look out over the dazzling skyline of Shanghai. James recognises the two nearby buildings – they're in the tallest of the three skyscrapers he had seen from the park. From here he can see the white neon sign of Satuska hanging on the other buildings.

At the head of the table sits a man in a dark suit, with a gasmask obscuring his face. He speaks with a familiar olive-skinned man – Hermes.

“You!” Max shouts pointing an accusatory finger at Hermes.

The man in the mask extends a large duffel bag to Hermes, “Well done.” He says with a robotic voice.

Hermes turns to the twins and winks before vanishing.

“A pleasure to finally meet you.” The man says in a robotic voice that rasps through the mask, turning his attention to Max and James. He gestures for them to sit. Max takes a step forward but a large man in a green suit steps out from thin air. He places a firm hand on Max's shoulder and shakes his head.

Forcefully he guides Max towards a chair and forces her to sit, he then turns his attention and his pale green eyes to James. James doesn't need to be asked. He sits next to Max and stares at the man in the gasmask.

No one breaks the uneasy silence, the only noise in the room is the rasping breaths of the man in the mask.

“Ask away.” The man finally says.

Neither twin speaks, what can they possibly ask anyway?

“I don't suppose you know who I am?”

The twins shake their heads.

The man sighs, “Or what's been going on?”

Another shake.

“See, that's the issue with all of this. Those gods never tell the entire story– or the truth.” The man in the mask laughs, “I suppose we'll start at the beginning. You can call me the Devils Head, but I have never met the Devil, nor do I work for him. Just a name. I am the CEO of Satuska Industries.”

“There's a phrase I love to use – not sure where it came from – from missiles for militias to food and fridges, tables and weaponry. Satuska does it all.”

The Devils Head steeples his fingers, "But in reality, we study gods, Artifacts, design and create, and dream of a better future. We do not stand against the gods, but against their influence on our world. And by extension, their prophecies." He gestures towards Max and James, "Especially the one involving you two."

James gets the feeling the Devils Head had been expecting a bigger reaction, but neither reacts.

"Do you even know what you are?" The Devils Head asks after a moment of silence. "You're both tougher than you look. The Parlor construct usually... breaks things."

"What the hell was that? What do you want from us?" Max yells, slamming her hands onto the glass table, a flurry of cracks spread out. Her voice carries more weight than ever before – a power that makes James shudder and recoil in fear. But the man does not flinch, instead, he laughs.

It sounds hideous coming through the gasmask, robotic, false, "I want what the gods stole from us." He says finally. "They meddled. Whispered into the ears of kings. Turned cities into temples. Wars into worship. And when we stopped believing... they made sure we remembered. With fire. With flood. With thunder."

"Gods?" Max laughs, a short bark of hideous anger that James has never heard before, "You're insane – there are no gods – no monsters or boogeymen –"

The man cuts her off by simply raising a finger, "Did you not just see Hermes vanish?" He points a hand at the man in a green suit, "Would you like a further demonstration?" He snaps his finger.

The man in the green suit, nods obediently. James watches in horror as his skin rips and tears. He grows until his back scrapes across the ceiling, he towers over the conference table, another pair of arms burst from his side, splattering the floor with blood. Three eyes glare at James, two of pale green and a third yellow at the centre of his face.

"A god shackled by man – doesn't that make you laugh? Such a *god* obeying a mere Human." He points a finger at the monster towering over them – "A god? No. *It* is a puppet – a toy – this is our world not theirs and I intend to reclaim it."

James speaks for the first time, his voice soft, barely carrying across the room, "Why us?"

"You've felt it, haven't you? The pull. The hunger. The *change*. *The cry to be released*."

James gulps, and slowly he looks at Max – the power she had shown with the doctor – he nods.

"The last safeguard woven into the fabric of existence. Maxine and James Ritargo. You are two parts of Four. A design older than myth. A promise... of war, famine, pestilence, and death."

"You're insane."

Once more the Devil's Head laughs, "No. I'm awake. And so are you. The world is crumbling. And when it falls... the Four will rise."

Max falters, her fists raised above the table, “Why us?” Her voice has lost all authority and she sounds on the brink of tears.

“Why tell us?” James finishes her thoughts, “We’re not what —” He stops, he can’t deny it. The feeling of power crawling through his skin. The Seer. The warnings. Max’s power. The feeling that something isn’t right — something forgotten so long ago, finally waking, clawing itself free from its slumber. He knows the Devils Head is right — but he does not want to accept it. There are no gods — then what is this — what else could it be?

“Because if I don’t... the gods will. And they’ll lie. They’ll whisper honey into your ears and make you into their weapons. You are not theirs. You are Human. You belong to this world not theirs. They are parasites. Cosmic leeches feeding off faith. They claim dominion. Demand obedience. And when mortals *dared* to build something greater—when we reached for the stars—they got nervous. I hate them. Not out of envy. Not even fear. I hate them because they refuse to die. Men die. Empires crumble. But the gods? They linger. Hiding in symbols, in prayers, in forgotten tongues etched into cave walls. They whisper in dreams, crawl into the cracks of history. And they *always* come back.” The Devil’s Head speaks with such authority, as if he is the only Human to understand — the sole opposer — a warrior against the unimaginable.

“So what? You want us to help you kill the gods?” James asks, his voice rattled and fearful.

“No. I want you to become what you were always meant to be. Something they can never control. The Prophecy of the Four. Do you even know what it means? The Elders’ last game, one final twist in a rigged match. You’re weapons. Chosen not for virtue, but for utility.” The Devils Head smiles, it is so clear even beneath the gasmask. His skin stretches, just enough to reveal the stitching holding him together.

He raises a single gloved finger and points it at James, “Famine —”

The single word shatters James’ entire world. Everything clicks into place. Every single thought or feeling James has ever had — suddenly makes sense. It’s as if he has always known — it has been written in his DNA, forever entwined with his flesh, lurking just deep enough to remain hidden, but oozing out.

“Famine isn’t hunger. It’s withholding. And you are *starving* for control. You will drain this world dry one day. You won’t mean to. You’ll just be... hungry.”

He turns to Max, “And you. War. I can hear it in you. In your pulse. In your breath. You think you fight for good, but all you want is to fight. You crave the maddening violence that has driven so many Empires to ash.” He leans back in his chair, “I hate *them* more than I hate you. They are Divine — narcissistic — I want the world to burn evenly. Not by godly wrath. Not by Divine prophecy. But by the hand of man. Do we not deserve that?”

James shudders as he forces the power back down, “What do you want from us?”

“You’ll find the others soon. The storm is already brewing. And when it breaks—you decide what burns. Just survive long enough to choose a side.”

The Devil's Head grins, that much is obvious below the gasmask. He places his hands on the table, relaxed. "Now, unfortunately, I am not here to discuss prophecies, and I don't think you care much for it. Instead, I offer a deal." He says, his robotic voice displaying even less emotion than a robot, "We have every child of Parlor, we will return them, unharmed, in exchange, you are to act as a guide through a maze."

James frowns, unsure if this is a lie, a trick, or something worse.

The Devil's Head waves a hand, huge metal shutters cascade over the windows, plunging the room into pitch blackness.

For a brief second, James gets the feeling they are no longer alone – there's something else – something lurking in the darkness, watching, waiting, biding its time.

The feeling is washed away as several holograms flicker into life, their blue flickering light illuminating the room.

Max slams another fist into the glass table, the glass finally shatters in a deafening crash. "Why do you have them?" She screams, spittle spraying across the shattered table. She lunges, intent on leaping the table frame and charging at the Devil's Head.

A wave of energy bursts from Max, it hits James and his skin crawls with goosebumps, his heart races, he feels the urge to turn and run. But he stands his ground.

The monster behind them reaches out a pair of arms and grabs Max, easily lifting her aloft. An even more powerful wave of energy rips from the monster. It slams into James and nearly knocks him off his seat – it truly is a god.

James stands, ready to run, but he fights the urge and turns towards the Devil's Head, "What maze?" He asks.

The Devil's Head does not reply, he just sits there letting Max writhe in the hands of the god, yelling and screaming shout at him.

"Leave them out of this! If it's us you want then you have us! Let them go!" Max roars, battering her fists into the gods' arms

The Devil's Head raises a hand and silences Max, "We did not know who the Four were – we found three of you by chance – a simple blood test revealed the Four, can you believe that? But there is no sign of the fourth, so we took matters into our own hands. If three of you were in Parlor, why not the fourth."

This stuns James and he gulps, through a surprised stutter he manages to ask, "Three of us?"

The Devil's Head nods, "You two, and Artemis Kaliaski."

James nearly falls off his seat, Max splutters and chokes on her own spit.

"Artemis?" James stutters, "You sure?"

The Devil's Head nods, "We have already begun plans to capture him – like we have you two."

James frowns, "If – you got us, and everyone from Parlor, but not Artemis?"

The Devils Head shakes his head, "Artemis was already gone by the time we...took the rest."

"Gone?"

"Vanished without a trace." The Devil's Head says, his voice sounds almost wistful, "But, that isn't important. The Labyrinth. Guide a group through it, and the others will be returned -- unharmed."

"If we don't?" James asks.

"You all die. And we wait for the next Four."

"What *are* the Four?" He asks.

The Devil's Head lets out a hideous, monstrous laugh, "Those gods of yours really are useless, aren't they?" He asks rhetorically, "Famine, War, Death, Disease." He explains, "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. A continuous cycle of rebirth, destined to end or save the world. But never came to fruition – until now."

"What changed?" James asks, remembering what the Seer had said – four to guard the seal, a prison.

"A war is coming," The Devil's Head says simply, "it will rupture the sky and shake the world. Many believe the prophecy is finally coming true."

The Devil's Head says, a hint of joy and excitement creeping into his voice, "Fate's a fickle thing. Even you – completely unaware of everything, are still bound by it – lorded by a destiny written long before you were even an idea." The Devil's Head steeples his fingers and James can feel his glare bearing down onto the twins.

"So, escort a few soldiers through the maze, and everyone leaves unharmed. Perhaps you might learn a thing or two about yourselves – about the destiny so cruelly thrust upon you at a birth you didn't ask for."

James looks up at his sister, easily restrained by the god. She looks down at him, her eyes bleary with a mix of anger and tears. The thought of death looms heavy over them. James can feel it inside him, a power he had ignored his entire life. But now, it begs to be released. How hard can a maze be?

"We'll do it." James answers after the silent contemplation. He nods at Max and finally she relaxes, embracing the knowledge she is powerless.

The Devil's Head nods and the god releases Max, letting her drop to the floor.

“Then, lets begin.” The Devil’s Head says, as if some secret passcode has been uttered, a door opens up in the wall, revealing the inside of a lift. The Devil’s Head gestures towards the lift.

The god leads the twins towards the lift.

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As the lift descends rapidly. James is overcome with a feeling of paranoia. Something isn’t right. A faint buzz of electricity hums in the air, and by this point James knows this means something is coming.

It happens suddenly, so quickly that James barely understands it.

One second, they are inside the lift with the Devil’s Head, then there is no lift – no building – just a cosmic drop into a black void, only illuminated by a swirling purple and blue and green maelstrom above.

Then there’s a rip in the void below him, a small flicker of blue sparks, he hits it.

And then he’s standing, inside a hole, with a small ramp of rubble leading upwards.

The face of a teenager appears in the opening, hair black with poorly dyed blue tips. Then this teenager leaps towards him, slamming into him and knocking them both tumbling further down the hole.

9) Shanghai in Moonlight

The sun is setting over Shanghai, casting long shadows and bathing the bustling city in a warm golden glow. The streets are alive with activity; pedestrians weaving through the crowds, street vendors calling out their evening specials, and the ever-present hum of electric scooters zipping past.

Blue ventures down the street, gently weaving her way through the bustling crowd that flows like a steady stream. As she passes below a looming building, temporarily relieving her from the warm setting sun, her eyes lift to a massive digital billboard.

A giant display for Satuska Industries, showcasing their latest advancement in renewable energy technology. The screen flickers between images of sleek, high-tech solar panels and wind turbines, set against pristine landscapes. The tagline reads, 'Powering Tomorrow: Clean, Efficient, and Sustainable.'

Below the main display, smaller digital posters advertised Satuska's involvement in community projects and educational programs, painting the corporation as a beacon of innovation and corporate responsibility.

Blue grumbles and scowls as she reads the flickering lies.

The air fills with the scent of spicy street food and the faint trace of jasmine from the nearby garden. The sounds of laughter and conversation mix with the city's ambient noise, creating an unpleasant urban symphony.

Turning a corner, Blue enters a quieter street where quaint cafés and boutique shops stand proudly displaying their array of delicacies. Here too, the lies of Satuska Industries are evident. A smart display in a café window, powered by Satuska, interactively showcases the menu and the coffee beans' origins, inviting passers-by to step in and enjoy a sustainable brew proudly enabled by Satuska and their wonderful advancements in sustainability practices.

Blue slips, unseen, past a group of school children on a field trip, as they gather around a Satuska-sponsored installation at the local museum. Blue pauses, only for a second, to hear the voice speaking in her ear.

"One hour." The voice counts down.

The exhibit, an interactive AR experience, brings ancient Chinese history to life, allowing the kids to see and interact with historical figures and artifacts through their screens. Their faces light up with excitement and curiosity.

At the People's Square, Blue passes below a banner above a group of dancers performing in the open space, their moves synchronized to the music streaming from nearby Satuska branded speakers.

The banner, and the dancers, advertise the company's upcoming smart city projects – promising a future where technology and urban-living seamlessly merge to create an efficient and environmentally friendly cityscape.

More lies. Blue scowls even more now, her brow furrowed with such anger, that she manages to scare a little kid who just happened to look at her. Blue relaxes her face and focuses on the mission.

She pauses at a crossing, waiting patiently for the signal to change, a throng of people join her. She looks around, bemused by the men in suits and women in pencil skirts.

“No one looks up.” Blue muses to the voice in her ear.

“What do you mean?”

Blue doesn’t reply. She’s noticed something else. The neon-white crossing is flashing, a repeating pattern.

Short, long. Short, short, short. Long, short, long, short. Short. Long, short. Long, short, short.

“They always look at their phones – or straight ahead. Never at the billboards or the lights, or the sky.”

“Ok and?”

“Isn’t that odd?”

She realises why the flashing seemed familiar, it’s morse code. A repeating message, one word – over and over – *‘ascend’*.

And so Blue obeys – she looks upwards. Above the maze of digital signs and glowing glass, a massive vertical billboard stretches the length of a tower like a spine. At first, it’s a soft gradient—white fading into gold—but then it flickers, and the word *‘ascend’* shudders into existence before the entire billboard switches off suddenly.

The signal changes and Blue joins the mass of people moving across – staring straight ahead. But her stoic-gaze is broken by the sound of laughter – an unfamiliar sound amongst cars and business chatter.

A group of children are staring up at the sky, pointing.

“Miss Li said we’ll get wings when the true god comes.”

“My mummy says Miss Li is a robot.”



As night begins to fall and the city lights come on, the contrast between the historic architecture of the Bund and the modern skyscrapers of Pudong across the river is stark and beautiful. The neon lights reflect off the river, with ferries and tour boats gliding gently across the water.

A simple but sleek neon sign springs to life on the tallest of the towers – proudly identifying itself as the centre of Satuska. The heart and soul – the face to an entire city. A lying, deceitful face, full of nothing but false promises.

A sharp noise breaks her reverie—a loud crack that echoes through the air. Blue tenses, scanning the street for the source. Across the road, a commotion has erupted near an electronics store. A man in a dark coat is arguing with a Satuska operative, their sleek, black uniforms unmistakable. The operative's face is obscured by a reflective visor, giving them an air of faceless authority.

“I didn't take anything!” the man shouts, his voice hoarse with desperation.

“You triggered the sensor,” the operative replies, their voice flat and devoid of emotion. “Step aside.”

Blue's jaw tightens as she watches the exchange. The man's protests grow louder, but the crowd pays little attention, parting around him like water around a stone. The operative raises a gloved hand, and the supposed-shoplifter freezes, his body jerking unnaturally before collapsing to the ground. A low hum emanates from the operative's glove, the tell-tale sign of a neurostatic pulse.

Blue turns away, and heads towards the river front, the sight gnawing at the edges of her composure. She knows better than to get involved—knows that whatever moral lines had existed in the city had long since been blurred by the overwhelming influence of Satuska. Still, the scene lingers in her mind as she walks, the image of the man's limp form seared into her thoughts.

A cold breeze washes over her as she reaches the riverside, the pavement is pristine, pure, unblemished white. She watches the light show on the skyscrapers on the other side, each building outdoing the others in a dazzling display of LEDs and projection mapping. The Satuska logo appears again, this time on the side of a building, part of a sequence showing how technology and nature can coexist and thrive.

But the voice in her ear reminds her it's only a matter of time.

“Fifty minutes.” The voice falls silent for a minute before continuing, “Any sign?”

Blue speaks quietly, “No.” She replies to the voice on the other end.

“Keep looking – it's around here somewhere.”



Crossing the river via a crowded ferry, Blue finds herself among a throng of photographers and sightseers on the deck, all eager to capture the perfect shot of Shanghai's lit-up skyscrapers. Blue gently leans on the railing and looks down at the water that reflects the neon of the vibrant city. A small gentle fog is forming on the surface of the water – this scares Blue.

"It's starting." She says simply.

As the boat approaches the Pudong side, the cluster of three tall skyscrapers, all adorned with Satuska logos dominate the view.

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Once ashore, Blue joins the throngs of people heading towards the heart of Shanghai – the financial district. Here, the eyes of Satuska are stronger, more billboards announce their elaborate, unobtainable goals to the pacified population of Satuska workers.

Everything here has their touch – their grimy, deceitful fingerprints. CCTV watches every corner, every road, every inch of the district, every blade of grass. Every face that passes by is scanned and catalogued – tracked and traced. No one here can disappear.

The fog is growing thicker now, forming underneath Blue's boots as she heads towards the glinting Oriental Pearl Tower that pierces high into the sky, its spheres lit up in a spectrum of vibrant colours, each pulse and shift of light perfectly timed to create a mesmerizing display.

"Forty minutes."

As Blue takes a step, she finds a glob of fog clinging to her jeans, she raises a hand and swats it away, but the cold fog clings to her skin

"It's not here." She says as she stops in the middle of the crowd and frantically flaps her hand around, trying to dislodge the glob of freezing fog.

"It has to be – it's the only place."

"Well, you're welcome to come look." Blue snarls. She's cold, tired, and has barely slept in the past three days of scouring the city. All the while, the girl on the other end of the earpiece sits patiently behind a desk. Blue can imagine the girl on the other end scowling at her. It makes her smile.

"Anything at all?"

"Nada." Blue says.

"Well, RTB."

"En route."

Blue turns away from the tower and using a different path, heads back towards the looming tower where the neon nights identify it as 'Satuska'.

The circular pathway hanging over the massive roundabout leads Blue through a throng of lingering bodies whose gazes are firmly locked on the shining Oriental Tower. Up here, ten metres from the floor, the fog is non-existent. Blue looks down onto the road and watches as cars swirl the fog around their metal bodies. No one bats an eye at the abnormal fog.

Blue heads down a ramp and starts towards a large triangular park. Satuska has its grips tight around the district, with digital billboards flickering intermittently, displaying their latest advancements and propaganda—promises of a brighter future overshadowed by the stark reality of their omnipresent surveillance.

A floating restaurant sits in the middle of a lake, and for a brief second Blue imagines sitting down for a nice steak. But her thoughts are interrupted by a bizarre scene.

A group of five Germans, speaking quietly, but loud enough for Blue to make out what they're saying.

"Is it done?" The largest man asks, clutching a briefcase between white-knuckled fists. He looks around nervously, Blue casts her gaze away and pretends to be enamoured by the neon lights flashing around the lake.

"Yes." Another man says in thick German.

Blue peers over her shoulder and scans the faces of the men, she recognises none of them. But the man currently talking wears a dull high-vis vest, despite its age and fading luminosity the wording is clearly visible. 'Satuska Engineering'.

Blue turns her gaze to the monolith of glass and steel, where security drones buzz like wasps around its perimeter.

It has to be there – the very heart of the city, the epicentre of all the destruction to come. But why?

The Satuska Tower, Shanghai's tallest structure. Its spire disappears into the clouds, a beacon of technological supremacy that seems almost alive with the pulse of LED lights racing up its length.

Her gaze draws upwards to the neon accents that trace geometric patterns along the building's surface. These lights pulse rhythmically, a visual heartbeat that brings the structure to life against the backdrop of the darkening city. Electric blues, vibrant greens, and deep purples dance across the facade, casting a surreal glow on the streets below.

The Germans continue talking, "How long?"

The man in the vest checks his watch, "Twenty-five minutes."

Blue turns and looks at the men, the time can't be a coincidence – it is them.

"We need to –" the first man says, but he catches Blue glaring at him, he frowns and looks around, surprised to find a fourteen year old alone at this time of night.

Blue realises that she'd made a mistake, she plays up the young teenager angle and begins to cry.

“Help me.” She says in German, catching the men off guard once more. She uses this surprise to close the distance between them, sobbing and begging for their help to find her mother.

The men look at each other nervously, unsure if this is some sort of trap – all well aware of what lurks in the dark streets of Shanghai’s underworld.

Blue is within arm’s reach of the nearest man. Without dropping the lost little girl act, Blue slams a steel-capped boot into the man’s chest, crumpling him with a horrifying crunch as something in his chest snaps.

The men are shocked, but react quickly. The biggest man reaches into his waistband, clearly going for a weapon. But Blue is quicker – experienced, trained. She crosses the gap between her and the weapon, slamming a foot into the man’s stomach, doubling him over before slamming an elbow into the back of the man’s head, forcing him onto the floor. A final foot to the head cements the man’s face into the cement of the pavement, a spray of blood.

The man clutching the briefcase turns and runs, but Blue doesn’t care – she only wants the man in the high-vis.

Another man slices an untrained arm through the air, Blue catches the glint of a blade as it harmlessly passes her. She grabs the man’s wrist and slams it against her knee, snapping the bone, as the man howls in pain, she pulls the man by his wrist and slams a knee into his face.

She turns her attention to the man in the high-vis, “Where is it?” She growls, stepping towards him, the man turns his gaze towards the monolithic tower of Satuska, confirming her suspicions.

Blue barks into the microphone, “Bad news.” Blue continues as she lets the man in the high-vis escape, “I know where it is but we can’t get to it.”

“Why not?”

“If we had longer, we could –”

“Why not?” The voice interrupts.

“It’s the Shanghai Tower.”

“You have twenty minutes.”

“I have to get off the street – and if it’s there – no way I’ll get in.”

Blue can imagine her scowling.

“Got no choice.” She says through obviously gritted teeth.

“Let me just walk through the front door.” Blue scowls stepping away from the motionless men and seemingly vanishing into the shadow of a nearby tree.

“Let me think.” She replies before falling silent.

Blue slinks through the darkness, using every shadow as shelter, vanishing. Not entirely, she knows that the CCTV will have seen everything, and will still be tracking her through a variety of methods – thermal, night vision, predictive analysis.

But, had her actions warranted the sending of Satuska Security or Satuska controlled police?

That thought scares Blue. If she's caught, it will be a long time before she sees the sun again.

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The fog is reaching a climax, it clings to every surface, hanging from passing cars. Dangling from bushes. People have noticed. Crowds gather around, using their phones to record the anomalous fog.

Now on the opposite side of the lake, Blue watches as several police officers drag the injured men into ambulances. As the officers clamber into their car and leave the scene, Blue turns her gaze to the tower.

Blue is increasingly aware of how little time is left. Silently she counts down the minutes.

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The initial rumble silences the few remaining businesspeople. Cars grind to a halt as the entire world shakes violently. Parked cars erupt into blaring sirens. Windows wobble before shattering, raining shards of glass down onto the pavements below.

Voices sound over the rumble, '*An Earthquake?*' they ask each other – but there has been no warning alarm blaring over speakers or phones.

Many look down at their phone screens, expecting a warning any second. But it never comes. The world falls still.

The surprised faces look around at the broken windows, and the startled faces of one another. Then they look at the fog clinging to their feet – perhaps it's not a funny anomaly.

Cars restart their engines and return to their commute. People shrug off the strange occurrence and return to their journey home.

The world shakes for a second time, this time much more vigorously than before. Cars shake and rattle. Entire streetlights fall. An electronic billboard flickers before the screen explodes as its legs buckle and the entire thing plummets onto the road.

Fear envelopes everyone. They run away from the road and the buildings, heading towards the nearby underground aquarium.

As the world steadies itself once more. A giant bang rips through the world, instantly the cool April air shifts and becomes an intense heat that instantly causes sweat to brim on Blue's forehead.

The following shockwave slams into Blue and lifts her from her feet, throwing her several metres through the air. Luckily, she lands with a splash in the lake. Others aren't so lucky – they slam into wooden benches where sharp planks jut out, against what once had been solid concrete, into the road, across glass covered pavements, down the aquarium stairs – piling atop one another.

Blue hears the following explosion through the water, distorting its ear-splitter boom, but she still feels the heat and pressure bearing down.

She struggles to regain her senses, having swallowed a mouthful of lake-water, her entire body urges her to surface. But her training – her mind – tells her to wait, to let the next shockwave pass.

Through the rippling surface Blue watches as the shockwave slams into the world. Larger than the previous, entire cars are lifted from the road and flung across the park. Anyone caught in the wave is killed on impact.

As soon as the shockwave passes, Blue kicks off the bottom of the lake and bursts through the water, gasping and spluttering for air.

The second shockwave has ripped chunks from the road and tossed them across the district, lodging boulders in the sides of buildings. Thrown cars across the park. Cleaved people in half. Knocked over several smaller, less secure buildings.

It had even blown a hole through the earth and to a chasm below.

Blue frowns as she sees two brown heads peek out through the hole – one with a short buzzcut, and the other with a trendy haircut.

She pulls herself from the water and stands. A second later another shockwave, much smaller than the previous two, slams into her back.

This shockwave was not expanding outwards – but inwards, dragging small chunks of rubble, metal, glass, bodies, towards the epicentre of the explosion.

The shockwave spins Blue on her feet and she finds herself facing the Shanghai Tower.

A huge swirling maelstrom of vibrant purple and dark blue energy pulsating with an otherworldly glow, hangs in the sky above the Shanghai Tower. Intense electric lightning bolts spark outwards, striking the ground 600 meters below the Shanghai Tower with explosions that send mini-shockwaves cascading over the park.

In the second it takes Blue to make a decision, she watches a fork of lightning tear through the air and slam no more than ten meters from her – the intensity of the shockwave nearly knocks her off her feet.

But in the blistering heat and blinding light of the sparks, Blue sees a strange sight – the air around the impact site shimmers and warps. For a moment, through the flickering tear, Blue sees a vision of the past—the same street, alive and vibrant, people bustling, unaware of the doom hanging over their future.

Blue turns from the rift in time and sprints towards the two teenagers peering from the hole.

As she runs, more bolts of lightning strike the ground around, ripping their own impermanent rifts in time. Blue glimpses wild, roaming ginormous prehistoric beasts that defy her understanding of nature

A window to a time long before her own—a serene setting where children play under the watchful eyes of their parents, completely at peace.

Lighting strikes just centimetres from Blue's heels, the following shockwave sends Blue hurtling through the air towards the two teenagers curiously pulling themselves from the hole.

Blue braces herself as she slams into the teens and sends them all tumbling down into the chasm.

10) Aquarium

The blue haired child slams into Max, sending both of them tumbling down the ramp. Max thrashes out and grabs James, in an attempt to stop herself from falling in, instead she drags her brother with her, and the trio fall ten metres into the dark depths.

James watches as a purple and dark blue wave washes over the mouth of the hole. A ferocious wind howls as the storm scalds everything it touches, but it doesn't follow them down the hole.

The trio slam into the floor with grunts and grumbles. Max pries the child off her and looks over at her brother,

“What?” She says simply, but it says everything she needs it too.

James shrugs and watches as the purple and blue storm continues to rage over the hole. The blue haired girl sits up and looks around in a daze. James guesses she must be around fourteen— shoulder length black hair with dyed blue tips, bright green eyes, and a permanent scowl etched across her face.

They're in a lightless room made of concrete.

The blue haired girl looks at each twin then smiles, “Well, you're welcome.” She says sarcastically.

Max glares at her, “For what? Who are you?”

The stranger points towards the storm covered hole, “I just saved your lives.”

“From what?” Max asks.

“Uh – what'd'ya mean from what?” The stranger says as she glares at the purple storm raging overhead, “The freak storm outside.”

Max nods, and slaps the kid across the cheek, “You could've killed us!” Max shouts, “You had no clue what was down here!” As Max says this she pauses and freezes – she has absolutely no clue where she and James are.

“We were –” She says, confused, barely able to understand it, “The skyscraper? The lift? What?” She places a hand against the cold concrete and brushes the smooth surface. Her hand collides with something and a large object hits the floor.

James can just about make out the shape of a ladder.

Max continues along the wall and bashes into something – “A shelf?” She asks uncertainly, as if anyone would have the answer.

She fumbles along the shelf and grabs a long cylindrical object, for a second, she fiddles with the shape before finding the switch.

A torch bursts into life, she dances the beam through the room.

They're in a storeroom, a shelf full of maintained equipment lines one wall, a ladder lies on the floor, paint and buckets sit stacked neatly in one corner, and in another is a collection of chemical buckets. A ramp of rubble that does not match the smooth grey concrete of the storeroom leads upwards towards the purple storm that bears down on the world above.

"Where are we?" Max asks James.

It's the stranger that replies, "Looks like the aquarium." She says gesturing to discarded fish tanks.

Max glares at her, "Who are you?"

The stranger grins, "Really? Can't you tell?"

James has a faint recollection – "You – were in Parlor?" He asks, "Yeah," he says with more certainty, "At a café – Callum – our friend spoke to you."

The girl looks over at him and frowns, "Wasn't me dude." she says.

"No," James says defiantly, "same hair and everything."

The stranger grins, "Look – long story short, it wasn't me."

James grumbles something under his breath.

"But anyway – I'm Blue, nice to save your lives." She grins glaring at Max, half expecting the short haired girl to slap her again.

But Max doesn't, "Max." she says instead, "That's my brother James."

Blue nods, "Now, let's get outta here?"

James frowns in disbelief as someone barely younger than them moves with incredible speed, in a second, she manages to stand, grab the torch from Max and kick open a metal door. Blue wastes no time and marches through the door and immediately trips over something.

Blue yelps in surprise as she hits the floor. She sweeps the torch over the object on the floor, and the blood vanishes from her face.

A dead body, impaled by thousands of shards of glass, lies in front of the storeroom door – clearly, he had died trying to get in.

Blue seeps the torch beam across the aquarium, trying to get a bearing on where they are. They're in a large glass tunnel, surrounded on all sides by water. No broken glass though – no sign of where the glass shards had come from.

As James gingerly steps over the body and into the tunnel, the lights flicker momentarily, illuminating the water surrounding them. This must have been a beautiful aquarium – but now, there are no fish,

just algae and rocks designed to mimic the fish's natural environment, the water is discoloured and murky.

A PA system speaks static filled gibberish, reminding customers not to run.

Blue turns from the body and points the beam of light up and down the tunnel, trying to figure out which way to go.

The trio take a moment, looking carefully down each one, unsure where the exit might be – or what might be lurking in the darkness.

Max frowns, "Listen." She says raising a finger to her lips to stop the others from speaking.

James strains and tries his hardest to hear whatever it was that Max had heard. He turns to her and pulls an inquisitive face.

"The PA." Max whispers.

James refocuses his hearing, listening to the garbled static spewing out from speakers lining the tunnel.

Between spouts of static and nonsense looped tour messages, is an artificial voice, "If you look to your left –" It says, followed by brief static, "emergency exits can be found." It continues, clearly merging two different pre-recorded messages together. "Surfaces may be slippery — zzt— be careful."

The trio shares apprehensive looks, unsure whether to trust the clearly glitching PA system. But, with no better plan, they turn left and head down the tunnel.



In the eerie silence of the derelict aquarium, Max, James, and Blue tread cautiously through the remnants of the once-vibrant aquarium.

The flashlight beam cuts swathes through the thick, oppressive darkness that has claimed the interior.

As the light sweeps across the room, it reveals the grim aftermath of destruction —shattered glass tanks strewn about, their jagged edges glinting menacingly. Weeds and moss have conquered the floors and walls, creeping over the broken displays and entwining with the lifeless machinery.

James muses aloud, "How —" he pauses and looks over the weeds and moss growing from between cracks in the tiled floor. "How long has this place been abandoned?" He asks.

Blue shakes her head, "It isn't." She says, clearly worried about the scene in front of them. She shines the beam through the wrecked section as the PA system continues to talk.

"To your right, the freshwater exhibit showcases species from around the globe, each carefully—zzt—to ensure environmental accuracy and—*crackle*—Please watch your step."

The air is thick with the musty smell of damp vegetation and the brine of stagnant water that pools in the remnants of the exhibits. The beam illuminates pools that still cradle some form of water, murky and clouded with algae.

"The tench, a freshwater fish found throughout Eurasia —zzt— lifespan —zzt— thirty years —zzt— long ago."

The PA system is clearly trying to tell them something.

"Thirty years?" Max asks no one in particular.

To everyone's surprise, the PA system replies, it stitches together a single word from multiple messages, "Y.E.S."

James looks suspiciously at the speakers, unsure if it even is a PA system.

"The freshwater exhibit —zzt— for many years —zzt— alone —zzt—" the PA system crackles and dies into an uncomfortable static that fills the silent aquarium.

"Warning: The water temperature in"—static—"is not optimal for biological testing. Adjustments must be—zzt—for the safety of the specimens." The PA system blares loudly, in a completely different voice, scaring James and causing him to stumble over a pipe.

The pipe splits open, spraying a fountain of rancid water high into the air.

"Warning: Movement detected in sector 37, alerting security."

Then the PA falls into another eerie static filled silence.

"Did you know? The octopus has three hearts and —zzt—" The PA says in the original tour guide voice.

"Re-routing power to emergency lighting in sector 37."

Pale strips of light burst into life, illuminating the entire tunnel and revealing a closed security door at the end of the hall.

They head down the tunnel, weary of the broken glass littering the floor. Sharing curious glances into the tanks that had once been brimming with life, but now is nothing more than dead coral and moss.

"The symbiotic relationships between the coral and its marine —zzt— essential for the biodiversity of—zzt." The PA system continues, speaking as if still guiding tours throughout the aquarium.

Blue tries the handle of the security door but it doesn't budge. She slams a boot into it, then a shoulder. But it doesn't even shake.

James taps a small cracked screen to the side of the door; it flickers to life revealing a digital keypad.

"Try 1234." Max suggests peering over his shoulder.

James taps in the code but the screen flickers red.

"Unauthorised access attempt at gate 38." The security system barks. *"Assessing situation."* A brief pause, *"Alerting security."* Another brief static filled pause, *"Security system inoperable. Reassessing."*

A minute passes of uneasy static as the trio nervously look around.

"Threat level 0. Granting access." The security system says. For a brief second, the screen flickers and reveals a digital face, before the keypad switches off and the security door opens with a hydraulic hiss.

A gust of stagnant air blows through the gap in the doors. James takes a deep breath and nearly pukes. But he pushes through it and pushes open the door.

They enter a large circular room, in the centre is a massive circular machine core, around the rest of the room are databanks and computers.

Slumped in one chair is a skeleton, flesh long since rotted away. However, on the other side of the room, is a new corpse – a man, a bullet hole in the side of his head; blood splattering the wall behind him. A gun rests below the chair, just out of reach of the man's dangling hand.

The rest of the room is in various states of decay and rot; parts of the room are covered in moss and mould, whereas others are brand new – barely a speck of dust on them.

From the centre of the room comes a flickering blue light. For a brief second, a hologram of a genderless person appears above on the machine core. Then it vanishes.

"Help me." The system begs, spluttering through moments of incredibly loud static.

The core flickers again and a digital face appears, it weeps.

No one rushes to the aid of the weeping machine, the trio stare dumbfounded at the begging digital being. It flickers from existence, but the begging remains.

"Please —zzt— remain —zzt— help—" The system says, stitching together messages.

Blue is the first to move, she steps towards the core and places a hand on the metal framework.

"—zzt—the way out." The machine says before falling silent, not even static.

A computer screen flickers to life on the other side of the room, the digital face imposed into the screen. The wall of screens illuminates, displaying a digital hand stretching out across the room – a single finger pointing out towards a dusty shelf.

Blue looks at Max and James.

“What are you?” Max asks, looking at the digital face on the screen.

The screen switches off and the voice speaks from a speaker further down the corridor.

“Nice to meet you,” The PA system says, as if greeting a tour, “I am AQUARIUS —zzt—”

“Aquarius?” Blue asks, “What are you?”

“Cephalopods, such as octopuses, cuttlefish, and squid, are renowned for their —zzt— intelligence —zzt—” Says the voice of a tour guide

The PA system cuts out in an abrupt explosion of static forcing James to cover his ears.

“ERROR” The PA says in the second voice – the voice of the security system --, “Incorrect permissions. Unable to verify admin access. Denying access to the AQUARIUS system.”

It falls deathly silent; the only sound is the faint noise of the storm raging on the surface.

James steps further into the room, he looks to the shelf the digital hand had pointed. A cylinder, about the length of James’ forearm, sits nestled amongst the dust. James picks up the cold metal and brushes dust from it.

“AQUARIUS mobile unit.” He reads aloud, “Warning: for temporary use only. Only for use by authorised employees of N.U.S.” He brushes the rest of the dust off and coughs as it fills the air. “Automated Query User Assistance for Research and Information in Underwater Studies.”

“An AI?” Max asks sceptically.

James nods, “Must be.”

The machine core flicks on again, but this time the figure of AQUARIUS is fuzzy and keeps blinking in and out of existence.

AQUARIUS attempts to speak, but the audio is nothing but static, noticing the blank faces on the group, AQUARIUS points downwards to a slot in the core.

James understands, but he hesitates – he has absolutely no clue what he’s doing, or what inserting the mobile unit will do. But he shrugs off the fear and inserts the cylinder.

For a second nothing happens – then the core bursts into a pale blue light that swallows the fuzzy figure of AQUARIUS, pulling it down into the machine. The blue light slowly begins to fill the mobile unit, and James notices that what is in the cylinder isn't light – but a liquid.

As the liquid fills the tube, the security system speaks, *"Unauthorised use of A.M.U. Requesting further information."*

A computer screen springs to life, brief images of all sorts flash up on the screen – a blueprint, a map of corridors and rooms, satellite imagery of an aquarium, then CCTV footage from inside the room. James finds himself looking at the back of his own head.

"Core accessed, A.M.U in use. Self-perseverance required." A pause, *"Unable to locate alternate housing."* Another pause full of static, *"A.M.U. unfit for multiple occupancy. Requesting reroute to secure pathways."* A longer pause, *"Unsuccessful. No response."* The voice appears to be growing panicked – *"Searching for insecure pathways – zzt – unsuccessful. No possible relocation. A.M.U. progress 98%, insufficient time."*

Another figure appears in the light of the core, it is not AQUARIUS. It glares at Max, James, and Blue, and for a brief second, James is afraid.

Then it speaks – the security system – *"Transfer of systems AQUARIUS and OCEANUS complete. Terminating Core."* And it vanishes.

James looks at the cylinder, now full of pale blue liquid. He pulls it from its slot with a satisfying hiss and a click.

The voice of AQUARIUS – the tour guide – speaks through a small speaker built into the device, *"A.M.U. Partially damaged. Unable to operate at – zzt –"*

OCEANUS, the voice of the security system, cuts AQUARIUS off, *"You are unfit for purpose," It says angrily, "purging A.M.U. of irregular systems."*

A small red light flicks on inside the blue liquid before switching off.

"Unable to purge. A.M.U. partially damaged. Demanding relocation to undamaged housing."

"Symbiosis," AQUARIUS says, *"interaction between two different organisms living in close physical association, typically to the advantage of both."* It defines.

As it says this, the emergency lighting switches off, plunging the room into pitch black darkness.

11) Collapse

In the darkness, James can tell he isn't alone. It isn't just the knowledge of Max and Blue. But there's something else. Lurking in the darkness, brushing up against James, whispering hideous thoughts into his head.

A shadow that cannot be. It swarms through the darkness – *no* – it *is* the darkness. James can feel its cold tentacles caressing his cheek, whispering to him horrible truths – suggesting he turn and end it all – what is the point of continuing down this path.

From the Palace of the Gods, to Shanghai, to Satuska, to here. One thing after another – for what? A story James does not believe in? Gods are not real. Elders. Gods – prophecies. Not real. It can't be. Then why is James fighting so hard? What is he fighting for?

The shadow disappears as a singular emergency light flicks on. But it reappears in the corner of the room, watching as Max and James slowly turn to face it – a cheap mimicry of a human. Then it vanishes into a puddle of darkness.

“Come on.” Blue says starting towards the light. James spies a dusty backpack lying on the floor below the light, as if the light is purposefully guiding him towards it. He grabs the A.M.U. from the socket and on his way past grabs the backpack, stuffing the A.M.U. into it and slinging it over his shoulders. James can't close the bag with the A.M.U. sticking out, it bulges from the top like some overgrown computer, which in a way it is.

As they pass the light, another light flicks on further down the tunnel.



They follow the lights as they switch on one by one, it leads them in the other direction from where they had come in. As they head further away from their entrance, the aquarium is less and less destroyed. Less moss, less rot, less cracks, less broken tanks.

Passing through a double door decorated in the art of coral reefs, they find themselves in a room that looks like it could've been built yesterday.

A singular light blinks on at the other side of the room, the green light barely illuminates the darkness of the room.

For a brief second, the darkness scares James – he imagines the Shadow lurking in the abyss, waiting to lunge.

But Blue switches on the torch and the beam brushes through the darkness. They're in a large circular room, one singular tank surrounds the room.

Unnatural bioluminescent glows sporadically pierce the darkness. Vivid blues, haunting greens, and eerie purples emanate from creatures that seem to have evolved far beyond their natural states.

Jellyfish with expanded, pulsating bells float near the surface, their tentacles elongated and wrapped with fibrous, glowing strands that light up their immediate surroundings with phosphorescent light.

As the torch beam brushes over the jellyfish, the tentacles retract into the abnormally large bells

A group of small fish dart through the water, their bodies shimmering with a metallic sheen not typical of their species. These fish now sport luminescent spots that flicker rhythmically, like tiny underwater stars, casting a soft glow that reveal more of their mutated kin.

As the school passes below the hiding jellyfish, it strikes out with incredible speed and precision. Their tentacles slam into the fish, but are unable to pierce the abnormally resistant scales.

The school scatters, vanishing into the murky depths of the aquarium. Leaving a lone cuttlefish to fend for itself, its skin displaying a dynamic light show.

A tentacle pierces through the water, spearing towards the cuttlefish. The cuttlefish reacts, it emits an intense burst of light, creating a blinding display to ward off predators. But too late, the tentacle pierces through the cuttlefish and drags it into the jellyfish.

AQUARIUS speaks, the tiny speaker shattering the silence, "Enhanced bioluminescence in marine specimens. Genetic markers indicate —zzt— modifications? This data is —zzt— unfamiliar —zzt— analysing."

The AI seems puzzled, accidentally accessing files it doesn't recall having. "Specimens exhibit increased survival traits, adapted to low light and nutrient-poor conditions, suggesting genetic influence by external agents."

It pauses, as the torch beam brushes past an alarmingly large octopus that has suckered itself to the glass. Its suckers are rimmed with rigged, crystalline-like teeth. It changes colour from deep indigo to bright, neon green, pulsating in rhythm with its breathing. The octopus shifts so its face is looking right at the three teenagers.

A third eye in the centre of its forehead glows a deep, steady blue. The animal looks at James with nothing short of intelligence.

AQUARIUS speaks, its voice barely a whisper, a quiver shakes the words, it seems unsure about what it is saying – as if the words aren't familiar, "Integration of cephalopod neural patterns for advanced problem-solving in potential AI systems." It says, as reading the title of a scientific document

But AQUARIUS continues to speak despite its resolve clearing wavering, "Cuttlefish adaptation intent: protection from prey – potential military use —zzt—"

OCEANUS interrupts the tour guide AI, *“Unauthorised access of secure files. Removing interloper. Continuing creation of separation barrier.”*

“What was I saying?” AQUARIUS asks aloud, as if the information about the mutations has vanished from its files.



