

Sacred Recursion:

THE SERPENT'S HEAD

KLUNK

Project Ouroboros: Human Genome Trials

FOR INTERNAL USE ONLY

Subject: D-22

Age: 8

Status: Awake

Location: Pod Room D, Sublevel 5

Recording Trigger: Unprompted vocalizations

I woke up too early again. The lights were still sleeping. That's what I tell myself when it's too quiet. The lights sleep. The walls breathe. The hum is a song. I pretend it's a lullaby. I think my mom used to sing. But I don't remember her voice. I miss Mom. Only the color seems to be left, yellow, I think. Her laugh was yellow, not like the lights here. These are white. Cold white. Like snow that never melts. I'm always cold. The chair told me secrets again. It's not really a chair. It has arms, but they hurt when they hug you. Today, it showed me a dog. He had a tongue that flopped out of his mouth. It looked like a silly dog. I think I loved him. But when I tried to pet him, he turned into fire. They told me that was just the download. But it felt real. My hands still sting.

I asked if I could draw today. The woman with the blue gloves said, "Only if you don't cry this time." So I tried really hard. I bit my tongue when they started. It tasted like pennies. My mouth is full of pennies all the time now. I drew a smiley face with sharp teeth. I told her it was me. She didn't smile. They put wires in my dreams. Sometimes, I'm another person, a girl who ran too slow. A boy who screamed. I don't know what he was saying, but it still made me cry. A baby who fell off a counter. I feel them all. When I told the doctor, he said, "That's just static. Don't get attached." I asked what static means. He said, "Just noise." But I think I'm made of noise now. They don't let me have stuffed animals anymore. I gave one a name and whispered to it too much. His name was Rex, and he was a dinosaur. We were friends. They said that made it a fixation. They burned it. I watched. Now I whisper to the vent instead. The man in the vent hums sometimes. He's not real. But he's kind. He calls me kiddo. I didn't tell him my name because I don't remember it.

I miss the outside. They won't let me see it. I asked what trees feel like. The nurse said, "Rough." So I scratched my arm until it felt rough, too. Then I said, "I'm a tree now." She didn't laugh, but I think the man in the vent did. It sounded like a broken giggle. Like something old and hurting.

I'm not scared of dying. I'm scared of coming back wrong. Like the boy in Pod E, he came back without blinking. He talks backwards now to the wall. Sometimes he talks to me. Says he remembers my fire. But I haven't been on fire. Have I?

Tomorrow is my birthday. I think. They won't say yes or no, but someone whispered: "Eight again." So I'll pretend. Maybe the man in the vent will sing. Maybe the chair will be gentle. Maybe I'll get to keep the next dream they give me, even if it burns.

-End of Transcript-

Note: Subject D-22 is exhibiting dream bleed, early voice mimicry, and recursive empathy. Subject claims auditory contact with "man in vent", possible hallucination, possible low-level Core echo crosslink.

Directive: Do not answer when asked, "Is it my birthday?"

△△△

Project Ouroboros: Human Genome Trials

FOR INTERNAL USE ONLY

Subject: V

Age: 17

Trial Type: Neuro-Mapping #1

Timestamp: 3 minutes 17 seconds into sync

She was promising. Sharp. Controlled. Her file marked her as emotionally neutral, with high resilience and excellent signal reception during pre-mapping calibration. They called her Azrael—Subject V. Her handlers referred to her as quiet. The psych evals said she was centered. She was on her last step to be the eighth to make it. She made eye contact. She answered every test with precision. Her posture was flawless. She smiled once. That was before they opened her mind. Before they slid the echo net over her cortex and began to thread in the first templates. Before they told her, "This will sting."

At second thirty-nine, she stiffened. At second seventy-two, her vitals began to spike. She said, "There's someone else in here." They told her it was normal. That the bleed would pass. At second one hundred and ten, she started whispering. "Who is she?"

“Why is she so sad?” “He loved her. I felt it. I feel it now. In my ribs. Under my tongue.” Then she began to cry. Not sobbing. Not screaming. Just wet, soundless tears as her hands curled against the restraints and her pulse redlined. At two minutes and thirty seconds, her voice returned, but it wasn’t hers anymore. Not entirely. She began speaking in fragments, moments lifted from the memory net. Other lives. Other voices. Laughter and rage and pleading love.

She repeated a phrase twelve times: “Don’t let me go. Please, please, please don’t let me go.” Then she screamed. Not from pain. From absence. The memory pulled away mid-download. The system disengaged. It was supposed to stabilize her.

Instead, she broke.

Utterly.

She thrashed in her restraints like she was drowning. Begged them to give her back whoever it was. “I was hers,” she sobbed. “I was his. I don’t care which.