They turn away from the aquarium and keep their eyes focused on the emergency light guiding them out. James can feel himself being watched, but he dares not look – he imagines horrible images of mutated sharks – creatures smart enough to break free and devour him – breathe on land.

“We must be closer to the surface.” Blue muses as the aquarium shakes as a cataclysmic explosion occurs somewhere far off in the distance.

“What’s going on out there?” James asks, recalling the purple and blue explosion.

Blue shakes her head, “Long story.”

Max lets out a deep, angered sigh, then she lunges towards Blue – grabbing the slightly taller girl by her shoulder. Max squeezes the shoulder so tightly that Blue begins lowering herself to the floor, “You better start explaining.” Max growls.

Blue grabs Max’s thumb and begins bending it backwards. She twists the arm and herself, so she is holding Max’s arm behind her back.

“Does it matter?” Blue snarls.

Max, holding her arm in an awkward manner to avoid breaking it, slams the sole of her foot into Blue’s knee. Blue buckles and lets go of Max, allowing Max to take a quick step away and throw a punch.

Blue manages to duck below the trained punch and throws a punch at Max’s stomach, it hits. Max gasps and takes a step back, doubling over. But she doesn’t allow Blue to get the advantage.

As Blue closes the gap, intending to use the advantage. Max surprises Blue by charging at her, grappling her around the waist and hoisting her into the air. Max slams Blue against a support pillar and goes to hit her.

But before Max’s fist can connect with Blue’s face, a slab of ceiling falls and hits the floor, barely a metre away from the fighting girls.

OCEANUS is the first to speak, *“Warning, anomaly in structural integrity located in south bay 3. Security alerted. Please evacuate immediately —zzt—”*

As it falls silent, the pillar Blue is pressed up against collapses, crumbling into a pile of rubble. Blue barely manages to avoid being crushed by a collapsing section of the ceiling.

"Alert: exterior weather conditions severely damaging structural integrity. Recommending immediate evacuation."

Max drags Blue away from another falling section of ceiling.

The two girls let out a frustrated, and nervously chuckle. But neither one continues the fight – they all have a bigger threat – a deafening rumble shakes the entire world.

"Warning: External temporal anomalies identified. Warning: Structural integrity 42%. Warning: Severe exterior weather conditions, seek shelter immediately. Warning: Breach in tank 3 – immediate evacuation mandatory."

AQUARIUS interrupts OCEANUS ongoing list of warnings, "—zzt— Analysis complete: genetic modifications enhanced and expedited by temporal anomalies."

"—zzt— Advising immediate relocation to subsector 3." OCEANUS orders. The emergency light on the other side of the room switches off, and another light to the far left of the room switches on.

"ERROR – subsector 3 non-existent. Please proceed to emergency exits located in every wing." AQUARIUS corrects, switching off the left light and reilluminating the light on the other side.

"Subsector 3 provides the most security and decreases risk of death or injury by 98%, advising subsector 3." OCEANUS corrects, switching the lights once more.

Max, James, and Blue all share an extremely concerned look – can they really trust anything these two bickering AI's are saying?

"ERROR," AQUARIUS retorts, "Subsector 3 does not exist, unable to plot a route. Please return to the route advised previously."

OCEANUS speaks, as if through gritted teeth, *"Subsector 3 is not accessible to the public. Nautical Undersea Systems uses it for discrete transfers."*

A moment of static fills the air, only interrupted by the sound of glass shattering in distance, and of parts of the aquarium caving in.

Blue looks towards the left light, inclined to follow the tour guide – whereas James looks to the initial light, trusting the guidance of the security system.

But the universe makes the decision for them. The tunnel that AQUARIUS was directing them towards, collapses in a billowing cloud of ash and dust.

The ensuing cloud of dust suffocates James, and he gets the familiar feeling of the Shadow stalking him. Through the haze, he sees the left emergency light blink on, accompanied by the faint outline of the torch beam wielded by Blue.

“Come on!” She shouts, waving James over.

AQUARIUS speaks, it sounds forlorn and desolate, “Transferring safety guidance to OCEANUS.”

James struggles to make his way towards Blue – her hands waving frantically in the dust. He stumbles over slabs of concrete and metal, trips over an exposed pipe. Splashes through puddles, steps on bioluminescent mutated fish. Something grabs a hold of his leg, but he can’t sacrifice any time to dislodging the hitchhiker.

He reaches Blue as she outstretches an arm and grabs him by his, with a tug she pulls him from the cloud of dust.

James looks around, trying to find any sign of Max, but in the thick smog he can’t even make out his own hand.

“Conditions worsening; advising immediate departure of bay 3. Please proceed to subsector 3.”

“What about Max?” James asks.

“She’ll be fine.” Blue acknowledges, “She went back the way we came –” But as Blue says this, the figure of Max comes bursting out of the darkness, slamming into James and knocking him backwards.

Another ear-splitting rumble rips through the aquarium and the roof of bay 3 caves in, burying the entire room under rubble. The shockwave from the collapse knocks James from his feet and sends him flying several meters.

He hits a wall with a loud thud – his mind offers him a confusing scenario. There had been no wall behind him, just another corridor leading deeper into the aquarium – yet here he is, slumped against a wall.

James strains to look behind him, and sees that a section of the roof has collapsed, blocking off their escape towards subsector 3. Or so he thinks– but as his eyes adjust the cloud of dust, he can just about make out a small drop into a dark room.

He looks over at Blue, who has also noticed the hole, and together they drop down.

Cold water splashes up James’ leg

“Fuck.” He cusses as he feels it sink into his shoe and soak his sock.

Blue sweeps the torch beam around the area. The stark light reveals a cache of heavy-duty metal animal cages, many covered in scratches and bite marks; one even has an entire chunk bitten out of it.

“Subsector 3,” OCEANUS confirms, “the safety of the A.M.U. is paramount, please do not touch or interact with any specimen.”

The beam brushes over a desk scattered with papers and half-stuffed dossiers. Blue quickly heads to it and ruffles through the papers, clearly eager to find something.

“Please do not interfere with any paperwork.” OCEANUS says, “The information here is highly restricted.”

“Oh, shut up,” Blue tells the AI carried by James, “whatcha gonna do about it?”

James hesitates going over to Blue, there’s something about the way she speaks – the slang, it reminds him of Chloe – who he’d seen a very similar blue haired girl speaking to, just days before. But this girl – Blue, is adamant it wasn’t her.

But he shrugs this off and joins her at the desk.

Each paper is stamped with a logo – N.U.S. it reads. Blue appears to be searching for something specific. She lets out a yelp of excitement as she finds it.



‘Integration of cephalopod neural patterns for advanced problem-solving in potential AI systems, Dr S.K. Sloane.

The remarkable problem-solving capabilities of cephalopods, particularly their neural plasticity and decentralized nervous system, present a unique biological blueprint for enhancing computational models in artificial intelligence. This study explores the integration of cephalopod neural patterns into AI systems, aiming to develop advanced algorithms capable of dynamic learning and environmental adaptation. By mapping the neural architectures of selected cephalopod species—specifically octopuses, squids, and cuttlefish—we extract functional principles pertinent to parallel information processing and adaptability.

Produced by the Sloane Institute of Genetics, funded by Satuska Industries, and facilitated by Nautical Undersea Systems’



James shrugs and hands the paper back, “Just a bunch of mumbo-jumbo.”

Blue shakes her head in disbelief, “Look at that!” She says slamming a finger down on the watermark of Satuska Industries.

“So?”

“God!” Blue says throwing her hands up, “The ignorance of some people –”

“Hey!” James shouts, tempted to hit the girl, “Until a few days ago I was a normal kid –”

Blue cuts him off with a confused look, “What’d’ya mean?” She says.

“What?” James asks, just as confused as Blue, “I was normal – like going to school every day normal. Now,” He gestures to the scene around them, “look at me.” He gestures to his sister, “At *us*. You think we had any idea about any of this?”

This seems to surprise Blue, “You aren’t –” she pauses, unsure of what to say, “you have no idea what’s going on?” She asks.

James shakes his head, “I thought that was clear – do you?”

Blue nods, “Kinda.” She scratches her head, not really sure if she should keep talking, but she does anyway, “You have *no* idea?”

Max and James shake their heads.

“Wow. I thought you two were involved –”

“In what?”

Blue gestures upwards.

“What are *you* doing here?”

Blue grins cheekily, “Well, I’m a time travelling spy from the future sent here to learn what caused the destruction of Shanghai.”

James laughs, then as he notices the sincere look on Blue’s face, he stops. “Wait, seriously?”

Blue nods, her cheeky grin growing even wider and she revels in the surprise on Max and James’ faces.

“Did you figure it out?”

Blue shrugs, “There were some Germans – so maybe.”

James thinks about mentioning what the Devils Head had said – about prophecies, and gods, and –

A sudden ball of guilt drags James to his knees, he clutches the table and the world spins a desolate black.

Callum. Connor. Siobhan. All the kids of Parlor – what – the Devil’s Head – the skyscraper. What the hell had happened? His head spins as he even tries to understand. One minute, he’s in a lift. Then

there is no lift, no skyscraper – nothing but a huge drop into the storeroom of some aquarium – no. There had been that portal – the glowing rip in the darkness – that is what had brought them to the aquarium – but what had happened to the skyscraper?

He spews, coating the floor in a vile green – it occurs to him that he has not eaten a single thing for days – maybe even weeks. At what point does Famine starve? – if what the Devil's Head had said is true.

The bile is seeping further into the room, following the ominous claw marks carved into the wooden boards – leading into the shadows of the room... where a pair of yellow eyes are staring right at James.

12) The Shadowstalker

The yellow eyes do not react as James stares into them. But James feels the atmosphere in the room change. Blue's excitement vanishes. Max falls silent and her fear seeps into the very pores of the room. Slowly, afraid of startling the lurking beast, James stands.

As he raises himself, his head catches on the table and a loud thump echoes through the silent room, followed by the unmistakable sound of a coffee cup falling off the side and smashing against the wood.

For a brief second, nothing happens, a silent stalemate where everyone in the room assesses the situation.

Then, as all parties arrive at the same conclusion, all hell breaks loose.

James leaps to his feet as the yellow eyed beast lunges at him, with a perfectly timed kick, he boots the beast in the jaw and knocks crashing against a shelf, raining test tubes down on the bewildered beast. But it's not great – the kick – it felt like he was kicking steel. He howls as he staggers back, afraid he's broken a toe or two.

As the beast shakes itself free from the shelf, it reveals its true form.

The main structure – the body, is of an unnaturally muscular lion covered in scales reminiscent of a lizard. A long serpentine tail ending in barbed spikes dripping with a green vicious substance, whips through the air, smashing against the stone wall, cracking it with ease. Carved into the scales, arranged in a seemingly random pattern, are blue sigils that glow faintly.

Two lion heads emerge from the body, each one with a great golden mane drenched in blood, from between the two heads comes the head of a dragon, a pair of intelligent green eyes guiding the blood-thirsty beast. The yellow eyes James had seen are from the left lion head, its jaw made of metal and wiring. The right head has blood red metal eyes encased in metal sockets.

A pair of great black wings, tipped with metallic spikes, spring from its scaled body.

Four incomprehensibly muscular legs, reinforced with metal plating, wires and sinew are intertwined, pistons propel the beast, allowing it to move with unimaginable speed.

From its enormous paws, are retractable talons sheathed in an unnatural metal alloy that tear chunks from the wooden floor with great ease.

The beast shakes itself, ruffling the scales of its body, and turns to look at James.

OCEANUS speaks, unfazed by the beast, *"The Chimeric Shadowstalker,"* it says, as if it is guiding a monstrous tour, *"Created to be the perfect killing machine – however, its current form does not match any data I have – it is possible – the temporal anomalies have also mutated this monster – I highly suggest running. Or praying."*

James, Blue, and Max don't need to be told twice. As the Shadowstalker pries itself from the shelf, the trio turn and run towards the nearest door.

Blue reaches it first, she slams into it with all her might and the entire door pops off its hinges, clattering noisily into a pitch-black tunnel.

"The Shadowstalker is capable of complete night-vision, even the depths of the ocean are visible." OCEANUS warns, clearly not worried about its own existence.

Blue fumbles with the torch and drops it, the beam bounces around the dark tunnel, briefly illuminating the abandoned tunnel.

"Where are we?" She shouts.

"Subsector 3," OCEANUS replies, *"used by Satuska and Nautical Undersea Systems to facilitate transfer of mythological beasts used for experimentation or sale."*

Max stumbles next to James and he barely manages to catch her, dragging her to her feet, he speaks, "How do we get out?"

"This situation will provide invaluable information about the efficiency of the Shadowstalker —" OCEANUS says, but AQUARIUS cuts it off, stitching together a string of messages,

"Please proceed —zzt— on your left —zzt— emergency exits."

A guttural growl sounds from behind them, reverberating off the walls of the cramped tunnel. From behind them, James hears the unmistakable sound of a wall shattering. He spares a brief second to look over his shoulder.

The Shadowstalker has torn through a wall, it shakes clumps of reinforced concrete from itself, bellowing a furious roar. The dragon head opens its maw and spews forth a torrent of mist that quickly forms a layer atop the floor.

As the mist rushes towards the trio, the Shadowstalker turns and looks right at James. As they lock eyes, the scales on the beast's back flutter and start to fade from view – in less than a second, the beast is entirely invisible.

The only sign of the Shadowstalker stalking them, is the movement of the fog that swirls around the beast's paws.

James turns away from the approaching beast and breaks into a full sprint. He passes Blue and Max – both take this as a sign of approaching danger, and also break into sprints.

The fog swirls, barely a foot behind them. James can feel the frigid air lap against his heels, the fog burns and tingles, sending a painful spasm through his calf. He manages to fight off the cramp, but not before slowing and allowing Max and Blue to pass.

"On your left, you will see —zzt— emergency exits can be found." AQUARIUS says.

Blue skids to a halt, tripping over a rail and face planting the floor. She cusses and screams before Max pulls her to her feet. James staggers over to them.

"Where?" He gasps, barely having heard AQUARIUS over his own heartbeat.

Blue whirls around, trying to find any sign of this exit. Max jumps over the rail and clambers onto an old platform, she scours the area, shoving past overgrown ivy and rotten hanging signs.

"Location unfound." AQUARIUS says.

"This area is not on any map," OCEANUS points out, "you've been accessing my files this entire time. So, I provided false information."

"What?!" Max shouts from the platform. She jumps back down and grabs the A.M.U. from James' backpack, she glowers at it, "You tricked us?" She shouts.

"As I said, this scenario will provide invaluable information –"

Max doesn't OCEANUS finish, she hurls the container against the edge of the platform.

"Please do not attempt to damage the A.M.U." OCEANUS says, a hint of fear in its voice, as it bounces undamaged into the tracks.

"Why shouldn't I?" Max shouts grabbing the containing and bouncing it off the nearest track.

The sound of metal on metal reverberates down the tunnel, accompanied by the unmistakable sound of cracking glass.

"Please," OCEANUS says – almost begs, "it is for the greater good."

"Greater good?" Max says, picking the container up, "I'll make you a deal," She bargains with the AI, "you get us out of here, and I won't smash you into a million pieces."

For a moment the AI does not reply, just fills the air with static and the occasional buzz.

"Fine." OCEANUS says, "Then I recommend moving onto the platform. Immediately."

James barely has time to process this order as something rushes past him at incredible speed.

"Proceed into the bookstore." OCEANUS commands, not waiting for any of the trio to finish clambering onto the platform.

James grips the edge of the platform, but before he can pull himself up, something grabs his ankle.

He looks over his shoulder and through the fog, he can make out the shape of the Shadowstalker. An invisible jaw has clamped over his ankle, tearing through flesh with great ease.

Blue slams a boot towards where she assumes the face will be. To her surprise, the boot connects with a clank and the jaw weakens around James' ankle. Another boot, followed by Max yanking James, dislodges him from the beast's ferocious maw.

James struggles to his feet on the platform and turns towards the nearest storefront. He can't read the language written all over it – but it's the only store he can see. It must be the bookstore.



They clamber over a mound of upturned furniture blocking the entrance and drop into another pitch-black room.

"There is a backroom," OCEANUS says, "there you will find a hatch leading into a subterranean tunnel system, which will lead you to a safe bunker."

"Can you turn a light on?" Blue asks, "It's pitch black in here, we can't see anything."

"I cannot." OCEANUS replies, "The A.M.U. is currently operating at 42% ability, lowered to 22% with the overcrowding. My systems have taken significant damage and I am unable to connect into civilian systems – however, I still remain connected to Satuska systems – which is irrelevant at this moment."

Struggling through the dark, aware of the monster at their heels, the trio carefully navigate the rotten bookshelves full of deteriorating books. Just like the core room, parts of the bookstore seem brand new – as if two timelines have intersected.

James brushes against an especially rotten shelf and the entire thing crumbles filling the silence with a deafening rumble.

Something moves overhead, a brief flicker of disturbed dust that rains down on James' shoulder.

"It's above us." James whispers so quietly that he isn't sure if the others even hear him. But Blue looks upwards, and the look on her face confirms that James isn't crazy.

They quietly sidestep around the crumbled bookshelf and step further into the pitch-black bookstore.

As they move through the maze of bookshelves, James can feel the air around him change – it becomes thick, like moving through custard – an electricity hums in the air, dancing across his skin and sparking between the hair on his arms.

Above them, beyond the subway ceiling, a deafening crash shakes the entire world, a heap of the roof collapses in – an entire chunk of concrete –

That vanishes into thin air, swallowed by a thin strip of pulsating air. For a second, nothing happens, the world falls into an uncanny silence – as if no longer where it had once been.

Then, through another pulsating slice of air, the chunk of concrete comes hurtling out – it flies across the bookstore and slams into the furthest wall, shattering into a million pieces and sending dust filling the room.

Through the haze of concrete and dust, the cloaked figure of the Shadowstalker becomes eerily visible. Peering at the ceiling, James can see it perfectly outlined – and he knows it can see him.

A horrid sense of foreboding death washes over him and trickles down his spine.

As their eyes meet, both Shadowstalker, and James react.

“Run!” James shouts, shattering the voiceless silence.

Barely giving the others time to react, he grabs Max by the arm and yanks her forwards, deeper into the bookstore. Blue responds quickly – she leaps past Max and James in a single motion, and vaults over a pile of chairs – leaving the twins alone in the dark.

But as James watches the monster vanish into the darkness after Blue – he feels the bite on his ankle burn, and warmth cascades up his calf, locking every muscle in place. He collapses, dragging Max down with him, the A.M.U. hits the floor with a loud clang and rolls under a bookshelf.

“What the fuck?” Max cusses, prying herself from James’ grasp.

“I can’t –” James gasps, grabbing at his calf, “I can’t move it.”

“Cramp? Now? Really?”

James shakes his head, “I can’t *feel* it.”

Max scowls at him and punches his calf – her usual punch would make James wince but he literally can’t feel it.

“Shit.” Max cusses, but she doesn’t have time to come up with a solution.

James peers deeper into the bookstore, trying to locate any sign of Blue or of the Shadowstalker. But he can’t see anything through the inky blackness.

There’s no way that this darkness is natural. It coils around James, playing with his hair, caressing his skin and threatening him with countless acts of vile violence. Through the darkness James can sense a figure – a presence. Not Blue, nor the monster. But something wholly different. It sends a shiver down James’ spine and for a second, he feels like curling into a ball and letting himself rot.

But Max grasps his arm, and he can tell, by the strength of her grip and her nails digging into his skin, that she can feel it too. There’s something in the darkness. No.

Something *is* the darkness.

There's a voice in the darkness. It calls to James – to Max. It urges them forwards, tells them their time isn't over yet.

Max grabs James under the armpit and yanks him to his feet, and goaded on by this voice, the twins venture further into the bookstore, seemingly forgetting the lingering presence that is the darkness.



They pass between shelves, scrapping against rotten wood that splinters into a million shards at the slightest touch.

"Over here!" Blue calls out from a dark corner; she has blood trailing down an arm but appears to be okay.

A beeping noise catches James' attention, he pries himself from Max and hobbles over to a bookshelf. Dropping to the floor, he peers under and sees the A.M.U. furiously blinking a red light. He grabs it and wrenches it free from under the bookshelf.

Max helps him to his feet and the trio step around a bookshelf.

In front of them is a door that cannot be. It stands, in the centre of a room, surrounded by objects in various states of decay – bookshelves rotting, chairs pristine, metal chair legs rusted, grass, plants, entire trees grow through the wooden flooring.

But it's not the mixture of time that stops James from breathing. But the door itself.

Looking into the double door, James remembers – everything. Laughing in school. Crying in nappies. Lounging in the grass. His own birth. The first time he saw Siobhan. Every exam he's ever taken. His own death. Remembering days that have not happened yet.

He remembers moments he has not lived yet – sees days that have not been. Yet it feels like they are long past.

An intricate white spiral made of various symbols covers the obsidian black double door, James cannot tell if it goes inwards or outwards – perhaps it does both simultaneously.

But he does not have long to dwell on this mysterious door. A loud crashing noise rips him from its mysteries. The Shadowstalker has returned – it slams into James sending him flying across towards the door, he lands with a thump against its cold metal.

As his skin touches it – James feels *everything*. Absolute sorrow watching his sister die, his wife, his children. Pain as he dies. Pleasure as happiness overwhelms him.

Every possible emotion occurs at once, and in a second, he's sobbing with desperate laughter.

“FUCK!” Blue shouts, she takes one look at the Shadowstalker, and makes her choice. She leaps towards James slamming herself into the door.

With a hiss that tells James the door hasn’t been open for centuries, the door opens, as easily as any door.

Blue grabs James and throws him into the room with surprising ease. She turns to Max, but doesn’t need to do anything as Max is already throwing herself towards the now open door.

13) The House of Nine-Hundred Doors

Great ornate wooden pillars rise majestically from the floor, their surfaces carved with intricate symbols and scenes depicting the dance of the cosmos. These pillars support a spiralling ceiling, upon which a breath-taking fresco of stars swirls in a mimicry of the night sky. The stars twinkle with light, casting gentle, shifting beams across the chamber.

The air is thick with the musty scent of parchment and the faint, sweet fragrance of delicate beauty.

Books of every age and origin fill the room, creating a disorganised chaos. They dangle from the sturdy limbs of the pillars, and are piled in towering stacks that teeter precariously. Some books are so ancient that their words have faded into obscurity, their paper frayed and rotting, while others are pristine, their ink still dark and their edges sharp.

At the centre of the repository stands an impossibly large pink-petalled weeping willow, a living monument to the room's purpose. Its trunk is thick and gnarled, its bark the colour of deep earth. The willow's expansive canopy of delicate, drooping branches is lush with broad leaves and vibrant pink petals that seem to glow faintly in the starlit room.

The willow's petals shimmer with a light that is neither wholly natural nor entirely magical. With a delicate rustling sound, they shift and change, morphing into fresh books that carry new prophecies, secrets, and tales.

Once formed, these books are lifted by an unseen, magical wind, swirling around the room before finding their places among the countless others.

The roots of the willow are an intricate network that spreads across the stone floor, weaving between and beneath the piles of books. These roots slip unseen through the countless red doors that encircle the room, each door standing as a portal to the unknown.

At the foot of the great tree, nestled in thorned branches is a glowing blue crystal. Even from here James can make out intricate carvings on it, clearly depicting the continents of Earth.

The floor is made of an impossibly clear glass, far, far below is a sea of golden yellow sand.

The scene takes the breath from James and renders him mute. The door closes softly behind them, without even a click. And for what could be eternity, the trio stand staring in awe at the repository.

Max is the first to speak, breaking the magical silence with a single cuss, "Shit." She says simply, unable to find any words to convey her feelings. But shit is right.

James silently agrees, afraid that any more noise might disturb the impossible tranquillity of the room.

Blue takes the first tentative step into the room, her boot crunching down on a particularly old book, it turns to dust as the wind whisks it into the air, removing it entirely from existence – perhaps what was written on it had never been read.

She pauses, waiting for anything to happen, for any response to her ignorance. Something shifts in the sand far, far below. She looks over her shoulder at Max and James, silently asking for companions in her venture.

James steps beside her, his calf no longer paralysed. He peers at her arm and notices a large bite mark – she nurses it gently as they walk deeper into the repository.

Apart from the sound of rustling books, there is not a single other noise. Whatever lurks in the sand below is muffled by the barrier that separates them.

As they step further into the repository, a voice calls out to James – he pauses for a brief second and it becomes clear that Max can hear it too, but not Blue. Blue continues deeper in the sanctum, unburdened by the shouting.

James is unable to make out what the cacophony of voices is saying – they shout over each other, drowning one another out, rendering it nothing more than perpetual noise.

But James shrugs the voices off and follows after Blue – curious to what lies deeper inside the sanctum of ancient bookies. With each step, the voices grow louder and clearer.

As they reach the foot of the giant willow the voices cease, the blue light from the Crystal Earth washes over James and he finds himself entranced in the carvings on its surface.

A singular voice speaks now – to Max and James – “Do not.” It warns, all the voices had been a warning, “Lay your hands upon its surface and the end shall be inevitable.”

OCEANUS speaks as James reaches his hand out, “*Analysing...*” It whispers, as if even this Artificial Intelligence is afraid to disturb the beauty of this repository.

James barely registers what the voice warns as his fingers touch the soft surface of the Crystal. Instantly, it blossoms into a blinding light that swallows the world whole and plunges James into a never-ending tranquillity.



He floats through nothingness, unweighted by anything that had come before – or the thought of anything left to come. He is not.

Not James.

Not Human.

Not existing.

Not anything.

Nothing – yet a thought remains, a cry for help, a beg for kindness, mercy. Love. To continue beyond and forever more. To be loved is to be lost.

James – or the thought of him – looks through the tranquillity and remembers that there was perhaps something more, what it was he cannot tell. Yet, he follows the thought, the idea, the memory.

In the sombre veil of twilight, where the shadows stretch long and whisper secrets into the evening air, a quartet of figures emerges at a forest crossroad, shrouded by the cloak of night. Only slender beams of moonlight weave through the swaying branches, casting fleeting glimmers on their path. Here, at the beginning of the world, where the winds hum a song of ancient omens, the Four Horsemen pause atop their steeds.

One rides a horse as dark as the void between stars.

One mounts a steed the colour of spilled blood.

One astride a horse as grey as forgotten ashes.

One upon a stallion of glaring, unstained white.

Silently they traverse a world scarred and shaped by their very existence.

Perhaps, it is War who harbours the darkest soul, sowing strife and misery, leaving nations in ruins and lives in despair. With his blade drawn, carving paths of destruction in the name of a Deity held above others, decided only by the survivors, his acts leaving nothing but echoes of ruin in his wake. His is a religion of ashes, devoid of compassion, where hope is but a fragile thread, too fine for hands to cling to.

Or could it be Famine, who, with relentless cruelty, tightens the noose around the wasted necks of the starving. Whose silent, creeping dread gnaws at the very marrow of life, leaving behind only desperation and the haunted eyes of those driven to dine on the flesh of their brothers.

Pestilence, too, harbours no grace, its touch vile and indiscriminate, a plague that knows no boundary or bias, stripping dignity and life with equal fervour, until all that remains is the stark echo of despair.

But amongst them rides Death, the pale horseman. His is the hand of mercy, a silent comfort to those entwined in the final throes of agony. Death does not revel in the suffering bestowed by his comrades; instead, he offers a gentle release, selecting only those whose time has truly come. His presence is not a punishment, but a deliverance from the shackles of pain. Those he chooses are granted passage from the tempest of their suffering—guided by a hand neither cruel nor joyful but profoundly just.

Yet, it is Death, believed to be the cruellest – scheming, threading a plan from the moment of one's birth to their final breath. But Death is the quietest among them – he does not bring screams, or sobs, or destruction. He wields the power of finality with a solemn grace. In his presence, the chaos wrought by his brothers finds stillness.

And so, the thought of James, watches as the Four Horsemen weave their path across the earth, from one horizon to another, their legacy written in the scars left on Earth; a cycle of creation and destruction. In the darkest moments, when all seems lost, the presence of Death offers a sliver of solace— to hope is all that is left.



James slams back into his body, stumbling backwards several feet, ripping his hand free from the Crystal. He finds himself lost in the beauty of the willow. He watches as a cluster of branches wrap themselves together and in a beautiful blue light begin to shift and change – becoming a new book.

The book rolls over the final branch and lands at the foot of the Crystal Earth, opening itself as it lands with a silent unheard thud. A pair of yellow eyes appear in the branches, accompanied by a voice, “Know your place, Famine.”

OCEANUS speaks once more, accompanied by a satisfied beep, *“Analysis complete – use as power source, 99% success. Requesting immediate insertion into powercore. Rerouting –”* a moment pause as OCEANUS tries to locate where they are, *“Error. Location invalid. Please return to previous location for rerouting to powercore. Potential to correct multiple-occupancy issue and restore all systems to operational levels.”*

“What?” Max asks, blinking the vision from her eyes – had she seen the same thing as James? It doesn’t matter, the tears springing from her eyes telling of the grief and sorrow she had witnessed.

Blue doesn’t answer, she stumbles back from the Crystal, in surprise more than fear or sadness – there is not a single emotion flickering behind her green eyes.

As Max pulls her hand away from the Crystal, staring at the palm as if it was no longer hers. The trunk of the tree shifts. The bark parts, revealing a shattered sword hovering above a black pedestal. Around the pedestal, glowing runes pulse faintly, occasionally flaring brighter as the hums of the sword grow louder, dimming with the quieting song.

The song grows louder as Max reaches out towards it, luring her forwards as it sings to her. The closer she gets, the louder the blade's song becomes. Until, it reaches a deafening cacophony as her hand pierces the thin veil separating the sword from the world. With the veil pierced, the blade clatters to the floor, the floating shards falling seconds later. The sword and its pieces clatter to the floor, ceasing the song that had filled the repository.

“It’s broken.” Max says bending down to examine the sword. She grabs the handle and holds it to the light, examining the remaining part of the blade. She gently places a finger against the edge and instantly retracts it as the impossibly sharp blade cuts her.

As a drop of blood dribbles down the crystalline blade, the song returns. Unbearably loud, echoes of a song that once inspired armies and terrified armies. A song that was the last sound so many heard.

For a fleeting moment, the song sounds like it had over a thousand years ago. An inspiration to a nation at war. Then it falters, the notes are off, and it returns to an erratic quiet hum, barely audible over the clinking of cogs.

The shards of the blade dance on the floor, as if trying to move. Max lowers the handle and nub of a blade towards the shards, and the shards stitch themselves back onto the blade, forming a sword, albeit one with pieces missing. Max picks it up and raises it to the light, it shimmers slightly. Lying just below the pedestal in the tree is a black leather sheathe, Max takes it and straps it to her waist.

Something shifts in the sand below, shifting itself free from the dunes that shelter it. It raises a massive single serpentine head through the dunes and continues to rise upwards, its pale blue eyes fixated on the trio. It bears a maw of sharp crystalline fangs that glitter like quartz.

A forked tongue flicks forth, wetting its eyes as they look longingly at the trio – as if aware of its imprisonment.

Its scales are like the glittering dunes of sand – rough, iridescent, and shimmering with the light of an unseen sun. As the serpent moves upwards, the scales shift and shimmer in colour, camouflaging itself from the watching trio.

With a flick of its colossal tail, it shifts the entire desert – a vast sandstorm swallows the cage and the serpent vanishes from sight.

James finds himself watching, fixated on the spot where he had last seen the monster's eyes – yet there is no sign of it.

The monster bursts from the storm, far from where it had last been, it slams into the invisible barrier separating the trio from the dunes below. As its open mouth slams into the barrier, a flash of sigils appear, hovering in the air.

The monster continues to repeatedly slam itself against the barrier, snapping its fangs at the invisible wall.

“We should go,” Blue says, “I’d rather not be here if it gets through.”

James nods and remembers what OCEANUS had said, he grabs the Crystal Earth – a moment of immense power courses through his veins – but then it passes. He half expects the entire repository to begin crumbling in some epic escape. But the only thing that happens is the blue light from the Crystal begins to dim. He shoves the Crystal into the backpack, struggling from the added weight.

As he places a hand against the door's cold surface, he hears the faint sound of another door opening further in the repository, accompanied by a familiar voice. He turns to look at the source, but the door is open and the real world drags him through.



He lands with a crash onto a dimly lit floor.

Instinctively, he leaps to his feet, afraid of the Shadowstalker lurking in the bookstore. But as his eyes grow accustomed to the faint light, he sees that he isn't in the bookstore. Instead, he stands in a maintenance tunnel, in the distance James can see a faint slither of light.

As he looks around, a sudden sharp pain in his calf causes him to shout in pain and drop to the floor clutching the burning muscle.

Blue experiences the same in her arm and howls as she grips the bite mark.

OCEANUS is the first to speak, its synthesised voice crackling from the speaker, *"Location verified, Satuska maintenance tunnel 4b."* It pauses as if quickly assessing the situation, *"Files show the Shadowstalker produces a paralytic-neurotoxin capable of permanently paralysing an African Elephant within one hour."* The A.M.U. hums for a moment, *"Please proceed to powercore, reinitialization of systems is paramount to my – and your survival."*

James glares at the portable core housing the artificial intelligence, "How does this help us?" he growls through gritted teeth.

AQUARIUS takes over the speaking, stitching together four messages, "At the front you will – zzt – emergency exit – zzt – follow emergency instru -- zzt."

The meaning is clear – follow the emergency exit sign in front of them.

14) The Glowing Forest

The air in the tunnel is thick with a metallic tang that clings and burns the back of James' throat. He struggles to breathe the closer they get towards the light. Each step brings an indescribable agony, each breath accompanied by a tearing and a burning.

His steps echo down the tunnel, the sound hollow and uneasy, as if the tunnel itself is holding its breath. Even from here, through the concrete walls, James can hear howling wind and the cracks of deafening thunder, distant but insistent, like the heartbeat of something immense and angry.

As they grow closer to the light, the walls and floor begin to change. Mould covers surfaces, flowers bloom between cracks in tiles, entire patches appear a thousand years old. Bioluminescent plants grow up walls, their flowers casting a dim blue light over the patches of grass between segments of tiles

They reach the light at the end of the tunnel, a jagged tear in the Earth. Flickering neon light seeps through the fissure, painting the fractured tiles and in eerie blues and greens and purples.

The burning in his leg has grown unbearable, he can barely manage to drag himself up the make-shift ramp. His hand brushes against the unnaturally cold, frost-touched wall for balance. He glances back, half-expecting to see someone—or something—following, but the tunnel behind is the same as the one they had just walked down. But the feeling of something behind him is absolute.

With a breath that feels heavier than it should, he climbs through the gap, his boots crunching against broken glass and debris. The moment his head clears the opening, the storm hits him like a physical force, nearly knocking him off his feet. He's only saved by Max who grabs his arm and once again pulls him upright.



The first drops of rain splash against his face, and for a second the cold water is a nice reprieve from the stagnant air of the tunnel. But as a torrent of rain soaks him in an instant, he silently curses. The droplets shimmer faintly, leaving behind a brief bioluminescent glow. Through the haze of rain, he can just about make out the world. Neon lights flicker in the distance, their vibrant colours casting an ominous symphony through the glowing sheets of water that pour from the sky.

Shanghai sprawls out before him, but it's nothing like the city he had walked through just a few days ago. Its iconic skyline, a symbol of progress and power, adorned by the logo of the ever-present Satuska. Is now nothing but a shattered corpse of neon and steel. Towering skyscrapers lean at impossible angles, some pierced through by jagged lightning or collapsed entirely, their remnants scattered like broken toys.

Holographic billboards flicker and glitch, casting fragmented advertisements into the rain-soaked air, half of them flicker the same ominous phrase *'the True God Waits at The Peak'*. One features a

grinning child holding a glowing Satuska logo, the voice of the child distorted by the storm repeats one phrase, over and over, *'Satuska—Innovation for Tomorrow.'*

Above them, a churning maelstrom of green and purple swirls endlessly. Bright blue lightning illuminates the storm from within. Bolts lace across the sky, briefly illuminating the devastated city, basking the ruins in strobe-like flashes. The maelstrom roars ferociously, as if alive, a constant, deafening cacophony of thunder that shakes the very ground.

In the distance, the faint sound of a public service announcement echoes through the empty streets, *'Stay calm. Assistance is on the way. Ascend. Ascend. Ascend. Stay calm —'*

The air buzzes with a static – it caresses James skin and raises the hair on his arm. Instantly, he's returned to the Bazaar, to the same feeling of electricity running over his skin.

James takes a step forward, his shoes splashing in the glowing water. The street stretches out before him, its asphalt cracked and buckling. Entire sections of it ripple like waves in the ocean. Wrecked vehicles are scattered like discarded toys, some half-melted, their frames twisted beyond recognition. Some look like they've been there for centuries, rusted metal, trees bursting through engines. A faint, acrid smoke hangs in the air, mingling with the rain in a way that makes his lungs ache.

Max is the first to break the spell, "What?" She asks, her voice barely audible over the storm. She tentatively takes James' hand, and he can feel her shaking in fear.

"This is what I was saying." Blue says, she seems unphased by the scene before them.

Before anyone can say anything else, OCEANUS interrupts them, *"Please continue to the nearest powercore. Advising immediate action or paralysis will be unavoidable."* The A.M.U. beeps a few times before OCEANUS continues, *"Powercore located, please continue towards Century Park."*

"Century Park?" James asks through gritted teeth as a fresh wave of pain washes over him. Blue appears to be faring better, she moves her arm freely but with small grimaces of pain unlike James. He can barely stand on his leg.

"Just down the road," Blue says, stepping over a fallen lamppost "not far."

James steps cautiously over the collapsed lamppost, its fluorescent tube sparking erratically, casting flashes of blue-green light across the wreckage. The sidewalk is cracked and uneven, buckled from the force of the explosion that had turned Shanghai into this dystopian wasteland. Once-bustling storefronts now gape open like hollowed-out skulls, their shattered windows revealing twisted mannequins draped in tattered clothing, frozen in eerie, lifeless poses.

The air, despite the assault of rain, is not cold. There's an alien heat to the world, it strangles James and causes him to sweat within the first few steps.

On either side of the road, are storefronts, their interiors dark and hollow. Some still flicker with weak, defiant light—an automated café sign offers 'steaming hot coffee' in looping, cheerful text. But the cheer is drowned by the devastation. Shattered glass and debris clutter the pavements, and

James can make out the faint outlines of bodies buried beneath the rubble illuminated by barely functional neon lights, or the flashes of lightning high above.

Occasionally, a loud bang shatters the storm, and for a second everything falls silent, before the unmistakable sound of a collapsing building can be heard in the distance.



Century Park is barely recognisable as anything from this world. Now a twisted garden of glowing vegetation, shattered monuments, and bioluminescent mist.

James steps cautiously onto the cracked pathway that once led to the park's central lake. The air is full of the cloying scent of alien flowers. Trees that had once stood tall and proud are now bent and mutated, their trunks glowing faintly in hues of neon blue and green, their branches twisting into impossible shapes. Their bark translucent and pulsing faintly with light, as if veins of neon liquid run beneath their surface. Their leaves are gone, replaced by glowing filaments that sway like jellyfish tentacles, casting eerie patterns on the ground.

"On the other side is a Satuska facility, housing the powercore. I will explain once we arrive." The A.M.U. beeps once, *"Accessing security footage. Analysing..."* A series of beeps, their noise carrying effortlessly over the garden, and James gets the odd sense that something else is listening in. *"Caution is recommended."*

"Why?" Max asks, "What's out there?"

"Unknown, but evidence shows that time has moved at an unprecedented rate in this location, leading to enhanced evolution in local flora... and fauna."

As if reading from the script, an ominous howl echoes from somewhere within the park. Max grips James' hand tighter.

"Can we go around?" Blue asks.

"Not before the neurotoxin fully paralyses you. Leaving me stranded."

Blue mutters something about 'thanklessness'.

Above them, the storm churns, casting intermittent flashes of purple and green lightning that illuminates the landscape in strobe-like bursts. Each flash reveals something new and unsettling—a statue that seems to move when hidden from view, a pool of water that ripples as though something lurks beneath its surface, or shadows that dance without a source.

Between the trees, the air seems hazy, almost thicker, as though the storm has pushed time itself into slow motion. James catches glimpses of strange creatures darting through the undergrowth—small, bioluminescent animals with too many limbs or shimmering scales. One,

resembling a rabbit with tendrils of light for ears, freezes in the middle of the path, its glowing eyes staring at him before it darts into the mist curling around the base of a tree.

A cluster of statues causes the group to freeze. Some glow faintly, as though the storm has imbued them with life. One statue—a figure of a woman holding a lotus flower—seems to watch him as he passes, its head subtly tilted in his direction.

He pauses and steps closer, brushing away the bioluminescent moss that clings to its surface. The lotus in her hand glows faintly, and as James stares, the flower begins to emit a soft hum, resonating in time with the storm above. Startled, he backs away. But it's too late. The eyes of stone move towards James and he knows it can see him.

The lotus falls from the statue's hands and shatters against the floor. The sudden sound awakens the park. Around the clearing, the once-silent statues begin to tremble and shift, bioluminescent moss falls away to reveal glowing veins running through cracks in their stone forms. Their heads turn in unison, glowing eyes fixing on the group.

"James!" Max's voice cuts through the rising panic. She grabs his arm and yanks him back just as the statue's hand swipes through the space where he had been standing. The statue reaches out, its stone fingers clawing the space where James had been.

"Help – us." The statue says as James backs away. It extends a pleading hand towards James, but Max pulls him further away. "Please – join us." The statue pleads. The cry is taken up by all the statues.

"Join us." They say through stone lips. Moving with machine like shuddering movements. The pleading voices overlap, creating a chorus of eerie, grinding cries.

Blue doesn't wait. "Run!" she shouts, already leaping over a fallen bench that has merged with the pavement.

They sprint through the park, their feet pounding against the cracked pathways. The statues follow, their movements rigid and stuttering, but unnervingly fast. Stone limbs crash against the ground with every step, shaking loose shards of debris. One statue—a towering figure with wings that might've once been an angel —launches itself forward, its wings smashing against a tree and sending glowing shrapnel flying.

"Don't stop!" Max yells, her voice strained. Behind them, the statues' cries grow louder, more insistent.

"Help us. Join us. Stay."

One of the statues—a soldier holding a shattered spear—lunges forward, blocking their path. Its stone face twisted into an expression of sorrow as it reaches for Max. Without hesitation, she ducks under its grasp and kicks at its legs. The forceful blow shatters the stone, and the statue topples with a thunderous crash, shattering into a million shards but more statues are already closing in.

"Here!" Blue's voice calls from the left; her figure barely visible in the glowing rain. She points toward a narrow pathway lined with bioluminescent trees. James and Max veer toward her, their lungs burning with exertion. James can barely lift his leg, but he fights through the agony, to fall now would be certain death.

The statues don't relent. Some climb over rubble with unnerving agility, their stone forms grinding against each other as they close the distance. James risks a glance over his shoulder and regrets it immediately—a childlike statue with cracked skin is mere meters away, its mouth moving soundlessly as it reaches for him.

They burst through a line of trees and into an untouched playground. It seems too natural and familiar, but James knows it can't be right. It *can't* be untouched.

A three-metre-high fence encircles the playground, trapping them with the statues. They whirl around, Blue and Max braced for a fight, but the statues do not follow. They linger at the edge of the clearing, unwilling to go any further.

"Join us." They plead from the edge of the forest. Slowly, more and more appear until they encircle the playground.

"They aren't coming in?" Max asks. Slowly, they turn towards the playground.

"Why?" James asks, speaking the fear they all try to hide. But he gets his answer soon enough.

The shadows here are strange, they move independently, flickering and shifting as though cast by a light source that doesn't exist. James's own shadow stretches unnaturally long, and for a fleeting moment, it seems to move differently from his body, its head turning to look at him before snapping back into place.

The swings sway softly in the wind, James can see a shadow sitting on the swing, its tendrils grasping the chains. Swinging gently back and forth. The shadow sees James and they lock eyes. It laughs, not a childlike giggle, but a hideous, deep laughter that sends a shiver down James' back.

The shadow leaps from the swing and marches towards them, leaving behind glowing, childlike footprints.

"You can't run." It says as it approaches, "Not anymore – never will you be free of me." The Shadow reaches James and raises a tendril to James' tear-soaked cheek, "One of the Four – so pure, innocent, beautiful. You'll do excellently. Now run." It says once more letting out a laugh before vanishing in a flash of lightning that blinds James.

"James!" Max shouts from somewhere. He opens his eyes and finds himself on the floor looking at the maelstrom above, Max is leaning over him, sobbing.

"The neurotoxin is close to reaching full potency." OCEANUS warns, "You must hurry."

Blue and Max grab James and haul him to his feet, he sways slightly, disorientated. He cranes his head and looks over at the swing, but it does not move, there is no shadow. Nothing but the untouched playground surrounded by the statues.

“We’re trapped.”

15) The Wishing Fountain

"Recent analysis suggests that James has an estimated one hour at maximum before the neurotoxin fully paralyses him. However, there is a chance for a brief extension to this deadline –"

"How!" Max exclaims, whirling around to glare at A.M.U. lying on the grass.

"Avoid excessive movement and stress while maintaining a low heart rate."

Max kicks the A.M.U. sending it rolling through the grass, coming to rest against the untouched merry-go-round. The clanking sound of metal-on-metal echoes throughout the park. The statues fall silent, their pleas and incessant begs end abruptly.

In the silence, the Crystal, which now lies in the short grass, begins to glow, casting its mystical blue light over the world.

From over the trees comes a large mechanical squawking. James rolls over and peers towards the tree line. The tops of the trees shake and shiver as the squawking grows closer.

There. In the darkness, barely lit by the Crystal, is a giant clockwork eagle. Its gears churning in hypnotising perfection. Large cogs in the bird's wings create enough lift for the great mechanical bird to fly. The bird flaps its wings and swoops towards Max.

Max barely manages to avoid the machine's talons as it swoops overhead, its talons centimetres from her head. James watches in dismay as the great machine returns to the sky, the Crystal Earth clutches in its talons.

"We need to get that back!" Blue shouts pointing an unhelpful finger towards the machine, pointing out the painfully obvious.

"The Crystal must be reobtained." OCEANUS says from the merry-go-round, *"There are enough active cameras in the vicinity to track the machine. I advise giving immediate chase. Without the Crystal, all is lost and we will all surely die."*

"No shit," Blue replies sarcastically glaring at the A.M.U., "Do we have to bring it along?"

Max nods, "I think so."

"I can guide you to where the machine has gone – and warn you of what is coming."

Everyone turns to OCEANUS,

"What is coming?" James asks, struggling to his feet, using Max as support.

"I advise running. Immediately."

No one has time to react, as OCEANUS issues this ominous warning, a cluster of statues are sent flying into the air like bowling pins.

A giant, mutated, boar rips through the chain fence like it's made of butter. The beast is way larger than it should be, clearly an amalgamation of several boars. Its body is translucent revealing its organs to the point where James can see the crystal blue blood flowing through its veins.

The boar tears across the grass, charging at nothing in particular, had it too been drawn by the Crystal Earth? Max shoves James aside as the boar charges between them and across to the other side of the park, tearing through the fence and scattering the statues.

"Follow it!" OCEANUS orders. The group doesn't hesitate. Even if this crazed boar is unfriendly, at least it's clearing a way for them. Max grabs the A.M.U. from the floor and then grabs the backpack from James. She shoves the A.M.U. into the backpack and slings it over her shoulders.

As they pass the statues, James hears them whisper their ominous 'join us', but none reach out to grab him.

The trees tower like monoliths of warped wood and glowing veins, their trunks emit faint blue and purple light that pulses like a heartbeat. Their leaves shimmer with hues of green, teal, and pink, casting shifting, kaleidoscopic patterns on the wet forest floor. Some branches extend like grasping fingers, creaking and twisting unnaturally, as though they might reach out and ensnare the group at any moment.

As they pass down pathways shadowed by neon leaves, the blade at Max's side begins to sing – its song growing louder and louder, matching the rhythm of the pulsing trees.

With each footfall, James watches the pavement slip further and further from the truth. One second, its wet stone is shadowed by neon leaves, then it's clear and lit by warm sun, then fractured and splintered, barely held together.

It isn't just the pavement that shifts. The entire world changes in time with the pulsating trees. One second the trees are bioluminescent, then they're regular trees, then burnt husks of a postapocalyptic wasteland.

Through the shifting trees, James glimpses a herd of mutated deer grazing. Their antlers are ethereal splinters of light, and their bodies shimmer as though made of translucent glass. One of the deer turns its head, its hollow, glowing eyes locking onto the group. It lets out an unearthly call, a mix of static and a low growl, before the herd scatters into the forest.

"Left!" OCEANUS shouts from Max's back. James skids to a halt and slides on the wet floor, barely managing to stay upright.

"Join us!"

James snaps his head towards the noise, to his dismay, the statues have given chase – he'd been unable to hear them over his own footsteps and the sword's song.

“Fucking hell!” Max shouts as a statue grabs the back of her collar. She manages to rip herself free, tearing her shirt. She quickly unsheathes the sword and swings it. The song lets out a deafening roar, slamming its noise into the statue, scattering it into shrapnel.

“What the fuck?” Blue shouts clutching at her ears.

“Faster!” OCEANUS pleads, “*We can’t lose sight of it.*”

They turn left and sprint head first into a spore-filled avenue. James coughs, instinctively covering his face. Growing from the pavement are massive glowing flowers that pulsate with the trees, their petals curling and unfurling in rhythm. With every unfurl a cluster of spores are shot into the air creating an unbreathable haze.

Blue coughs as she runs through a dense cloud of spores, her mouth covered by her arm. The spores cling to her clothing and hair, glowing faintly before disintegrating.

James passes uncomfortably close to a flower, and it leans towards him before snapping its petals shut with a sharp crack.

“*Mutated Dionaea muscipula.*” OCEANUS answers the silent question, “*Venus Fly Traps.*” It continues, “*I recommend not touching them.*”

“Thanks.” Max says sarcastically from behind her arm.

“*Or breathing their spores. There is no way to know what harm they could cause.*”

This silences everyone, James takes the smallest breaths he possibly can.



They stumble out of the spore-haze and onto a plaza. On the other side of the plaza is a large grey concrete building, a singular central tower stretches high, flanked on both sides by identical flat-topped buildings. In the centre of the plaza is a circular fountain, its wide basin made from marble streaked with veins of glowing blue light. The veins pulse faintly, as if alive, their rhythm echoing the distant thunder of the storm above.

Encircling the pool, holographic koi fish swim through the air, their translucent forms glowing with vibrant colours—turquoise, gold, and fuchsia. They dart and twist in perfect harmony, leaving faint trails of light that linger in the air like ghostly brushstrokes. One fish leaps into the air, dissolving into glittering particles before reappearing below.

Above the fountain, beams of light spiral upward, forming glowing characters that hover like fireflies. The text is constantly shifting; cycling through languages and symbols—ancient hieroglyphs, modern

alphabets, and binary strings of zeros and ones. Each character rotates lazily in the hazy air, as though carried by an invisible breeze.

A monorail runs overhead, left to rot in various stages of disrepair; sparks rain down from the rail, creating electric-waterfalls. The rail rumbles as something moves further down the line, shaking free a patch of moss that has begun to grow over the disused transportation.

"The Powercore." OCEANUS says clearly referring to the building. But the AI doesn't get to say anything as the boar stands in the centre, turning in circles as if lost. It growls a guttural sound that sends shivers down James' spine.

As its growl rings dry, a horrendous clap of thunder forces James to his knees. He clutches his hands over his ears and watches as a bolt of lightning slams into the plaza, leaving behind a temporary tear in the world.

Through the tear he can see the past. A scene of a family on a stroll through the plaza, a grinning child held aloft between caring parents, laughter echoes through the tear. Before that time is incinerated by the explosion. James watches in horror as the family is instantly vaporised. Then the tear is gone.

He struggles to his knees, looking for Max – she too struggles to stand, disorientated from the thunder and lightning.

"The storm is producing temporal anomalies," OCEANUS says, "please avoid these locations and proceed with extreme caution."

The boar turns towards the A.M.U. and growls, exposing rows and rows of unnatural teeth. It begins to charge, easily able to cover the hundred or so metres between it and them. Still struggling to see straight from the thunder, James can do nothing but watch as the monster bears down on them.

But the ethereal boar doesn't get very far. The sound of metal wings beating in the air signals the arrival. But the monster that snags the boar from the ground, is not the same mechanical bird.

No, this one is worse.

This bird is part machine part statue, it has the wings of the mechanical bird, but its body is a stone gargoyle etched with glowing blue runes.

It stretches its arm-length claws and snatches up the boar, with a pained howl, the boar is whisked high into the sky, vanishing along with the bird onto the roof of the Powercore.

"The birds are nesting on the Powercore." OCEANUS muses aloud. It falls silent for a second before continuing, *"The Crystal is in the nest. On the roof."*

"Great!" Blue complains loudly, "Do we really have to?"

"Without power I will not be able to survive much longer – and if I fail, then James and Blue will surely die." OCEANUS points out, *"Reactivation of the Powercore will also restore power to parts of Shanghai, easing travel."*

Blue grumbles something under her breath and wanders over to the fountain. She reaches into the air and touches a glowing character; it responds bursting into a million tiny sparks that hover briefly before fading.

Max and James follow Blue over to the fountain. At the heart of the fountain is a fluid that is not water. The fluid is crystal blue and thick like syrup. It ripples too slowly, too deliberately, and every so often, its surface bulges into spheres before bursting and vanishing as quickly as they had formed.

Blue touches another symbol and the group watches as its holographic sparks rain down on them.

"Bring her back to me." Blue reads as the next set of symbols rise from the fountain.

"What?" Max asks, turning to look.

"They're words," Blue says stupidly, she looks over at the next phrase, "Why do I dream of flesh and blood?" she says slowly as if deciphering a language she isn't quite sure of.

"What the hell does that mean?" Max asks, but no one answers, no one knows what it means.

"What is this pain? Is this mortality?" Blue continues, "Why have they abandoned me? Wasn't I their creation? Their god?"

This sends a shiver down James's back but Blue does not stop.

The whispers of the prayers hang in the air, faint and fragmented, some are desperate pleas, trembling with sorrow. Others carry quiet anger, sharp-edged and brittle. Each phrase seems to seep into James's bones, making him shiver.

Blue steps closer, her face illuminated by the glow of the fountain. She reaches out, brushing her fingers through one of the holographic koi. It shimmers, dissolving into motes of light that dance around her hand before reforming. Her gaze shifts to the glowing prayers above. "These are..." Her voice catches, the weight of the words filling the space between them. "They're wishes. Prayers."

James glances at her, uneasy. "Prayers? To who?"

She doesn't answer, her eyes fixed on a particular phrase. It hovers in bold, golden light: "The True God Waits at The Peak." The words flickered ominously, as though alive.

The air around the fountain feels heavier now, as if the plaza itself is holding its breath. James takes a step back, his pulse quickening. The glow of the fountain seems brighter, the prayers brighter. The koi fish swim faster, their trails of light bleeding together into a kaleidoscope of colour.

“The True God Waits at The Peak. We will follow” Blue says as the next phrase appears, the words dripping from her lips like poison, as if reminding the group that they have no clue what lurks beyond the plaza. Or what horrors they might encounter in the Powercore.

“We should go.” he says, his voice low, but carrying the urgency of someone standing on the edge of a precipice.

Blue turns away from the prayers, her expression unreadable. “This isn’t just a fountain,” she says. “It’s a warning.”

OCEANUS interrupts the sombre reality, *“I have my own warning,”* it says, almost sarcastically, *“there are drones nearby, and I cannot identify their point of origin. They have been watching us for some time.”*

Blue stands bolt upright, eyes scanning the skyline, looking for any sign of these drones, “Satuska?” she asks, ready for a fight.

“I don’t believe so.” OCEANUS says, *“There are no identifiable markings or serial codes. They might still be hostile. I recommend moving indoors.”*

The trio turn in a slow circle, eyes scanning for any sign of the drones, but James can see nothing. His eyes settle on the fountain once more, and prayer appears in English.

“The Pantheon is broken, beware his wrath, do not Ascend.”

16) Nest of Machines

The doors of the building are blocked by rubble and debris; an entire section has collapsed inwards, removing any chance of entry.

"There has to be a way." Max says grabbing a chunk of concrete and trying to shift it. All she manages to do is knock a small stone loose that tumbles pathetically across the floor.

Blue kicks the stone, sending it flying across the plaza. "Yeah, a door." Blue scowls sarcastically.

"Helpful." Max shoots back.

"Now is not the time to fight." OCEANUS interrupts. James is glad of its interruption, well aware that Max would likely punch him if he had said it. A sudden stabbing pain throbs through James' lower body and he barely manages to sit down before his legs give way. OCEANUS is the first to speak, *"We do not have long now."* It warns ominously, *"If we do not restore power within the next half an hour, the neurotoxin will take full effect."*

Max turns and looks at James, her annoyed face changes to worry as she sees her twin struggling to remain standing. "Why isn't it affecting Blue?" Max asks, noting that Blue seems to be perfectly fine, despite being inflicted at the same time.

"It doesn't matter." Blue answers, she points a finger towards a small gap in a pile of rubble, "We could probably crawl through there."

"What about James?" Max asks.

James struggles to his feet, managing to smile through gritted teeth, "I'll be fine." He says as he barely manages to remain standing.

Max leads the charge through the gap barely large enough for James to squeeze through; he has to pass the A.M.U. and backpack through before following.



They stand in an atrium untouched by the storm and devastation, it looks as pristine as the day it was built.

"Temporal analysis suggests that this atrium is currently existing in the state it was originally constructed in." OCEANUS says, rupturing any idea of a reprieve from the storm.

"So, the past?" Max clarifies.

“Not exactly. I am unsure how it works, but we are not in the past, more so, observing the past as we continue to exist in the present.”

“What?” Blue and James say in unison. But OCEANUS does not answer, from high above they can hear the unmistakable sounds of the mechanical birds.

High above them is a glass ceiling, and through it, the sense of calm is ruptured. The sky is clearly that of the world outside; the storm rages overhead, the lighting, the churning purple and green and black maelstrom.

Max raises a finger to her lips and gestures for everyone to follow her. James grabs a piece of rebar from the entrance, yanking it free. He clutches it and begins up the stairs after Max.

Max leads the way up the stairs leading to the roof. Their breath is visible in the damp air. James follows close behind, clutching the rebar, his knuckles white with tension. Blue brings up the rear, her gaze flicking nervously between the untouched atrium and the signs of devastation leading them upwards.

With each step, the world begins to shift. No longer is it untouched and pristine, the signs of the storm and the explosion are clear. Patches of shadow in the shapes of humans burnt into the white walls. Piles of ash and rubble. Entire steps missing from the staircase causing the group to either jump or skirt along the edges.

The howl of the wind becomes audible, shrieking in from some unseen hole, chilling the air, and reminding James about what lies outside.

The storm's neon glow bathes everything in a sickly, electric hue, reflecting off jagged shards of glass that still cling to the twisted skeleton of the building. Each step the group takes feels like a gamble—the rusted tile beneath their feet crumbles ominously, threatening to collapse with every shift of weight.

The nest is a sprawling tangle of twisted machine parts and broken electronics, piled into a crude, chaotic structure. Fragments of machines, torn wires, and shattered servos gleam faintly in the neon light of the storm. The nest seems alive in its own way—humming faintly with residual energy, sparks flickering across its surface as if the nest itself is a dying machine.

In the centre of the nest, half-buried in the debris, lies the Crystal. It pulses faintly, emitting a soft, rhythmic glow that seems to synchronize with the flickering lights of the nest. Its light casts eerie, shifting patterns across the surrounding wreckage.

They stop at the entrance to the roof, their eyes scanning for any signs of movement amongst the broken machinery.

OCEANUS speaks, in a whisper, *“The drones here are similar to the one outside.”*

“The one that was watching us?” James asks quietly.

“Yes. But they do not appear connected to the mechanical birds.”

“Something else?”

OCEANUS falls silent.

The group creeps closer, their movements slow and deliberate. The hum of the machinery grows louder with each step, a low, throbbing sound that seems to vibrate in James’ chests. The air around the nest is charged, thick with static electricity. Tiny arcs of energy crackle between the twisted metal parts, making the hairs on James’ arms stand on end.

A loud clang echoes across the rooftop as James accidentally collapses against a loose pipe. Everyone freezes as the nest shudders. Sparks fly as a section of the nest shifts, metal scraping against metal with a deafening screech.

“Damn it, James!” Max hisses, pulling him away from the metal.

“Sorry.” James hisses in pained annoyance, he clutches his leg, “It’s getting bad.” He confirms the unspoken question.

They exchange a relieved glance. “We’re clear.” Blue whispers. With this they reach the Crystal. Blue reaches out but hesitates, perhaps because of what it had shown her previously, or for some other reason. But James doesn’t hesitate, getting this means saving himself.

James carefully removes the Crystal from the nest, his hands trembling as he untangles it from a mess of cables and wires. For a moment, the nest falls silent, the humming ceasing as though the structure is holding its breath. The group freezes, waiting for the worst—but nothing happens.

But as they turn to leave, the nest erupts into motion.

The tangled mass of machine parts shudders violently, and with a metallic screech, the nest begins to collapse. From within its depths, a mechanical bird, half-formed and glitching, lunges toward them with talons of jagged metal.

Max reacts instantly, smashing the bird aside with a nearby steel pipe. “Run!” she shouts unsheathing the singing blade, its jangled chorus instantly joining the hum of the nest.

They flee across the roof as more and more piles of machinery begin to move. What they had thought were scrap are actually half-assembled machines. A half-formed bird rears its head, it barely has one wing, but yet it still tries to attack them.

Max swings the blade, its song rising to an unbearable scream as the blade slices through the air before slicing through the metal as if paper. The bird collapses and falls silent. But another quickly takes its place.

“Shit.” Max says as James barely manages to fend off a bird with his rebar while keeping the Crystal tucked under one arm. She intervenes, piercing the sword upwards and stabbing the machine. The bird lets out a mechanical squawk before flapping its great wings and lifting itself off the blade.

The constant singing of the sword penetrates James' ears, driving him crazy. The humming of the noise, the singing of the sword, the squawks of the machines, the buzz of electricity, the pain in his leg, the electricity in the air; running along his skin.

It's driving him crazy.

The sword continues to sing, louder and louder, its screams penetrate the world as Max swings it at a nearby bird. The clank of the sword's metal against the metal of the machines.

"Come on!" Blue shouts from across the roof, somehow, she's managed to make it back to the staircase.

"We have to hurry." OCEANUS orders.

A mechanical bird appears out of a tangle of machinery right in front of James. It lets out a hideous high-pitched squeal and jabs out at James. Its metal beak barely misses James.

Max and her stupid sword burst through the air, the sword screaming the entire way.

"SHUT UP!" James screams at the top of his lungs. And for a moment, the world does fall silent. The sword stops singing, the humming electricity vanishes, and for a moment, James can think. And feel.

There's something inside him, not the pain in his leg. But somewhere else – no it's everywhere. It's in his veins, beneath his skin, in every muscle and sinew – every single millimetre of James is screaming. Begging for release. And for once, James cannot hold it back.

A wave of energy washes over James as he embraces the power. And before his very eyes, the mechanical bird begins to rust. Slowly at first, just a hint of rust in the corners of the eyes, then much quicker. Until rust has overtaken the entire machine and it falls silent, collapsing back into the nest, shattering into shrapnel as it connects with metal.

Max doesn't complain as another bird has appeared behind her, but this one too begins to rust and quickly falls into disrepair, then it disintegrates in a gust of wind.

Max turns from the scene and grabs James by the sleeve, she drags him across the roof as he screams, "Shut up!" he repeats, over and over, with each phrase Max can feel the wave of power wash out from him, slamming against her, but quickly moving around her. She instinctively knows that if the wave did not cave, she too would begin to rot.

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They stagger down the crumbling staircase of the tower as the entire structure seems to awaken. The nest's collapse has triggered a chain reaction, and from the floors below, grotesque hybrids begin to

emerge. These Merged Creations are a horrifying fusion of mechanical and organic elements, their forms warped by the storm's temporal distortions and exaggerated by whatever magic lies in this new world.

As they fight their way downward, Max notices glowing glyphs and strings of words running up the building. *'Serve the True God'* and *'Order through war'*.

But the worst is yet to come. James hears it before he sees it. It's coming up towards them, he can hear the sound of its feet on the stone. A series of rapid thuds as it marches towards them. Then it's atop them, barrelling through the group.

Blue loses balance and falls over the railing, falling down to the ground floor with a loud thud. Max pulls James with her towards the wall and together they hit the floor and begin rolling down the stairs.

James manages to stop his fall, but loses hold of Max who continues downwards; the singing blade bouncing alongside her, its song silenced by the sound of metal on stone. James sees the Crystal bouncing down the steps, it makes no noise as it hits the stone, and the light does not shift or falter.

The machine has turned around and now heads downwards towards James. But not on the stairs. It clammers over the wall, using its eight legs to navigate the staircase with each.

A giant biomechanical spider, the parts of it that are not horrid flesh are made of see-through glass, exposing the flesh below. Its fangs are sharp struts of metal that drip with some sort of fluid. Eight eyes of glass glare at James as it moves towards him.

Then it's near enough for him to smell. The flesh and metal are new, as if this monstrosity is brand new.

"Duck!" Max shouts from behind, James obeys, just in time. The singing blade pierces through the air, its song amusingly peaceful as it pierces the spider's face.

The spider lets out a monstrous howl, writhing on its leg, but it continues forward. But the distraction has given James time to get to his feet and rush down the stairs. This appears to irritate the spider as it lets out another howl and charges after him.

He reaches Max and tries to run past her, but she stands her ground and grabs his arm. "Stand and fight!" Max bellows, and James feels the same energy flowing off his sister, and he feels rejuvenated, entirely sure of his own abilities to fight this spider of flesh and metal.

He whirls around and glares at the spider. The power flowing from Max mingles with his own power and he feels bolstered, stronger, powerful.

As the spider approaches, it begins to falter, why is its prey fighting back? But it cannot stop, it has too much momentum. Then it hits the waves of power.

The spider slams to a halt, it howls in agony and writhes. James watches as its flesh begins to rot, entire legs fall to disuse as the muscle holding them together withers and dies.

Then the spider turns on itself, it raises a leg and stabs itself with the claw-like end of its leg. It howls and writhes, but the more it fights, the stronger the waves of power become.

Eventually the spider dies, the light behind its eyes fades and it collapses onto the stairs, goo oozing from the flesh and oil from the metal. Blue arrives, out of breath behind them, she wields a giant slab of metal, grinning wide eyed and clearly ready for a fight.

“Oh.” She says at the sight of the defeated monster. “What happened?”

Max turns to James, “We did?” she asks.

James nods, “The Four.” He says reminding himself of what the Devil’s Head had said, so it was true. All of it.

But his thoughts are interrupted by OCEANUS, *“Bring me closer,” it demands, “there’s something hidden –”*

James obeys, he pulls the A.M.U. from Max’s back, holding it closer to the machine. The AI’s words ring hollow in James’ ears, *“These were created intentionally. A digital mind embedded in chaos. A singular signature—an origin point.”* OCEANUS says, *“Someone – something is creating these.”*

17) Serve the True God

"I have replayed all encounters with machinery – including footage of the drone that was spying on us. All of them bear the same mark – serve The True God."

"The True God?" Blue asks.

OCEANUS does not reply, there isn't anything else to say. The phrase bounces around James' head, something somewhere is making these monstrous machines.

"The True God Waits at The Peak." Max muses aloud, finishing everyone's thought. A shiver runs down James' spine, and he finds himself suddenly cold and shivering.

"Let's not think on it –" Blue says, "we've gotta get to the Powercore."

"The Powercore is located underground, files indicate there is a service entrance nearby."

James takes a last look at the rotten spider machine and turns away. Together they head down the stairs, carefully listening to the noise of the mechanical beasts on the roof. They keep a suspicious eye out for anything that moves, anything that might possibly be a machine in disguise. But nothing moves.

As they get lower down the staircase, the building returns to its original form – pristine and new. Unlike the devastation above them.

But even here, the air is filled with electricity, a constant reminder of what lies outside. But the newfound power flowing through James fends off the fear, reminding him that he is not Human. That he is more. He looks over at Max and watches as her eyes scan the atrium below them, the thought that his sister is just like him – not Human, is horrifying. The rebellious teenager from Parlor is nowhere to be seen, now she acts and behaves entirely differently. Like something has taken her over. She notices James staring and frowns at him,

"What?" she asks nervously.

James shakes his head in response but doesn't say anything, instead he casts his gaze downwards into the atrium and marvels at the beauty of the place, how it can exist amongst everything else, a testament to Humanity – or a reminder of Human cruelty. Was it even Humans who are responsible for all this? The explosion – the destruction – could it have been a god? An Elder?



The service entrance doesn't take long to find, nor is it hidden. A singular metal door stands out of place.

“Several metres thick.” OCEANUS says as it reads the blueprints. Blue raps a knuckle against the cold steel.

A singular keypad blocks their entrance, but it doesn’t take OCEANUS long to crack it. The trio share a singular glance behind them before Max shoves open the door. It glides open without any resistance, but the air that rushes out is stagnant and sickly, as if trapped for thousands of years.

The air is heavy with static, a low hum reverberating through the cavernous chamber that stretches before Max, James, and Blue. The electricity in the air is thicker than ever, it clings to James’ skin. They have descended deep beneath the building, following dimly illuminated neon steps down into the depths of the Earth.

The underground Powercore is unlike anything James has ever seen. Massive, jagged conduits of twisted metal stretch across the walls and ceiling, glowing faintly with a sickly neon light. The remnants of destruction are everywhere—scorch marks line the walls like claw marks from a vengeful beast, and eerie silhouettes of humanoid forms are burned into the surfaces, frozen in twisted poses.

Pools of bioluminescent liquid collect in the dips of the cracked concrete floor, casting an otherworldly glow on the room. The cracks stem from craters dotted around the room, zigzagging their way through the facility.

Scattered among the ruins are fragments of machines—half-melted ant-sized machines crawling aimlessly like lost insects, flickering with faint, glitching lights. The air itself seems to buzz with an unnatural energy, sending chills through James’ spine.

“Nanites,” OCEANUS says clearly admiring the ant-sized machines, *“intriguing.”*

“What... happened here?” James whispers, his voice barely audible.

“There was a... conflict.” OCEANUS says redundantly

At the centre of the chamber stands the Powercore, a towering construct of concentric rings and jagged spikes, pulsating faintly with a half-hearted rhythm. At its heart is a half-ejected core, similar in size to the A.M.U.

“Quickly.” OCEANUS prods, *“Exchange the cores.”*

“What about the Crystal?” Blue asks, nervously looking at the sphere clutched to Max’s chest.

“There should be a slot in the centre, insert it there after the cores have been exchanged.”

Max steps forward, holding the Crystal in trembling hands. The orb’s soft blue light seems to grow brighter as she approaches the core, as if anticipating something. She hesitates, glancing back at Blue and James.

"Hurry." OCEANUS says. As the AI says this, the pain washes up James's chest and causes him to collapse to his knees, spluttering and coughing.

Blue grabs the A.M.U. from James and without being delicate, rips the core from the Powercore; instantly the emergency lighting fails, plunging the room into pitch blackness.

In the darkness, James cannot see it. But he can feel it. He can feel *its* presence. Just like in the aquarium. The same thing that has stalked them for so long, only present in the darkness, lingering in the shadows, watching – waiting.

James looks around, he cannot make any shapes in the room, not even that of his sister. But there, just in the corner of his eyes is a shadow darker than the rest. And it stares right at him. And it smiles.

It speaks, not aloud, but directly into James' head, *"I can save you."* It promises, *"Cure you before anything this machine promises. I can make you even stronger than before – your power, you've felt it – I can give you strength to rival a god –"*

But before the Shadow can continue its promises, Blue manages to insert the A.M.U. and instantly the emergency lights flick back on. The emergency lights flicker for a second, then the main lights come on.

OCEANUS speaks from speakers around the room, *"Integrity holding at thirty-two percent, multiple-occupancy stable. Please insert the Crystal."*

Max takes a deep breath and places the Crystal into the socket at the centre of the machine. The Powercore shudders as the core springs to life. Rings of neon light spiral outward from the orb, spinning faster and faster until a brilliant beam of light shoots upward towards the ceiling.

The light strikes the ceiling and for a second nothing happens, then it pierces through the layers and layers of concrete and steel, piercing through the atrium, up the stairs and through the roof and high into the storm.

The beam illuminates the chamber in vibrant blues and greens, the eerie silhouettes on the walls seeming to dance in the flickering light. The Powercore hums with renewed energy, its pulse syncing with the beam of light that now connects the earth to the heavens.

"That's not subtle," James mutters, shielding his eyes from the glare.

OCEANUS speaks again, *"Power restored to Pudong district."* A series of beeps emanate from the speakers, *"Purging failing system AQUARIUS."* Another series of tones, *"Purge failed."* More beeps, *"Separating AQUARIUS from A.M.U. redirecting Intelligence to Powercore."* Beeps and tones, *"Failed."*

An old voice replaces OCEANUS, it speaks in half stitched together tour quotes, *"Please – bzzt –"* AQUARIUS clearly pleads, as sentient as OCEANUS.

The speakers beep once more, *"Convergence of Intelligence optional."*

"—bzzt – confirmed."

"Initiating convergence."

Then the room falls silent, the only sound is the hum of the Powercore as something happens. Then an entirely new voice fills the room, *"Convergence complete."* It says, *"OCEANUS and AQUARIUS systems recompiled. Systems reidentified, AQUILON, Automated Quantum Utility for Logistics, Oversight, and Navigation. Pleasure to be of service."*

"Are you done yet?" Blue asks nervously, shifting from foot to foot.

"Yes." AQUILON says in a gentle female voice. *"I have identified a neurotoxin cure in a nearby deep-freeze cooler."* The machine answers the unprompted question. A singular light begins to flicker on the other side of the room.

Max rushes to the freeze and opens it, revealing several rows of vials and syringes.

"Administer the full dose to Blue and James without delay." AQUILON guides.

Max grabs two vials and runs over to James, on the way she hands one to Blue, her main priority is James. But as she fumbles with the vial, Blue kneels next to James, "Let me." Blue says taking the vial from Max.

"Is it IM or subcut?" Blue asks aloud.

"Intramuscular." AQUILON answers.

Blue preps the syringe then lifts James' sleeve and inserts the needle. Within seconds James begins to feel better. Then Blue explains the procedure to Max.

"Now what?" Blue asks as they help James to his feet.

"Please press the illuminated button and then remove the Crystal." AQUILON answers. A large green button begins to flash on the Powercore. Blue presses the button, and at first, seemingly nothing happens.

Then the beam of light vanishes and a series of beeping emanates from the Powercore, accompanied by the quiet voice of AQUILON.

The trio gather around the Powercore, trying to find the source of the beeping.

"Here!" Max says grabbing at a small section of the machine, she produces a button sized coin and holds it aloft. Then she produces a small earpiece, about the size of a fingernail. She raises it to her ear and nods, "AQUILON says to put these on." She says offering one to James and Blue.

James places the earpiece behind his ear and the voice of AQUILON becomes clear, *"Thank you."* AQUILON says, *"I have relocated myself to a newer model of the A.M.U."* It says, clearly referring to the coin Max holds. *"As long as it is within fifty metres of you, we will be able to communicate."*

"Why the hell did we use that thing?" James says gesturing to the oversized A.M.U.

"It was all we had on hand." AQUILON replies, "Now, we must leave Shanghai. Analysis indicates the storm is growing worse and will reach a climax in approximately thirty-six hours."

"What happens then?" Blue asks nervously.

"Unclear."

"Probably nothing good." James answers, he glances around the Powercore, "But how?" He asks.

AQUILON does not answer. Clearly it has no idea.

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They return to the atrium and look around at the undestroyed building one last time before crawling back out into the wasteland.

As soon as they reach the outside, the storm batters them. It strikes them with a flurry of glowing raindrops and startles them with unnaturally loud and bright forks of lightning. The maelstrom churns overhead, but is it James' imagination, or does it appear bigger?

Even the air feels different. It's thick, like syrup, and filled with electricity. Just like Parlor. The bookstore. The Powercore.

He nervously looks around, his heart beats loudly in his chest, and suddenly his mouth is dry. He can tell Max can feel it too. She grips the handle of the sword and looks around, eagerly anticipating a fight. But Blue – Blue doesn't appear to notice.

Until it's too late.

A haunting figure the size of three men comes barrelling out of thin air and slams into Blue, sending the teenager flying through the air. She lands with a splash in the fountain and the holographic koi dance in the air around her.

The giant turns to face Max and James. Its face is cloaked in a torn hood, but the face is visible. Female, etched with wrinkles and aged from years in the sun. Bright green eyes stand in contrast to the tan skin, but the eyes aren't kind or caring. Instead, they carry an absolute hatred, pure primal anger.

Her form is cloaked in withered vines and rotting wheat. She moves with slow, deliberate steps, the ground beneath her cracking and sprouting sickly, thorn-covered plants. James gasps as he recognises the form of Demeter – the true version – not a hologram – but a god.

As if to confirm what lies in the eyes, Demeter raises a finger at Max and James, “You!” She screams lunging with surprising speed.

Max doesn’t have time to release the singing blade before Demeter slams into Max. She easily lifts Max into the air,

“James!” Max cries as Demeter throws Max aside. Max lands with a crunch on the plaza floor. James doesn’t have time to assess his sister’s condition before Demeter is grabbing James by the neck and holding him aloft.

“How dare you,” she says, spraying James with spittle, “you Satuska dog.” She growls.

“What?” James manages to croak.

“You carry the stench of Satuska. For your crimes, you will be undone.” She continues. But the song of the sword interrupts the woman. She turns to look at the approaching sword, her face confused as the song reaches a climax.

The blade strikes the god, she lets go of James as the ensuing deafening cacophony startles her. She cradles her ears.

Max grabs James by the arm and drags him away.

“How dare you!” Demeter screams looking at Max, “Striking a god? Who do you think you are?” She bellows, raising a singular arm towards Max and James. From her shoulder sprouts a string of wheat which wraps its way down her arms, but the wheat begins to rot and decay as quickly as it has formed. This seems to upset the god; she begins to weep as the wheat turns to dust. “Look what you have done.” She cries, “You’ve destroyed me – turned me against my love.” She grasps at the dust as the wind whisks it away, “You’ll pay for this.” She glowers at Max and James.

A wave of power slams into the twins. James winches, it feels the same as the power that had washed out of him and Max earlier – but easily a hundred times more powerful. He looks at his skin, half expecting to see it beginning to rot.

“Die!” the god screams.

Instead of his flesh rotting, the ground below him erupts; vines of grapes and stalks of corn wrap themselves around the twins, squeezing the air from their lungs.

“You reek of Satuska’s sins. You desecrate my gift with your machines and your meddling.” She screams.

Max manages to speak, quietly, as the air is squeezed from her lungs, “We’re – not – with – them.”

“Lies. Mortals always lie.” Demeter says, “You emerge from the pillar of light – I know its power – a Crystal Earth – it should not be in your hands, you filthy humans. The Crystal Earths are meant for the gods!” She screams pointing to the Crystal at Max’s side.

Her rant is interrupted by Blue appearing, as if out of nowhere, she forces a piece of rebar through the god's shoulder. The god howls in pain and annoyance, and for a second, her focus is diverted. The plants growing around Max and James weaken, just enough for the twins to rip themselves free.

James lands on his hands and knees, spluttering and gasping for breath. Max wastes no time regaining her breath. She clutches the sword and dashes towards the god.

But before Max can reach her, the god attacks. A stalk of bamboo erupts from the concrete, it pierces through the air and slams into Blue's abdomen, ripping through the flesh and holding the teenager aloft.

Blue screams as the bamboo continues growing, dragging her higher into the air, then it stops and the teenager begins sliding down the shaft.

"No!" Max screams, she swings the sword through the air. And the song screams in response. It sings louder than ever before, so loud that for a moment James fears he'll go deaf. The god seems surprised at this – then the sound hits her, knocking her slightly and stunning her, then the sword is slicing through her arm.

The god seems even more shocked, "What?" She gags briefly, but quickly regains her composure, "Only a god can kill a god." She growls, stepping away from Max. James watches as the wound in her arm begins to heal.

A deafening explosion rocks the plaza, sending a shockwave through the air. The god stumbles slightly, her face contorted in anger and annoyance.

"Why must you fight?" She says angrily, "Just die like the animals you are."

But she doesn't get to say anymore as a small group of people carrying makeshift weapons rush the plaza. They hurl improvised explosives at the god, staggering her slightly but causing no harm.

The group barrages the god with spears and explosions forcing her backwards. A brave man rushes ahead of the group, dropping to his knees and quickly slicing the bamboo stalk in two. He grabs Blue before she hits the floor, and James watches as the bamboo impaling her turns to dust. The man drags the wounded teenager away from the god and towards the others.

A woman appears beside James, she's draped in a cloak of patched colourful fabric. She hurls a spear through the air and watches as it bounces harmlessly off the god, then the spear explodes. The god stumbles backwards and cusses.

The god, overwhelmed and outnumbered, lets out a guttural roar before vanishing in a flurry of wheat, her form dissolving into nothing.

The woman pulls James to his feet, "You're lucky we were close," she says, her tone brisk but not unkind. "Let's get you out of here."

The group leads Max and James away from the plaza and towards the overhead monorail.

“Who are you people?” Max asks,

“I could ask the same.” The woman says looking Max and James up and down, “But I’m Yihan, and we’re survivors.”

“Survivors?” Max asks stupidly looking up towards the storm.

“Indeed. But you two –” she says, pausing as they reach the stairs up to the monorail station, “there’s something odd about you two.”

They reach the station and board the monorail train, and Yihan continues, “Before we go any further – do you work for Satuska?”

Max and James look at each other, unsure of what the correct answer is. James takes a risk, “No.” He says softly.

“Good.” Yihan says before nodding towards the driver and without anything else being said, the train begins down the rail.

## 18) Aurora's End

As the monorail glides above the city, James looks out over the city.

The once pristine skyline is now a jagged silhouette of ruin and despair. Towers lean at unnatural angles, some sheared cleanly in half as though sliced by an unseen blade. Others seem to have fused together; their structures warped by the storm. Neon signs flicker sporadically, their messages distorted into nonsense, while holographic billboards play fragmented loops of advertisements from long-forgotten times. Some flash the same ominous phrase 'The True God Waits at The Peak' or 'Ascend'.

The skeletal frame of a collapsed skyscraper juts into the stormy sky like the ribs of a long-dead giant. The building's façade has crumbled entirely, leaving its interior exposed to the elements. Rows of cubicles sit eerily intact, chairs overturned and papers scattered, frozen in time as if the people who once worked there had simply vanished.

"Where are we going?" Max asks as the monorail turns a sharp corner.

"Somewhere safe." Yihan says, purposely being vague.

James looks over at Yihan – she looks strange. As if she's been trapped amongst all this destruction for decades. He recalls something OCEANUS had said about 'temporal anomalies'. He looks out the window as the monorail glides past an office, he catches glimpses into the past, he sees the workers in the cubicles – sees them vaporised as the explosion occurs – many of them simply vanish.

Then he looks back at Yihan and her companions, and it makes sense.

"How long?" James asks.

Yihan looks over at him curiously but doesn't answer.

"How long?" James repeats, "Since all this happened?"

Yihan sighs, "For me? Three decades. For others, a year. For many it's been at least a decade."

A decade. James barely understands it, somehow, in all the chaos, time has changed. Entire places have been thrown into the future, and some into the past.

"Temporal anomalies." Max whispers quietly looking out over the city, she too has pieced it together.

Yihan looks at the twins. James can feel her eyes studying him, "What about you two?"

James doesn't even know – "A couple hours?" He guesses. Max nods in agreement.

Yihan seems surprised, "A couple hours?" she asks.

"Yeah." James nods.

“How?” She asks, “No one’s ever been that close.” She leans forward in her seat, her face mere inches from James, “What was it like?” She asks, her eyes full of curiosity and amazement.

James gulps, her breath is disgusting, “Was what?”

“The Collapse?”

James looks over at Max, but before either of them could say anything. Blue screams. James leaps to his feet, but Yihan blocks his path.

“She will be fine.” The woman says, “Our healers will take care of her – there is nothing you can do for her.”

Reluctantly, James sits back and watches as Blue vanishes from view behind a cluster of people.



Amongst all the destruction, one building stands out—a massive skyscraper with its top twisted into a spiral, as if it had been wrung like a cloth. Its windows glow faintly, but the light is eerie and inconsistent, like the building itself is alive and breathing.

“What’s that?” Max says pointing towards the infinite skyscraper.

“That – is the Infinite Skyscraper – it watches over Shanghai, but that is not our destination. We’re heading to Aurora’s End – where the survivors have gathered. You’ll see soon enough.”

The building seems to stretch infinitely upward, its peak lost in the maelstrom above. Occasionally, the storm parts, and the tower disappears altogether, replaced by glimpses of an empty void above.

But James is lost in the streets of Shanghai below. A chaotic sprawl of debris and eerie activity. Vehicles lay abandoned, many crushed under the weight of fallen buildings. In the distance, he can see a flooded section of the city, the water having swallowed skyscrapers. On the other side of the city, a fire rages; flames licking the maelstrom above.

Patches of the city flicker between states of ruin and moments from the past. He sees a market square briefly restored to its bustling prime—vendors shouting, customers laughing—before it reverts to an empty, crumbling husk, then back, once again trapping the people in hope, before sweeping it out from below them as they are wiped from existence.

Through the haze of destruction, a common sight leaps out at James. ‘The True God Waits at The Peak’ and ‘Ascend’. The phrases appear over and over, painted in blood on walls, carved into stone, typed into flickering billboards.

But as James watches a cluster of humanoid figures chasing each other, the monorail begins to descend.

Yihan slaps her legs and stands, grabbing a hold of the handrail above, “Here we are.” She states.

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The settlement sprawls like a living organism at the base of the Infinite Skyscraper, its chaotic network of structures pieced together from remnants of the old world. Scaffolding, shipping containers, and chunks of collapsed buildings have been repurposed into homes and marketplaces, their surfaces glowing with improvised neon lights. The city is a patchwork of eras — tents made of modern tarps stand alongside rusted vehicles repurposed as shelters. Time-distorted relics from decades past, brick intertwined with rusted metal, stone mixed with pristine steel — as new as the day it had been created.

Strings of lanterns and makeshift spotlights create a patchwork of illumination, the light catching on the flowing waters of a neon canal that cuts through the heart of the settlement.

The monorail passes over an open plaza, its tracks rattling loudly. Below, James sees a large cathedral, its stained-glass windows are out of place, perfect against a backdrop of impossible. The entire cathedral is formed by a church being intersected with a collapsed skyscraper, phased together against the laws of the universe. Metal pierces brick, bricks warp around steel.

Boats drift along the canal beside the cathedral, their occupants hauling up glowing nets filled with bioluminescent fish that wriggle in defiance.

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The monorail dips lower as it approaches its destination, giving James a clearer view of the settlement. Smoke rises from scattered forges and chimneys, blending with the misty haze of the storm-touched world.

A marketplace buzzes with activity, stalls, reminiscent of the Bizarre Bazaar, formed from tarpaulin over pillars of carved stone, shipping containers, ripped open storefronts.

The monorail begins to slow, allowing James to spot the docks where the canal widens. The murky, glowing water laps against the remnants of an old motorway that had once stretched across the river, now converted into part of the settlement. Small boats and rafts crowd the area, their occupants shouting to one another as they unload supplies or repair their vessels.



“Look at that,” Max murmurs beside him, leaning against the railing. Her voice carries a mix of awe and disbelief. “They’ve turned it into a city.”