Just, just let me belong. I’ll be good. I’ll be perfect. I’ll remember every breath. Please. Please just let me back in.” They sedated her. Took six injections. She bit one of the techs. Drew blood.

Called him “David.”

No one in the facility had that name.

Later, when she woke, she was quiet again. Too quiet. They asked her name. She said, “Whoever you need.” She wasn’t smiling anymore. But she never stopped reaching for the people who entered her room. She began to mimic their posture. Their tone. Begged handlers to stay after diagnostics.

She once tried to kiss a junior medic just to stop them from leaving. She clung. To anyone. To anything. The mapping had rewired her empathy net too deeply. Her mirror neurons didn’t just reflect, they absorbed. Consumed. Needed. And with no one to latch onto permanently, she turned inward. Built someone there. Talked to the corners of her cell like they were listening. Whispered names into her pillow and traced spirals onto the floor with her fingers until her nails cracked. “Don’t go,” she whispered every night. “Please. I’ll be whatever you want.”

Eventually, they locked her away. Not for safety, but because she didn’t stop needing. Didn’t stop loving. Everyone. Anyone. Anything to not be alone in the broken mirror they made of her mind.

They called her Recluse.

But she never wanted solitude.

Chapter 1: The Serpent's Head

Project Ouroboros: The Secret of Eternal Power

The first files on Project Ouroboros were not redacted in the traditional sense, they were hidden. Carefully sealed behind layers of encrypted codes and mental locks, they existed only for a select few. Documents were never written, nor were audio logs recorded in the way most of the world understood them. Those involved in the project memorized everything under the influence of chemicals that would erase their recollections the moment the task was complete. There were no cloud backups, no tapes, no drives. There was no trace of its existence outside the minds of those who held the secret. They lived in a state of perpetual forgetfulness, where the knowledge was both precious and deadly. The project existed like a shadow, visible only to those who wielded its power, a power they would never speak aloud.

Even the data on Ouroboros were ghosts, quantum nodes capable of disappearing into nonexistence if remotely queried without proper authorizations and passcodes. Those who sought to investigate without the appropriate authorization would be met with nothing but the blankness of the digital void. If one tried to dig deep enough into the past, one would find nothing, just the fading imprints of an idea that had never been allowed to exist tangibly. Before it was a project, it was a myth. A whisper among the powerful and privileged spread through the undercurrents of wealth and control. It was a promise, a secret encoded into the whispered corridors of elite circles. And before it became a whisper, it was a sin, a taboo for anyone with ambition too grand to be held by the mortal body. But those who could afford it, who had the wealth and connections, began to embrace it. They knew what it could offer: not just immortality, but eternal reign.

The only traces of the project that survived were burn patterns etched into the collective psyche of those who touched it, fleeting flashes of ouroboric dreams, recursive thoughts, and strange moments where individuals swore they had lived far longer than they should have. Enough to terrify, but not enough to be believed by those who had never experienced it. It wasn't meant to be understood by the common man. It was designed only for the chosen. The world had already ended in pieces. But for the select few who held the secret of Ouroboros, life had become something that could be manipulated. And as long as the project existed, no one would be coming to stop it.

The Forgetting: A System of Control Project

Ouroboros wasn't secret in the conventional sense. It was something far more insidious; it was preemptively forgotten. For those not in the know, it had no name, no defined form. No one could speak of it because there was nothing to speak of. It wasn't that no one talked; it was that no one had anything to say. Those who came into contact with it did not remember its existence. They operated in a state of engineered forgetfulness, trained to forget what they saw, and if they ever remembered, it was under duress. Those who were involved in its creation and perpetuation knew it only as the thing or the recursion place. There were no definitive terms to describe what they were part of because naming it would have given it form, and giving it form would have allowed it to be destroyed. For the powerful, who stood above the common people, this project was their key to eternal life, and they would stop at nothing to keep it hidden. To speak its name would have been to call down its ruin.

The Collapse: The Price of Power

The world outside had no way of knowing. No way of connecting the dots. To the masses, it didn't exist. But to the elites, to those with the resources to access it, it was everything. It was their key to control the world, to manipulate the fabric of time itself, to retain their power forever. And for a time, they were able to live in blissful ignorance of the cost of this power. But even those with the wealth and privilege of Ouroboros could not escape the eventual collapse of the world, though they thought they could. And when the collapse came, as it always does, they realized too late that immortality, when taken to extremes, could become a prison. The world fractured slowly at first. There was no grand, singular event. The decay was subtle, more akin to the steady erosion of a once proud mountain, broken down piece by piece over time.