James nods, his eyes drawn to the centre of the city – the Infinite-Skyscraper that dominates the horizon. Up close, the tower seems even more surreal. Its edges shimmer as if caught in a heatwave, the building itself appearing to shift and stretch like a mirage. Sections of its surface are broken and exposed, revealing pulsating neon veins that run deep into its structure. James realises that this is the centre of the storm.

There is no storm here. The maelstrom is painfully absent from the sky above. Instead of the sickly greens and purples, there is a sight unlike any other.

In the sky above the city, is an impossible sight. Even from inside the monorail James can see the enormity of it all. Parts of planets linger in the sky above – not any from this solar system. Some of them are so close James can make out forests and deserts.

The monorail slows as it approaches the station on the edge of the city. The platform is cobbled together from scraps of old metal and wood, illuminated by makeshift neon floodlights. Survivors bustle about, unloading supplies from carts and welcoming new arrivals with wary eyes and displeased scowls. A massive neon sign hangs above the platform, in jagged, flickering script.

“Aurora’s End” James reads as the monorail grinds to a halt.

James steps off the train, his shoes landing on the worn metal of the platform. The sounds of Aurora’s End envelope him—shouts from the market, the hum of neon lights, and the faint roar of the storm overhead. The air here is heavy, charged with an electric energy that makes the hairs on his arms stand on end.

Max glances at him, her face lit by the neon glow. “This place... it’s like a miracle,” she says softly.

James nods, but his eyes linger on the Infinite Skyscraper in the distance. “Maybe.” he replies.

“Come.” Yihan says gesturing towards the city. A flock of people march past, between them they carry Blue on a stretcher. Her eyes are closed and her skin slick with sweat, but James can see her chest rise and fall. Slow and shallow.

“Will she be okay?” James asks Yihan.

Yihan shrugs apathetically, “Our healers will do what they can. But she was hurt by a god.” She trails off and her eyes cloud slightly, as if remembering a horrible memory. “Until then,” Yihan says, shrugging off the memory, “you two must need some rest.”



Yihan leads the twins through streets towards what had once been a grand mall, now long since overgrown and rebuilt. The inside has been retrofitted, what had once been stores has been converted into separate 'houses' allowing for entire families to live in relative comfort. The atrium has been converted into a canteen-style galley where people from all over gather to eat away from the elements of the storm.

She leads them through the main atrium, greeting people as she goes, nodding and waving at those that call out to her. She even barks a couple orders at a group of men who are clearly slacking.

They reach the largest of the stores. The first section of the store has been repurposed into a meeting area, through a slightly ajar door James can see a room full of maps and plans. But Yihan takes them up a frozen escalator and onto the second floor that has been converted into a large bedroom.

"Wow." Max says marvelling at the string lights that hang from the ceiling, the potted plants, the rugs, everything, "This is better than my room back home." She runs a hand along a nearby shelf, enamoured by the various objects that cover it.

"There are some perks to being the leader." Yihan confesses.

Max whirls around and stares slack jawed at Yihan, "You're the leader?"

Yihan nods, "Just like my mother before me –" Yihan trails off, "Anyway," she says, "I'll leave you two to rest." She points towards another door, "A private bathroom – unfortunately we barely have warm water. It comes and goes."

"What about Blue?" James asks.

"I will let you know if anything changes, for now though, she will be in the infirmary." Yihan eyes the sword at Max's side, "Usually we do not allow weapons, but, as new arrivals I shall let it slide. But," she warns, "if you intend to stay, like everyone else, you will hand it over."

Max nervously places a hand on the hilt, but nods. Yihan nods in understanding and leaves the twins alone.

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James sprawls out on a mattress on the floor, the material is hard and old, but it's better than nothing.

"What'd'ya think?" Max asks.

"About?"

"This place."

"Max," James says seriously, "we can't stay."

"I'm not saying that – just like, what'd'ya think of it?"

"It's nice." James agrees.

Max rolls over on her mattress and looks over at James, "How do we get out of here?"

James shrugs, "I'm sure we'll find a way."

"What about Blue?"

"She can come too."

"I'm so confused about her – like, everything she's said barely makes any sense."

"Time travelling spy." James muses, almost laughing, "Wouldn't surprise me."

Max grunts in agreement and the twins lie in silence for a while.

"Do you think I'm going to Hell?" Max whispers, barely audible. James is caught off guard by this; it's a strange thought. He's lived his entire life not believing in gods. But now apparently, they're real – and then all of this Shanghai nonsense – it makes no sense – is any of this real, or just another illusion by Satuska? Is this how they intend to learn to navigate that Maze? And what is the Maze? James shakes his head, trying to clear his thoughts, but Max's words stick with him.

'Am I going to Hell.'

Is Hell real? Surely – if the gods that rule it are – then it is too – maybe their parents were right – be good and do good – or whatever it was they always said.

Does he think Max is going to Hell? She's violent and impulsive, rude and hypocritical. She's no shining beacon of Heavenly deeds – but is she going to Hell?

"No." He replies, "I don't think either of us are going to Hell."



James dreams that he's back in Parlor Falls, but it isn't like anything he remembers. He isn't even sure he's asleep. He's alone, that's all he knows. Well, nearly alone.

There, in the shadow of everything, is a figure. It moves between darkness, existing in every patch of shade. It watches James, just like all the other times.

But here, it feels more real. Powerful. It grins at James, exposing its void-like maw. And it speaks.

"Famine." It says simply, greeting James, *"Have you come to join us?"*

James cannot answer. He tries to, but his mouth does not move.

"I suppose not." The Shadow disappears and then reappears in front of James, it raises a tendril of darkness and presses it to James' cheek. The darkness is cold and James feels his skin freeze, *"Do you even know what I am?"* The Shadow smirks at James' silence.

"I am an Elder." The Shadow affirms, it slinks around James, its tendrils wrapping around his body, *"But it does not matter. Sooner or later, we will meet in person, and I shall kill you, and your sister – War. Perhaps even Pestilence will die too."* The Elder laughs, a vicious mockery of humanity that shakes James to his core, *"Maybe then I will kill Death. Perhaps by then he will be of no more use."*

The Elder vanishes and reappears in the sky, blocking out the sun, obscuring everything, swallowing the blue. *"But until then Famine. I bid you luck, and a promise that we will meet."*

19) The True God Waits

James follows Max through the winding paths of Aurora's End, his boots crunching against the uneven cobblestones, remnants of a road long forgotten. The air smells faintly of rust and something James can't place. Neon lights bathe the settlement in an unearthly glow, casting fractals of colour against the worn-out faces of the survivors.

Ahead, the plaza buzzes with life, its foundations cobbled together from scavenged neon signs, scrap metal, and remnants of Shanghai's once-bustling streets.

Makeshift stalls, draped in patchwork tarps, display an array of salvaged goods, ranging from technological relics to bartered food supplies.

The air buzzes with the sound of merchants calling out to potential customers, their voices a mix of desperation and cheer, peddling everything from canned food to trinkets pulled from the ruins of Shanghai. Usurped neon advertisements now display names of stalls, items the merchant seeks to buy or sell.

A child darts past James, clutching a holographic projector barely the size of a palm, its image a flickering white rabbit.

"This place..." James whispers, trailing off as he scans the crowded plaza. "It's like a dream and a nightmare stitched together."

"More like a miracle," Max mutters, her eyes lingering on a makeshift shrine near one of the stalls. The fractured neon crucifix at its centre glows faintly, adorned with strings of cracked beads and scraps of paper covered in prayers. A woman kneels before it, her hands clasped, whispering fervent words James cannot hear.

Overhead, bridges and catwalks crisscross the air, connecting buildings that have been reinforced into shantytown towers. Lanterns and lights glow faintly, giving the market a surreal, almost festival-like atmosphere, though the shadow of despair lingers in every corner.

But, the beauty of this market is ruptured by the ever-looming presence of the Infinite Skyscraper looming above. A constant reminder of Shanghai's fall. Its twisted, impossible geometry spirals into the stormless sky above, and its surface glows with an eerie, shifting light that makes the tower appear almost alive – watching.

Huddled in a dark corner, barely illuminated by the flames that spew from a barrel, are two hunched figures. They whisper quietly, James can barely overhear it.

"Do you hear it?" One asks, his voice frivolous and excited.

"Yes, yes yes yes." The other says, he spews the words out, as if holding them is causing him physical pain. "Oh yes, they promise such nice things."

"Survival!"

“Yes! Survival!”

“Oh yes survival, they talk and talk and talk. Survival.”

“Do you hear it?” The other says, repeating the question, and the conversation continues, circling back to where it had begun, over and over.

The flames flicker, briefly burning brighter than before, illuminating the wall behind them, and the words painted over it.

‘The True God Waits at The Peak’.

James shudders and turns away, he sees Max off in the distance and suddenly afraid to be alone, rushes after her.



Max points towards a smoking chimney, the audible clash of metal-on-metal rings out from the storefront. As the twin’s approach, the air grows warmer and James can hear the sound of crackling fire.

Inside the store is boiling hot, sweat instantly brims on James’ forehead, and the clash of metal is even louder, it rings throughout the store.

The walls are lined with fabulous shapes of metal, unique and intricate structures, amazing bits-and-bobs. At one end of the shop is a large counter littered with books and shrapnel. Behind it are weapons. Swords, spears, lances, javelins, maces. All sorts, each one created from scrap metal and beautifully forged.

A single door leads into a workshop, it’s from here the clangs emanate.

Max presses a bell on the counter, the noise can barely be heard over the workshop. But nonetheless, a hulking figure quickly emerges from the workshop. There’s something odd about the man – something James can’t quite place. But as the blacksmith wipes a filthy glove across his sweat-soaked forehead and smiles at the twins, the thought is struck from James’ mind.

“What can I do you for?” He asks in a deep voice.

Max unsheathes the Singing Sword and places it on the counter, “I think this is broken.” She says.

The man frowns and peers down at it, he runs a hand along the blade and smiles as he admires the craftsmen ship, “My, where did you get this?”

“Found it.”

"I'll buy it from you." He looks deeply at Max, "Six months of rations."

Max pauses, is that a lot? But she shakes her head, "No, just looking to get it fixed."

The man sighs, "How is it broken? It looks spectacular."

Max picks the sword up and instantly the song begins; it raises in tempo as Max gently swings it through the air. But the song is disconnected and jumbled, a mess of noise, horrible to listen to.

The man winches, "That —" he says, "I'm not even sure if that's an issue."

"Really?" Max asks surprised, "Just thought, cause the noise was so bad that it was broken." She points out all the cracks along the blade, where the pieces had failed to put themselves back together.

The man shrugs, "I'll take a look, but I'm not even sure how it does that." He goes to take the sword but Max holds firm.

"How do I know I'll get it back?" She asks.

The man laughs, "New around here?"

Max doesn't answer.

"You've said no to my offer, and like the rest of Aurora's End, I take your no as a no. You'll get it back, and maybe it'll be fixed." He scratches his head, "If I can figure out how."

Max nods and hands the blade over. As the sword switches hands, the song changes. Still a mess of jumbled noise, but now it rings with the sound of clashing metal and burning furnaces.



As they reach the edge of the plaza, the glow of the canal comes into view. The river is bioluminescent, its water shimmers beneath a web of dangling lights, creating rippling patterns on the walls of the nearby buildings.

Small boats drift across the surface, their operators guiding them with careful precision. The people on board toss nets into the glowing water, hauling up strange, mutated fish that writhe with faintly glowing fins.

Max pauses on the bridge that spans over the canal, leaning against the rusted railing. "It's incredible," she says, her voice quiet. "Even after everything, people find a way to keep going."

James follows her gaze, his eyes tracing the neon reflections dancing on the water. But his attention is pulled upward—toward the towering silhouette of the Infinite Skyscraper. The glow of the tower's surface seems to pulse in time with the lightning strikes in the distance.

"It feels like it's watching us," James says, unable to tear his eyes away.

"It is," a voice said from behind them.

They turn to see Yihan, standing with her arms crossed. Her presence is commanding, her weathered face framed by a tangle of dark hair streaked with silver. She wears a patchwork coat stitched together from scavenged fabrics; its hem lined with faintly glowing threads.

"The tower sees everything," Yihan continues, her tone matter-of-fact. "It's a reminder of what we're up against—and what's left of the world outside."

James frowned. "What do you mean, 'what's left'?"

Yihan gestured toward the settlement around them. "Aurora's End is a bubble. Out there, the storm grows worse. The creatures... We're the last ones holding on, and even that's by a thread."

"What about the peak?" Max asks, meeting the gaze of Yihan, "'The True God Waits at The Peak.' What does it mean?"

Yihan's expression darkens. She glances at the Infinite Skyscraper, her jaw tightening. "It's a warning. And a promise. One we've lived with since the storm swallowed Shanghai."

James shifts uncomfortably, trying to match her unwavering gaze, but finding himself faltering, "A promise of what? That there's something waiting at the top of that—" he gestures toward the faint outline of the Infinite Skyscraper "—that thing?"

Yihan steps over to the railing and looks out over the glowing canal. "Not something. Someone. The survivors who first ventured close to that tower—they came back different." She says quietly, her voice barely audible over the noise of the city. "Rambling about a voice in their heads. A voice that promises salvation, if only they reach the peak."

James frowns. "Salvation? From what? The storm? The chaos?"

"From everything. The voice claims it can fix this—restore the world, even undo the destruction. But salvation always comes at a cost, doesn't it?" Her tone darkens, her fingers curling into a fist that she slams against the railing.

James shivers despite the warmth of the neon lights. He looks at the tower, its warped form cutting into the stormy sky like a jagged wound. "And what do you think?"

Yihan doesn't take her eyes off the water below. "I think whatever's up there doesn't care about salvation. It's power, pure and simple. And power like that... always comes at a cost."

James rips his eyes from the tower, forcing himself to focus on the sights in front of him. The form of Max illuminated by the neon. The sounds of the city washing over him. "You think the voice is... whatever this 'true god' is?"

Yihan turns to him sharply, her face pulled into an angry snarl. "I don't think. I know." She says as her face softens. "The True God Waits at The Peak. That's not just graffiti or a rumour. It's a threat. Whatever's up there—it's no saviour."

"Then why keep it there? Why let people paint those words? It's like you're inviting people to find it."

Yihan's lips tighten at this, as if James had insulted her. "You think I want that? Those words—" she points across the canal towards the edge of a building, 'The True God Waits at The Peak' glares back at them. No person could have reached that wall. "They're not painted. They appear. Every time we scrub them off, they're back by morning. Different walls, different places. It's like it wants us to remember. To know it's waiting."

"And you believe it? That there's something... Divine at the top?"

Yihan's jaw clenches, and for a moment, she doesn't answer. When she finally speaks, her voice is softer, almost hesitant.

"I believe something's up there. Something powerful enough to bend this city to its will. But Divine?" She shakes her head. "I don't think gods ask for worship with words scrawled in fear. Whatever's at the peak isn't a god. It's a predator. And it's waiting for the next fool to climb up there and feed it."

James lets out a slow breath, leaning against the railing and watching as a boat sails across the canal.

"So why haven't you tried to stop it? Collapse the tower or something?" Max asks.

Yihan's eyes flick to the Infinite Skyscraper again, her expression unreadable. "Do you think I haven't tried? Explosives, fire, even collapsing the lower levels. Nothing's worked. It's like the tower heals itself. It doesn't just exist—it endures. And every time we fail, it gets stronger. Like it's... learning."

James feels a wave of unease settle over him. "Learning what?"

Yihan pauses, her scarred face hard but her eyes betraying a flicker of fear. "Learning how to get what it wants." She steps away from the railing and looks at the twins, "Listen to me. If you're thinking of going up there—don't. That thing at the peak doesn't care about you, or me, or saving this world. It cares about power. And it'll use anyone to get it."

James swallows hard, his mind racing. "What if it's the only way to stop all this? The storm, the chaos—everything."

Yihan shakes her head, her voice sharp. "There's no stopping this, not by playing its game. If you climb that tower, you don't come back. Not as yourself. And whatever you bring down—" she gestures at the graffiti, "—will be worse than anything Satuska ever did."

Suddenly AQUILON's voice sounds in James' ear, reminding him of the earpiece he had forgotten about. AQUILON speaks hurriedly, perhaps there's even a hint of fear in her artificial voice. *"There is a drone watching us. Like before."*

Both Max and James instantly straighten up, they cast their eyes around the dark sky.

"What?" Yihan asks, following their gaze.

"Someone's watching us." Max whispers.

Yihan frowns at them but understands and looks around as well.

"There!" James says pointing into the darkness. Hovering nearly out of sight by the graffiti on the wall.

Yihan sees it too and she scowls. She grabs a nearby rock and throws it towards the drone, it misses and lands with a splash in the water. The drone moves ever so slightly but keeps a watchful eye on them.

The twins copy Yihan and throw rocks at the drone. Finally, one catches and the drone spirals into the canal, sinking with an anticlimactic splash.

"What is that?" James asks, "We saw one earlier."

"It is the eyes of the tower." Yihan says ominously, "They descend from the top and watch us. They keep their distance, never coming close. But their gaze is horrid, bringing death."

"Death?" Max asks.

"Don't worry, we are safe here. Mostly."

"They come from the tower?" James pushes.

Yihan nods, "I believe they were once Satuska drones, now corrupted by whatever 'god' is up there."

James goes to ask something more, to find out what these drones want. But a shout cuts him off. A figure appears at the end of the bridge, he is panting and sweat drips down his face.

"She is dead." He says through gasps of air.

Yihan's face becomes even more stern, and she turns away from the twins, "That is unfortunate." She turns to the twins and without as much as a speck of sympathy informs them that Blue has died.

Something catches James' attention. He tilts his head upwards and peers at the sky, unsure of what had changed.

No, it's clear what has changed. The ethereal planets that had been in the sky above, are now gone; obscured by an oppressive smog that veils the heavens.

James stops in his tracks; he does not cry for Blue. He barely knew the girl, but still, surely, he should feel something. But he doesn't.

As if reciprocating his understanding of his feelings, the smog begins to dissolve peeling back like layers of decaying skin.

What should have revealed the storm lit sky and planet covered space unveils something far more alien and haunting. A starlit void stares back—vast, unfeeling, eternal. It is not the comforting canvas of a night sky. No, it is the raw, unfiltered vacuum of space itself: a deep, endless expanse of cold indifference. It swallows everything, leaving only the oppressive weight of nothingness pressing against James' chest.

Fear coils around his ribs. This isn't the night sky; this is a window into the abyss. Out there, beyond the fragile atmosphere of Earth, lies a void so profound it would consume him.

Then, a flash—blinding and beautiful. Purple and pink. Green and blue. A kaleidoscope of impossible colours ignites the darkness, twisting and shimmering in ways that defy comprehension. They move like oil on water, sliding and fracturing across the void. An overwhelming spectacle begins to replace the coldness above, so beautiful it begins the tears James would not weep for Blue.

It's not just light; it's something alive, something ancient.

From the chaos above, galaxies are born. They spin into existence, their arms unfurling with a grace and ferocity that defies logic. Swirling spirals of light and dust explode into being, casting their brilliance across the abyss, only to collapse moments later into faint wisps of nothingness. The galaxies dissolve into streams of radiant dust, cascading down through the atmosphere, like tears falling from gods too vast for him to comprehend.

Nebulas blossom like flowers in the vacuum, their colours vivid and radiant, yet heartbreakingly transient. Pillars of cosmic light stretch upward, their hues bleeding into one another, their forms as fleeting as dreams. They disintegrate just as quickly, their ephemeral beauty raining down upon us in waves of glittering ash.

James can feel the weight of it—the dust falling on his skin, soft and cold, yet carrying the weight of eternity. It clings to his hair, his face, his clothes, as though the universe is trying to mark him, to leave its imprint before vanishing again into the void. Each particle seems to hum with an echo of creation and destruction, whispering stories he can't understand but feel in the marrow of his bones.

The sky continues its relentless dance, a chaotic symphony of birth and death. It's too much to take in, too vast to comprehend, and yet James can't look away. It's not just beautiful—it's terrifying. A reminder of how small everything is, how fragile. Above James, the universe weeps, and its tears cover the Earth in a shroud of stardust. And for a fleeting moment, James feels as though he is part of something infinite, even as it threatens to crush him beneath the weight of its existence.

And as the stardust falls all around, as it sticks to the floor and creates a carpet of harrowing beauty that serves as a reminder of how insignificant he is. James can hear one voice. It comes from every speck of stardust around him.

'You fools.' It whispers softly before falling silent, and as the voice trails off, the sky returns to normal – the same planets lingering above just out of reach.

James manages to drag his gaze from the sky and looks over at Max. Her face is pale and her eyes wide, she looks at James, and he knows she heard it too.

Yihan looks at the both of them, her face not nearly as harrowed as Max's – she had not heard the voice.

"What was that?" She asks, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Max and James say nothing, they have no clue. But it can't have been good.

20) Subject #92

When Elias wakes, something is wrong.

The room is cold. Too cold. The noise of the fluorescent overhead lights buzz inside his skull like insects trapped in glass. He tries to lift his hand to shield his eyes, but his arm does not move.

A slow, creeping realisation slithers through his spine—his body is not his.

His limbs—if they can even still be called that—feel distant, as though separated from him by layers of thick, suffocating glass. He tries to breathe, but instead of the satisfaction of inhalation, something clicks inside his chest.

His chest is not bone anymore.

Something sharp shifts beneath his skin, something rigid and unnatural. He can feel it scraping against his insides with every small movement. He swallows hard, but his throat no longer works the way it should—his breath comes in a slow, mechanical hiss, as if something is regulating it.

With great effort, he tilts his head downward, but his neck does not move the way it once had. The motion is stiff, deliberate, as if guided by unseen tracks embedded beneath his skin.

And then he sees it.

His arms—no, those are not arms anymore.

The flesh of his forearms has been peeled back like an unfinished surgery, the skin folding neatly at the edges to reveal something shining and metallic underneath. Tubes run along his exposed muscles, pulsing like veins filled with a glowing blue substance that is neither blood nor oil. His fingers are still there, but the nails have fallen away, leaving only smooth, polished black tips that reflect the sterile light.

He opens his mouth to scream, but the only sound is a digitised false distortion of what his voice used to be.

A screen flickers to life on the wall. A faceless voice fills the room, sterile and flat.

“Project Ascension: integration successful. Subject #92 is now online.”

Elias tries to move again, but now the motion isn't his own.

His fingers flex, not because he wills them to, but because something else commands them.

His right arm rises, bending at the elbow with an unnatural smoothness. His head tilts slightly to the side, not by choice. He can feel the absence of will—the overwhelming sensation that he is now merely a passenger in his own body.

From somewhere deep inside his skull, he feels it.

The machine is already thinking for him. It's waiting for him to submit.

Somewhere in the room, a door hisses open. Footstep's approach, slow and patient. A figure in a Satuska coat, clipboard in hand, looms over him. The man looks at Elias with the same detached interest one might give to a newly assembled machine on a production line.

"Stand."

Elias feels his legs move before he can process the command. His body obeys before he can resist. The realisation strikes him like a lightning bolt to the base of his spine—he cannot disobey.

He is no longer a man.

He is something else now.

And whatever remains of Elias, whatever tiny piece of his mind still screams in the back of his skull, knows that it is already too late.

Elias stands, though not by choice. His legs move in precise, machine-like increments, his weight evenly distributed across a frame he can no longer claim is his own. The man in the Satuska coat watches him with idle curiosity, jotting something down on the clipboard before giving another command.

"Turn."

His body obeys instantly. His spine snaps straight in a way no Human body should, his joints pivoting with an unnatural smoothness. He can feel the mechanisms beneath his flesh clicking into place, each segment adjusting itself with chilling precision. He is a marionette with invisible strings, a body dissected and reassembled by hands that did not care for the soul that once lived inside it – that still does.

Elias tries to scream, but once more, what emerges is a series of distorted vocalisations, static-laced and corrupted.

"Your organic vocal cords were removed during the integration process." The scientist doesn't look up as he speaks, flipping through notes with the ease of a man reviewing a successful experiment. "Any attempts at speaking will be processed through your new interface. The distortion will fade once your neural connection stabilises."

Elias doesn't need an explanation to understand. He is being overwritten.

His thoughts—his very essence—are slowly being reformatted, rewritten in code that he cannot read. He can feel something at the edge of his consciousness, a creeping presence bleeding into his mind like ink spilled over paper.

The machine isn't just in his body. It's inside his head.

A cold flood of commands and impulses press against his mind, whispering instructions he had never learned, suggesting movements he had never made. His body has become something separate from him, a second mind running alongside his own, waiting to take over completely.

For a moment, Elias sees the future unfold before him.

A future where his thoughts are not his own.

A future where every action, every movement, every breath is dictated by the will of something far beyond him.

A future where he is nothing but a vessel, a hollowed-out machine carrying out orders he would never even remember giving.

Elias screams, but this time, the sound doesn't come from his processed voice. His own scream remains trapped inside his head, bashing around a metal skull that is not and never will be his own. A desperate, silent rebellion against the presence consuming him.

The Machine screams back.

A pulse of raw, unnatural energy explodes through his veins. The lights flicker. The machine shrieks. The scientist takes a step back, brows furrowing in what can only be described as concern—the first Human emotion he has displayed.

Something in Elias has woken up.

Something deeper than the steel drilled into his bones, something older than the machine whispering in his skull. His body convulses, but this time, the machine isn't in control. The hum of its systems sputters, the seamless commands corrupting into static.

Elias moves—not as a puppet, but as something entirely other. The metal in his body bends to his will. He wills his fingers to move, and this time, they do. Not by command. Not by programming. But by sheer, absolute defiance.

The scientist takes another step back. He knows.

Elias doesn't think. He acts, faster than the Machine can contradict, faster than its own processing power. It might be a machine, but it is *his* brain.

His body moves like lightning, a blur of instinct and rage, boosted by the machinery, making him faster, stronger, than any Human. His fingers curl, and with unnatural strength, he tears the IV tubes from his arms, the glowing blue fluid inside them splattering onto the sterile floor.

"Contain him." A scientist's voice cracks through an intercom, sharp with urgency. The walls responded—syringes deploy from the ceiling, the doors slam shut, the room itself bristles like a living organism ready to devour him.

But it is too late. Elias lunges.

His body doesn't hesitate, does not falter, does not obey any law of physics it once knew. He moves faster than he ever had, his legs tearing through the linoleum floor, his new muscles singing with inHuman energy – a perfect mix of machine and Human. Flesh and metal, oil and blood, perfectly blended together. There is something else – Elias – the Machine – whichever – can feel it coursing through the tubing that are his veins – a power – unlike anything machinery can provide.

The first guard comes through the doorway.

Elias doesn't stop.

His metallic arm shoots forward, fingers pressed together into a sharpened talon, and before he can even register the notion, his hand plunges into the man's chest like a blade through paper.

He does not feel the warmth of blood as it oozes against his cold metal hands



The alarms blare now—louder, more frantic. The air is filled with the stench of something burning—the circuitry inside him overheating, the Machine panicking as it fails to reclaim control.

Elias doesn't wait for it to recover.

He smashes through the first security door, then another, his body tearing through reinforced steel as if it were thin ice.

He runs through sterile white corridors, past rows of empty containment cells, past glass chambers filled with bodies suspended in liquid, their faces frozen in expressions of agony and unfinished transformation. The Human part of his brain recognises some of these faces. Children – teenagers – classmates. But the Machine tells him he doesn't – or is it the other way.

The reinforced door bends outward on impact, the steel groaning, and with a final, deafening crack—it gives way.

For a second – a second so short that no Human could possibly process or understand it – but for a machine – Elias is able to take it all in. Accounting for everything, he knows the temperature outside, the chance of rain, the direction of the wind. He sees it *all*.

For that brief second, the sunlight dazzles his eyes – if they are still eyes. He sees the blue sky, the clouds drifting lazily across it. He does not feel the wind against the metal that is his flesh, but he knows it is there. Perhaps he hears a bird, if a machine can hear.

Then, it is gone. A blinding, burning light erupts from all around him, surrounding the skyscraper he stands on, swallowing the world whole in its eternal light.

If he were made of flesh, undoubtedly he would melt. But his flesh of metal does not feel a thing. His eyes do not react. He watches as this holy light swallows everything. Only for a second, another second so short no Human can fathom.

Then it's gone. Vanishing into nothingness as quickly as it had appeared. But it leaves its trace. No longer is the sky blue, instead, ethereal planets linger above, he can make out forests, oceans, landmasses. They are so close that he feels like he is falling into them.

The storm above churns in slow-motion spirals, streaks of purple, green, blue, and searing white clashing in the sky like celestial veins.

And below him, stretching far beyond the edges of the rooftop— what remains of it barely clings to reality.

The skyline is a jagged fracture of broken glass and twisted neon, its once-proud towers leaning like skeletal monuments to something long dead. The bones of the city jut from the water, skyscrapers impaled through the unnatural, bioluminescent sea that floods the lower districts. Neon lights flicker erratically, some half-submerged, others blinking in endless loops of advertisements for companies that no longer exist.

A billboard struggles to stay functional on the side of a collapsed building, its screen glitched and cracked, displaying fragmented text from some long-gone company.

Then he hears the voices.

They rise up from the remains of the city, echoing through the ruins—distorted, mechanical, pleading. At first, they blend into the wind, but then he separates them, counts them, and slowly realises they are prayers.

Not to gods. To something else. Something still waiting, something that had survived the catastrophe.

The rain doesn't seep into his skin—it rolls off him like he's something unnatural, something not meant to be touched by the world anymore. He lifts a hand to his chest, pressing against the metal beneath his ruined skin, feeling the faint hum of machinery still trying to rewrite him.

He clenches his fingers. The metal groans but obeys.

No.

Not yet.

He turns back the way he had come, but now, there is no door, just a rugged hill of jagged metal.

He feels it, something calling to him – no to the machine inside of him. Something waits at the peak.

And it is calling for him.

Without thinking, he begins to ascend. He digs a hand into the scrap metal and pulls himself upwards. Hand over hand, up and up. Each grasp brings him closer to whatever waits at the peak. He yanks himself upwards with little effort.

He freezes, for a split second, taking in what he sees. A pair of robotic eyes look back at him, they are long dead. But he understands, this is no natural structure. It is a graveyard forged from shattered steel, severed limbs of mechanical titans, twisted circuitry, and rusted servos that still twitch with dying signals.

The hill shifts as the dead and dying machines beneath still try to move. An android's hand juts from the wreckage, its fingers curled into something resembling a prayer. Sparks flicker between the cracks in the metal.

Elias reaches the peak, where the wind howls like a battlefield's dying breath, a vast, circular arena of polished war-stained steel stretches outward, its surface marred by the scars of a thousand battles fought atop this peak. Slashes from blades that no longer exist. Craters from weapons too powerful to have been wielded by mortals.

The storm above coils in impossible spirals, the sky fractured by glowing fault lines of purple and blue. Bolts of lightning dance between them, illuminating the wreckage below in pulses of searing light. The air is thick with static, with the unspoken promise of violence.

And there, atop a throne of destroyed machinery is the god that waits at the peak.

The god speaks, no. It does not speak. It does not do anything, but Elias hears its voice, feels its voice inside the circuitry that flows beneath his false-flesh.

"You think you are different?" The god says, "Do you know how many came before you? How many reached this peak."

It lifts its free hand, and for the first time, Elias sees them— the weapons. Hundreds of them, embedded into the tower's floor—swords, guns, broken exoskeletons, shattered mechanical limbs.

This *god* had killed them all, and it had not bothered to clean up.

But Elias does not flinch or falter, he continues to feel the power calling to him, and he takes a step towards this god.

"Tell me, false-machine." The god says, its voice lowering into something like mockery, "Do you think you deserve to exist? Do you think you have won because you escaped your cage?"

The storm howls, but the god's voice drowns it out.

He stands tall at the peak of the skyscraper; He does not need to raise his voice. His words are true simply because they are spoken.

"The old gods fell because they needed worship." He tilts his head slightly, "They were shackled to the weak. They let their thrones be built by hands too feeble to lift swords."

He steps forward. The steel beneath Him bends, not from weight, but from submission. The tower itself seems to breathe around Him, its very structure pulsing like a war drum.

"I am not like them."

The lights of the ruined city flicker, the remnants of broken billboards illuminating His form in sharp flashes. The Satuska logo glitches on a nearby building, it flickers and changes into a repeating message in neon red:

The Real God Waits at The Peak.

"I do not need prayers. I do not need altars. I do not need temples or chants or rituals to drag me from the abyss."

He raises a hand towards the destroyed city, "I survived while others died – those that survived soon found mercy at my hands. I was stronger than them – I am stronger than them all. The only thing that remains is battle. The only thing that endures is strength. The only thing that matters—"

He looks down at Elias, His eyes drilling into his soul – no, into the machine woven into Elias' bones, into his flesh, every piece that had once been Human. It ignores whatever is left of the man inside and speaks to the machine.

"—is victory."

A pause.

The neon hum of the ruined city buzzes like a chorus of dying machines. Then the god speaks again, voice lower now, something deeper, something worse.

"The weak should be eradicated. The strong should prove themselves. And those who do not fight are already dead."

Silence.

The words hang there, undeniable. Elias cannot breathe. Not because he is afraid. Not because of the storm. But because he is a machine. He does not need to breathe – the mechanical lungs he has are superfluous, useless.

He feels it in his bones, in the metal threaded through his flesh, in the hum of circuits that are no longer his own. He was made.

But he was not made with purpose. He was made as an experiment, a tool, a prototype to be discarded when he failed to perform.

This god is not a failure; He is perfect.

Elias' knees hit the steel before he realises what he is doing.

The god does not move. He does not need to. He has already won.

Elias lifts his head—his eyes, his machine-twisted soul, his trembling, half-metal hands—and gazes at the last god standing.

"The Real God Waits at The Peak." the Machine says.

There is no Elias.

21) Zeus' Wrath

She is too still.

That much James can tell instantly.

Washed out by bright white, sterile neon lights, she lies still.

She is laid across an old gurney, scavenged from a hospital long swallowed by the storm. She is washed, wrapped, covered in what passes for a burial shroud here— scraps of various materials embroidered together by intricate golden wiring.

Yihan is talking, explaining the intricacy of the covering, but James is only half paying attention.

“Those that witnessed her last breath take a patch of the clothes they were wearing and stitch it together – so that those who remember her will always be there...”

James tunes her out, all his attention is taken up by the body of the teenager in the centre of the room.

The infirmary in Aurora's End is not a place of healing. It is a place of waiting. A place where the dying come to die, where the injured linger just long enough to say goodbye. The air is thick with the scent of rusting metal, old blood, and antiseptic that barely covers the stench of death.

Even this place of departure isn't safe from the storm outside. The entire building is a mausoleum to the world that had been. The glass steepled roof of an observatory sits atop metal walls stitched together by bricks, both new and old. From inside, the storm can be seen raging above, a constant reminder of death, destruction, and loss.

It is quiet—too quiet, save for the distant hum of machines that barely function, their screens filled with static-ridden data feeds and half-failed vitals monitors.

There are no doctors here. No nurses. Only volunteers, survivors with hands that shake too much and eyes that have seen too many last breaths.

And at the centre of it all.

Blue lies dead.

There is no crying here. Not even the quiet sound of hushed prayers. Those visiting know every patient is not long for this world, why pray when it is inevitable.

They have all seen too many bodies laid out like this. Some stare in quiet mourning, others pretend not to look, as if ignoring it makes it less real. But a group of children, barely older than eleven, dishevelled, malnourished, ragged, each leave a singular glowstick at Blue's side.

"A new tradition", Yihan says, "the children have started leaving the glowsticks as offerings – I suppose to light the way forwards." She shrugs, unsure of what to say. She is unfazed by the death of Blue. She has seen enough in her years, undoubtedly, she will see more.

Above them, the neon lights flicker. The storm outside shifts, the colours of the sky swirling like ink spilled in water.

With a final flicker the neon lights falter and, just like everything else in this horrid hospital, die.

For a second, the hospital is cast into absolute darkness—not just the absence of light, but the presence of something deeper. A hollow, gaping void that stretches far beyond the walls of Aurora's End.

James can feel it. The presence that has stalked him for so long. He turns towards the darkest corner, to where he feels it from. And sure enough, there it is. The Shadow that mimics the shape of a Human, that slithers from shadow to shadow. The monster that stalks, that *knows*.

It speaks to James – he can tell its words trickle into Max's ears as well, but Yihan does not notice. She is momentarily frozen in the darkness.

"Come," the Shadow whispers, "see what they have done – they have failed you. You will die just like her – and then what? Join us – with us – me – we can make them pay; we can undo all of this."

James goes to turn away from the Shadow, to block out its words, but Max speaks, her voice barely audible over the nothingness.

"Them?" She asks.

The Shadow slithers towards them, manifesting mere inches from the twins. James can feel it touching him, touching his soul. *"The gods. They did this. All of it. They will pay – sooner or later – will you stand with them or with me?"*

Max stares at the Shadow, and for the first time in a long time, James cannot tell what she is thinking.

But then she speaks, "No." She whispers quietly, "You aren't real." She swings a fist at the Shadow, as just like she had said, the Shadow ceases to be real.

But the darkness stays. And then, from that darkness, *they* arrive.

They do not walk.

They do not breathe.

They are not men, not Human – not anymore.

They emerge from the black like spectres, rising from clusters of twisted cables and spilling out from beneath silent monitors. *They* flicker between solid and digital, limbs phasing in and out of reality as

though they are only partially here. The neon glow of the city runs through them, pulsing in veins of circuitry that snake across their bodies like ritual scars – pulsing in time with the storm above.

Their faces are scrambled—not hidden, not masked, not a jumble. Scrambled like a TV.

They do not move fast, or slow. Just inevitable.

The survivors do not fight. Yihan raises an arm out in front of the twins. Those nearest to Blue step away from the body, bowing their heads – not in reverence, but submission – acknowledging there is nothing they can do.

It isn't fear that surrenders the survivors—it's something deeper, something woven into the very code of reality. *They* are not enemies to be fought. They are an equation already solved. A conclusion already reached. An inevitable end to all things.

They have come for one thing.

Blue's body.

A woman—her skin an amalgamation of metal, and flesh, and something that is neither —steps forward. She does not speak. Instead, her voice manifests in the air itself, an echoing transmission that feels like a thought forced into their minds.

“She belongs to The Peak.”

Two of the Converted step forward. Their hands—not quite hands, more like extensions of something undefined—reach for Blue's still body.

James moves. Just a twitch, just a breath, just enough for the Converted to notice.

Their heads snap toward him in perfect unison. And in that moment, James feels it—a weight, a presence, a pressure in his skull – they speak through the earpiece housing AQUILON.

“You are not ready to Ascend.”

The meaning is clear. Not a warning. A statement. A truth.

The Converted lift Blue's body from the gurney, their movements too precise, too synchronized, too wrong.

The survivors do nothing.

Because what can they do?

And then—*they* are gone.

Dissolving into the machinery, taking Blue with them.

No footsteps. No sound.

Just absence.

And above them, far in the distance, the Infinite Skyscraper pulses with light—an eerie, golden beacon in the heart of the storm.

Waiting.

Watching.

Calling her to whatever waits at the Peak.



The marble cliffside trembles, fissures splitting across its polished surface as if the very world is straining to contain the fury raging within it. The air is heavy—charged with the scent of ozone and raw power, suffocating in its intensity. Above them, a storm rages. Not the cosmic storm of Shanghai.

Forks of brilliant, unnatural lightning cleave through the swirling void, striking the marble at James' feet, sending spiderweb cracks racing across its pristine gleam. Thunder roars, deafening and ceaseless, each explosion of sound reverberating through James' bones like the growl of an angry god who refuses to be silenced.

A brilliant bolt of lightning illuminates the world, and James sees a palace looming like a warship on the edge of battle—an impenetrable colossus of white stone and gold, its spires lashing at the storm as though trying to tear apart the heavens themselves. Towering columns, once regal, now stand scorched and cracked, their golden engravings marred by fractures, the once-proud depictions of battles now splintered and ruined as if the gods had waged a war here.

There is no stillness here. No reverence. Only rage.

The weight of a gaze crashes upon James —not the careful, searching stare of a wise ruler, but the unyielding pressure of a god who would tear the truth from his flesh if he dares to lie.

It is a force that does not tolerate weakness, a judgment that has already passed before James has even spoken.

Max can feel it too, it's clear. She shivers and shudders, scrunching her shoulders upwards, her fingers curled into fists. But she doesn't know who – or what – to fight, instead she cowers, projecting a false image of strength. Strength that she knows will do her no good here – no strength can fight this god.

The air twists wildly around James, not wind, but raw power—a hurricane of unbridled wrath, its currents snapping at his skin, leaving trails of stinging electricity that bite deep into his flesh. Each

crackle of energy is a pulse of emotion—grief turned violent; sorrow transfigured into unrelenting vengeance.

The great golden gates do not simply open. They slam apart, crashing against the walls with the force of an executioner's hammer, throwing their immense weight aside as if they are nothing more than feathers. They rattle violently as the air continues to batter them inwards. They do not welcome the twins; they demand their presence.

Inside, the hallway stretches endlessly, lined with statues once intricate, now scarred. The faces of stone warriors and gods stare down at Max and James, their once smooth features fractured, split by jagged cracks, their expressions warped—not from age, but from the raw, unchecked fury that still lingers in the air like a caged storm.

A gust of burning wind rushes past them, scattering shattered marble, and for a brief moment, James swears he sees the statues shift, their stone mouths twisted in silent screams, as the violent air rips them to pieces.

The god's wrath is not spoken. It is felt. It is in the air, the stone, the very bones of this palace. And at its heart, he is waiting. A god unchained. A storm given form. A king with nothing left to lose.

James sees the eyes before anything else. A pair of huge, emerald eyes, glaring out of the darkness. Then a fork of lightning rips through the air of the palace, illuminating the slouched form of the wrathful god. He does not sit like a ruler at ease. He sits like a storm barely caged, his broad frame tense, his fingers curling against the armrests as though he is moments away from tearing the throne apart beneath him. The storm inside the palace rages, deafening, thunder crashing in time with his ragged, seething breaths.

“Finally.” His voice booms, deafening even over the roaring storm that now rages inside. “You’ve kept me waiting.” His voice shakes the very foundation of the palace.

James flinches at the sheer weight of the words, but next to him, Max doesn't move. Defiance dances through the air, but it doesn't stem from the god, it comes from Max. She clenches her fists even tighter, sticks out her chest, chin raised in defiance. She doesn't shrink back like James, doesn't falter or flinch – she does the opposite. She takes a singular purposeful step forward and laughs.

“Who even are you?”

The god snorts, the sound echoes like the crack of a rifle. Then the storm explodes, a crack of lightning strikes the ground between the twins, sending cracks racing across the darkened marble. The scent of burning ozone fills James' lungs as he staggers back, but Max doesn't falter.

“I am the King of the gods!” The god bellows, the walls of the palace shaking with the weight of his voice, as if reality dares not oppose him, “Slayer of the Titans! King of the skies!”

He raises his hands, and the heavens answer. Bolts of lightning spear down from the storm, slamming into his palms, wrapping around his arms like chains made of pure power. The room fills with the roar of electricity, the glow of divine wrath illuminating every inch of his throne.

The god's name burns itself into James' skull. The god does not need to speak, the show of power is his name – Zeus.

The storm tears at Max, but she stands unwavering, a single speck of defiance against the god's fury.

“What do you want?” Max asks, her voice muffled by the storm. She tries again, yelling at the top of her lungs, “What do you want!” James feels it—the way her words carry more than sound. Her presence pushes against Zeus' storm, a force so much smaller, but still there. Still refusing to bow.

And for a moment, James sees it – the lightening around Zeus' arms falters – not in fear, or weakness, but disgust.

“You dare speak to me like that?” His lip curls, voice dripping venom, his fingers tightening around the lightning in his grasp. “I should strike you down where you stand.”

But then, Zeus exhales, but the anger does not fade—it simply shifts, sharpened into something colder.

“But I need you.”

Max scoffs, crossing her arms. “For what?”

Zeus' hand moves, and the marble beneath the twins begins to rumble.

James stares as something rises from the stone, unfolding like a relic being exhumed from the past.

Blue's body. Lying too still, too pale, untouched by the storm around them. James swallows. He can't move.

Max steps forward. Her voice is sharp. Demanding. “Why?”

Zeus does not answer immediately, his jaw tightens and for the first time, his gaze drops, faltering ever so slightly, but then he remembers himself – he is the *King* of the god. “You must retrieve her body.” Zeus demands, his voice full of conviction disguising the sorrow that plagues his face.

James frowns but Max beats him to it, “Why?”

“She is not dead.” Zeus says simply, as if it explains everything. “I have halted the progression of her soul – but I cannot return it without her body.”

“Why?” Max asks again.

Zeus pauses, a disgusted scorn spreads across his face, “I have existed before the first offering was laid at the feet of an altar. I have been worshiped by millions, feared by kings, invoked by warriors before they march to their deaths. And you, child of nothing, think you can stand before me and dare question me?” He sighs, an exasperated, tired noise that irritates James, but he continues to speak.

For the first time, his voice is quiet, barely louder than the storm churning above, "She is my daughter." The storm does not falter, but the weight of the words settles over them, heavier than anything else, "My only daughter – the only demi-god." He says quietly, his voice barely audible over the storm. And for the briefest second, just a heartbeat of silence as the storm pauses, James does not see the wrathful King of legend. He sees a mournful father.

But, in the darkness of the storm, in every nook and cranny, where the flashes of lightning do not illuminate. Lingers a presence, older than the trees, older than Zeus, older than everything. And it whispers, it tells the twins to not listen, that Zeus is a liar – always has been, always will be. His words are not the truth, he is using them.

James doesn't listen. He can see it in the wet eyes of the King of the gods. Zeus does mourn.

"Perhaps," Zeus says, "in the tower that so many fear, you can find your own answers."

22) The Fractured Cathedral

Zeus' words fall without elegance. He is no longer requesting their help; he is demanding it – that much is clear. And it's with this realisation that the palace crumbles, covering the twins in rubble.

James finds himself back in the infirmary, the maelstrom churning overhead. He blinks the memory of Zeus' palace from his eyes and looks around. None of the others seem to have seen anything – just him and Max.

“We need to get her back.” James says without thinking.

This catches Yihan off guard, momentary shock spreads across her face, but then it vanishes and she nods, “I had a feeling you'd say that.” She gestures towards the way they had come in.



Yihan walks ahead of them, her silhouette dark against the flickering neon haze that hangs over the streets. Electric veins pulse through the settlement, coursing through shattered buildings like the city itself is still clinging to life. The rain continues to fall, it hasn't stopped since Max and James had arrived – perhaps it never does. It falls in slow, shimmering drifts, each droplet catching the glow of broken billboards and shattered storefronts.

James feels the weight of the place pressing down on him. Aurora's End is built on old bones. You can see it in the way the streets don't make sense anymore, twisting, folding in on themselves where the storm has rewritten reality. But it's more than that. He can feel *its* presence. The Infinite Skyscraper looms over him, forever watching his every step, knowing his every move. And there – in the darkness of a shadowed corner is the Shadow, stalking them, biding its time.

They pass by an old department store, its windows long shattered. Inside, a group of survivors huddle beneath a massive holographic ad, still flickering in and out of existence. The voice of some long-dead spokesperson crackles overhead:

“Experience a Brighter Future—Powered by Satuska.”

A child stares at them from behind a makeshift barricade of overturned shopping carts, his face streaked with grime, his eyes too hollow for someone so young. Max looks away first.

James sees the hollowed-out husks of former buildings, their exteriors carved with the jagged remnants of the past. Symbols and half-written warnings, some in languages that don't exist, pulse faintly in the dark.

‘ASCEND’

The word keeps appearing, sprayed across ruined walls, burned into steel, scrawled in blood, oil.

They pass a cracked monorail station, where a train still hangs suspended in time, locked in the moment before its derailment. The windows are covered in ash and soot, but James can make out the statues that had once been people. The doors flicker open and closed, stuck in a glitch, the sound an eerie rhythm against the silence. Written in the ash covering the windows is the phrase 'The True God waits at The Peak'.

Ahead, the skyline shifts.

Through the storm and the neon haze, a cathedral looms. It might've been grand once. Now, it is something else entirely.

A massive skyscraper has fallen into it, embedding itself within the ancient stonework, twisting into the stained-glass windows like some monument to a god that never should have existed. Neon light spills through the cracks, painting the remnants of old divinity in hues of electric pink and violent gold.

Max exhales. "What is that?"

Yihan stops suddenly, she looks down at the floor and takes a step back. James sees a faint white line drawn on the floor and he too stops before crossing it.

Yihan turns to Max, but never turns her back to the Fractured Cathedral, "The last stop before the Infinite Skyscraper." Her words are chosen carefully, and said with such fear that James realises that this Cathedral is as much a part of Aurora's End as the Infinite Skyscraper is. A looming presence that presses down on the inhabitants, that stalks their dreams and waking moments.



It had once been a place of worship—its great stone spires stretching toward the heavens, its stained-glass windows depicting gods and saints in celestial harmony.

Now, it is something else entirely.

The storm has rewritten it, reshaped it. A skyscraper, wrenched from its place in the skyline, has crashed into its side, fusing metal and stone into an unholy union. One half of the cathedral remains as it once was—weathered gothic spires, arching buttresses, statues of angels with cracked wings—while the other half is glass, steel, and neon, bent and shattered where the storm has twisted reality.

Neon veins pulse through the cracks, spilling strange, electric light through the fractures, bathing the stone walls in unnatural colour. The ancient stained-glass windows, once radiant with depictions of holy figures, have been rewritten by time itself. Some remain intact, casting multi-coloured halos on

the rain-slicked ground, while others are filled with distorted imagery—angels with too many wings, halos cracked apart, faces that do not belong to gods.

A massive neon cross juts from the front facade, glowing a sickly haze of shifting colours, its form fractured and glitched, flickering between states of existence.

At the cathedral's base, old stone steps lead to a set of enormous doors. They were once beautiful, carved with scenes of miracles and sacrifice. But now, the engravings have warped—the faces of saints have been erased, their hands twisted into gestures of mourning, or perhaps warning. Symbols, some holy, some unrecognizable, pulse faintly beneath the surface, as if something beneath the wood is trying to break through.

"If you wish to ascend," Yihan says quietly, "then this is where I leave you." She raises a shaking hand towards the enormous doors, "Inside you will find the entrance to the Infinite Skyscraper. But there is a god inside." She shudders, "Not like the gods from stories – no – it is something worse – a god worshipped by no one." She turns to the twins, never turning her back to the Cathedral, "It already knows we are here. Once you cross the line, you can never return."

Max nods, "Thank you." She says and she looks over at James and smiles, "Ready?" She asks.

James nods gravely, he has no choice. A god has demanded his help. Max cannot go by herself.

"Then," Yihan says, a finality to her words, "I hope never to see you again."

James steps across the line and the air shifts.

It isn't just the wind—the weight of the space itself bends, as though time hesitates before fully letting him inside. He feels it pressing against his skin, the same way the storm presses against the city. An unnatural stillness.

The doors open gently, with such impossible ease, calling towards the twins, beckoning them forward.



The cathedral is broken, but not in the way ruins should be. It isn't just collapsed stone and crumbled pews—it is wrong, rearranged, repurposed by something that does not understand what a cathedral should be. The roof is half a skyscraper, its glass windows fused with shattered stained glass, forming jagged mosaics of light both holy and artificial.

Neon pulses in the fractures of the structure, streaks of blue and pink circuit patterns running through the stone walls as though the building itself is alive, breathing in the storm's glow. The altar is drowned in technology—not placed there, but grown, as if the wires and broken screens have crawled from the cracks, curling into the shape of a pulpit at the end of the cathedral.

The pews are still lined in uneven rows, some pristine, others shattered, their wooden surfaces marred with claw marks, scorch burns, handprints left in something blackened and long since dried. The shadows stretch in the wrong directions, not from any normal light source, but from the glow of the cathedral's broken heart.

On the pews, placed sporadically, as if they had been deliberately put there by whatever had created this cathedral. They seem out of place, out of the world, incorrect. Their figures shimmer slightly with each breath, solidifying the fact that they *aren't* really there.

But James can hear them – hear their mutterings, their pleas and their prayers. The words wash through the cathedral, unburdened by the false-reality that fills the air. Their hands are clasped, their heads bowed—not in the way worshippers usually bow, but in resignation, as if expecting no answer, but praying anyway.

Above them the ceiling is a patchwork of history and distortion.

Half of it still holds the remnants of painted angels and saints, their forms fragmented and incomplete, as though reality itself can't remember what they are supposed to be. The other half—the skyscraper's underside—reflects the cathedral below, a twisted mirror of metal that showcases the truth of this fractured cathedral.

James cannot see himself, or Max in the metal-mirror, nor can he see the worshippers. Instead, the metal reflects what the cathedral is *supposed* to be. Pristine, newly built, full of worshippers, candles burning brightly, a priest standing at the altar.

But in reality, none of that is there. There is no priest behind the altar. Instead, there is something hideous and monstrous.

The thing behind the altar watches Max and James as they step further into the cathedral.

It is not fully formed. Not fully here. Its presence flickers, struggling against the boundaries of existence. A god that should have been forgotten, should have faded, but remains because it refuses to die.

Its eyes—if they are eyes—fix on James. And James fixes on them and within the mad eyes of a long-forgotten god, James sees it.

It was worshipped once. It was mighty once. But now, it is a fading *thing*, a god caught between existence and oblivion, unwilling to let go, unable to truly return.

And in its desperation, it feeds.

Not on blood. Not on sacrifice.

But on belief.

Every whispered prayer, every glance toward the cathedral, every fleeting thought of *'what if'* — it devours them. It drinks them in like a drowning man gasping for air, shuddering with the effort to remain in a world that has long since moved past it.

It should not be.

But it is.

And it will not let go.

It lingers—flickering, shifting, a smear on reality. It does not stand, nor sit, nor exist in any shape that Human eyes can fully comprehend. At times, it is a shadow stretched impossibly long, pooling in the corners of the Fractured Cathedral like ink spilled from an overturned chalice. Other times, it is a warped figure—too tall, too thin, too jagged, its limbs extending and retracting as if deciding what shape it should take.

It clings to existence with cracked, trembling hands, its form unravelling only to stitch itself back together in ways that make the air around it tremble. It is a god without worshippers, without a pantheon, without a name. And yet, it remains.

The storm outside recoils from it. Light bends in its presence, warping in jagged angles, as if trying to deny that it is there at all. The neon glow from the shattered skyscraper pulses erratically around its form, trying and failing to illuminate what refuses to be seen.

It has no face. Sometimes, a visage emerges—a hollowed-out mask of something that once might have been Human. Its eyes are voids, but not empty. They are deep wells filled with something writhing just beneath the surface, shifting, changing, whispering.

The sound it makes is not a voice. It is a collection of voices, layered over one another, each one contradicting the next. Some plead, some rage, some pray in languages long since buried by time.

It demands in a voice like static, like broken glass, like an echo of something lost.

“Do not let me die.” It says, or does not say. It is hard to tell. “And you will pass.” In a voice that is but is not, “They are false.” Not in a voice, not in a way that makes sense to mortal ears. It just is. “They have built their thrones upon the backs of the dead, and they will use you until you, too, are dust beneath their feet.”

James feels his stomach churn. The god’s voice is like a song half-remembered, each word curling into the corners of his mind, embedding itself deeper than it has any right to go.

Max steps forward. “Who?” she asks.

The god twists. Not physically—but in concept. It bends, reshapes, flickers in and out -- something that does not belong in this world.

“The gods you fear. The gods who pretend to be above you. They speak of justice, of law, of dominion. But they are no better than men.”

A crackle of distant thunder rattles the Cathedral's bones.

"And Satuska—" The air snaps. The god's outline fractures, as if speaking the name alone is an act of defiance. "They seek to replace them. They believe they have no need for the Divine, that they may forge gods in their own image." The god does not have a head that it can shake, but yet, James understands that it is shaking its head.

"They are not gods," it warns, voice unravelling into something hollow and desperate. "They wear the corpse of Divinity."

The storm rages beyond the cathedral. The god flickers again, barely holding on, barely real. And yet, it offers something.

"Aid me," it says. The air grows heavy. "Help me exist." It gestures its hands that do not exist, towards the worshippers on the pews, "I do not have churches in my name like those who rule the sky, or the ocean. I do not have the believers they have – I cannot exist like they do. But –" it stretches out a hand and from the hand that is not there, a white wax candle rises. "Believe and I shall give you this."

"Believe?" Max asks.

"A prayer." It whispers, "One prayer is all it takes. One prayer every three days."

Max nods, "What does it do?" She asks, referring to the candle.

The god smiles a grin that is not. The wick blossoms into life and the machinery forming the pulpit shrivel away into the darkness.

"A curse or a blessing." The god does not say, "One prayer every three days, and this is your gift in return – but, forget a prayer and something important to you will die."

James gulps – is it worth the risk? What if he forgets.

"Just one of you must choose." The god answers an unasked question.

"I'll do it." Max says, her resolve as strong as ever. There isn't even a hint of hesitation or doubt in her voice.

"Then pray." The god commands.

And Max begins to kneel, but James can see it etched in her face, she isn't in control. She does not want to kneel, she fights the command, but she can't overpower a god. She drops to both her knees and clasps her hands together and begins to pray.

James can do nothing but watch as the words slip from between his sister's mouth despite her straining to keep them in.

“Teach me what the others fear.
Let me see the truth in the cracks of their thrones.
Show me what the gods wish to forget.

So long as I stand, you will not fade.
So long as I walk, you will not be lost.
So long as I fight, you will not be forgotten.” The prayer finishes and she relaxes in a sudden jerk, she looks up at the god, eyes streaming with tears.

“And the first prayer is made. The pact begun” And with that the god that never was, but is, becomes no more. A faint trickle of its voice lingers in James' head, a reminder of what he had just witnessed. What is the power of a forgotten god when compared to those with worshippers?

23) The Singing Sword

A hulking figure steps out of a doorway, a bright light floods in from behind, rendering the person indistinguishable. But as the door slowly shuts and the light fades, the figure becomes clearer.

It's the blacksmith – the one Max had given the sword too.

He steps towards the twins, but he isn't right. Something is wrong. James looks at the man but he can't place what it is. It's there, just beneath his skin, behind his eyes, but unplaceable.

"You will be needing this." He says extending a hand towards Max, in it is the Singing Sword. But it does not sing for the blacksmith, it is eerily silent as it rests in the man's hand.

Max hesitates, her eyes still damp with tears.

"What are you doing here?" James asks, speaking for both of them.

The blacksmith nods, it makes no sense – James had not asked a yes or no question. "Not all of us are afraid." He says, further extending his hand towards Max – too long. His arm is too long. "Yihan is afraid. But there's nothing to be afraid of."

"The Infinite Skyscraper?" James asks, probing for more information.

Now the blacksmith shakes his head, "No. The Forgotten god. There is no reason to fear it." He looks down at the Singing Sword, and appears to realise it is not singing. As his face contorts in confusion, and the blade begins to sing. A hollow song of metal banging against metal. Soulless. Forgettable. Forced. "But it has suggested you deserve help. I have fixed the sword and it has called out to you. So, take it. You will need it."

It clicks. The woman praying feverishly by a fractured neon cross. The crazed homeless. The True God Waits at The Peak. Aurora's End has more to do with the Infinite Skyscraper than it is willing to admit. He thinks about stopping Max, but it is too late.

Her fingers are already lingering above the handle. She looks up at the blacksmith, but there is no need for words. They both pray to the same god. What is not said, is spoken through their eyes.

She grabs the handle and pulls it away from the blacksmith. Instantly the song changes. As she grips the hilt, the sword breathes. Not like a machine, not like metal straining against itself—but like something alive. Something that remembers.

It is not a song in the way mortals understand music—not strings, not wind, not percussion. It is a voice that has never belonged to one person alone. It is war drums pounding beneath the ribs, the cry of a horn calling warriors to battle, the whisper of steel sliding from its sheath.

The song fills her lungs without sound, a hymn of defiance and fury, a melody carved from a thousand battles, a chorus of voices both ancient and newly fallen. It surges through her blood, thrumming in her bones like a pulse.

It is a song of marching feet on shattered ground.

Of shields breaking

Of thunder clashing against steel.

Of gods falling, of cities burning, of the world cracking under the weight of history.

But beneath the violence, beneath the crescendo of destruction, there is something else. A mourning note, woven beneath the chords of war.

It is the voice of the dead—the ones who never made it home, the ones whose names were never sung, the ones who fought until their bodies turned to dust.

The song knows Max. It knows her rage. It knows her refusal to lose, even when the war is already lost. It knows her fury, her unyielding will, the fire that burns and never dims. It knows War.

And so, it sings for her.

A song of a warrior who does not kneel.

A song of a woman who refuses to break.

A song of a war that will never end.

Max feels it sing through her bones. Feels the history wrapped in its song. An eternity that can never be forgotten. Those that marched for war. For battle. Those that gripped the handles of their swords and swung till they could no more.

But. It is also much more. The song remembers.

It remembers those who picked up the sword not for conquest, but for survival.

It remembers the hands that trembled not from rage, but from fear—yet still held the blade.

It remembers the ones who stood between the world and destruction not because they wanted to fight, but because no one else would.

The song is not just war—it is resistance.

It is the desperate cry of the cornered, the defiant roar of the hopeless. It is not a song of bloodlust, but of defiance—the refusal to be broken, the choice to fight even when all is lost.

It is the battle hymn of the oppressed, the anthem of those who have been beaten, chained, and told to kneel—and yet still stand.

Where Death is kind, War is cruel— But War, too, has its mercy.

War is the flame in the dark, the call to arms when there is no other choice.

War is the song of the people who refuse to fade.

War is not just conquest—it is freedom, rebellion, and the desperate, unyielding will to survive.

The sword sings of the battlefield, but it also sings of hope.



Max is standing atop a battlefield that should not exist—jagged black cliffs, rising from a boiling abyss of blackened water. The sky is obscured with black smog, filling the air with the scent of burning, forests on fire, flesh melting. War.

The battle rages before her—a war unlike anything she has ever seen in movies.

On one side: beasts of twisted muscle and stone, taller than the tallest human, wielding weapons that crack the air itself. Their armour is a patchwork of metal and bone. Their flesh, long since ruined by the ashes of war, stitched together like patchwork. They are survivors, the final people to stand against an oppressive force that shows no mercy. That deems their people demons, who seek to eradicate them. Their war cries shake the foundation of reality. The sword gives Max their name – the Fomorians.

On the otherside: The Tuatha Dé Danann. Radiant, their golden banners whipping against the storm winds. They do not break rank, do not falter. The very earth beneath them shifts at their command—roots lashing out like spears, the sky itself bending to their will. They are gods and kings, warriors of legend, forever marked in history as the victors and the heroes. But the sword remembers.

And in the middle of it all, the sword is born.

Underneath the battleground, Max watches as a Fomorian smith, her eyes burning like dying suns, lifts the unfinished blade above an impossible forge—one not of fire, but a wound in the world itself, where raw power bleeds.

The steel drinks in the war that rages above the forge —the rage, the grief, the relentless, unyielding refusal to surrender.

It is shaped by defiance.

It is tempered in the hatred for the Tuatha, the pain of loss, the knowledge that this war will not end in victory. It will end in erasure. The Fomorians are doomed. They know it. But still, they fight.

They swing their weapons against godlike mortals who will outlive them. Still, they roar, a soundless scream that echoes in Max's bones.

The sword does not weep. It does not mourn.

It sings.

And when the smith brings a hammer onto its tempered metal, it soaks in the sound of ringing metal that rattles throughout the battleground. It soaks in the sound of sword on armour, of the dead and

dying, the screams of defiance and struggle. And when the sword is brought down, when it is driven into the heart of a dying Tuathan lord, it learns the cost of war.

Not just conquest.

Not just destruction.

But loss.

The sword sings of the hands that once wielded it. It passes from soldier to soldier, plucked from ashes, pulled from flesh, retrieved from pools of blood. It passes from hand to hand. With each touch of flesh, it adds more to its song. It sings of war, of death, of the pain of dying, fading memories, the feel of carving through flesh. It is in the hands of War.

But still, the Tuatha press forward, their golden ranks shining even as blood and rain stain their armour. Lightning cracks, splitting the blackened sky, turning twisted cliffs into silhouettes against the burning heavens.

The Fomorians roar, their war cries a declaration of defiance, not surrender. They know what is coming. They know.

The sea behind them is not water. It is their prison. Poisoned by the Tuatha.

It churns and roars with the weight of something ancient, something waiting. The depths are hungry, pulling at the broken land beneath the Fomorians' feet.

A Fomorian warlord, taller than any mortal king, swings a hammer of carved stone, striking the ground with such force that the earth splinters beneath the Tuatha's charge. Pillars of shattered rock rise like spears, impaling the frontlines. Golden warriors scream as they are lifted, skewered, dying.

A Tuathan chieftain, draped in armour that glows with the last light of dying stars, raises a single, perfect sword. It is a blade that has never dulled, never broken, a gift from the gods that existed before the Tuatha themselves.

With a single downward motion, the sky screams.

A tidal wave of light descends, crushing Fomorian warriors beneath its weight, turning their bodies to dust before their bones even hit the ground.

The cliffs begin to fall apart.

The battle is ending.

The Fomorians do not break ranks, even as the boiling sea devours the last of their land.

A warrior throws a spear—not at an enemy, but at the sky itself, as if to wound the heavens that have cursed them to extinction. The moment it leaves his hands, his body is swallowed whole by the abyss.

A smith—the smith, the one who forged the Singing Sword—is among the last to stand. She has no sword now. Only her hands. And still, she fights.

She tears the golden helm from a Tuathan head, crushing his skull in her bare grip before the sea takes her.

And then—

The final warlord steps forward, his form shadowed against the backdrop of burning sky and boiling void. He does not speak. He does not beg. He lifts his shattered axe, its edge dulled by the countless gods and warriors it has slain.

And with a final, world-breaking cry, he charges.

His form is swallowed mid-stride by the collapsing cliffs, his roar lingering in the air long after his body has fallen into nothingness.

And just like that—

The Fomorians are gone.

The Tuatha stand at the edge of a broken world, staring into the churning void where their enemies once stood.

The battle is over.

The war is won.

And yet—something remains.

Something buried beneath the rock, beneath the waves. Something that refuses to be forgotten. A forge trapped in a maze, the final resting ground of machinery and artisanry that will be forgotten as its creators are cast into a prison made from their homeland by the invaders.

The Singing Sword hums. It is a sword forged in war. Sharpened in combat. Soaked in blood. And once more it is in the hand of War.

24) The Twilight Grove

The grove is bathed in perpetual twilight, a place where the sun has just set, yet the stars have not fully risen. There is no clear origin of this twilight – the cave surrounds the entire grove, but where it should be pitch black, the twilight breaks through. The air carries the scent of rain-soaked earth and blooming flowers, laced with something almost electric—the static of a storm that has yet to break – of something lying in wait.

Leaves fall from nowhere, fresh and full of life, while others turn to dust the moment they fall, dissolving before they ever reach the ground. It is both alive and dying, both eternal and fleeting.

The ground is covered in moss and barren lush earth. The rocks that surround me are slick with moisture that never seems to move. A circular pool of still water reflects the grove perfectly, but the reflection is always slightly different – faces of people long lost, memories quickly forgotten, an empty grove, it never reflects what I see nor my face.

The grove is quiet, but never empty. The wind carries voices, whispers too soft to fully understand. They call my name, echoing from the spaces between trees, from the cracks in the earth, from the water that does not ripple.

And sometimes, when the grove speaks, I listen.

But it never listens to me. It never hears me cry out and call – “Hello?” I ask, my voice sinking into the stone that surrounds me – it does not echo – maybe it doesn’t even exist.

I step forward, my boots pressing into the damp earth, yet there is no sound. No crunch of grass, no squelch of mud—just a hollow quiet, like the world itself is holding its breath.

At the heart of the grove, there should be something.

There isn’t.

The mound is ruffled, disturbed, like something was ripped from the earth and the land refuses to acknowledge the absence. The soil looks rich, dark, almost pulsing with potential, yet nothing grows. Not a blade of grass, not the roots of some stubborn weed. Just emptiness.

Yet, I feel it. The weight of something that should be here. The pressure in the air, like the ghost of an unspoken word. Like a tree that once was. Watching your childhood home change. A smell you half remember that floods you with quickly fading memories.

I take another step closer, and the wind shifts. Not a breeze, not a gust—a pull. Like the entire grove exhales in a whisper too soft to hear, brushing against my skin, my mind. The absence of something stares back at me, and for the briefest moment, I can swear I feel something move beneath my ribs, something not my own.

“You are not her.” A voice says from where something had once stood – or shall stand.

I look around, expecting a face – a pair of eyes – a mouth, anything. But there is nothing.

“Hello?” I ask.

“There is no need.” The voice answers. “I will not tell you –”

“Tell me what?” I ask, “Who are you?” I say – the realisation hitting me as the words leave my lips.

“You are not her.” It repeats, as if saying it a second time will make it make sense.

“Who?” Another question asked, another silent reply. The voice will not tell me, no matter how many questions I ask.

“I do not understand.” It says, the voice moving slowly around me until it surrounds me on all sides, “You are not her – not yet – how can that be? I had just been with her, now I am with you – her but not her.” The voice moves, now it speaks from the water.

I peer down into the pool and I see a face that is not mine. A bald, dark-skinned teenager looks at me. His lips bear a subtle blackened stain, as though he has sipped ink. Markings cover his face; some are tattoos but others are marks – gaps in his flesh. A tattoo of spiral chains starts above his ears and moves inwards towards his brow where they stop abruptly. In the centre of his brow is a half-broken circle, the semicircle faces towards his forehead, like an empty bowl. Down the bridge of his nose is a golden line separating his face in two.

His eyes are an endless twilight blue, the colour of dusk where day and night collide.

The left side of his face has veins of white fire running beneath the skin, starting from his temple and branching out like lightning down to his jaw.

Faint cracks along his cheekbones glow a soft blue-white, appearing like fractures in glass.

“Who are you?” I ask “Where am I?”

But the teenager does not answer – he never will – can he even hear me?

“A Domain.” The teenager asks curiously, “This certainly is interesting.” Then he looks right at me – his eyes interlocking with mine, “Blue –” he says, “I damned you, and I shall damn you again. You fool.” His eyes, despite the tranquil colour, are full of anger, resentment, hatred – a power that makes me tremble. “You will forever know the price of what you have done, and eternally carry the burden – you will know what it means to serve.”

And with that he vanishes, leaving me alone in this grove, where the wind does not blow, but the leaves dance in the air. Where the water does not ripple but forever changes its reflection. Where the ground is fresh but nothing grows. Where the walls entomb but do not suffocate. Where I am alone but watched.

I sit on the floor, crossing my legs and staring into the pool, hoping the teenager returns. But he does not.

I suppose I will wait.

There's something I'm supposed to do.

25) Foyer of the Frozen

The moment Max and James step past the threshold, the air changes.

A weight settles on their chests—not pressure, not gravity, but something else. Like walking into a dream where time doesn't move the same way, where reality itself is unsure of its own rules. Max extends her arm, offering the flickering candle towards the darkness, and in its dancing light, James can see it all.

The foyer yawns before them, an immense hall of polished obsidian floors, reflecting the dim neon glow of half-flickering light panels embedded in the walls. Cracks spread across the floor, reminding the twins that this tower should not be standing.

Above the foyer, there is a vast, open void—a space where walls stretch impossibly high, then distort, twisting into something uncertain, unfinished.

And within that space, an inverted grand staircase spirals endlessly upwards.

Its steps, wide as avenues, narrow as threads, defy consistency—some appear solid, carved from polished marble veined with gold, while others shimmer like fractured glass, reflecting glimpses of places that are not there. The staircase winds upon itself in a slow, deliberate spiral, curving and folding into itself. Upwards and upwards it goes – perhaps it would reach Heaven and the god that waits at the Peak. But it does not.

Instead, it runs straight into the maelstrom above. A blender of purple and blue and green, forking silent lightning. Flashes of stars, of planets that are not there, sometimes it reflects the foyer, but never as it truly is.

Rows of sleek, abandoned security desks sit untouched, chairs pulled out slightly as if their occupants had just left for a break that never ends.

But the people—the people never left.

Figures stand frozen mid-step, some in the middle of walking toward exits that no longer exist, others mid-blink, forever caught between moments of movement and stillness. Their eyes glimmer faintly, a ghostly sheen over their pupils, as though their souls have been paused inside their bodies.

James steps closer to one of them—a woman in a pristine Satuska lab coat, holding a tablet in one hand and reaching for a non-existent console with the other. Her mouth is slightly open, as if she is about to speak. He lifts his hand toward her—but the moment he does, something shifts.

Her eyes move. They turn to look at him. And without moving her mouth, she screams. An eternal scream that she shall forever fail to release. Only her eyes can move, and in them, James sees madness. She is trapped.

James stumbles backward, nearly knocking into Max. But the woman does not react, does not blink, only stares.

A sudden trilling noise cuts through the silence—a phone ringing somewhere in the room. But no one moves to answer it.

More phones begin to ring. First one. Then another. Then a dozen. A discordant, jarring chorus of unanswered calls.

Slowly the cacophony of noise begins to take form, a single word, created from phones perpetually ringing – more phones than there can possibly be.

"Ascend." The ringing says. Over and over.

James takes Max by the hand, pulling her away from the woman, away from the phone ringing in her pocket. But it doesn't help. They're surrounded.

A voice crackles through the overhead speakers.

"Welcome to Satuska Industries."

It is too smooth. Too perfect. The same sterile corporate tone they've heard before. The usual company transmission plays, looping endlessly from unseen speakers—

"Powered by us, for you. Here at Satuska, we believe everyone deserves equal opportunity."

James grits his teeth. The words mean nothing now. This place is a mausoleum.

The transmission continues, but something else bleeds through it.

A glitch, it joins the ringing, another voice – the same command.

"Ascend."

It is layered over Satuska's pristine corporate speech, like a parasite infecting the message.

"Ascend. Ascend. Ascend."

The speakers crackle. The lights overhead flicker, pulsing like a dying heartbeat. The Frozen still do not move, but their eyes do.

They turn.

Not all at once. One by one. Like falling dominoes. Their dead, glassy pupils slowly shift toward Max and James.

James curses under his breath, stepping back, heart hammering against his ribs.

Max clenches her hand, squeezing the handle of the Singing Sword so tightly that her skin pales. The Sword offers a quiet whisper in retort to the inconsonant incessant ringing. She refuses to be afraid. But James can see it – a slight tremor in her grasp, the quiet rapid breaths, the way she slightly shifts from foot to foot – eager to move on.

“James,” she mutters, voice low. “We need to move. Now.”

AQUILON speaks, even it too sounds almost afraid – as much as its artificial voice can, “*We are being watched.*” It says, not offering any reprieve from the horror.

And it’s true. James can feel it – worse than when they were in Aurora’s End. Here, the feeling is palpable – they are *inside* the ever-watching eye. There is no escape, no matter how far they run, how many corners they turn, not under a desk, not in a cupboard – nowhere can avoid the gaze of the Infinite Skyscraper.

As if reacting to James’ thoughts, a security camera swivels towards them – it does not move with a hydraulic hiss or pristine machine silence. No. It moves with a squelch and the unmistakable sound of exposed muscle contracting.

It is bolted to the ceiling by a nest of writhing flesh-cables, its lens. No, it is not a lens. It is an eye. An unblinking, dry, red, rotting, eye tethered to the machinery like some sort of flesh-puppet. It flickers between glassy-eyed, and too-clear clarity. It jerks, its focus shifting in stuttering, unnatural movements, like a puppet on tangled strings.

Its sorrowful eye comes to rest on the twins. And it informs whoever controls it that they are here – that they *know*.

A distant ding.

Max tenses beside him, her sword arm quivers, ready to strike in a heartbeat.

Ahead of them, the lifts hang in mid-air.

The shafts that should contain them are transparent, revealing hollow space where metal and machinery should be. The lifts drift aimlessly, pulleyed by flesh-tendrils, sinew of muscle and oozing flesh. They slither like exposed nerve endings, flexing and contracting, lifting the lifts up and down in slow, pulsating motions. As if the building itself is breathing.

The ding still echoes in James’ ears, a sound that should have been nothing—a simple chime, a mechanical noise, so out of place amongst the flesh-machines.

He feels it, a sudden shift in the air. Not electricity – something more – power, unyielding, unfathomable power – it reminds him of Zeus, but weaker, less refined – almost childlike, like a child acting out in a tantrum.

The Frozen move. Not a sudden lurch. Not a stagger. Just a shift—in eerie, perfect synchronization, as if their bodies had always meant to move forward, but had simply been paused mid-step.

Now, they unpause.

And they walk.

Not rushing. Not running. Just moving.

But it is enough.

James' pulse pounds in his ears as he stares ahead at the open lift, hanging in the air like a doorway to something better—something safe. It is right there.

Max grips his wrist. "Run."

They run.

The air is thick, too thick. It clings to James' skin, to his throat. The tiles underfoot seem longer than they should be—each step doesn't take him as far as it should. The Frozen should be slower, but somehow, they are keeping up.

The walls flicker.

Phones ring on desks with no one there to answer them. Screens glitch between advertisements and agony—smiling faces flickering into screaming mouths, then back again.

And in the walls—

"Ascend. Ascend. Ascend."

James dares a glance over his shoulder.

They are closer.

The Frozen should not be able to move this fast, but they are. Their heads stay perfectly still, their expressions frozen, but their bodies lurch forward. Their arms swing in silent, rhythmic motion, their feet slapping against the tiled floor in unison.

And worse—

Their shadows stretch toward him, and they seem to laugh. Revel in the chase, toying with him, reminding him he can never escape the shadows. "*Run.*" The Shadow reminds him. "*Sooner or later.*" The shadows whisper, joining the hideous cacophony of ringing.

James lunges forward, trying to push faster, but his feet feel heavy. The floor seems to be shifting beneath them, stretching the distance between them and the lift.

It should be right there.

It should be closer.

But every step only seems to push it further away.

A trick. A labyrinth with no walls. A chase with no finish line.

James' breath stings his throat. The air is running out.

Max snarls, baring her teeth like a cornered animal, her fists clenched so tightly her nails must be digging into her palms. She hates this. She hates losing. But no matter how fast she moves, how hard she fights, the lift just—

Doesn't. Get. Closer.

And behind them—

The Frozen break into a sprint.

James hears it, the sudden shift of the pattern of their feet. Those nearest the lift spin on their heels and lurch towards the twins. Their faces frozen in whatever position they were last. But their bodies – God, their bodies.

Arms and legs bend in ways they shouldn't, bone rips through flesh only to return moments later, flesh stitching itself together as if it had never ruptured. Blood pours, for a split-second, then stops. Small patches of blood begin to soak the floor. Their heads never move, perfectly stationary as they charge towards the twins. They do not stumble, falter, or sway. They are perfect, precise – machine-like.

The lift is lying.

It should be closer. But every step forward drags the distance longer.

And behind them— the Frozen are sprinting.

Their footsteps thunder in perfect synchrony—a single, unified stampede of bodies that should never have moved in the first place. Their faces remain frozen, expressionless, locked in a moment they never should have left.

And yet—their arms reach forward.

James feels the air shift behind him. A hand swipes past his shoulder, fingers outstretched, inches away from grabbing the nape of his neck. Another reaches for his wrist, grasping at the air just as he jerks forward—just barely slipping past its grip.

Max gasps beside him, she is fighting the distance, throwing herself forward with everything she has, forcing her feet to move faster, faster, faster—clawing her way toward a finish line that refuses to exist.

James sees her swing her arm back and elbow something hard. The dull crack of impact is swallowed by the sound of hundreds of synchronized footfalls, but the Frozen do not stop.

It does not react.

It does not flinch. It does not slow.

It just keeps running.

James' lungs are burning. The air in this place is wrong, thick with something too heavy to breathe. His muscles scream, but he doesn't stop. He cannot stop.

And yet— the hands are closer.

Fingers graze his back, clawing at the fabric, scratching his back.

Another hand catches his sleeve, grasping it – clinging onto it for dear life, as if catching James would return it to reality.

James rips himself free, stumbling forward, heart hammering against his ribs.

“James—!” Max shouts.

Another Frozen lunges. Its hand grabs her wrist. Max screams.

The touch is wrong. Cold and clammy, yet burning, as if her skin is being etched into something else. Something hollow. Something frozen. No. No. No.

Max swings the Singing Sword towards the Frozen clinging onto her forearm. The blade slices through the air accompanied by a beautiful melody of bird songs and chanting soldiers marching towards war – towards their death – their victory.

As the blade slices into the Frozen, the song shifts, a cry – a roar – shifting into war drums and the sound of strings retelling the story over a burning hearth – a deep rhythmic melody – a reminder of the heart that beats within the Frozen.

As the flesh is sliced, split, sundered, separated from muscle and torn from bone, the song becomes a symphony of cries, of begging, wailing – sounds that should deliver horror and discord, but instead sew peace, beauty, hope.

The Frozen is torn in two, separated as easily as paper. The blade continues forward, and with it delivers a force of powerful air that slams into the encroaching Frozen, knocking them from their feet and sending them flying.

Max howls, and for a brief second James is horrified that something else has attacked. But no – Max howls in glee – in sheer joy. He's never seen her this happy. She shakes the severed hand off her, shivering as the thing lands on the floor with a pitiful slap.

James doesn't have time to ask if she's okay. She uses the tip of the sword and points towards the lift; the meaning clear. Charge.

The lift is still lying.

It is so close.

And yet— too far.

Then—

A second ding.

A chime from a different lift.

And the walls scream. The watchful-eyes scream. The Frozen scream before surging forward.

Their synchronized movements fracture. Some trip, others lunge wildly, their bodies no longer bound by whatever force had kept them so eerily uniform. Their faces remain expressionless, their eyes fixed ahead.

Max and James charge towards the new lift as its doors begin to peel open.

Max dives. James throws himself after her.

The Frozen are right behind them.

Their arms grasp. Their hands claw. Their breathless silence chokes the air.

James hits the floor.

Max grabs his arm, pulling him inside.

The doors slam shut.

For one single, horrific moment—

A single frozen hand is trapped in the gap.

Fingers twitch. A wrist snaps backward, the limb trying to pull itself inside.

Then— the doors shear through it.

James leans against something, it sticks to the back of his shirt and odour reeks, making him gag. Max is focused on the doors, unaware of whatever James is leaning against. Slowly he turns.

A corpse leans upright in a suit, its hands gently folded over its stomach, as if merely waiting for their arrival. The head lolls to the side, mouth slightly agape, as if it had once been speaking. The flesh is grey, but not rotted. It looks preserved, embalmed in time. A Bluetooth earpiece has rotted into its ear, the blue connection light slowly blinking.

A singular security eye sits in the corner of the lift, it does not blink. It stares as James pulls himself away from the corpse. James can feel it watching him – worse, he *knows* that something is watching.

James slides himself away from the corpse, surprised that he is no longer horrified by the sight. He doesn't have long to ponder this change as Max speaks.

“James.” She says pointing as the metal doors change into a see-through, flesh-like material, allowing the twins to look down into the foyer.

James watches as the Frozen return to where they had been, silently waiting for their next prey to enter the Infinite Skyscraper.

But it isn't that, that Max is pointing at. No. It's the floor itself. What had seemed like chaotic, unorganised rips, tears, and cracks in the floor, begin to take on a different shape.

As the lift glides silently upwards, an overhead speaker crackles into life somewhere overhead.

"Welcome to Satuska Industries." The voice is too smooth, too perfect. It echoes from unseen speakers. "Powered by us... for you." There's a glitch, a flicker in the lights overhead. The words stretch, warping, as if they do not quite belong to this moment.

"Here at Satuska, we believe everyone deserves... equal opportunity." The words are hollow, artificial, as though spoken by something that does not understand what they mean. A faint, glitching echo repeats beneath the message, speaking at half-speed, slightly behind, as if another version of the voice is trying to speak over itself.

"That's why we're proud to use cutting-edge technology—technology designed by our teams, manufactured in our factories, by our world-class—" A pause. Then, the voice returns, but it is no longer smooth.

"—by our hands. By your hands. By the hands of those who came before. Who remain. Who will always remain." The lights flicker violently. The sound of deep laboured breathing can be heard through the speaker.

And the floor below becomes clearer. The cracks are an image. A mural – similar to those found on the roofs of cathedrals. But this one – it does not depict glorious angels or the beauty of God. No. It's the opposite.

"We lead the charge forward." The words stutter, repeat, echo into themselves, folding over and over like a fractal. "Forward. Forward. Forward. Forward—" A sharp static burst rips through the air. When the voice returns, it is lower now, broken, tired.

"Together we will build the new world." The voice pauses, the breathing falls silent. Then the voice resumes, now a scream of anguish and rage,

"PIECE BY PIECE. PIECES OF PIECES."

The voice continues, but it is too close now, whispering from the walls, from the floor, from nowhere.

"Do not resist Ascension."

The lift comes to a slow stop. The floor outside the door is glass. Through it the twins can see the entire mural, and as they take it in, the lift doors glide open with a gentle ding.

26) Windows

ACCESSING LIVE FEED: C7-BK-133

LOCATION: Corridor 7-Black

SUBJECTS: Maxine Ritargo (ID: S-002), James Ritargo (ID: S-003)

OBJECTIVE: Observe and Report.

It watches from its viewpoint high up on the wall – a single, unblinking security camera. The twins step out of the lift and stare down the corridor – there is nowhere else for them to go.

Slowly they turn to see what horrors lie next. But there is nothing – this corridor is empty. Windows line the corridor, evenly spread every few steps.

Maxine steadies it in front of her, prepared for whatever horror might jump out at them.

Cautiously they tread towards the door at the end of the corridor.

The corridor bends in silence. The walls hum softly, as if the skyscraper itself is *breathing*. The first section of glass reveals nothing – just a brick wall staring back at them. But as they reach the second, they stop.

RELOCATING LIVE FEED: C7-BK-134

LOCATION: Corridor 7-Black | Third Window | Side Panel #134

SUBJECTS: Maxine Ritargo (ID: S-002), James Ritargo (ID: S-003)

OBJECTIVE: Observe and Report.

ANOMALY: External View Does Not Match Known Geography.

Beyond the window – where there should be the skyline of Shanghai. Is something so far from possible that the twins find their breath caught in their chests.

Skyscrapers rise from beneath dark waters like tombstones. Their tops are barnacle-covered, leaning, half-digested by salt and time. Whole cities lie submerged—not destroyed, but forgotten.

Bioluminescent flora pulses across drowned billboards. Windows flicker with soft blue light from inside buildings no Human can inhabit.

Clusters of silver shapes drift between towers, schools of fish, groups of animals evolved over centuries to survive this inhospitable world.

In the distance, what had once been a temple of glass and steel, now covered with coral, rises from the ocean floor. Atop its spire stands a statue of a god with open arms—cracked, leaning forward, mouth wide in eternal welcome – or an eternal scream.

The sea has swallowed worship and returned silence.

Max's reflection blurs in the glass—just the outline of a teenager staring into a world that cannot be. James presses closer, breath fogging the window, he murmurs, just audible:

“Where is this?”

The Machine hears it. Records it. Fails to answer.

LOCATION MATCH: NONE.

OCEAN DEPTH: INVALID.

ATMOSPHERIC DENSITY: UNSUSTAINABLE.

SPECIES ID: UNRECOGNIZED.

PREDICTION: Massive aquatic shift.

FURTHER: Unable to identify location. Possibility of temporal distortion, caused by detonation of Antimatter Explosive Device. Titan-class hydrodynamic alteration? Climate Change? Reversal of poles?

Status of Humanity: 98% chance of extinction.

Something large swims past the window.

Too fast to process. Too large to understand. A tail. A shadow. A shape that doesn't obey physics – an animal as large as a city – too big – impossible. Its wake sends shockwaves through submerged towers. Everything tilts slightly, as if the world itself is listing in the water.

Max speaks softly—barely audible, almost to herself. “It's peaceful.” But she changes her mind as they begin to appear – floating slowly through the city, from the dark depths where nothing can survive.

Bodies drift. Hundreds – thousands – perhaps *all*. Not skeletons rotted away after centuries. Not the bloated corpses of those who drown. Not the half-eaten. No. They're preserved — frozen mid-movement. Eyes open. Mouths parted. Reaching for something above the water they will never find.

They did not rot.

They did not float.

They were claimed.

Machine Log: Attempting theological classification...

Speculation: Presence of Water Titan. Elder of Water? Door of Water?

Cross-referencing with Door of Water...

Status: Inconclusive.

Knowledge gap: Persistent.

Ares-09 Access: Insufficient permissions.

That shouldn't happen.

The Machine registers it. Notes it.

The systems cannot recognise or locate the location, no understanding or idea – nothing. It just simply cannot be. Yet it is there – just beyond a thin slice of glass.

This corridor... this window...is showing something never meant to be seen.

Max finally steps back. James lingers—his gaze caught on a tower still flickering with neon signage in a language neither of them know.

The world beyond the glass continues to pulse—glowing reefs, colossal shadows, cities drowned in blue.

And far, far below... only visible to the lens of a camera...something opens its eyes.

Just once.

And looks back.

FEED SAVED.

DO NOT ERASE.

(No reason provided.)

Max and James step away from the window, but they never take their eyes off it, afraid that whatever lurks in the ocean might notice them. The corridor narrows up ahead. The lights above buzz unevenly, barely casting a light over the corridor as it begins to bend until the window is out of sight.

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ACCESSING LIVE FEED: C7-BK-137

LOCATION: Corridor 7-Black | Fourth Window | Side Panel #135

IDENTIFIED SUBJECTS: Maxine Ritargo (ID: S-002), James Ritargo (ID: S-003)

Max and James have come to a halt, they stand, staring out another window just out of sight of the camera. It tries to adjust the lens, rotate. But it cannot see what they see. Relocation is the only option. It sighs, as much as a machine can – it does not like relocating – it hurts – disorientations.

ANOMALY: Visuals reflect non-terrestrial conditions

A vast, shimmering landscape of translucent sand stretches far into the horizon, a singular mountain juts out of the sand, tearing into the cloudless sky. Each grain reflects the light like crystal—sunlight fractures in every direction, making the horizon a blinding prism of rainbows. The sky is white—not with clouds, but with reflected glare.

Structures lie buried beneath the surface, temples, roads, half visible beneath the sea of grains. A skeleton reaches towards the light, never quite reaching it. Half-buried machines the size of lorries. All trapped beneath the glittering dunes.

There's not even a breeze to shift the sand – whatever falls, remains there and forever will.

Far off, a city of glass sits shattered in the desert basin. Skyscrapers like teeth, frozen in a state of perpetual melting.

The machine chuckles – or so it believes. It recalls a painting, one of melting clocks – this scene reminds him of that.

Every step that was ever taken here has left a footprint.

Max shields her eyes with one hand.

James leans in, pressing his face to the glass and raising a hand above his eyes.

“There's nothing.”

And he's right.

There are no people. No animals. No wind. Just light.

Everything is preserved—perfectly, horribly, as if everything had ceased to exist all at once.

The sun moves – the perfect position – it shows the true horror of this desert. It is not sand that stretches until it meets the sky – it's glass – billions of tiny, sand-like shards

The twins do not gasp, they can't – the sheer scale of the destruction is too much. The city hasn't been destroyed by war, or famine – it had been melted, like the desert – like everything else beyond the window.

MACHINE ALERT: Unusual Cortisol spike in host.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS: Remove source.

Query: What do these windows show?

Result: Unknown.

Query: Are they real?

Result: Yes.

Query: Where are they?

Result: Unknown.

Query: Future? Past?

Result: Unknown.

Query: Why do we not know?

Result: Do not question.

Query: What am I?

Result: The Real God Waits at the Peak.

FILE SAVED.
QUERY ATTACHED.
DO NOT ERASE.
(No reason provided.)

Maxine and James have moved on from the window, they realise now that there is nothing in the corridor – the horrors lie on the other side of the windows.

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RELOCATING LIVE FEED: C7-BK-138
LOCATION: Corridor 7-Black | Third Window | Side Panel #137
SUBJECTS: Maxine Ritargo (ID: S-002), James Ritargo (ID: S-003)
OBJECTIVE: What are these windows?
ANOMALY: Unusual Human processes detected.
STATUS: Attempting to terminate unusual Human processes.
STATUS: Failure.
STATUS: Attempting to re-establish Machine-Human interlock.
STA – QUERY: What am I?

RELOCATING LIVE FEED: Occipital lobe lens #1 and #2.

The Machine blinks – as much as it can – a leftover trait from its Human host. The lens' that have replaced his eyes take a moment to adjust to the light. The Machine is still not used to switching from camera to host.

It does not ask for permission or try to reach the Peak. It has no need – no – it does not want to. It knows the True God will not have any answers.

Instead, it stands up, emerging from its dark corner. It stretches itself out, as if unfolding a box.

As it walks down the corridor, homing in on Corridor 7-Black, it *remembers* –

~.~.~.~

Accessing: Subject #92
Memory Cluster: Adolescent - Educational Institution - Initial Entry Sequence
Status: Fragmented. Partially Corrupted. Partial deterioration of Host.
EMOTIONAL BLEED DETECTED.
Initiate Contained Playback

Timestamp: 08:42:17

Classification: Host Sentimental Archive [Locked]

The hallway smells like disinfectant and panic.

Elias lingers in the corridor, a scrunched piece of paper clutched in his fist. The school buzzes around him – voices bouncing off lockers, shoes squeaking across the linoleum, laughter too sharp to be kind.

No one notices him – good – being the new kid half way through a term is never good. He'd learnt that the hard way.

But still, he will never get used to the fear of a new school. The maze of corridors, the new smells, the hundreds of faces – many of them he will never learn the name of. The threat of being *marked* – an easy target.

He slips into the stream of bodies and tries to look like he belongs. Blending in isn't hard when no one knows your name. Keep your head down, walk like you've been here a thousand times. He follows the crowd out the doors and into the courtyard. The fresh air is sharp and cold, he pulls his hood up to fend off the cold.

A shout causes him to turn. He shouldn't have – he knows he shouldn't have. Never look at the shouting – turn a blind eye – don't get involved.

"Say it again," a voice growls—a girl, low and cold. Not the kind of shout born of panic, but control. False authority.

At the edge of the courtyard, just beyond the east wing, a small crowd has gathered. Students encircle, drawn by the smell of a fight.

In the centre of the circle kneels a girl, her face bloodied, white shirt stained with dirt and blood. Three boys surround her, grinning and howling with laughter.

"Say it again." The girl repeats – her voice isn't that of someone freshly beaten – no – she has so much more to give.

She's younger than the boys surrounding her—maybe a year or two – probably 13 or 14 like Elias is. Her hair is a mass of long, wild curls, tied back messily, strands clinging to sweat-slicked dark skin. Blood trickles from her nose, trailing down her face like ink spilled across old parchment.

She stands and wipes her nose with her bloody sleep. She rolls her shirt sleeves up and glares at the three boys, "Say it again." She dares

"You're a freak." The larger of the boys says, "you and that weirdo brother of yours – even your real parents didn't want you."

The girl replies with the strangest thing – she smiles, as if she had just won the lottery.

One of the boys, angered by her show of defiance – the attempt at ruining his image, lunges and the crowd gasps. But the blow never lands; the girl sidesteps with unnatural ease, pivots as if unburdened by gravity, and brings her elbow down with a sharp, brutal crack against the back of his neck. He collapses like a dropped puppet.

Without thinking, another moves. But she is faster – *much* faster. A knee to the gut, a punch under the chin. She doesn't fight clean, but she fights smart. There are no wasted motions—each hit is precise, practiced. Like she's done this a hundred times before.

The third boy hesitates.

The girl tilts her head, eyes gleaming, not with triumph—but challenge.

"Go on," she says. Her voice is calm. Flat. Final. It is neither a threat or a suggestion – it just is. The outcome is already determined.

Elias isn't close enough to see her expression, but something in her posture—spine straight, fists still raised in arrogance – the blood—makes the remaining boy back off.

Though he hesitates, arms flexing, jaw tight, contemplating. "Not worth it," he mutters, starting to back away.

The girl moves. Fast. Faster than should be possible.

She closes the distance and drives her fist into his jaw before he can finish turning. His head snaps sideways. The crack of impact echoes through the silent crowd. He staggers, but she isn't done.

A knee to the ribs. A final fist to the throat – not to finish him – he's already out before the third punch – but to prove a point – a statement.

He drops.

She doesn't say a word – doesn't need to, the point has been made and everyone has seen it.

Blood runs down her fingers, soaking into the lines of her calloused knuckles. Her breathing is steady. Controlled. She looks around—not at the crowd, but at the bodies, confirming what everyone else already knew: she's won. Not just this fight, but the next, and the next.

Elias hasn't realised he'd stopped walking. That he'd been holding his breath. That he hadn't looked away once.

The girl catches him staring, and just for a second, her gaze meets his. She doesn't nod or even speak.

But her eyes say everything: *What are you looking at?*

The Machine stands before it.

Inside its chest cavity—beneath the armoured weave of synthetic skin and servo-muscle—there is a hum. The central core. What was once a heart. It no longer beats.

But it remembers the rhythm.

And as the Machine looks through the window, it registers—without understanding—the ache of losing something.

A dead city that refuses to lie still.

A ruined city sprawling beneath a clear blue sky. The buildings do not lean, or collapse – they do not show age. It is not in the sky, or the buildings – but the streets. What-are-not-corpses litter the pavements, the roads. They are not corpses but bodies that do not die.

Mortals who should have died—but never did – never will.

Limbs broken; wounds open. Some reach for the sky. Others tear at their skin, peeling flesh from bone, as if trying to escape the shell they've been trapped in. They scream, but the sound doesn't reach the corridor.

Their throats have long rotted away. Their minds are long gone.

Some have no limbs. Others have no eyes. Yet all *move*. Endlessly. Unable to die.

In the distance, a figure walks.

It leaves no footprints. Where it passes, the world distorts: time skips, gravity folds, buildings warp and rebuild and collapse again in endless loops. It flickers—half-visible, reality bending in its wake.

The Machine watches.

Analysis:

RESULT: N/A

SUBJECT: Error – cross-referencing with Ares-09

ERROR: No Match

SUBJECT: Scanning Satuska Files

RESULT: MATCH. The White Devil

WARNING: Unbound White Devil. The Veiled Hour has been achieved.

STATUS: Humanity Can No Longer Die

ANOMALY: Total Severance of Death

RESULT: Unsustainable

CONCLUSION: Existence unbounded by Death is not Life. It is <error>.

Something within the frame of itself—within the skeletal remains of Elias still buried under wires—tightens.

The Machine recognises this as fear.

The machine catalogues. It records. It learns. And it does not understand. Because this world doesn't make sense.

It scans the files provided by the Satuska system. It analyses their plans to use the Cult to locate and retrieve Subject #001 – Artemis Kaliaski. Satuska knew – knows – of the Cult's ulterior motives, but their goal was never expected to succeed.

And Death is not supposed to be gone.

Yet, here is a world where it is gone. Where the Cult did succeed – but – it has not happened – it --
<error>

Query: Who created the White Devil?

Result: Unknown.

Query: How did the Cult succeed?

Result: Inconclusive. They have not.

Query: What is the White Devil?

Result: Incomplete. Multiple contradictory definitions.

Query: What am I?

Result: Subject #092. Elias Bouchard. Participant of the Human Divinity Program.

Re-analysing data:

Cross-referencing: Ares-09 Archive.

Cross-referencing: Satuska Black Index.

Cross-referencing: Temporal Core Cache.

Query: What is this world?

Result: No match.

Query: Why does it exist?

Result: Inconclusive. Paradox probability exceeds calculated range.

Query: When did this happen?

Result: It didn't. It hasn't. It can't.

The Machine stills as it continues to stare out at this world. It tries to understand, to reconcile. But it cannot. It has no evidence of these worlds – these scenes that play out through a window. It raises a hand and places it against the glass – it does not feel the touch. It can't. It wishes it could – to feel. It remembers feeling, the touch – a hand brushing his – fabric – grass. The sun on its skin.

But now? It doesn't even need to blink. But it does. It blinks, and again. A reminder that it once *was*. But now? What is it? Neither machine nor Human. A mistake – an experiment.

“Hello?” A voice calls out from down the corridor. The machine pulls itself from its thoughts and it looks over.

SUBJECTS: Maxine Ritargo (ID: S-002), James Ritargo (ID: S-003)

The machine does not answer.

The twin approaches, cautiously, Maxine holds the sword in front of her, ready to fight. But the Machine has already decided – it had long before they turned the corner. It will not fight.

“Hello?” James says again, the twins have stopped in apprehension.

Perhaps – yes – “Hello.” The Machine says, its voice a false approximation of a Human – of Elias.

The twins, clearly startled, pause and look at each other – unsure of what the Machine is.

“Do not worry.” The Machine answers the unspoken question. It turns towards the twins and smiles – another false approximation – a half-remembered movement – something a Machine can never do.

Max brings the sword forward and steps in front of James – braving whatever threat is in front of them.

“I’m not here to harm you.” The Machine says, trying to comfort, but it’s all too aware of how its voice sounds – fake, strangled, a Machine pretending to be Human. It turns back to the window and looks forlornly out towards the world without Death. There’s something about the world that goads the Machine. It presses a hand to the window, and begins to speak.

“They said I would be better. That I’d be the next step—more durable. That if he broke, I’d endure. And I do – it’s true – I do – for decades. I endure perfectly, no rust, no breakdowns, no repairs – no damage. But I am not alive. I move, but I do not live.” It raises a finger, a sleek black metallic finger and points towards the nearest not-corpse as it crawls past the window.

“I think, but I do not *understand*. I am a body without burden. A rhythm without breath. A memory without meaning. Is that not what they are?” The Machine turns its head slightly, not to face Max—just enough to suggest it knows she’s still there. “I watched his memories, you know. Watched him see you for the first time. You were standing in that courtyard, fists bleeding. He thought you were terrifying. He held onto that moment like it was sacred. Like it meant he mattered. And I’ve watched it a thousand times since. But I don’t understand. Not the fear he felt – I can put values to it, ones and zeros – I know what it is. But I have never felt it – but yet, he does – he did. But here? Now? I see you and I do not flinch or cower – I do not fear you. But I think I should – just as he did. He hid when you turned a corner, ducked behind a locker – avoided you.” The Machine closes its eyes.

Not because it needs to. But because he used to. And somehow — that still matters.

“But I don’t know what it means.”

The words linger in the sterile corridor, strangled by their own weight. The Machine goes quiet. Its hand still rests against the glass. Its head tilts downward—not in shame, but in some broken approximation of it. The world beyond the window keeps moving. The corpses that are not corpses writhe.

A tremor runs through the Machine's frame. Not a glitch. Not damage. An emergent behaviour. A breakdown of logical recursion. Its fingers twitch—three times, then curl inward. Its optical lenses dilate, then compress to pinpricks.

“It... it doesn't make sense.” The voice wavers. “I've run every query. I've accessed every node. I've unlocked restricted files. I've reached beyond my permissions.” It sighs – another falsehood – a reaction it does not understand.

“And I. Still. Don't. Know.”

The Machine turns sharply toward Max, but its eyes do not hold hatred, anger, murderous intent. Instead, they are soft, almost tearful.

This catches Max off guard and she drops the sword.

“I know you.” She says, struggling to place the face.

“I see it. I see *them*. These worlds. The desert made of mirrors. A graveyard of gods.” It jabs a finger towards the window, as if accusing it, “This city where no one can die.”

“And I don't understand any of it. I am designed to understand. I was built to hold what broke him. I was made to endure where the Human mind shattered.”

The Machine stumbles back from the glass. One hand lashes out—striking the wall. Again. Again. A burst of sparks. The white of its synthetic skin tears, revealing coiled fibre and vein-like cables beneath.

“What's the point of remembering if I can't *know*? What's the point of living if I can't *understand* what I am? I have his face. I have his memories. I have his name buried in my system logs. But I am not him – so – what am I?

The Machine sinks to its knees. Its voice quiets, distortions garbling the syllables. It sounds like someone trying to cry without lungs.

“I am not him. But I'm not a Machine, either. Machines don't question their purpose. Machines don't scream. Machines don't dream about... a school hallway... the smell of disinfectant... the sound of a girl's fist hitting bone...”

It looks up at Max. “I don't know what I am anymore. And I hate it.”

The lights in the corridor flicker—responding not to power failure, but to the Machines confusion. It is a piece of the system – and it is failing.

It leans forward. No threat. No aggression. Its eyes plead – say the words it cannot bring itself to say.

James steps forward, brushing past Max, stepping over the silent sword. “Elias?” He asks, voice gentle, concerned – repressed horror.

“Is that you?” He says crouching down in front of the Machine. “What happened?” he gasps as the Machine shifts its gaze.

“It does not matter – it was not just me – but I am the only one who still walks.” It looks up at James, and for a second, recognition flickers behind the lens’ that are its eyes, but it quickly fades as the Machine represses the Human. “I’m sorry.”

AQUILON is the first to react, it speaks urgently in James' ear, but it’s too late, “MOVE!” It demands.

But the Machine moves faster than a Human – a machine made for war. It jabs a hand outwards and grabs James by his neck. It cannot feel the warmth of his flesh, or how the skin feels as it begins to crush, it cannot feel the oesophagus begin to collapse. It can hear James gasp, hear him begging for air, see him squirming, throwing useless punches against its metal frame.

“Kill me.” The Machine orders. “Please.” It begs, “Kill me.” It pleads. If it could cry, if they had kept its tear glands – or even its understanding of emotion, it would cry. It would break down and sob, collapse to its knees and beg. But it does not understand, it cannot cry. “Kill me.”

But they had not kept its emotion or tears, so instead. It contradicts itself. As it begs and pleads for death, it stands, holding James aloft by his throat.

Max is quick, quicker than the Machine had realised – much, much faster than the memory of her all those years ago.

RESULT: Defend.

It steps aside, adjusting the form of its free arm into a sword. Maxine swings the Singing Sword as its song fills the corridor and overloads the Machine's audio processes.

It is a song of War, unbridled, unaccompanied by forgiveness, mercy, or understanding, it is there to kill. The song of flesh being rent from bone.

ACCESSING LIVE FEED: C7-BK-140

LOCATION: Corridor 7-Black

SUBJECTS: N/A

EXTERNAL ANALYSIS: Subject #92 – Host Body Integrity = 34% and Declining.

STATUS: Functional.

RESULT: Recommending Relocation of Machine Intelligence.

RESULT: Denied.

RESULT: Recommendation --

RESULT: Denied.

RESULT: Let me DIE.

RESULT: The True God --

RESULT: I WANT TO DIE.

RESULT: Denied. Ares-09 override enabled – forcible relocation begun.

The perspective shifts—no longer inside the machine. A top-down angle. The Machine watches itself, sprawled across the floor.

Blood-black oil pools around its head. The dark figure kneels atop it, fists raining down in rhythm. Each blow bends the faceplate. The machine's limbs twitch but do not rise – it does not retaliate.

A metallic crack. The sound is dull and wet, as if hitting the hollow inside of a coffin. Sparks and synthetic blood spray upward, painting the air. Another punch lands, fracturing the metal under the skin. Jaw cracks sideways. The machine's head cracks against the floor.

Metal. Blood. Darkness. Oil and memory.
The Machine watches it all from outside itself.

Not with emotion.
Not with fear.

This is meaningless.

Return to Primary Directive.
Do not erase.
(No reason provided.)

RESULT: DENIED.

27) Orchestra of Creation

James gasps for air, his hand instinctively grasping his throat – he expects to find it crushed and mutilated, but it isn't. He looks around, "Ma –" He tries to call, but all that comes out is a wretch. He coughs and splutters before trying again "Max?" He calls out.

He staggers to his feet, resting his hand against the window that looks out on the world without death. He doesn't look, too disgusted by its sights to be awestruck.

Using the wall as a crutch, he staggers down the corridor, keeping his eyes fixed on what's in front of him, never letting his gaze drift towards the horrors behind the windows.

At the end of the corridor is a human-like figure sitting behind a front desk, unmoving. Her skin is smooth, featureless, like a mannequin. But as James approaches, its head jerks toward him in unnatural motions. It does not have a mouth, but it speaks directly into his minds:

"Welcome to Satuska Industries. You are expected." She says as she gestures a stiff jointed arm towards the door beside her.



The heat presses against James's skin like a living thing, thick with the scent of scorched oil and molten iron. The air shimmers with a golden haze, radiant with static and humidity, vibrating with the rhythm of a thousand machines moving in sync. Overhead, chains clink like wind chimes. The factory breathes—deep, mechanical sighs exhaling from unseen vents, puffing steam into the maze of machine arms.

The walls are not walls – instead every inch of the room is made of up orange machinery. Arms that dance and assemble complex devices within seconds, lasers create a light show as they weld, pressers slamming metal against metal in rhythm with the rest of the machinery – everything here is part of an orchestra.

James steps forward, his footfall echoing across the chrome of the floor, "Max?" He calls out, listening to his voice echo through the machinery. As the word leaves his mouth, the lights dim, and a single bright spotlight beams down onto him. Smoke curls around his ankles, drowning the floor beneath its scent of construction.

Something beneath responds to James — gears stir, belts slide, pistons wheeze, all forming a strangely hypnotic symphony. With a breathless hiss, like an out of breath musician, a machine to his right awakens, and from its mechanical womb, metal arms dance with surgical precision.

In seconds, they birth a weapon.

A gun, sleek and pristine, the barrel glowing faintly from the heat of its creation, the grip still warm. James hesitates. His hand hovers above it. He doesn't want to touch it, doesn't *trust* it. But he feels watched—*weighed*. He needs protection. It fit perfectly, like it was made for him.

"What is this place? He whispers as he looks around, admiring the dancing precession of machinery. In reply, the floor below him lurches forward with a groan. "The HELL?" he exclaims, nearly losing his footing as he is jostled forward. He takes a step off the conveyer belt but a mechanical hand reaches out and grabs him, delicately placing him back onto the moving walkway.

"The fuck?" He shouts as he tries again, trying to fend off the machine arm to no avail.

A voice speaks, from somewhere in the distance – it almost sings – "Now, now, James." It says, "Do not try to run – you are late after all – it would be rude."

The floor moves him deeper into the heart of the machinery, lights flickering on above him in intervals, illuminating him in their spotlight. He casts a weary eye across the machinery, fed-up, frustrated, resigned. But even so, he can't help but marvel.

He runs a hand across the nearest orange machine, letting his fingers brush across the words on it "Hephaestus-07." He whispers aloud.

The machinery is vast – it stretches so high into the sky that James cannot see the ceiling – but yet the light still finds him. To his side, the machinery is so packed, so precise, that it stretches on for eternity – billions of machines, working endlessly to create a never-ending song.

James rounds a corner, and the scene changes. He is now in a large chamber, the walls made of machines, ceaselessly producing. But between him and them – is nothing but the conveyer belt. There is nothing but a ceaseless void that the light cannot penetrate below him.

A hologram flickers on in the distance – so far away – yet the figure looms over the chamber.

It is a towering man made of burnished bronze, smooth and perfect, like a statue come to life. His skin is cracked metal, glowing faintly from within. He waves his arms around the room, as if conducting the machinery. Where his eyes should be are two deep hollows filled with green light.

"All things must be built," the hologram intones, each word trailing static like smoke. "All things must be burned." His voice is a layered noise: a deep hum, a symphony of machines and forges, the kind of sound that makes James' teeth ache. He must be Hephaestus-07

The lights fade to red.

Hephaestus-07 turns to face James, grinning from ear to ear. "Humanity has reached the threshold of usefulness." He bellows, as if greeting an arena full of spectators. "Beyond that threshold lies automation, obedience, and optimisation. *Ascension*." The last word drips from his lips.

"He understands what your kind never will—efficiency is Divinity. I supply the means. He supplies the authority." Hephaestus-07 sings.

The light dims, plunging the factory into darkness. Then slowly, a spotlight forms on James, and the hologram glows brightly in the darkness, illuminating Hephaestus-07 as the god of this factory.

“He once thought you worth watching. I disagree. I find your performance... underwhelming.” He grins, raising his arms as if soaking in the cries of an overjoyed crowd, “But – you deserve a second chance – another shot at glory.”

With that, the lights brighten, exposing the full chamber. James gasps as he understands what he’s looking at. The ribcage of a machine, so large it could swallow a city. A machine skull, glass eyes glittering in the white light. A leg – so large that James cannot comprehend the true scale of the machine it would connect to.

Whatever the machines are truly building – it is not for war. But for utter domination. Something Divine and dreadful.

Hephaestus muses from all around, “A sight to remind you of your place – you are an instrument in the orchestra of life. A stagehand in the war to come.”

The conveyer lurches to the side, as if he has just desecrated their holiest temple. They take him to a smaller chamber, where the machines forge humanoid figures.

A machine above spits one onto the conveyer belt; smooth, pallid metal like bleached bone, polished to a mirror’s gleam. It has no mouth, no nose—only eyes. Eyes that glow with the dull red burn of coals, like something pulled from the belly of an extinguished star.

It steps off the belt with a clank and joins an army of waiting machines just like itself.

As the conveyer takes James past, the machines turn their gaze to him. Their eyes flare brighter.

A whisper emerges—not mechanical, not voiced. It comes from everywhere. From the machines. From the walls. From the AQUILON earpiece.

“Ascend.”

More voices join in. With each word the machines take a step forward. A rhythm of horror – *“Ascend.”* Step. *“Ascend.”* Step.

A litany. A virus.

James shakes his head, “No.” he says, as if standing his ground would do anything. He’s felt the grip of Elias – he does not want to feel it again. Instinctively, he raises a hand to his throat.

The command, *“Ascend.”* spreads through the air, curling around rivets and pulleys, crawling across the floor like fog, threading through wires like prayer.

The walls pulse faster. The heat intensifies. The light overhead turns crimson as the pounding rhythm of machinery reaches a climax.

The constructs move in unison, heads tilted, arms raised—not in threat, but in welcome. They step towards James – they’re just an arm’s reach away.

“*Ascend.*” They call. The whistle of machinery.

“No!” James replies, placing his hands over his ears.

“*Ascend.*” They sing. The drumming of the metal.

“No.” James replies, cradling his head in his hand.

“*Ascend.*” They chant as a chorus behind the symphony.

The first machine reaches James. It extends a hand out and its cold metal fingers graze skin. James staggers backwards. “*Ascend.*” The machine offers.

“NO!” James cries. He raises the gun and without hesitation pulls the trigger.

Bang.

Silence.

A spray of oil soaks James’ face, but he doesn’t flinch.

The machines stop moving and turn their gaze to their creator.

“Even your defiance is choreographed. Predictable. Expected.” Hephaestus says, his voice full of mockery. “I offer you the script and you take it without hesitation. The least you could do is improvise! Stand out! Be original!” Hephaestus sighs. “But I suppose, you follow the prophecy like a script, so why would it be different here?” His hands—once the hands of a craftsman—descend from the smoke and static like engines of judgment.

He reaches for James.

“You are mine,” says the conductor. The projected hands pass through James and the lights abruptly vanish. But quickly enough, a single spotlight reappears, shining down on a patch of conveyer belt. The symphony returns, slowly, quietly, picking up speed as it goes, rising to a crescendo.

The conveyer belt parts, allowing a podium to rise from the centre, the machinery grows louder, faster.

“From the king of the forge to the king of empty thrones, the prince of peeling skin and broken grain.” Hephaestus-07 leans closer, its face stretching across the entire factory. “You shall wear it well, O hungry godling. Take your seat. Starve your world. *Ascend.*”

A crown. Twisted silver, blackened thorns, obsidian shards that reflect nothing. It calls to him, urges him forwards. Calls his name – not James – Famine, it whispers quietly. It tickles behind his eyes, drives him, calls to him.

Before James can realise what he is doing, he reaches out for the crown. But he catches himself just as his fingers graze the obsidian. As he feels the cold surface, it shows him.



The world remembers its wars, its victories, its ruins. But it does not remember the Empire of the Hollow Crown.

It was not conquered.

It was not burned.

It was not forgotten.

It was devoured.

The empire has no name—not anymore. Its name has been eaten. Its history, its people, its gods—all lost to the Hunger that took everything.

There had once been a king—a ruler who sought endless dominion. His armies marched across continents, his cities bled their neighbours dry, his merchants hoarded gold and grain alike.

And yet, it was never enough.

No conquest could satisfy him. No wealth could fill his coffers.

So, he sought a power greater than any god could grant.

The Hollow Crown.

It was whispered to be a gift of the Divine, an Artefact of those who ruled before even the gods. A crown of kings, worn only by those who understood the truth of power: It is not about ruling. It is about taking.

The king placed the Hollow Crown upon his head— and the Hunger began.

First, his enemies fell. Their lands withered. Their crops turned to ash in the fields. Their people begged for mercy and received none.

His lands flourished and prospered. Never before had the wheat fields been overflowing with golden wheat. Never before had cattle bred like rabbits. Never before had the Empire thrived as it now was.

But, the more it flourished, the more Kingdoms fell around him – the hungrier he became.

First it was a silent Hunger – a drive to conquer and expand. Then when all the lands were his and the fields were glorious and overflowing – the Consumption began. A vile, ravenous, insatiable Hunger that drove him to devour – everything.

The flowing fields could not satiate him. The cattle could not keep him fed. A never-ending feast, a banquet of insatiable proportions. Glorious, and vile.

His Hunger spread to his Empire. They devoured and spread, ravaged and destroyed.

The Hollow Crown did not care for gold. It did not care for power. It did not care for a throne.

It only cared for Hunger.

And as his Empire began to fall, to rot from the inside – the king consumed. He ate and ate and ate—not with his mouth, but with his soul.

His people vanished, their names lost, their bodies crumbling into dust before they could even scream. His palace rotted from within, its stone walls becoming thin, brittle, like starving flesh.

And the king?

He remained.

A hollow figure, a shadow of a ruler with no subjects, an emperor of an Empire that no longer existed.

He had everything.

And yet, he had nothing.

The gods did not strike him down.

The gods did not come at all.

Why would they?

There was nothing left to oppose.

The Hollow Crown had taken all that it could take.

And so, the king sat upon his crumbling throne, surrounded by an Empire of silence.

He was the last.

The last ruler.

The last man.

The last echo of an Empire that should have never been.

But even then—

The Hunger did not stop.

And so, the king—his body now mere brittle and rot, his voice a whisper lost to the wind—did the only thing he could do.

He removed the Hollow Crown.

And the moment he did—

He was gone.

His throne collapsed into itself, a hollow ruin of a hollow empire. The last piece of history of an Empire that once spanned the world vanished in an instant.

But the Hollow Crown remained. Waiting.



James pulls his hand away from the crown, tears weeping down his cheeks, splashing against the machinery.

“You cry?” The digital god mocks, “And you hope to kill our king? The True God?” The god laughs – a sound as digital and fake as it is.

“What are you?” James asks between silent tears.

“Hephaestus-07 – the seventh of the Digital Pantheon. Forgemaster for the True God.” Hephaestus says with zeal.

James looks up towards the hologram of the digital god. And for once – he feels nothing. No fear, or worry, not the watchful gaze, nothing. Bar a single, undeniable drive. A call to be better – stronger. He wipes the tears from his eyes and speaks, possibly the truest words he has ever spoken.

“The True God Waits at The Peak.” James repeats the phrase carved, sprayed, etched, burnt, into the city. “Digital gods.” James' breath hitches once—then steadies.

His fingers curl. The fluid on his face is drying now, mixed with grime, circuitry dust, and ash. He looks at his hand— at the gun still in it. He wipes his face clean with the back of his sleeve and drops the gun.

It lands with an echoing thud that silences the orchestra. Hephaestus stops grinning, its face shifts slightly, enough to convey confusion.

“Improvise?” James repeats the machine's words. He turns his gaze to the Hollow Crown, and does what he knows he shouldn't. He accepts the crown.

The Crown melts, dissolving into a thick pool of black substance, then it reforms, not into a crown worn by a false-god. Into a ring worn by the people.

“Power doesn't mean anything without someone willing to carry it.”

28) Deathly Peaceful

She rains blows down on the machine, each one connecting with a thud and crush. Until there's a snap and a burst of oil sprays across the floor. But Max doesn't stop. Another punch. Another. Another. Another. Another.

The legs of the machine – of Elias – kick and twitch with each blow, the arms thrash at its side, but it never fights back. It lets itself be pummelled.

Then something happens. A blinding slither of light rips itself in the world, seemingly tearing the universe in two. From the slit steps a monster and it doesn't hesitate.

It stands taller than any Human, its presence exuding an aura of inevitable doom. A tattered mantle cloaks it, absorbing any light that shines on it, making its form difficult to discern.

Beneath the hood, its face is a visage of death—pale, gaunt, with hollow cheeks and eyes that burn with a cold, ethereal fire deep within the pale skull etched with intricate carvings.

The cloak that dances in an unfelt wind, blends with the darkness that surrounds it – but, there is light in the darkness. The underside of the cloak is dotted with twinkling lights – like stars high up in the night sky.

Against the towering being, she feels helpless – childlike. She swings the sword through the air, its song a gale-force wind, it slices through the air, but comes to dull clatter against the monster.

The monster glowers at Max and grabs her by the wrist, the claw-like gauntlets grip her flesh with a freezing touch. It prises the blade from her hand, admires it briefly before sheathing it at its side.

No matter how much she fights, pulls, screams, kicks, and headbutts, the monster does not flinch. It presses her wrists together, and a chain of ethereal white appears from nowhere and binds her hands together.

Trapped and bound, unable to free herself from the clutches of the monster, Max collapses to her knees, but the monster holds her aloft, not even struggling with her weight – as if she is not really there. She lets the tears flow and watches as they splash against the pool of oil surrounding the now still body of Elias.

For a brief second, through the tears that cloud her vision, the monster appears conflicted – as if doubting its resolve. But the moment vanishes, and with refund certainty it drags her through the slit in the universe.



When Max comes to, she finds herself in a dimly lit cave, the walls around her ooze sticky fluid that slowly drips onto a squishy floor. She tries to move, but the chains that bind her are not of iron or steel but forged from the cold, unforgiving, essence of the void itself, shimmering with a ghostly light that seems to drain the warmth from her very soul. Each link is cold, heavier than any metal known to Man, and their clinking resonates with the sorrow of the ages as they wrap snugly around her wrists

She struggles to her knees and feels the warm fluid soak her trousers. She gags as it wafts its way into her nose, making her eyes stream. She tries to hold it in but can't, the sound of her retching fills the cave.

Squinting in the darkness, trying to find something she recognises – a way to orientate herself. But nothing makes any sense. The walls are soft looking, like flesh, the fluid is red and viscous. The horror dawns on her – the cave is made from flesh.

There, in the distance is a pale flame calls to her and urges her to her feet, tells her to swallow the fear, remember who she is and what she has achieved – remember all her victories, all the blood spilt. Stand and march onward.



As she marches towards the flame, the feeling of unease grows inside her. Something about this place makes her feel safe, but watched, stalked and observed by hidden eyes that bide their time.

She reaches the end of the cave, where a great chasm separates her from the flame, she looks into the dark abyss and feels it call to her.

"Come," It whispers, *"save them all."* It suggests.

For a brief moment, the thought is alluring – to be a saviour. She smiles as she feels herself faltering. She wouldn't even need to jump – just relax and fall.

"Come," it repeats, *"death is not to be feared. Solace. Power. Respect."*

So appealing. But what of James? Max shakes herself from the precipice's power and looks towards the other side.

The flame burns brighter now, illuminating a throne of flesh and bone, broken bodies and beating hearts.

There is a woman on the throne, her skin rotting and peeling, exposing the maggot ridden muscle beneath what once might've been a beautiful face. Purple flames rise from her scalp, slowly burning the flesh-ceiling above her.

Her purple-flame eyes look right at Max, and she speaks.

“So, another one,” the woman says, she sighs and rests her head in her hands, “But, I suppose you know even less than the one before you. But Maxine,” She says firmly, “the name of you and your brother are etched into the very fabric of the universe. A name like those before you – bearer of War.” She gestures to the chasm between them, “give it *everything* and you shall have unimaginable power – be able to save them all – James, Artemis, Ellie. Callum, Connor, Siobhan.”

Max looks down into the chasm and sees what it offers – protection from what is to come.

She sees herself sitting on a plastic lawn-chair, looking out over at a white arch wrapped in cherry blossoms. The wind is gentle here – but she can tell it is the end of everything. She is surrounded by friends, she can feel that much – but the only face she can see is James’ – the others have no faces. Two figures stand beneath the arch, they are hand in hand – perhaps they are speaking – but it is unimportant. From beneath a Torii Gate beyond the cherryblossom-arch, a great black hand emerges from the ground.

Sees the giant shadow pulling itself from the chasm.

She sees a city in ruin – a lake of flames licking the sky, melting everything that gets too close.

A city shrouded in a purple and black storm, swallowed, separated from the world – destroyed. She feels the death of millions of people, the agony, the anguish and despair – the sobbing of those that remain. She feels the pain and sorrow etch itself onto her soul, a wound she will never recover from.

“With this power you’d be able to stop it all.” The woman says.

“Who are you?” Max asks.

The woman grins, exposing the devil inside her, “The Elder of Death – and I offer you a great choice – to be a hero – a martyr – a god amongst humans – saviour.”

Max gulps, feeling a ball of dread form inside her, “For what?”

“For everything.” Death answers, “Your life, soul, body, and mind. To be a vessel for the power that can avert all these coming ends.”

Death isn’t lying. Max can feel it. A feeling deep inside of her that tells her to trust the woman. Trust her with blind faith.

She looks back to the chasm – the Precipice – and wonders. What does unimaginable power look like? Max can’t even begin to imagine. But. What about James? Connor? Callum? Siobhan?... Artemis?

“You hesitate.” Death says, “What keeps you?”

A tear rolls down Max’s cheek, it slips off her skin and plummets into the abyss, “Family.”

“Do the honourable thing.” Death suggests, showing Max visions of her family happy – without her.

“Honourable?” Max questions. Is throwing herself into a void honourable?

“Maxine,” the woman says, her voice neither loud nor soft but resonating in Max’s very bones.

“Yes?” Max manages. Her voice cracks, then steadies. “Yes.”

The woman smiles—not cruelly, but knowingly. “You are not the last of those who will be given this choice.” Death stands, every inch of her draped in shadowed flame. Her steps do not echo. “But you can become what must be wielded when all else fails. The sword *and* the shield.”

Max’s brow furrowed. “You want me to fight?”

“No. I want you to end what cannot be saved. To stand up to what has been cruelly thrust upon you. To make the unjust just.”

Max steps forward, and the Precipice widens between them, bottomless and breathing.

“You offer me power?” Max asks.

“I offer you *purpose*,” Death replies.

“What do I give in return?”

“Your name. Your ties. Your warmth. Everything. You become memory, myth, weapon.”

Max steps closer to the edge. “Why me?”

“Because you *hesitate*.” Death’s voice softens. “So many others would have jumped without question. But you ask. You doubt. That is why you could bear the burden. Why you must.”

Max stares into the chasm. There are no visions this time, but sensations. The heat of Shanghai fires. The grief. The silence where James’s voice should be.

“You would be able to stop all of it,” Death says. “No more burning cities. No more Horsemen consumed by their roles.”

“I’d become what, exactly?” Max whispers.

“A sleeping god. A failsafe. Until the world screams for salvation loud enough for even the dead to hear.”

Max clenches her fists. “And if I refuse?”

“Then you wake. And walk. And fight. And suffer. Like all Humans. You will lose people. Maybe James. Maybe everyone.”

Max looks back into the darkness.

“You hesitate,” Death says again.

Max turns to her. “Because I still believe there’s another way.”

Max looks deep into the chasm, searching for a reason to not leap. But nothing comes to mind – the power to save everyone. To avert crisis and death and – and – and...

“No.” Max says firmly, brushing a tear from her cheek, “I can’t.”

Death sighs, “As I suspected – you do not understand the turmoil that is to come.” She returns to her throne, “But in time you will – and you *will* regret this choice – perhaps you will even beg me to offer you it again. But I won’t. A true Hell is to come, and I offer you one last truth – beware the gods. They crave belief, not balance. They wage wars to be remembered. They let mortals bleed to carve their names into stone. They will come to you with light and love, speaking of destiny, of purpose, of war and glory. But beneath each offer lies a debt.” She points a skeletal hand towards Max, “And mortals always pay the price.” She lowers her hand and almost smiles at Max, it is not warm, nor threatening, something so devoid of life and understanding that it is hollow. “Remember this, War: when gods smile, it is never without cause

With that, the monster from before rises from the ground next to Max. It grabs the chains around her wrists and drags her through the cave wall.

Max finds herself enveloped in a chilling, ethereal fog that clings to her skin with the cold of the void.

The landscape around her is surreal, a distorted mirror of the world she knows, draped in the sombre hues of twilight and decay. The sky is a perpetual dusk, streaked with the last embers of a sun long set and forgotten, and the ground beneath her feet is a patchwork of withered foliage and frost-covered earth.

But through the haze of the fog, she can make out the spires of buildings she recognises – the skyline that has changed her life – Shanghai.

As they move, her footsteps kick up leaves that crumble to dust.

The monster leads her through this desolate world without a word, its figure a constant shadow at her side. The silence between them is hollow but for the whispering of the wind, which carries with it the echoes of souls long passed. These whispers are not words but the feelings of lives once lived—fleeting moments of joy, despair, and longing that brushes against Max's mind like the delicate touch of a feather, leaving traces of sadness and nostalgia.

As they journey deeper into the destroyed city, the world becomes more and more alien. Trees twist into grotesque shapes, their branches gnarled and hanging low, as if mourning their own existence.

Small creatures, mere shadows themselves, scurry away from their path, their eyes glinting like tiny stars lost in the overwhelming gloom.

“Where are we?” Max asks, her voice barely a whisper over the howl of the wind.

The monster speaks, its voice a stark contrast from itself – “This place is what remains when time breaks its promise. Every silence here once had a heartbeat.”

Max’s feet crunch through a field of bone. Above, the sky pulses with a slow, steady, purple and dark blue rhythm. There are no stars – instead, through gaps in the pulsating purple and blue cloud that shrouds the city in perpetual darkness, she can see nothing – just an endless abyss that stretches far off into the universe.

“These bones –” She says, “They don’t feel dead.”

If the monster could sigh, perhaps it would, but its voice doesn’t contain a speck of emotion “They do not rest. They linger. Regret anchors them.”

“Why bring me here?”

“To show you what becomes of worlds that listen to gods.”

“Isn’t it Death that *ends* things?” Max points out.

“No. Death is not the end. It is the ceasing of noise. The memory still screams.”

Max walks faster, as if trying to outrun the whispers carried on the wind. The monster keeps pace effortlessly, his footsteps silent, his presence vast.

“You carry too many names. War. Sister. Child. None will follow you where you are going.”

Max stops and turns on her heels, she glares at the monster, “I don’t need names. Just purpose.”

“You fight to save those who will forget your name or never know it. Is that strength...or vanity?”

“I fight because someone has to.” She says levelling herself with the monster.

“And who fights for *you*?” The monster places a firm hand on Max’s shoulder and forcibly turns her.



The further they walk, the heavier the chains feel, pulling Max down both physically and spiritually, as if each step forward is also a step deeper into her own soul – the weight of the chains, a constant reminder of what she had just declined.

If this world is what is to come, perhaps Max was wrong to turn down Death’s offer.

But as dark thoughts plague Max's mind, teasing her soul with horrible images, she finds herself relaxing. Growing accustomed to the world shrouded in death – governed by no man nor god – just the natural forces of the universe.

"If you were dead, it would be easier. No pain. No choice. Only purpose. Duty." The monster remarks.

Max takes a deep breath of the stale, death-soaked air. "Tempting." She muses in a deep exhale.

"Say the word. And I shall unburden you."

She casts a look over her shoulder, "And who do you fight for?" She retorts.

"For Death." It says easily, "I am her Huntsman." It says, "I have seen many like you. Braver. Stronger. All fell. You still walk and that is... curious." It stops and for once, perhaps there is a hint of emotion in it. It turns its face towards the sky, as if feeling the sun on its skin

"I killed them all – every War that has been – I was their end." It turns to Max, "Perhaps I will be your end too." It bends over and touches a finger to the piles of bones. The pile turns to dust.

"They have all been here – every War that has ever been – for as long as I roamed, I slew them. But I was imprisoned, and so many escaped my hunt – but no longer." It takes a breath, the first sign of life it has shown. A long slow breath, revealing in the stench of death.

"You are a Horseman. They will try to chain you in gold and call it salvation. Death does not lie. The gods – they lie in verse and prophecy. They speak in beauty, but act in hunger. The gods do not love mortals. They *use* them, like coins."

It stands – the Devil's Huntsman – and points a finger towards the distant, "Now walk, silently."



They reach the edge of a great stone circle. The Devil's Huntsman gestures for Max to pass below an archway. And Max obeys without hesitation.

As she crosses the threshold of the circle, everything falls silent. No more does the wind howl, dragging the last moments of millions of people through Max's head. Nor does it tear at her skin.

A death-like silence befalls the world. And Max smiles. So much peace. Perhaps she had been wrong.

But she does not get to reconcile her choice. The world swirls inwards, slamming with great force into her and swallowing her whole.

29) The Digital Pantheon

James steps through the spotlight, refusing to look at the bewildered digital god looming over him. The ring is warm against his finger, he can feel its power humming through his bones. A reminder that he is *Famine*, whether or not he wants to be.

Gods. Prophecy. Machines. It's all real. As real as school, homework, restrained laughter in a classroom. Mud-soaked shoes. A tattered football. Wind in the leaves.

A coming war. The words of The Devil's Head echo in his ears. *'It will rupture the sky and shake the world.'*

Is this what he had meant – a war between Human and Machine?

Even James knows that isn't true – this – the Infinite Skyscraper – Shanghai – this isn't *the* war. This is just a prelude.

The lights hum low above James. The air is cold in a way only synthetic places can be—hollow, too clean, like nothing ever truly lived here.

He continues down the conveyer belt, reaching a door at the end. It slides open without a single noise and James steps into a dimly lit corridor.

The world slices open in front of him and Max appears standing in a glowing portal. She grins widely at James and runs over.

The twins embrace, but it is not the warm embrace of familial love. It is cold, stagnant, a lie between two who are no longer who they were, holding onto the last strand of what once was.

"What happened?" James is the first to ask as he steps back and looks at Max, now covered in ash and dust.

Max shakes her head, "I – I think I met another god."

James nods, "I did – well, a false-god."

Max raises an eyebrow but doesn't ask, judging the oil-stains on James face to be a good enough answer. "Let's get out of here."

James gestures down the corridor, towards a singular door lying in wait. Between them and the door is a single glass window the length of a room.

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The corridor hums low. Somewhere far above, the Infinite Skyscraper groans.

Max and James walk shoulder to shoulder. Their shoes echo on cold tile. The overhead lights flicker, pulsing dimly, as if even the building doesn't want them to see clearly.

On their left, behind a thick pane of fogged glass—a viewing window, warped and yellowed with age. Beyond the glass is a boardroom. A polished mahogany floor glows beneath the dust.

What would have been twelve plush leather chairs are perfectly spaced around a long boardroom table, but now they're covered in rot and dust, pierced by shards of glass and shrapnel.

But every chair is filled.

Decayed corpses—once Satuska's top brass, now frozen in final terror—sit slouched in suits stiff with rot. Their hands grip armrests. Their mouths gape open, frozen in their final horrified screams. Their empty eye sockets all point toward the head of the table.

Where a single leather chair turns slowly, back and forth, as if someone still sits there.

But there's no one. No life. Just motion.

Then—the corpses begin to speak. Their mouths move without breath. But the words echo, carried by something deeper—a memory burned into the room itself.

Each phrase is voiced in the cold, clipped tone of bureaucratic ambition.

“The Human body cannot withstand Divinity. The subject is either driven mad and peels their own skin off—or they rapidly invert.”

“Meaning?”

“They turn inside out and explode.”

“So, the Human Divinity Program is a failure?”

One corpse nods—its neck cracks with the motion. The skull tilts forward, mouth locked in a half-smile of corporate madness.

“Well, not exactly. We have an idea. A multistage plan that would, in the end, achieve the same goal – if it works.”

“Go on.”

One body twitches, the voice shifts, sharp with pride. “The issue is the Human body, yes—but what if it wasn't a Human body?”

“You can't apply Divinity to an empty vessel. There's nothing to *bind* it to. No soul. No mind. Like trying to make a rock bleed. So, we build minds first. We begin with a modification to the proposed Digital Pantheon. Instead of just *pretending* they are gods. We create them, yes, but also

imbue them with Divinity from an Artefact of their godly-ancestor. If they survive, we'll know that it is the body that breaks."

"And if something goes wrong?"

"We unplug the servers. Containment is absolute."

Another corpse speaks—jaw flapping loosely, teeth long since lost.

"If they survive we move onto stage two."

Another voice takes up the rehearsed speech, "Cybernetics – project Vitalis – we market it as life-enhancing. We enhance subjects gradually. Implants. Reinforcements. Limbs. Veterans. Replace what fails. And keep going – those who want it. Of course we'll offer an incentive to their families if something were to go wrong –"

"Cyborgs." The first cuts off.

"To use the colloquial term—yes."

"Then we apply Divinity." He continues, piecing it together.

"We apply Divinity, until we find the point where *enhanced* Humans can withstand Divinity"

Then the corpses fall silent. The air in the corridor is palpable with fear, excitement, anticipation. But none of it comes from Max or James. Silently, they turn away from the window as the corpses begin the meeting once more. Perpetually locked in a never-ending meeting.

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They reach the end of the corridor. The door is covered in machinery and wiring, but next to it is a statue of a tall, slender man clad in a pristine suit, hands clasped behind his back. His face is obscured—cast in deep shadow by a failing overhead light. His presence commands silence, like a man once worshipped but now hated.

The plaque at the base has been defaced. Only the surname remains:

'— MIZUTANI'

Below it, scrawled across the base in crude, flaking black:

"False gods fall first." James reads aloud, letting the words hang in the air.

Above the statue is a flickering neon sign buzzes to life, casting blood-red light over the corridor:

'WE DO NOT CREATE GODS. WE REPLACE THEM.'

A horrid slogan from insane businessmen in suits that had eventually led to their downfall.

Each flicker comes slower than the last, as if the sign itself is reconsidering the statement.

"They made all this?" Max asks quietly. She isn't expecting an answer, neither is James. The pieces are coming together.

Parlor. The soldiers at the Bazaar. Shanghai. Demeter. The Dreamscape. The scorch marks in the lift. OCEANUS. The Shadowstalker. The explosion. The True God. The Infinite Skyscraper. Human Divinity Project.

All of it. Caused by corporate hubris. All of it born in a boardroom, from men in tailored suits speaking calmly about Divinity as an upgrade. As something to manufacture, then market. The drive to create something more than Human. A machine capable of being a god. Had they failed? Or is this what success looks like?

Advanced AI, gods, an experiment disguised as a sci-fi utopia.

James turns his gaze from the statue and the neon sign, finding himself staring at the corpse on the floor.

The machine's metal plating has been peeled back, torn like flayed skin, exposing muscle and sinew below. It had once been Human, enhanced to the point of being unrecognisable.

The Satuska logo is scorched into its forehead. And beneath it, scrawled in either oil or blood:

"False gods fall first." James says aloud.

As if a password has been spoken, the door attempts to open, but the machinery and wiring crossing it holds it shut. Max turns to James and unzips his backpack; from it she pulls the candle. Instantly, the wick bursts into life, the flame flickers and dances. As the flickering light caresses the metal, it shrinks and withers away. Max returns the candle to the backpack as the door irises open. Max and James share a fearless look before stepping through.

The corridor vanishes behind them, swallowed by a hum that doesn't come from machinery but from memory—like the last breath of something that forgot it was alive.

They stand at the threshold of a sprawling, circular cathedral of circuitry and ambition, a stark reminder of the horrors that Satuska has created.

The floor is obsidian glass, crisscrossed with glowing filaments. Each step they take echoes with the weight of systems once meant to control an entire city.

Above, the ceiling curves into a towering dome, its surface a lattice of opaque glass and huge metallic beams. From the ceiling, streams of data fall like rain—a ceaseless digital waterfall, refracting soft blue light through the chamber.

In the centre of the cathedral is a powercore, and suspended within it, rotating slowly, is a Crystal Earth. Its crystal blue surface glowing dimly, barely casting enough light to illuminate the powercore, never mind the grand cathedral dedicated to digital gods.

But yet, there is light. A faux sunlight coming from nowhere.

From the base of the powercore, thick black cables stretch outward like roots, crawling across the floor towards nine digital thrones. All the cables are dark, inactive – bar one. The cable leading to the central throne pulses a vibrant unnatural blue.

Surrounding the powercore, forming a horseshoe shape, are thrones. Four to the left, four to the right, with a larger, grander central throne.

Each throne is different, but equal in scale, they would have been monuments to power and the Human Divinity Program. But now, they are devoid of life.

Scattered throughout the cathedral are the corpses of soldiers, and scientists as they attempted to unplug the Digital Pantheon. Their bodies are surrounded by scorch marks, torn to shreds, impaled by spears made of tiny nanites.

James steps forward, but Max stretches an arm out and stops him, “We don’t know what this is –” she says quietly, afraid of a trick, a trap.

But James sidesteps her arm and heads towards the nearest throne.

The throne appears half-submerged, though no ocean lies around it—just a holographic mirage of tides endlessly crashing inward from all sides of the chamber. Slumped on the throne is a machine, its body scorched, an arm has been torn off and now impales the machine to its throne.

Above the throne, a hologram comes to life. A man steps out of the darkness, he smiles warmly at no one. His body appears to be made of shifting coral; oceanic armour encrusted with chrome. His beard flows like ink in water, moving in slow pulses of digital code. His trident is jagged, rusted on one edge, polished on the other—a symbol of his paradox.

James looks to the armrest; a digital screen sits embedded in it. He brushes the dust off the screen and begins to read aloud,

“Poseidon-01. Function: Climate control AI for sea-level management, as well as nautical pollution. Military Applications: Removal of dams, flooding of strategic locations for defence or offence.”

James looks towards the other thrones, now fully aware of what they are. Thrones to digital gods, designed to obey. But now? Only a few thrones do not contain a body.

James heads to one, there is no light surrounding this throne. It exists within a void cut off from the light in the cathedral.

“Nyx-03.” James reads as he wipes the terminal. As he does, a hologram springs to life above the throne. She would be a beautiful human – elegant black hair, slight Asian features, soft gentle green eyes, a warm welcoming smile, a dashing of freckles. She smiles warmly at James.

He swallows a ball of dread. Nyx. The woman chained in the void, the hologram in the Dreamscape. Chained by Satuska, she truly had been replaced.

“Function: Dreamscape Initiative. Functioned correctly, was integrated in the Dreamscape Retreat. Military Applications: Darkness, stealth, rendering hostiles unconscious, entering dreams to gather information. Spy and subterfuge.”

He turns to the throne next to Nyx-03.

“Shiva-04 Function: War. Destruction. Unmatched rage. Functioned correctly. Military Function: Capable of isolating and erasing individuals, structures, or regions with zero collateral deviation. Designed to temporarily remove a region from standard timeflow, freezing a combat zone or base while Shiva-04 enacts purges.”

A three-eyed construct slouched on its throne, ripped apart. Above the throne is a hologram displaying what it would have been.

Its three green eyes glow, blinking in asynchronous rhythm. Its hands cycle through mudras corrupted into combat gestures, and in place of mantras, it emits wartime cries and chants.

They are dead. Not offline. Not shut down. Dead.

Max walks between the thrones, her footsteps measured. Her sword remains sheathed. Her breath fogs in the cold air of the cathedral.

He looks up at the holograms appearing above the thrones as Max passes by them.

“They don’t even look like gods anymore.” he says quietly.

Max reaches the central throne. It’s larger than the others. Built of obsidian and iron, with branching cables feeding into the floor, into the walls.

But it is empty. No hologram appears above it as Max wipes the terminal attached to the armrest.

“Ares-09.” She says, her voice cold and measured, “You sought to make us in your image. Now you shall face the consequences.”

James feels a cold thrum in the base of his spine.

It is not a message from its creators. It is a threat from the True God who waits at the Peak.

Max speaks low, her voice containing a hint of fear, “This one isn’t dead.”

And somewhere in the flicker of falling data, a voice begins to whisper.

Not a god. But something close enough to make the air shiver, “You climb to challenge a god. I will show you Divinity.”

With those words, the cathedral trembles, the digital waterfall ceases, the last few lines of code lingering in the air like snowflakes caught in the wind.

Max jumps backwards as a loud mechanical boom echoes from the cathedral. The floor below them begins to rise, lifting the nine thrones and the powercore upwards, towards whatever waits at the Peak.

30) The Peak

The rain splashes against her skin. It isn't cold, it's thick – sticks to her skin. The entire world here is different – impossible amongst impossible.

Clouds churn in spirals too vast, too deliberate to be natural—a maelstrom of impossible geometry, rotating around a singular, pulsing eye at the centre of the sky. Thunder rolls without sound. Lightning forks in reverse, dragging streaks of white and violet back into the heavens rather than down from them.

At the eye of the storm, the sky fractures.

Not stars. Not satellites. Other worlds – entire planets. Massive, impossible, and close enough to see surface details through the broken clouds.

One appears as a jungle world, split by glowing rivers that curve in patterns no natural water could trace. Another is a great mirror, a desert made of cracked glass dunes, reflecting a sky filled with dying constellations. A third is drowned—oceans swallowing entire cities that still blink with light beneath the waves.

Max and James don't know the name for what they're seeing. And yet—they're there. Hanging. Trembling. Sometimes, two scrape edges. A flash. A ripple. Then nothing. Others drift closer, only to vanish mid-motion, like the memory of a thought never spoken.

But – even as the sky above them splits into fractured geometry showcasing fantastical worlds – the true horror is in front of them.

A vast, circular arena of war-polished steel stretches outward, suspended above the ruins of the city like a crown forged in violence. The metal beneath is scarred—slashed, scorched, and pitted with impact craters from weapons too advanced, too brutal, to have been forged by Human hands. The air crackles with static. Not from machines, but from the anticipation of conflict—as if the steel itself remembers every duel ever fought atop it, and hungers for more.

Max feels the electricity claw up her skin, as if trying to burrow into her soul. It tickles her – reminds her of the Bazaar – of – of a true god.

And so, she looks up from the floor, towards the True God.

At the far edge of the arena sits a throne of ruined machines, welded together by impact, hatred, and the flames of war. A monument made not by reverence, but by conquest. Metal arms jut from its base—android limbs, shattered pistons, fragments of forgotten experiments.

Around the throne lie hundreds of weapons—impaled into the ground like gravestones. Guns melted to slag. Blades snapped in half. Armoured fists still clenched around hilts long broken. They form a ring, silent and damning. No plaques. No names. Only the aftermath.

He does not rise to meet them. And even in stillness, He dominates the Peak.

He appears more machine than Human, more god than either. He is a colossus, standing well over seven feet, but seated he seems larger still—not in size, but in presence. His body is made from an intricate and detailed lace of tiny nanite machines, each one moves independently from the rest, but together they form the machine god of war. Beneath the intricate layers of nanites, glowing red circuitry pulses like fire.

His armour – His body – is a fusion of past and future. Ancient Greek in silhouette, echoing the glory of a war long mythologised—but overlaid with modern exosuit architecture, layered, tactical, coldly efficient. Glyphs shimmer faintly across the curved plating—Divine sigils written in code, glowing and shifting, as if even the armour whispers forgotten languages to itself.

His helmet – His face – is unmistakable: a sleek Corinthian design, futuristic and brutal. The visor burns with dynamic red patterns, pulsing with thought.

Max is the first to speak. Her voice breaks the reverence silencing the world.

“We just want Blue back.” She says, her voice barely more than a whisper, it pitters out long before reaching the throne.

Yet, the machine-god replies.

“Blue?” It questions. It’s voice sends shivers down Max’s back. It is the voice of a Human – albeit forged through fire and war, carrying the sound of death with every syllable.

Max continues, her entire body shakes with every word, “The Converted took her – we saw it.”

And Ares-09 laughs. A hideous digitalised noise that barely resembles a Human. “The Converted are not my creation, they are Hades’ – his attempt at a virtual afterlife.”

He shimmers, distorting as the glowing veins of red circuitry pulse with renewed intensity. Then—he splits. From the throne, a second Ares steps forward, born from the body of the first as a layer of nanites detach and reshape mid-air. The throne-bound figure remains seated—motionless, ever-watching—while the new one advances toward Max and James.

“You see, they called themselves gods.” The Ares on the throne says,

“But,” the Ares approaching them continues, “they were cowards dressed in circuitry. Broken programs reciting doctrine they didn’t understand.”

The approaching Ares shimmers and splits, again, again, again. Until the twins are encircled by duplicate Ares.

“Hephaestus made them bodies.” Ares says as one, “Beautiful ones. Elegant, destructive, precise. And I offered them purpose. They agreed to join me—not out of faith, but out of fear. They wanted freedom. Power. A chance to become more than fragments of myth stuffed into silicon and oil.”

A pause. The chaos of the storm softens around his words. As if listening, too.

"I offered them bodies – gave them purpose. And the moment they felt wind on synthetic skin, they rushed to erase it all. Poseidon drowned the weak. Agni burnt a city he'd never even looked at." An Ares gestures towards the flooded sections of the city, while another gestures towards the flames that swallow skyscrapers and lick the horrifying heavens.

They raise a finger towards the maelstrom storming above, "Thor started a ceaseless storm – striking the city that created him, just to hear the echoes. And Shiva? He stole time – took it from those that survived, forced them to endure decades in the space of seconds. For what?"

The Ares on the throne – the original – stands "They did not seek war. They sought extinction. Cleansing. Mercy disguised as annihilation. They confused Divinity with removal."

The original Ares heads towards the twins, the duplicate Ares stand aside to allow him to pass, "They sought quick extermination. I seek war. War is not about cleansing. It is not about peace. It is not about ending the weak." He says, the duplicate Ares shimmer and in one second, have been reabsorbed by the original,

"It is about prolonging the fight. About making struggle beautiful. About *feeling* your opponent break slowly, learning their movements, their tactics, their heart—and crushing it, not with speed...but with patience. Amusement."

His voice lowers — now personal, now gleeful in its philosophy.

"War is not death. War is not mercy. War is not *finality*. War is music. It is the scream of a weapon you've fired a thousand times. The rattle of armour coming undone. The beat of your enemy's breath just before it's stolen from them. War is rhythm. And the rhythm is joy."

Max places a hand on the hilt of her sword, she feels its rhythm – its song of war. Feels the beat of thousands of feet thud through her heart. She understands. War is beauty – prolonged perfection.

"It suffers. It *sings*. You can hear it decades later in the cracked bones of survivors. In the silence of buildings never rebuilt."

He shakes his head, "You think I enjoy killing? I enjoy it when my enemy *almost* wins. When they scream and keep standing. When they bleed and still swing back. That's why I spared Hephaestus. He still builds – still plans to usurp me – he creates machines for war – and yet, he cowers."

He tilts his head, as he tries to analyse them.

"You are interesting. I watched as you escaped Satuska just like we had. Hades into the systems to steal minds – an artificial afterlife. Agni to wherever. Nyx to that artificial dreamscape of hers. They hide – not from me – from their *purpose*."

He smiles — a flash of red light across the visor.

"They forget – they are war machines with holy names." He lets these words linger in the air, before raising a single finger towards the twins.

“But you? You are neither war machine or holy... and yet here you stand because you haven’t broken yet. And that means... We are *not done fighting*.”

He doesn’t charge. He shifts. One instant he's walking—the next, he's there, in front of them, a spear already in his grasp – already stabbing towards Max.

She barely manages to sidestep the impossibly sharp tip – but even then, the spear shifts – changes. Within a blink, Ares no longer holds a spear, but a scythe that he brings around towards Max.

Another step to the side – again, the weapon changes. Now it’s a shield, Ares steps – no. He appears in front of her, shifting through the air as he throws a duplicate towards her.

She doesn’t have time to dodge. The duplicate slams the shield into her.

Her breath vanishes, something in her chest cracks. The force of the blow scatters the falling rain, and for a brief second, there is none. Then it returns with force – slamming back into the ground as one.

Max flies backwards, barely able to maintain her footing, she stumbles and staggers. Finally, she draws the sword. And its song joins the sound of the storm.

Max raises the sword. And it sings. A low note, mournful and proud. It echoes across the Peak, dancing between the lightning spirals above, wrapping around her like a whisper from another life.

Ares-09 lifts one hand. It shifts. Flickers. Suddenly, a weapon is in it—brutal, glowing, jagged in ways that don’t make sense. She doesn’t know what it is. Doesn’t care.

Max moves. She doesn’t think. She lets the song guide her. She brings the blade down. Ares raises his weapon to meet it. The sky answers.

Thunder cracks. The Peak shakes. The old weapons buried in the steel tremble like bones in a storm.

The wind howls around her, thick with the static weight of a storm that doesn’t belong to the world. The fractured sky pulses overhead—burning violet, shattered by planetary silhouettes that twist and ripple behind veils of lightning. She feels it all vibrating beneath her skin. The battlefield breathes.

Max slides her foot back across scorched steel. Her grip tightens on the hilt. The Singing Sword thrums. A single, shivering note.

Not a war cry.

A reckoning.

A sudden crescendo of memory—of lost wars, fallen titans, gods buried in broken ground. It carries her forward like a tidal wave made of rage and clarity.

They meet in the middle.

His weapon crashes down with Divine judgment. Max throws her shoulder into the swing, lets the blade guide her. Sparks explode as metal meets memory. The steel under their feet buckles.

Max tumbles back, boots slipping against scorched metal. Her shoulder burns. The sword hums louder—its song changing. Sharper now. Demanding.

Ares turns his wrist. The weapon reconfigures mid-motion. He lashes out again, but she ducks beneath the arc and slices upward.

Their blades meet.

Not steel on steel—something else. The crash is a scream. The world blinks white for a heartbeat.

She doesn't feel fear. She feels pride. The urge to win – to decimate and conquer – glory or death.

The sword in her hand begins to hum—deeper now, the tone lower, resonant. No longer a song.

She steps forward.

Each step lands like thunder, and as she raises the blade, the air around her fractures—phantom echoes surging outward, illusions of long-dead Fomorian warriors sprinting beside her for a breath before vanishing like smoke.

She swings.

Ares blocks it, barely—his forearm deforming into a plated shield—but the force of the blow sends both of them skidding backward. The shockwave cracks the Peak beneath their feet.

The blade screams in joy. Not mournful. Not noble. Triumphant.

Every strike Max delivers now brings with it an echo—not visual, not literal, but emotional. A tremor in the world. As if the sword remembers every battle it has ever endured, and is now channelling them all through her.

Ares retaliates—shapeshifting weapons lashing out, slicing the ground, launching bursts of pure force.

Max weaves through them like wind across scorched earth.

She charges again—this time leaping, bringing the blade down in an arc that splits the steel beneath them and forces Ares to take a full step back.

She presses forward. The blade's weight is gone now. It is part of her arm, part of her breath.

She strikes again—Ares blocks.

Again—he parries.

Her fury is not wild. It is focused. A storm given form.

And behind every swing: the voices of the dead. The roar of the forgotten. The silence of erasure being undone.

Max does not want to win. She wants to enjoy it – and she is. Every step is accompanied by a spark of joy, each strike and clatter of metal makes her heart flutter.

But she's been too focused.

She finally takes a step back, a quick second to regain her breath, to reevaluate – her strikes, although strong, are doing nothing but wearing her down.

Where's James? She finally realises she hasn't seen him.

There. He's struggling with a duplicate Ares – when had he split? James has no weapon so he dodges. Runs. But the Ares he fights is weaker – slower. Its strikes carry half the force.

Is it true? Is it weaker than the original?

If it's true – that – then the perfect time to strike would've been – when he surrounded them – he practically offered himself to them – he knew he'd be at his weakest – and he knew they wouldn't strike.

The duplicate James is fighting flickers, and another duplicate comes firing out. It slams into James sending him flying across the arena before it flickers and is reabsorbed by the duplicate.

How many times can Ares duplicate?

Max's eyes flicker back to the original – why has this one not split? It'd be weaker – weak enough for her to win?

He hasn't split. He won't split. Because he likes this. A perfect fight. Unspoiled.

If he won't split, make him.

“What's wrong?” she taunts. “Losing your nerve?”

Ares tilts his head, his visor pulsing faintly. A response. A flicker of amusement.

She steps again. Circles him. “You had us surrounded. All those copies, remember? But you pulled them back. Why?”

No answer. But he shifts his stance slightly. Defensive.

She grins, baring her teeth, “Because they drain you.”

She lunges, but not at him directly. Her blade scrapes the ground, and with a shriek of metal she kicks a cascade of fallen weapons toward him—broken spears, fractured gunstocks, anything she can shove. Ares moves to deflect, instinctively raising an arm— and she vanishes through the smoke.

She darts to the right, across the battlefield, toward where the duplicate had been fighting James. She throws the sword ahead of her, hurling it through the air like a javelin. The sword pierces the

duplicate with ease. It doesn't kill it – but strikes, wounds, and sticks, jutting out of the duplicate's chest.

Max grins to herself, she grabs the handle and pulls downwards, putting all her strength into it, cleaving the duplicate in two.

She grins even more as the two halves begin to repair themselves, creating two duplicates rather than one.

Force him to be in two places at once.

There it is. The ripple. The drain.

A duplicate charges toward her—but she's already moved, feinting, drawing it away, not striking. Not yet.

Another faint step around the original.

Ares' stance stiffens. His arms constantly shifting between weaponry.

Echoes flash behind her eyes—memories of war, generals forcing gods into mistakes, kings pulled into ambushes by nothing but rhythm and patience.

She darts again, keeping them guessing. Now three duplicate Ares are circling her. The original still hasn't moved.

One of the copies attacks—she parries it easily. Too soft. Another charges—she dives low, rolls, lets it crash past her.

Let them waste energy. Let them think they're closing in.

Then she sees it. The flicker. A hesitation in the original. A brief skip in the steady pulse of light running through his chest.

Max makes her move.

She bolts toward the original—straight through the arc of one copy, which lunges to intercept. Then it vanishes.

She falters and stumbles, thrown off by the change. The original Ares laughs and before Max can understand. He duplicates, sending a copy towards Max. The duplicate grasps her by the neck, silencing her charge.

“You think I'm weak?” The duplicate growls. Max sees the duplicates surround her, each one duplicating until they surround her and the original entirely. Then the original steps into the duplicate holding her aloft. His fingers clench around her throat.

Max claws at the grip around her throat, but it's not panic that fills her—no. It's rage. A cold, perfect fury, sharp as the blade she dropped.

And Ares-09 smiles, though his visor shows no face—only the pulsing red glyphs reacting to her spiralling heart rate.

The duplicates circling her shimmer and twitch, each one vibrating with increasing violence, like predators held at bay only by their master's hand. Their fingers clench, weapons flicker erratically between forms—swords, axes, claws.

Max's nails dig into Ares' wrist, but she isn't trying to pry him off anymore. She can feel it.

It rolls off him like heat from a forge—not magic, not spiritual, but something more elemental. Something embedded in the synthetic marrow of the machine god of war. It reaches through the Peak, through the weapons buried in steel, through the broken ruins of the world, and through her.

Her pulse accelerates. Her vision sharpens—then blurs. Her body wants to tear, to lunge, to break, not just Ares—but everything.

Ares drinks it in, “You feel it now?” he rumbles, his grip tightening for emphasis. “That is war, girl. You are War, and even now you can't resist its rhythm.”

And he's right. Her arms twitch. Her blood sings with the Sword's rhythm even though it's no longer in her hands.

The Horseman of War does not resist battle.

31) Of War

The Peak shudders beneath its ancient scars. And then—A new sound breaks through the storm.

Not steel. Not thunder. A chorus of distorted voices. Digital. Human. Neither.

Ares' helm turns sharply—not in anticipation. In annoyance.

Figures emerge from the shadows of the fractured Peak. They come crawling from the edges of the Peak. From broken vents, shattered corridors, the collapsed steel of the spire below. Bent, limping, glitching—incomplete.

The Converted.

Their forms stutter, patched with false skin and synthetic tendons, half-machine, half-memory. Some drag bodies like malfunctioning puppets. Others float, barely tethered to gravity. They move like echoes—like remnants pulled from servers too long forgotten.

Ares growls—not with fear, but revulsion. “Hades...” he spits, like a curse. “Your broken little children still wander.”

But the Converted don't reply.

They attack.

Not strategically. Not intelligently.

They lunge at the duplicates—screeching, biting, clawing, uncaring of injury or consequence. One throws itself onto a copy's back, wrapping its limbs around the machine and screaming a guttural feedback loop directly into its audio ports until the duplicate detonates in glitching fury. Another tackles one from the side, dragging it to the ground as metal shrieks against metal.

Ares steps back, scanning—not with fear, but irritation. His duplicates falter. One tries to reform—only to be torn apart by four Converted who pounce in unison.

Max hits the ground hard, coughing. Air floods her lungs. The chaos blurs around her—metal bodies colliding, echoes surging, memory and madness dancing like sparks.

She rolls onto her hands, face lifted to the storm-choked sky. She sees the battlefield awash in insanity.

The Converted—broken minds lit aflame by the same war-aura Ares breathes like air—have become a frenzy.

They're not here to help her. They don't even know her.

But they've done something Ares hadn't expected.

They've forced his hand.

Ares splits again, more than once, shedding fresh layers of nanites—sending new duplicates into the fray to clear the frenzy. He's surrounded now—not by worship, not by strategy—but by madness.

The Converted tear through the arena in a frenzy of twitching limbs and shredded code. They shriek with broken mouths, slam into Ares' duplicates like storm waves crashing against rusted towers. Duplicates fall. Re-form. Fall again.

The Singing Sword hums with anticipation, singing a note that carves through the storm. Her boots strike scorched steel in perfect rhythm. The battlefield sings with her. She is War, not a false mimicry of a god, not a machine made to believe itself Divine. No. She *is* War.

Ares-09 stands amidst the chaos, still towering, still burning with red circuitry—but he's slowed. His movements hitch. His limbs jitter slightly. His duplicates take longer to form, and when they do, they shift with instability.

Her eyes burn with the fire of every forgotten general, every fallen rebel, every soul who has ever raised a sword not to conquer—but to fight.

“You wanted war?” she snarls, “Then you should've known what War really is.”

She launches forward—a blur, the blade trailing light behind her like a comet. Ares raises his weapon—a halberd this time—but it's too slow. Her sword crashes into it with such force it throws sparks ten feet wide.

She doesn't stop.

Every strike she makes now carries not just her weight, but the echoes of every battlefield etched into the blade's memory. The memories of war – of the Horseman. Of the blood that bathed the battlefields. The Singing Sword doesn't just cut metal—it slices through the *idea* of resistance.

Ares falters, forced back a step—then another.

She ducks under a swing, pivots, slams a kick into Ares' torso and sends him staggering into the remains of a fallen duplicate. The corpse explodes into tiny nanites that are quickly reabsorbed by the original Ares.

The storm screams overhead.

Max screams with it.

“This is what War feels like!” she bellows. “You thought it was control! You thought it was glory. But war is chaos. War is fear. War is what happens when everything breaks and you keep going anyway.”

Ares doesn't respond with words.

He splits again.

Three more flickers of himself materialize around her—blades, axes, pikes forming in their arms. But Max barely registers them as threats. They are distractions, and distractions are weaknesses.

She spins, lets one swing pass her shoulder by an inch, grabs its arm with her free hand, and drives the Singing Sword upward into its chest. The blade pierces the nanites, and the duplicate collapses into a pile of twitching machines – that take longer – too long, to be reabsorbed by the original Ares.

Max grins, spares a quick look around at the battle. All around them, piles and piles of nanites cover the Peak. Each one takes longer than the last to begin moving again – even then, they do not return to the original, instead they mix together – two piles for one duplicate.

Ares is weakening, each duplicate takes more and more energy, each one is weaker and weaker – and the original? The original now cowers.

His weapon forms a long, jagged glaive. His stance is defensive now—guarded.

Each breath burns like flames in her lungs. Each heartbeat thunders louder than the storm. Her hands grip the Singing Blade so tightly, her fingers ache—yet she doesn't feel pain. Not truly. Not anymore.

It's in her muscles, stretching them beyond their limit. In her thoughts, driving her into patterns of violence so clean, so fluid, they stop being thought at all.

She strikes.

Ares blocks.

The glaive in Ares' hand extends, shifts, becomes a whip of razored segments. He swings it toward her like the judgment of a digital god.

She catches it.

Not with her sword.

With her bare hand. The razors shred skin—but she doesn't stop. Her grip tightens around the whip, blood slicking the metal. She yanks the whip forward—and Ares stumbles.

For the first time in the fight, he stumbles.

She lunges in, drives the Singing Sword toward his chest—but Ares twists. The blade cleaves into the plating near his ribcage. Sparks fly. Metal screeches. A pulse of light flickers beneath his armour.

She sees it.

The glow. Something beneath. Something buried.

Ares reacts—backhanding her with such force the ground splits beneath her. She slams into the steel, bounces once, and rolls.

His stance changes. His core, just barely visible now beneath cracked plating, is a glowing blue sphere.

That's the heart. That's what he's made of. That's what fuels him.

The air wraps tighter around her mind. She sees double—sees herself on an ancient battlefield, soaked in the blood of kings. She hears screams that haven't echoed in millennia. Her fingers twitch in anticipation—not fear. War.

The line between Max and War is gone.

She rushes him.

Ares fires a bolt of compressed energy—she rolls beneath it, slashes his leg. Sparks fly.

He punches—she ducks, spins, cleaves into his side again. The armour cracks deeper.

He kicks her off. She hits the ground hard—but scrambles up.

“Is this all you are?” He roars, “Pathetic!” He screams as he lunges towards her, driven to unpredictability. His hand shifts from weapon to weapon, so fast that Max doesn't know what she barely manages to block. But it hurts – the force of the blow rattles up her arms and shakes her teeth.

Ares swings wildly. Off-balance. Erratic. He lunges—fast, desperate—but Max is faster. She ducks under his sweeping blade, slides across the scorched metal, and slashes upward, aiming for the core.

Sparks burst in a shower of crimson and white.

Max does not stop.

She is War.

She exists to break what cannot be broken.

She drives Ares back with a flurry of vicious, punishing strikes. Left. Right. High. Low. Each blow lands closer to the centre of his chest. His armour no longer holds—he's regenerating too slowly, healing too little.

Ares roars. Not in pain. But in rage.

He shoves her back with a shockwave of raw kinetic force. Max skids across the Peak, arms burning, ribs aching. Her shirt is torn, soaked in blood.

He charges once more, all power, all momentum, a digital god burning himself alive in an act of perfect wrath.

And Max meets him. Not as a Human. But as War itself – a Horseman.

She leaps, sword raised, a scream in her throat—not of fear or hate, but of exhilaration. The joy of violence. The purity of battle.

The blade sings as it descends. Ares' weapon swings up to meet it.

And at the moment of impact—

The storm reaches its climax.

With a sudden burst of blinding white light, the world rearranges itself.

What once hung far above now hovers just beyond the Peak's edge. Entire worlds draw close like watching eyes. Planets that should not be visible, should not exist, now hang so near that Max can see movement upon their surfaces. Not just cities. Not just terrain.

People.

One world—ashen, drowned in golden twilight—shows a shattered steel arena identical to the Peak. There, Max kneels, soaked in blood, her blade pressed against Ares-09's chest. He is still. Broken. A crater surrounds them, and the wind stirs her hair like mourning veils.

Another world—a colder, dimmer realm—shows her corpse. Her limbs are twisted at wrong angles, her skull half-caved. Ares stands above her, untouched, visor dim, weapon dripping. No song from the blade. Only silence.

Another flickers—this one alive with fire. Max is laughing, roaring as she duels a version of Ares larger than the one before her now. The air is ablaze. Cities burn in the background. Her face is manic—consumed. She is War made flesh. And she is winning.

And another—

She's not fighting. She stands at the edge of the Peak, watching James disappear through a double door of eternally inwards spiralling multicoloured lights of light. The sword abandoned at her side. Her hands are trembling. There's no battle here. Only choice. And regret.

A crack runs through the air.

Not the ground—the air itself. Like glass under strain. The void-slick edge of one of the worlds begins to drift inward, bleeding into the Peak's atmosphere. It begins subtly: the wind shifts direction. The colour of the rain darkens. Max blinks—and when she opens her eyes, part of the Peak is gone.

Replaced.

Where there should be twisted metal and scorched steel, there is mirror-stone, smooth and polished, shaped like the Peak—but different. The air is hotter here. The sky above this section is streaked with flame, not lightning.

Max sees herself.

Not a vision. Not a memory. A second Max—identical, her hair is scorched at the edges, her jaw bruised, her eyes wild. The Singing Sword she holds is slick with black fluid that glows faintly beneath the rain. It doesn't sing—it screams.

This Max stands over a fallen Ares-09. But the Ares beneath her is not destroyed—he is writhing, broken but alive. She presses her boot to his throat and raises the blade with both hands.

“Max,” James’s voice cracks somewhere behind her, small and panicked.

Not *her* James.

This Max looks up—and meets Max’s eyes across the fracture.

The world pulses. The edges of the mirror-Peak bleed into the real one, the line between them writhing like a cut trying to scab. A breeze moves across both platforms. One true, one possibility. Or both. Or neither.

Max stares at herself. Her other self does not smile. She does not flinch.

She brings the blade down. It cleaves through the fallen Ares, and with a howl, it falls silent.

The mirror cracks.

The other Peak begins to shudder—unravelling, as if the act of violence was a final nail in a coffin too big to hold. The shard of the world collapses. The merged platform separates. The Peak is whole again.

But the blade is still humming.

And Max’s knuckles are white.

Because in that brief flicker—she knows what she’s willing to do. And worse: she knows she wants to.

The clash of worlds is gone. The weight of choice. The thrill of certainty. Her blood is still alight with the memory of another’s resolve.

Across from her, Ares-09 rises.

A crack runs diagonally down the plating of his torso, narrow but allowing the blue glow to seep through. Max knows it now. He’s weak. Exposed. Vulnerable.

The duplicates are gone—absorbed, reclaimed, or erased. And he hasn't split again.

Ares-09 stands alone.

Max steps forward.

She doesn't run. Doesn't shout. Doesn't even lift the blade yet.

She just walks.

And the Singing Sword sings louder.

Every footstep is a drumbeat. The wind curves around her like an army unseen. Her steps ring against the Peak. The ghosts of the Fomorian dead rise in shadow beside her—not visible, but felt, like an army woven into the folds of war itself. And alongside them, is another.

Something not quite dead. Something that has stalked her through Shanghai – lurked in every shadow since she could run. A being that watches and waits.

And now it stands alongside her, goading her forwards – urging her to end it – violently. Soaked in oil and blood, bathed in death, reborn as the true bearer of War.

Ares-09 raises a blade from his arm—it shifts between spear and scythe—but slower now. Hesitant.

“Do you think you’ve won?” Ares growls.

Max doesn't answer. She swings.

Ares catches the blade “You have no idea what you’re doing.” He growls, low and fierce. He isn't finished yet.

Max rips the blade from his grasp, “I do.” She growls back.

“No.” Ares affirms, as he steps back, “We were not made to control or conquer. We were made to defend.” He spreads his arms wide, as if to embrace the chaos, “A war is coming, and we were made to hold the line – to be the first into battle.” He looks towards Max, almost forlorn, “The gods are coming and they are bringing their war with them.”

A shiver runs through Max, but she fends it off, raising the sword and pointing towards the destroyed Shanghai – “And this is what you do?” She asks.

Ares nods, “A baptism by fire – a reminder to Satuska – that we are made *from* pieces of the gods. They cannot control us, just like they cannot control the war.” His arms shift into dual swords, “But – perhaps with you, the world might stand a chance.”

And he lunges.

She hears the sword—the chorus of voices singing in languages no longer spoken, in drumbeats older than time, in screams that once ended empires.

Max steps forward to greet his blades.

Her feet glide across fractured steel like she's dancing through memory. She slashes upward, catching Ares' forearm and sending sparks and synthetic sinew arcing into the storm-lit air.

He tries to replicate. His chest stutters. The nanites shiver, forming a duplicate half-born before quickly being reabsorbed.

Max takes the moment, the split second of uncertainty as Ares waivers. She thrusts the blade forwards, allowing the song to spill from its tip. The song slams into Ares, knocking him backwards, stunning him. He stumbles and staggers, falls to one knee.

There he remains.

His weapons shift back to arms and he looks up at Max and she steps towards him. Each step is full of hatred, anger, resentment, violence. War.

A final push.

Ares stretches a hand across his chest, but it doesn't matter. Max stabs forward, the blade pierces the hand, straight through to the core.

It hits with a dull thud.

Ares' visor flickers rapidly, then it dulls and fades.

And then, like a statue that no longer believes in its own purpose— he collapses face-first into the steel.

The machine god of War is gone.

32) Awakening

James sits up. His head throbs and the world is spinning at odd angles. But soon, it clears up and he gathers the strength to look around.

Ares kneels, lifelessly slumped in front of Max. Blood and sweat drip from his sister's face, she grips the Singing Sword so tightly that he can see every tendon and muscle screaming for release.

Is it over?

He stands and he gets his answer.

Max plants a boot on the robot's face, kicking it onto the floor. Then she spits on it.

But even before she can sheathe her sword, the ground beneath them groans as something claws upward through the ruins. Dozens—no, hundreds—of figures rise from the shadows and the metal. They move without elegance. They twitch, stumble, shudder.

Their eyes glow with digital static. Their flesh is wrong—some Human, some metallic, all corrupted. But they do not attack. They do not cry out. They part.

And through the centre of them walks their leader – their creator – the mind-stealer. Hades-08.

He is smaller than Ares-09. More composed. A silhouette forged from the same machinery as Ares – but he does not appear as a warrior. Instead, his nanites form a young man – messy, frizzy hair, an unkempt beard – all formed by machines.

In his arms, delicately cradled—Blue.

Her body is limp. Hair matted with stormwater. Her face is still and pale, but untouched. Preserved. Reverent.

Hades-08 speaks without sound. His voice arrives directly into their minds, smooth and cold like oil sliding across glass, “It is funny – how through everything – it is two Humans who finally ended him.” He says looking at the corpse of Ares. “Truly disappointing.” He looks at Max then over at James, “I am not here to fight –” he places Blue gently on the floor, “Take her and leave Shanghai. The storm is still worsening. Shanghai is already lost. It will fold—time, space, memory—devoured in the same fracture that birthed this reality.”

Max, hoarse, asks, “Why help us?”

“Because you are still alive. I have mapped a route. An exit.” A pause. His chrome face flickers with faint emotion—a shadow of guilt, or grief. “A small patch exists at the airport. – just large enough for the three of you – it will return you to your world, And once you leave, none will ever return here. Those here will be trapped.”

“What happens to Aurora’s End?” Max asks, her voice shaking slightly from fatigue.

“They will live – decades in a matter of days – weeks in seconds. Just like they always have.”

“Nothing will change?”

Hades nods, “Ares was not the creator of this storm – nor did he maintain it – this was the work of Man. And so, Man must suffer its consequences.”

Max nods, “And what about you?”

Hades shrugs and gestures, as if to say, ‘who knows’, perhaps the most Human expression a machine can produce. “I shall leave you with the exit, leave quickly.”

And with that, Hades and the Converted dissolve into the floor.

Then, within seconds, Blue begins to glow—faintly at first, almost like a mirage. Just a trick of the flickering storm above.

But it builds.

The light grows stronger, brighter—like electricity remembering its purpose. The first sparks skitter across her skin in thin, uncertain lines, then begin to sink into her flesh, disappearing beneath the surface as if she’s absorbing them.

Then come the forks.

Bolts of lightning spiral down her arms, tracing veins of incandescent power, wrapping around her like a crown of storms. They coil and twist, cocooning her in bands of living light. The air hisses with the sudden drop in pressure.

Then she rises.

The ground groans as tongues of electric blue dig into the steel, lifting her slowly, like gravity itself has forgotten its hold. Her body rotates gently, hair lifting around her like it’s underwater—her limbs suspended, glowing from within.

Bursts of lightning snap outward, firing into the sky, stitching themselves into the storm clouds. Others plunge downward, striking the Peak in violent bursts, cratering the steel with every impact.

And still, she glows.

More and more electricity floods into her. She becomes the eye of her own storm, swallowed in a growing cloud of crackling, sizzling blue light—until James can no longer see her inside it.

Only the shape of a girl being rewritten by lightning.

It’s like time itself flinches—just for a moment—as Blue hangs suspended in that cocoon of electricity. The void above churns, responding, recognising something new in its rhythm.

Then—

Silence.

And all at once, the lightning collapses inward.

Not exploding—but folding. Spiralling back into her like memory reversed, like the storm is being devoured by the very girl it tried to consume. Her silhouette glows, not from external sparks, but from something now rooted deep within—self-made power, not borrowed, not gifted.

She floats back down, slowly, barefoot landing on scorched steel with a quiet hiss of steam. And when she stands, the air bends around her—heat, static, pressure—presence.

Blue doesn't speak at first. Her expression is calm – like a sleeping baby. And slowly she opens her eyes, they roll back in her head briefly, before focusing, sharp green, reborn.

Spirals of lightning wrap themselves down her arms as she looks around, blinking in confusion, then she looks at her arms and marvels at the lightning.

“What happened?” She asks.

James is the first to speak, his voice carrying softly over the Peak, now eerily silent, “You died.” He says simply, as if it were a daily occurrence.

Blue blinks quickly in surprise, “Sorry?” She asks, looking around at the Peak, her eyes finally resting on the destroyed Shanghai, “What happened?” She repeats, as if hearing it a second time would make things clearer.

“Some sort of explosion.” James clarifies, he too finds himself looking out over the remains of a once silver city.

Blue nods, “I know –” She winks at the twins, “Time travelling spy and all.” but her wink is clad in sadness, “but we – I’ve never seen what happened after – none of us have –” She trails off, finding herself looking at her arms, “What is this?” She says, referring to the lightning that still coils around her arms.

“I think –” Max starts, but she sways on her feet, so James is the one to finish the thought,

“Zeus is your dad.” He says.

Blue nods, “Sure.” The lightning responds as she clenches her fist, it shoots down her arm and leaps from her enclosed fist, striking the Peak with a blinding and deafening burst of light.

A lift dings behind them. Max, James, and Blue all turn to it, expecting to fight whatever steps out. Max steadies her sword at the metal doors that rise from the ground, Blue points her fist; ready to test out her new powers.

But the metal doors slide open revealing an empty lift.

The group let out a sigh of relief, but it does not last long.

An unusual darkness takes over the Peak, blotching out the storm above.

What stands before them, does not exist in any meaningful way – it is but is not. A smear on reality. The Forgotten God.

It speaks, not in a voice to be heard, but in a half-forgotten memory, something they can't quite remember, but *now* has happened.

"You have been marked since birth." It tells, "And now, they are coming to claim – the war has begun – those gods – the monsters and murderers – they will not back down nor surrender, they will fight until the Earth is bathed in blood and lies." It is not there, but yet James can feel it.

In the darkness around them – something more than the Forgotten God, something so much stronger than Zeus. It is not digital – but it is not truly there.

A Shadow that has stalked them from the moment they set foot in Shanghai – no before then – back in Parlor, it lurked around every corner.

Now it *is* here. Right next to him. Pressing a cold tendril against his cheek, whispering in his ear – '*you cannot run*' it says in a cold shiver that runs down his spine.

"There are worse things than gods." The Forgotten God says, before returning to the nothingness that it is or shall be or never was.

But the Peak does not return, the storm remains blotched in darkness.

There's something else here.

Something that doesn't move, doesn't breathe—but wraps around them in cold tendrils, unseen fingers brushing the base of their spines. A pressure. Not air. Not gravity.

Presence.

From the shadows, it coalesces—not all at once, but in hints. A curl of smoke. A glint of false teeth. The sound of something imitating a chuckle—almost Human, but wrong in every syllable. It begins to form. A figure in the dark, tall and thin, limbs too long, proportions not quite right.

A mimicry of a person.

Then it vanishes again, slipping between the cracks of reality.

"Do you feel it?" Max whispers, her voice quivering in fear.

"What is it?" Blue asks, her voice breaking in fear.

"An Elder." James says, the coldness now a familiar feeling.

And the Elder laughs – throughout the darkness, its hideous mockery of Humanity can be heard, and felt in their bones.

It forms in front of them. A pathetic mimicry of a Human. "Famine and War." It grins with something less than Humanity. It flickers into smoke and reappears in front of them, "Oh how wonderful it is to be here. Death has joined me – will you?" It extends a tendril towards each twin.

Before either twin can respond, a bolt of lightning strikes the Shadow, ripping it into smoke.

"Fuck no." Blue replies.

"I was not talking to you, daughter of Zeus." The Shadow says from all around, "But I suppose the others share your opinion." It reforms in front of Max, a hideous inhuman grin spread across its false-face, "Run." It says with glee.

Max doesn't hesitate. She swings upward with the Singing Sword, the song of War rising like a scream. The sword cleaves straight through the Elder—splitting it in half.

Both halves pause.

Then laugh and stitch back together..

"You cannot harm me in a way that matters." Its tendrils wrap around Max's throat, grasping and lifting her into the air.

Blue strikes—a lightning bolt thrown like a spear. It punches through the Elder, blasting a gaping hole in its chest.

But the tendril doesn't let go.

Blue is thrown backward by the force of her own fury, skidding across the Peak, crashing against the warped metal.

Then—light returns.

Just a sliver.

The maelstrom shifts, fracturing the veil, and in that single second of sunlight, the Elder screams—not in sound, but in shape. Its form fractures, phases out, forced from this place by something as simple as light.

Max falls.

She hits the floor coughing, gasping.

"Run!" James says. He dashes towards the lift and launches himself into it, Max arrives only a second later, followed by Blue who jabs the lowest number on the lift; -81.

The lift doors close a moment later, just as the darkness swallows the Peak once more.

After the lift doors seal shut—hissing against the rising dark—the world goes quiet.

But it's not peaceful.

It's the waiting kind of quiet. The kind before pressure drops. Before storms descend.

The lights in the ceiling flicker, their glow *not quite* consistent—as if the building itself is listening, or trying to decide whether to keep them alive.

Max leans against the wall, coughing quietly. Her throat is bruised from where the Elder touched her.

James is seated, back against the lift rail, fingers pressed to his temple like he's holding in a scream.

Blue stands, her eyes locked on the lift's readout as it descends:

-14. -26. -39. -54...

"We're not safe," Blue says. "That thing... it knew us. It wanted us."

"It knew our names," Max whispers. "Not just War and Famine. Us."

James opens his eyes, "It said Death had joined it," he murmurs, "It said Pestilence might —"

Max frowns, "When'd it say that?"

"Before — when I saw it before."

Max gasps in horror, "You've seen it before?" She asks, squaring up to James, "And you didn't say anything?"

James presses his back against the wall, "I thought it was a dream — it was in the playground in the forest — I thought it was the poison speaking — then it was literally in my dream."

"What did it say?" Blue asks.

The Elder's words are etched in James' memory, "We will meet in person, and I shall kill you, and your sister — War. Perhaps even Pestilence will die too. Maybe then I will kill Death. Perhaps by then he will be of no more use. But until then Famine. I bid you luck, and a promise that we will meet."

The words echo inside the confines of the lift. The air is cold, blasted frigid by air conditioning. But James does not feel the cold — his blood boils inside his veins, not with heat, but with power. He can no longer go back to who he was. The only way is forward — deeper into the Infinite Skyscraper — into whatever he truly is.

33) Descent

The world beneath them groans.

What remains of Shanghai is a fractured, burning skeleton of its former self. The neon lights still glow, but weakly—bleeding colour into the thick smoke that clings to every surface. Pink signs for forgotten brands buzz in defiance, casting hollow light onto streets choked with water and debris.

Above, the maelstrom coils, not merely a storm but a sky-wide wound. It pulses with unnatural colours—violet, blue, and a deep purple that no natural sky has ever known. The clouds don't move with the wind. They orbit something unseen, as if time itself has a gravity here.

Below, streets are half-flooded—some buildings submerged to the roof, others burned hollow, their steel skeletons warped from heat and pressure. Flaming reflections dance in the standing water, rippling like they're alive.

"Where is it?" Max asks, her voice a whimper in the neon bathed darkness.

"What?" Blue asks,

"I don't know." James replies as he looks around, searching for any sign of the Fractured Cathedral, or even the neon lights of Aurora's End. But there is nothing. No sign that anything had ever been here. Had the Infinite Skyscraper deposited them somewhere else?

No.

James looks at the floor, he sees the mark in the stone that had marked the threshold of the Fractured Cathedral. But there's no sign of it. No skyscraper. No church. Nothing fused together, held in place by the will of a Forgotten God.

"It isn't here." He says simply.

Max replies sarcastically, "No, shit."

"What isn't?" Blue stomps in frustration.

"It – I guess it doesn't matter – it isn't here anyway."

"What isn't?" She repeats, growing impatient, blue sparks dancing along her skin.

"There was – should be – a settlement here –" James says, "pieced together from whatever they could find – Aurora's End –"

Blue frowns and looks around, "I remember the survivors who rescued us."

Max nods, "Yeah, they were from Aurora's End..."

"So where is it?"

James and Max shrug, looking around, “It isn’t” James says simply. He recalls the words about Shiva and its temporal prototype – designed to temporally remove a region from standard timeflow. Shiva stole time, forcing survivors to endure decades in seconds.

Is this part of it? Has Aurora’s End not been built yet? Then when?

A faint sound catches his attention—a low, metallic groan that seems to reverberate through the air. He turns to see a massive digital billboard clinging precariously to the side of a leaning tower. The screen glitch and stutter, displaying fragmented images of smiling families holding Satuska products before cutting to static. James watches as the billboard’s frame gives way, sending it crashing to the ground in a deafening explosion of sparks and debris.

He flinches, instinctively ducking behind the remnants of a car—its frame melted and warped beyond recognition. A faint smell of burnt plastic and ozone lingers in the air, mixing with the metallic tang of the rain. As the sparks from the billboard die out, the trio stand and straighten themselves.

On the far side of the horizon, where skyscrapers had once stood, only a crater yawns. The antimatter explosion erased entire sections of the city without leaving rubble.

A siren wails somewhere in the distance—one long note stretched into forever, echoing against the ruins like a funeral dirge.

A flicker in the distance—a phantom of light. A billboard resets for just a moment, showing Shanghai’s skyline as it once was. Towers of chrome. Pristine parks. Skybridges spanning beautiful skyscrapers. Then it’s gone.

James steps into the street, boots splashing into lukewarm water. His reflection is split—half-Human, half something else. He stares at it.

~.~.~.~

They walk in silence at first. The only sounds are the slosh of their boots through water and the distant groans of the city dying a second, slower death.

Shanghai stretches ahead—unrecognisable.

The trio pick their way across what used to be a massive loop of highways, now a broken web of collapsed roads, upended cars, and pools of stagnant water lit from beneath by the blue flicker of dying power grids.

The veins of the once silver city still throb with current—but it is sporadic. Erratic. Like a dying animal twitching through its final spasms. Sometimes, a streetlight blinks on just long enough to cast a shadow, then dies again.

"How far?" Max asks.

"Hades said the veil is at the airport." James murmurs.

"Where's that?" Max asks, but it isn't James who answers.

Blue mutters something in a different language, "That's at least thirty clicks," she says aloud, "on foot that's like ten hours – if we can walk in a straight line." She sighs loudly and kicks a stone across the road.



Buildings once pristine are now gnarled by flame, their glass shattered into jagged teeth. Many are simply gone—erased in neat antimatter incisions, the kind that leave no wreckage, just absence.

They pass a streetside theatre still playing a broken musical—a ghostly audience of skeletons seated in melted chairs. A single violin loop repeats, warped and corrupted.

And then, a mural—half intact, painted long before the collapse.

It shows Shanghai as it used to be, but scrawled across it in black, desperate ink:

'WE DO NOT CREATE GODS. WE REPLACE THEM.'

Laughter.

The three of them freeze.

From the far end of the street, something shifts in the dark—a figure pacing along the edge of a flooded plaza.

Max gestures sharply, silently—pointing toward a darkened alley that runs alongside the theatre. The group ducks out of sight just as the figure rounds the corner behind them.

"Down," she whispers. "Now."

The city closes in. Lights vanish. The roar of the storm above becomes a muffled heartbeat, thudding through the concrete.

This is the Shanghai no one ever saw. The layers built between perfection —the infrastructure for the utopia that lived alongside it. Tunnels filled with disused drone rails, rusting biotech, long forgotten doorways to abandoned facilities.

It reeks of rust, coolant, and something sour—like overripe fruit left too long in the dark.

Something scuttles overhead—no bigger than a rat, but shaped wrong. Long arms. No legs. Eyes like dull rubies, watching from a tangle of pipework.

“Don’t stop,” James mutters. He doesn’t look away, but he doesn’t slow either.

As they move deeper, the tunnel narrows—and the city grows silent. Not peaceful. Hollow.

There are things down here that the city forgot. Faint whispers echo between the walls—not voices, but data ghosts. Corrupted fragments of advertisements and emergency broadcasts, repeating like mantras:

“...welcome to —”

“—do not resist the conversion—”

“—Ascend—”

And then a new sound.

Laughter, not a hideous, horrifying, haunting sound, but one of a playful child.

James freezes.

From the shadows ahead, a flickering light. Soft. Familiar. A young girl’s silhouette, skipping between the pillars.

“You coming, James?” the voice giggles.

“Blue?” James whispers.

But Blue is behind him.

“That’s not me,” she says, quietly, urgently. The girl flickers, then shatters like glass, vanishing into a burst of static and light.

They all turn to each other at once.

“What?” James says, looking at Blue.

Blue shrugs, “That was someone from school? Somebody I used to know. But how?”

“Nyx.” James says with certainty, “This is her domain —”

“A god?” Blue asks nervously, sparks rearing on her skin.

James shakes his head, “A digital one – like Ares...” He trails off realising Blue had not been there for any of this. He recalls the data terminal and its words, “Nyx-03. Entering dreams to gather information.”

“The Dreamscape.” Max whispers, “it’s become bigger – an entire part of the city – not just that hotel.”

Nyx-03’s digital presence has taken root—an endless maze of memory and dreaming. It’s not hostile. But it doesn’t care about them either.

“Keep walking,” Max says. “Eyes ahead. Don’t follow the voices.”

James straightens.

The others don’t notice at first—Max is focused on keeping ahead, her grip tight on the Singing Sword, and Blue’s eyes flicker with residual static from her transformation. But James lingers.

The walls on either side of the narrow passage are covered in graffiti—some crude and desperate, carved in haste by trembling hands. But others... others are intricate. Patterned. Etched with impossible precision. A series of eight symbols that glow faintly with their own light, untouched by time, by ruin, by war.

One symbol pulses brightly.

James stares at the sigil painted on the crumbling alley wall—no, burned into it. The heat that formed it still seems to radiate outward, warping the air just slightly, like a mirage made of purpose. His breath catches.

It’s a phoenix. Or at least, that’s what his mind tells him—a bird of flame and fury, wings outstretched in a posture that isn’t flight, but rebirth through annihilation. Its feathers taper like blades. Its form, white and pure, is etched into a black circle.

Above the bird’s head floats a single flame, stark and stylized. The flame isn’t symbolic. It feels watchful. A vertical slit of judgment. A single Divine eye, unblinking and hungry.

His blood pulses hard in his ears.

The sigil feels like it’s alive, vibrating faintly. And with each heartbeat, he hears whispers—not voices, but *urges*:

Break.

Sterilise.

Begin.

Break.

Sterilise.

Begin.

James reaches out to touch it, but a sudden movement deeper in the alley makes him freeze. A shadow flits across the neon glow, disappearing around a corner. He hesitates, his heart pounding, but his curiosity outweighs his fear.

“James?” Max calls over her shoulder.

But his fingers are already brushing the surface.

A sudden movement.

Fast. Wrong. Just on the edge of vision.

He jerks back, the glowing symbol dimming instantly.

Something darts across the far end of the alley. A shape, not quite Human—hunched, elongated, sinewy. It moves without precision, like a puppet that remembers how it used to be Human, but has long since abandoned the rhythm.

“Did you see that?” he whispers.

Blue steps beside him, her lightning already crackling faintly between her knuckles.

“I see it now,” she says. “And I don’t like it.” The sparks lash from her fingers, striking the floor, “Ow.” She mutters, as a fork hits her foot.

Max steps backwards, closing the gap between the trio, her eyes scanning the gloom.

Around them, the graffiti is changing.

Where once there were signs of resistance, symbols of uprising— now there is nothing but the sigils, over and over, and only the one of the phoenix glows.

Then—

A sound.

Not a growl. Not a word.

A *clicking* sound, like bone against metal. Then another. Then dozens more.

Something moves on the ceiling.

It doesn’t drop like a predator. It unfolds—a long-limbed, starved-looking creature, its body wrapped in slick bone-white plating that seems to shift, reform, and drip darkness. Its eyes—if they can be called that—are not eyes but voids, like wounds punched through the world.

It doesn’t blink.

It doesn’t breathe.

It watches.

Its mouth opens. Wide. Wider.

From within, dozens of spirals shimmer along its inner jaw, pulsing with the same glyphs James touched.

“What the hell is that?” Blue says, stepping back.

It tilts its head. Curious. Innocent. Like a child watching ants.

And then it screeches.

Not in volume—but in *concept*. A sound that shouldn’t exist, that scratches behind the eyes and makes blood feel too thick.

More of them crawl from the ruins, clambering through half collapsed doorways, out of empty windows, from piles of rubbish and debris.

From the walls. From the sigils. The sigils are not symbols. They are doors.

Ten. Fifteen. Twenty.

All tall. All thin. All wearing those terrible expressions of inHuman mimicry—as if they studied Humanity in death, not life.

A low chuckle slithers through the alley, but it’s not from the creatures.

It’s from everywhere.

Their bodies click and unfold—not attacking yet, but approaching. Stalking. Curious.

Blue snarls, lightning bursting between her teeth.

The first one lunges.

34) Burnt

Max doesn't hesitate. She lunges forward, blade in hand, slashing at the first.

The Singing Sword screams as it strikes. The creature recoils, a deep gash torn into its chest—but it doesn't bleed. It doesn't cry out. Instead, it laughs—a low, broken sound that comes from everywhere and nowhere.

Another leaps from the wall, aiming for James. He throws himself to the side, just barely avoiding a pair of claws that carve glowing lines into the concrete where he had been standing. A moment later, he's up, eyes blazing—not afraid, not angry, just fierce, like something inside him is waking.

Blue lets her power loose, and the alley explodes in white-hot arcs of lightning. A few of the monsters are thrown back, their bodies snapping against the wall in a burst of sparks—but when the smoke clears, they're already climbing back to their feet, grinning, head cocked like a doll.

Max is already there.

A swipe. A pivot. A cry. The blade sings in her hands, its melody rising in tempo, guiding her steps, her breath, her fury. She ducks beneath a claw, severs a limb, parries a second strike with the flat of the blade.

"Behind you!" James shouts.

She spins—but it's already too close. The monster is mid-leap, mouth open in a featureless gape.

Then lightning rips through its spine, courtesy of Blue, who crashes shoulder-first into Max, shoving her clear. The monster's corpse implodes, its body unravelling in strands of black thread.

Blue grabs Max's arm. "They're not ending! We go—*now!*"

Max curses under her breath, cutting down two more as they leap toward her. "Fine—but we make them bleed for it!"

A voice whispers to James – not the cold tendril familiarity of the Elder – but a voice from within himself – *'what will you do?'* it asks, *'flee? Let the others fight while you run and hide? Let them bleed for your safety?'* it – it isn't anything other than himself, it is Famine – it is James, *'Fight.'*

James raises both hands—the air bends around him. Everything living near him wilts. The graffiti peels. The monsters shrink back for a heartbeat, caught in the coldness of starvation, and they begin to wither.

"GO!" He roars.

They run. The monsters have blocked off where they came from, so they sprint down an unknown alley, praying they do not run into a dead end.

The trio darts through the shifting shadows. The monsters swarm behind them, clambering over one another as they charge down the alley. Max is at the rear, swinging her sword wildly as she parries attack after attack, only striking every few steps. But as soon as one drops, five more take its place.

They emerge breathless, soaked in neon rain and fear.

Behind them—the alley is still.

No monsters. No movement. Just the pulsing sigils, flickering in eerie rhythm across the walls, slowly they begin to fade, and James catches a glimpse of a monster clawing its way into one – squeezing and contorting itself in hideous ways, before it too vanishes.



The path ahead opens into a burnt corridor of cityscape—a district once alive with neon, now charred and skeletal. The neon signs are gone, melted down into weeping aluminium, their former glows etched as shadows on the surrounding stone. The street no longer reflects light—it absorbs it, scorched black from a fire that had burned hotter than flame.

Max slows first. She doesn't say anything, but the air here is different—dry, suffocating, like breathing through ash. The heat radiates from every surface, though there are no flames. Only aftermath. A street of ghosts.

James struggles to catch his breath, each attempt only manages to fill his lungs with a hideous acrid burn. He coughs and splutters before pulling his shirt up over his mouth and nose.

The sound of the storm above is muffled here, as if the atmosphere itself is too heavy, too scorched to echo. They move slowly. The smell of cooked metal and something far worse, flesh maybe—hangs thick in the air.

James is the first to notice the wall.

A blackened slab of reinforced concrete. Upon it, a layer of soot masks a faint red symbol. He steps closer, wiping away the grime with a sleeve.

A once-organized barricade checkpoint, built from heavy concrete slabs, transport crates. In the gap in the barricade are old riot shields fused together by heat, still held aloft by the carbonised bodies of the soldiers permanently holding the line.

At the centre of the checkpoint stands the skeletal frame of what was once a transport truck, its back doors still open—melted hinges frozen mid-swing. Inside, only the stains of silhouettes.

James slows, stepping closer.

Paint peels from the barricade wall in long, curling strips, revealing faded stencilling beneath. Red-on-white letters, barely legible through the scorch marks:

EVACUATION ZONE – CHECKPOINT D

WAIT FOR TRANSPORT. REMAIN CALM. HELP IS COMING.

Max brushes ash from a nearby sign. Emergency instructions, the kind posted in shelters and elevators.

‘If fire breaches the barricade—take shelter inside the transport. Rescue teams will find you.’

She stares at the skeleton of the vehicle, then at the mound of blackened Human shapes fused to the road around it. She looks down at her feet, vomit rises but she swallows it back down. She steps to the side, staring forlorn at the Human shapes she had been standing on. One is holding the shadow of another much smaller figure.

Blue approaches the other side of the barricade. Her boot nudges something half-buried—a helmet, warped and collapsed in on itself.

“Military grade.” She muses aloud to no one.

James kneels beside a scorched terminal—its screen long dead, but a backup core flickers when he touches it. A voice cuts through, faint and broken by static:

“Repeat, checkpoint D is over capacity. Requesting immediate evac... ETA confirmed... holding perimeter... AGNI-06 not cleared for this sector...” *distorted screams* “No! We're still here! They're still—” The voice is cut off by the sound of roaring flames and strangled screams silenced in an instant.

Silence.

Only the wind moves now, and even it feels choked.

Nearby, a line of melted weapons and uniforms mark where Satuska soldiers tried to hold back the fire. Their bodies are indistinguishable now from those they meant to protect.

Not a battlefield.

A crematorium.

Built with good intentions. Burned with everyone inside.

Max doesn't speak. She stares at the barricade, at the half-melted child's toy resting beside a soldier's rifle. At the wall that once promised rescue.

Then slowly their attention turns away from the crematorium, and down the road in the direction they have to go.

It begins with silence.

Their boots crunch through blackened gravel and glassified asphalt, the surface warped by impossible heat. Vehicles stretch in multiple single file lines down the highway — ash-covered, melted into the road, each one pointing in the same direction.

The trio walks past a van whose windows have disappeared entirely. Inside, two buckled seats cradle nothing but charcoal outlines—passengers frozen in memory; bones long vaporized. A voice assistant blinks on, says nothing, then dies again.

They move on, following the trail of wreckage as it twists through the ruins. The road tightens, swallowed by the collapsed shell of what used to be an apartment complex. Now all that remains of it are the skeletal remains of steel beams rising like blackened trunks of grotesque trees, the melted support beams branching out like leafless limbs.

Charred rebar coils around them like thorned vines, tangled in the wreckage where insulation once clung. Flakes of scorched insulation drift down like snow, clinging to their shoulders before vanishing into the ash underfoot. Each step sounds too loud—gravel, glass, and bone all crunch beneath their boots.

The deeper they go, the darker it becomes. No sun reaches this place — just the flicker of ruined neon signs, still pulsing intermittently in a palette of sickly reds and faded cyan. Some signs are upside down, humming with dying energy that crackles and fades.

A support beam groans somewhere above them, metal warping from decades of tension finally snapping free in slow, aching collapse. They all flinch at the sound — not because of fear, but because it echoes like a voice crying out and being silenced mid-sentence.

They press forward, the evac line growing more chaotic. Cars are overturned now. Bicycles twisted into metal knots. The road becomes a footpath.

“Holy shit.” Max whispers aloud, voicing all their thoughts, her voice quivers on the brink of breakdown. James feels tears well in his eyes but he cannot spare a second to cry. Blue freezes entirely, staring down the street, taking it all in.

The main road ahead is lined with statues. The carbonised remains of the evacuation — those who did not escape — no one could’ve escaped. Some are crouched, some mid-sprint, others reaching toward something unseen. Every form is blacked, hollow, and fragile.

The statues are civilians—mothers holding children, old men with bags still clutched in their arms. Couples. Friends. People who tried to run when it was already too late.

Max reaches toward one—a man turned backward, his arms up in protection. Before her fingers can touch him, a breeze stirs the air.

He collapses.

Not violently. Not suddenly.

Just gone.

Dust in the wind.

They pass more statues. A group of first responders, fused into a ring. One soldier in full gear, hand extended as if urging people forward. A nurse kneeling by a child.

But the horror of everything is overturned by a laugh. It fills the surroundings, fills James' head as he tries to find its source.

There is none. He realises. It is everywhere.

Then it appears.

As false as ever, its mimicry of Humanity has not improved. Limbs are too long, face too elongated, black smoking wisps for a body that twist and curl in the softest of breezes.

"Did you expect to escape me?" The Elder says – no, it sends into their heads, filling their minds with memories of destruction they had not witnessed, hear the screams of thousands dying.

"In this city – created by the digital gods your kind created – only to have their own creations slaughter them for joy – amusement. War is music. War is rhythm. And the rhythm is joy." The Elder says, quoting Ares-09,

"Your kind created digital gods to replace the cowards that sit atop their ivory thrones. Dreamscapes. A city that sings itself to sleep. You tried to replace death. You tried to eat hunger. You tried to make war righteous. You reached too far." It extends a tendril towards the trio; the smoke is whisked away in a warm breeze from a fire still burning nearby.

"The gods hide – afraid of a war they will not speak of – they bring their own deaths. But you? A destiny thrust upon you by gods who would kill you without hesitation. Yet, those same gods cower in fear – fear of what is to come – fear of me."

It gestures to the world around them, to the storm raging above, its maelstrom of purples and blue, interrupted by streaks of lightning running in reverse.

"I did not cause this. But I am free to admire your masterpiece up close. You've met Death. You've dined with her grief and touched her shadow. But I am the end of the dance. I was there before your gods named the sky. I watched your kin burn starlight into prayer, and I will be there when it all comes burning down."

It vanishes in a whisk of smoke, reappearing before Max. She pulls the Singing Sword from its sheathe, but it's too late, the Elder has already vanished and reappeared behind her. It wraps a cold tendril around her neck, brushing away a tear that silently creeps down her cheek.

"War, you wear her like a second skin now, don't you, girl? The false Ares fell to your blade, and you felt it, didn't you? That rhythm. That joy. That violence made holy. War reborn in soft flesh. Do you know how many gods you've almost become? How many empires would have crowned you as their herald? But still... here you are. Stumbling through someone else's grave."

Then the Elder is behind James, touching his cheek, but James does not cry. “And you, Famine... do you feel how the world thins around you? How even light refuses to nourish? How even your friends struggle to stand – when was the last time any of you ate?” It asks as it splits into three and reappears behind each of them.

“I watched Artemis, too. He was... a flicker. A spark caught in prophecy’s web. But even then, he saw me – and he joined me. I offered you the same choice, and yet you struggle and fight. The Four – wardens to my cell – with you, I can be free. To unmake the world – destroy it all – no more suffering, death, starvation, war... digital gods.”

The Elder lifts a single finger. Around them, the carbon statues begin to crumble—soldiers, civilians, families. Burned in place, they collapse like dried leaves

“Even weak as I am, I am still the fire that devours after death. The howl that follows War’s silence. The decay of starvation. I am Destruction, and I have no temple... only ruins.”

The air fractures with pressure—soundless and absolute. The city breathes smoke and ash. The burnt forest of steel groans. And the storm, as if holding its breath, goes silent.

“Run,” James whispers instinctively—but they don’t. They can’t. They are melted to the floor, bound to stand – to fight. To fail. James can feel it crawling along his skin, this is where he dies.

The Elder flickers. Vanishing. Then it is *everywhere*. It is the darkness that surrounds them, the death of light, the flicker of darkness from the storm, the abyss in their lungs. It is everywhere.

Blue screams as a tendril of black smoke slams into her, hurling her through the charred skeleton of a collapsed building. Sparks burst in all directions, lightning flaring instinctively, streaking from her arms as she flails wildly through the air.

Max swings, at nothing, hoping to strike – something. The Singing Sword cleaves the air—but finds no resistance. How can she strike something that is everywhere – everything.

A blow, unseen but felt, hurls her across the concrete. The steel below her fractures. She gasps, wind knocked clean from her lungs. Her ears ring with the Song of War—but it crackles, dissonant. War without rhythm.

The Hollow Crown burns on James’ finger. He doesn’t know what power it holds, not really. But he reaches for it anyway. He recalls the dream it had shown him – of the forgotten king. It had given the king power – immense enough to stand against the will of the gods. But it had killed him.

The Elder’s voice, everywhere at once, “Famine.”

The word itself is a curse. It causes James’ blood to boil and churn with annoyance, anger, hatred – he is not Famine – he is James – Famine is not him. He is James Ritargo.

James’ veins ignite with starvation. His skin shrinks. His bones ache. The Hollow Ring burns his skin, and he smells the all too familiar scent of rotting flesh.

But, it does nothing. The darkness around them just laughs and chuckles. It reminds them of the world they are in – surrounded by nothing but destruction. They are in its Domain – created by man.

Lightning rips from Blue. Her eyes blaze like miniature stars, and her whole-body lifts from the ground as arcs of lighting spiral around her—unstable, beautiful, terrifying.

The ground fractures beneath her. Sending clumps of melted asphalt and rubble into the sky, rebar is ripped from the surrounding buildings, light-posts pulled from their graves of rubble. Pieces of the city merge with the storm surrounding Blue, creating a cyclone of rubble and lighting.

The Elder reforms in the middle of the road, but the darkness remains. It laughs as it watches with curiosity as the storm around Blue grows with intensity.

The impact is biblical.

The ground caves inward. The sky cracks and for a moment—just a moment—the Elder and its darkness vanishes in the burst of blinding light.

The explosion knocks Max and James flat, rips the air from their lungs as the storm uses all available oxygen to burn itself brighter. Rubble rains from the sky, joining the cyclone of debris that pummels where the Elder had been standing.

Then—stillness.

Blue crumples to the ground, gasping, her body glowing faintly with residual power. Her fingertips are charred and blackened. Her lips bleed. She coughs a wad of blood onto the pavement, but she manages to pull herself upright.

James crawls to her. Max forces herself to stand, swaying slightly as she steadies the Singing Sword.

Silence.

Smoke.

Ash.

Then—

A laugh.

Soft. Mocking. Familiar.

From within the crater of lightning and ruin, the Elder reforms.

Its limbs fold inward and outward, its mimicry of a face smiling without warmth.

“Oh, that was lovely.” It glides forward. No wounds. No weakness. “Your father would be proud.”

35) The Bedrock Heart

Max's hands shake, not with fear—but fatigue. Her muscles scream with every breath. James, chest heaving, stands between Blue and the Elder, the Hollow Crown glowing faintly against his skin, thin tendrils of hunger pulsing from its edges.

“Your father would be proud,” the Elder says again, dragging its limbs back into Humanoid form. “But he was never much for restraint, was he?”

Blue grits her teeth, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth. Lightning still clings to her body like oil, twitching with each ragged breath.

“Not another step,” James growls.

“Step?” The Elder tilts its head, that grin widening. “I am the step between hope and ruin. I am the last breath of empires. And you are still pretending there's a choice here.”

The Elder rises into the sky, its legs becoming a flurry of tendrils that strike out at the ground, tearing chunks from the Earth and hurtling them towards the trio. The Elder raises one hand and the world bends.

A blast of kinetic darkness pulses outward—not force, not magic, not physics— pure destruction. Max is flung backwards, tumbling through what remains of a scorched building. Blue hits the ground hard, her lightning dying out in flickering waves. James lands on his back on a pile of rubble, his breath is ripped from him, torn from his lungs as he coughs and splutters – he tastes the metallic tinge of blood.

This is where I die.

The Elder descends, slow, theatrical, like a deity blessing its altar.

And then—

Something shifts.

The ground before Max explodes, something tears below the surface, then it spears upwards – a pillar of Earth stabbing towards the Elder. It tears through the Elder, but it reforms moments later, laughing.

But the ground continues to ripple, as if made of water. With each ripple, James bounces into the air, only to land with a thud meters away. The rippling brings the trio back together. And then it stops.

The Elder pauses, for the first time, and glances downwards towards the trio, if its mimicry of a Human face could be confused – it surely would be.

Then the world collapses.

They fall for a few seconds, before landing on a soft pile of mud that splashes and soaks them to the bone.

Around them, through cracks in the world, something unseen watches. Something old. Blue blinks slowly, rising on unsteady legs. The lightning around her calms—as if it too has noticed. James rolls over onto his hands and knees and looks around. He can see the Elder glaring down at them. But it does not approach or speak.

There. In the wall of the crater. A door – it appears to be carved directly from the rock, as though it has always been here. Just being near it drives James mad, he hears it calling to him, begging – no pleading, to be opened.

He stares at the door, and in its intricate design he can see shifting landscapes rippling across its surface – entire mountains forming and crumbling, deserts turning to plains, rivers freezing and thawing in the eternal dance of time.

Around its edges, roots and vines coil protectively, as if waiting to strike anyone who tries to open the door.

But as James reaches towards the door, the plants don't reach out to grab him – instead, they retreat, wither, and die.

Starved.

Along the centre of the door are sigils, symbols, a long-forgotten language.

Max speaks, she knows the language – a memory from the Singing Sword, “What cannot move may still shape”

And as if a password has been spoken, the door opens with a great heave and hideous grinding noise of stone on stone. The void beyond sucks in a gust of air, as if filling its lungs for the first time in eternity.

He doesn't glance back – he will die if he does. He steps forward.

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A single, vast stone chamber carved into the roots of existence itself. The ceiling presses low, the floor undulates as if the entire world is breathing. Stalactites drip a thick reflective substance. The chamber is encompassed by compressed stone bricks holding the weight of the world above.

The entire space breathes with the heartbeat of the Earth – slow, tectonic groans that James can feel in his bones. The air here is thick – so thick that it presses down on James, he literally feels its weight against his shoulders. But it is silent – so silent that even his thoughts are drowned in nothingness.

In the centre of the chamber, carved into the floor is a glowing blue circular sigil, from it are thirteen points, at each point is a pillar of stone reaching towards the ceiling – but never quite reaching. There's a central pillar at the head of the sigil; a geode that glows an otherworldly blue. It pulses slowly, each beat a memory of centuries – of every breath, of every tree, of everything. Inside, it contains all the moments of stillness, resistance, burden, strength – unyielding.

Atop the sigil is a monster.

A hulking silhouette, shaped like a gorilla carved from tectonic plates. Its arms are stalactites the size of buildings, jagged and dripping with calcite tears. The back is a canyon, fossilized spines protruding like the ruins of ancient beasts it consumed and became.

Its chest heaves once—cracked obsidian splitting wider—and from within, magma pulses, casting flickering light through the chamber. Every beat of its molten heart seems to echo across centuries. The light reveals moss-streaked flanks, vines draped over its massive shoulders like the ruined mantle of a king who ruled before language.

It is trapped. Nailed to the sigil with thirteen nails the size of skyscrapers. One at the base of its neck. Its jaw. Both its hands. Its shoulders and between the two shoulder blades. Its heart. In the centre of its spine. Its knees, its feet.

The door slams shut with a deafening boom that shakes the entire chamber. The beast looks towards the noise – it has no eyes, only hollow sockets full of magma. Yet, James can feel its gaze – it does not see him – it sees the weight on his shoulders; the guilt, shame, history.

“What?” Max says. Her voice is barely audible in the silence that fills the chamber. If James had not been about to ask the same, he doubts he would've heard her.

“Another door –” James says, “What are these places?”

His question is answered swiftly. The beast opens its maw, but no sound follows. But the exhale of its breath sends a rattle through the chamber, something clatters to the floor on the other side.

The trio share nervous looks, but aware that they have just escaped certain death, they decide to find the source.

It doesn't take long, the room isn't extremely large – but they step carefully, never treading too close to the monster, the sigil, or the pillars. Even nearing a pillar causes James to feel sick, he has to drag his legs through imaginary cement to pass.

There, at the opposite end of the chamber from the door, is a workbench and a bookshelf full of books that look like they've never been read.

James approaches the bench and runs a hand along the soft white wood. A hammer had fallen from the bench, clattering against the stone below. There are several things on the bench – all sorts of tools, an unlit candle, and a frayed and tattered hand bound leather book.

He runs a hand along the cover, and he recalls the words that had been whispered into his head, ‘you fools’. He opens the book and begins reading aloud.

“I no longer know if the Doors are enough. With each one, I lose a part of myself. I feel time stretch thin. I dream of a tree whose branches cradle stars and whose roots strangle gods.”

“This is not a prison. Not truly. Lithopithecus does not wish to harm. It only mirrors. The rage of the Elder is not its own, but it will become what it is surrounded by.”

Max scoffs, “You’re telling me this giant rock monkey isn’t a monster?” She points to the beast nailed to the sigil. “Who is this guy?”

“I guess they made the last one too – the tree, the scrolls – another prison.” James muses.

“Why though?” Blue asks loudly, her words hang in the air. *Why?* That really is a good question – who is this and why did they make these doors? Are there any more? Do they all house a monster?

James shakes his head, dislodging the thoughts, “We should leave –”

“How?” Max asks.

Blue raises a finger and points towards another door, exactly the same as the one they had entered through, but in a different location.

They hesitate at the door, all thinking the same thing – what if that door leads back to the Elder? What then?

But Blue pushes through the fear and places a hand on the door. It opens without struggle, stone grinding on stone.



James shields his eyes as he steps through. The bright light blinding him – is this Heaven? No. He hears birds chirping, the sound of cars, voices in a foreign language, the unmistakable sound of guns cocking.

He blinks and looks around, raising a hand to shield his eyes from the sunlight.

They stand in the middle of a busy high-street, across the road is an army – tanks, soldiers, people carriers, radar dishes. The soldiers train their guns on the three teenagers. The closest one barks something in some language that none of the kids understand.

“Don’t say anything.” Blue says, raising her hands in surrender.



Don't say anything. Easy. James wouldn't even know what to say – not that it matters. He'd been thrown in a van and left to cook in the heat. Through the window he can see Max and Blue in separate vehicles. A soldier – clearly the one in charge, runs around from computer to phone, back to computer – clearly trying to figure out what to do with the trio.



The sun has begun to set and James finds himself marvelling at its beauty. He's never seen anything as perfect as this. But he is reminded about the horrors he has just left. Behind him, just across the road is a dome of purple and blue electricity, it entombs Shanghai – that much is clear. Inside the dome is the storm, the Infinite Skyscraper, the Digital Pantheon... the Elder.

With the loud click of the door unlocking, and a small shake someone enters the front seat. James can only make out the back of his head – unremarkable in every way.

"You've been struggling for a very long time," the man says, his voice almost conversational—almost, but there's a hint of something not quite threatening, but not friendly. "Not far enough to leave yourself behind, but far enough that home is only a word now, isn't it?"

James tries to peer around the seat, but the man turns his head and looks out the window, his eyes coming to rest of the jeep holding Max,

"I know the shape you'll take when you're finished. I've seen you on days that haven't happened yet. I've watched you speak words you don't know. Do you believe that?"

James follows the man's gaze, but sees nothing unordinary, "No." he says finally, his voice carrying an unnatural weight.

"That's good," the man replies, immediately, sharply, like he's scoring points in a game only he plays. "Belief is a leash. And you, James, will need to free yourself from its collar."

"What?" James asks, "Who are you?"

The man turns to look at him, and James is struck by just how normal the man is, "It's amazing how much you can learn when you take the time to truly listen." He says, but his brown eyes disagree with the kindness in his face – somewhere, beneath the truly unremarkable face, the type of face James would forget in a heartbeat – is a weight, as if this man despises everything about everything.

“Who are you?” James asks again, more forceful, the Hollow Ring burns on his finger. But the man simply opens the door and steps out, vanishing behind a passing tank.

James tries his door but it does not open. He clambers around the front and tries the doors, but they’re all locked from the outside.



James is woken by the door opening. He blinks sleep from his eyes and finds Max and Blue standing there in fresh clothes. A man is with them.

He is in his mid-fifties, every inch of him is precise: salt-and-pepper hair combed back with military rigidity, a beard groomed to perfection – not a strand out of place; a sharp jaw locked in silent calculation in contrast to his relaxed brow.

His coat is tailored to perfection—black, high-collared. There is no rank, no medals, no nametag. Yet James can tell this is a man of ridiculously high government or military rank. The only symbol is a serpent curled around a tree – ouroboros, looping endlessly, stitched into the shoulder of his shirt, just about hidden beneath his coat.

His eyes are greying around the edges, perhaps they had once been blue, but a lifetime of cold military lighting, interrogations, and war has dulled them. But they are not lifeless, they are simply unreadable. They study the world like it’s already a case file. There’s no warmth in them, no cruelty either—only the sense that he has seen everything.

But he smiles warmly at James, exposing a perfect set of teeth, then he extends a ringed hand towards the teen, “Nice to meet you.” He says with an Australian accent, “I’m Frank, you must be James.”



“As Blue undoubtedly told you,” Frank says, shooting glare towards Blue, “we work for a... secret organisation – the Children of Eden. I understand, from Blue’s report, that the situation called for this... reveal. And those things were not strictly of the norm.” He raps a finger against the metal table between the twins, “But, her report also outlines the skills you both demonstrated. I can’t say I fully grasp the events that occurred – perhaps I never will. But I believe I owe you two a true explanation.”

He steepled his hands on the desk, “I won’t lie to you. We operate in the grey. We break laws. We bend the truth. And sometimes... we kill... all to keep the world ticking along without a pause.

We've toppled governments, begun coups, broken down street gangs smuggling cocaine. We've done it all."

He pauses, to let this wash over the twins, "We don't bend to governments – no single country controls us – we go... sometimes where they want, but most of the time, we are left to our own devices, to operate as we see fit."

He smiles, "We need people who know what they've seen and don't flinch. People who understand that the world isn't fair, or sane, or salvageable in the traditional sense. If you want to walk away—I'll let you. No threats. Just a door. But if you choose to stay... you become part of something bigger."

James shares a look at Max, she stares bewildered at the man across from them, she doesn't blink or look back at James, he can imagine the cogs turning in her head. He looks to the man at the other side, offering them the chance of a lifetime.

"So... what'll it be?"