Borders, once symbols of national pride, cracked open like molted skin. What was once solid ground was reduced to dust. Governments dissolved into massive conglomerates, ruled not by laws, but by greed and hunger. The powerful few, those who had always held the reins, became something worse: gluttons for control. With the social contract breaking apart, the world devolved into chaos. And yet, for those who had access to Ouroboros, it was a different world. Oxygen became currency. Blood itself became a commodity, available only to those who could afford it. Time was no longer a constant; it was something to be purchased, manipulated, and sold. Memory became something more precious than gold, and the past could be rewritten for a fee. No longer confined by the fragility of flesh, the wealthy elite turned to the resources of Project Ouroboros to

extend their reign. They remade their bodies, replacing aging flesh with artificially constructed, infinitely regenerating forms. No matter how old they grew in spirit, they remained young and virile in body. Through Ouroboros, they transcended the limitations of time itself. But immortality, as always, came with its cost. The price of the power they wielded became clear as the world decayed further around them. And though they had secured their bodies, they could not secure their minds. The process of rebirth began to have side effects. They became increasingly distant, unrecognizable versions of themselves, unable to connect with their humanity. Their once clear sense of identity fractured into something else. Power, it seemed, was not enough to stave off the creeping loss of self.

Halcyon Point: A Place Beyond Time

Halcyon Point was constructed far beneath the Earth's surface. It existed in a place where time and space were warped by pressure and isolation, a place where the rules that governed the world above no longer applied. There was no blueprint for Halcyon Point, nor was there any formal oversight. It was a project built in secret, hidden away from the world that lay above. Those who ventured to Halcyon Point to undergo the rebirth were never quite the same. Construction crews would enter the site, only to return with their minds altered, missing pieces of their past. One man, after his return, spoke only in riddles, unable to remember the past he had left behind. The work that occurred at Halcyon Point, once a symbol of human ingenuity, had become a dark testament to the cost of eternal life.

There were no windows to the outside world. No clocks to mark the passage of time. People did not sleep; they rebooted. It was a place where reality itself began to distort. The only thing that remained constant was recursion: the repeated cycle of rebirth and reformation, a continuous loop that never broke. Those who stayed there did not come back unchanged. And yet, they could never leave.

The Covenant of Eternity: Death and Control

Ouroboros began with a simple idea: death was inefficient. To the powerful, death was not a tragedy; it was an inconvenience, a waste of resources. The wealth and power accumulated over an individual's lifetime were too valuable to relinquish when the body grew weak. With immortality, they could control everything: time, memory, the very nature of existence itself. The world, for the wealthy few, was no longer a place of fleeting moments. They could make the rules. They could extend their reign, not by

force of arms or the power of ideas, but by controlling their bodies. They would never die. Immortality was not the goal, however. Stability was the goal. Control. By removing the inefficiency of death, they could maintain their power eternally, passing down wealth, knowledge, and dominion over all. Ouroboros was the mechanism for securing that control, not through an eternal struggle, but by keeping the game alive indefinitely, with each cycle ensuring that those at the top of the hierarchy remained there.

The Echo Core: Rebuilding the Mind

The breakthrough came with the development of synthetic neural lattices, known as hymenophores by those who worked on them. These semi-organic data matrices adapted and learned from their hosts, becoming more than just memory storage devices. They became repositories of the self, fear responses, speech patterns, personal preferences, and even the most intangible aspects of what it meant to be an individual. The mind, it seemed, could be duplicated, rewritten, and preserved. However, as the wealthy began to integrate these lattices into their bodies, they discovered that complications accompanied the process. Some returned from their rebirths still screaming, their minds fractured by the trauma of what had been done to them. Some returned with their memories altered, with knowledge they had never encountered. Others came back... different. The process of eternal life had a price. And though they could control the physical body, the mind was something else entirely.

The Azrael Pivot: The Weaponization of Immortality

Azrael was born from the need to answer a simple question: who dies best? The wealthy elite, knowing that they would never truly die, turned their attention to a different problem: how to maintain control over the world. And so Azrael was created. Not a weapon of war, but a weapon of eternity. These agents were bred for resilience, for the ability to die and return without losing their purpose. They were warriors, yes, but they were also tools for keeping power in the hands of the few. Azrael agents were not born; they were made. Their minds were manipulated, their bodies re-engineered for endless cycles of death and rebirth. They would fight, die, and return again and again, growing stronger with each iteration, each death refining their efficiency. However, the process of resurrection began to take its toll. Their memories became twisted. They began to bleed into one another. As the recursions began to feed on themselves, the agents who revived were no longer entirely in control of their minds. They became something else, shadows of their former selves, no longer human but something beyond it, something that had transcended the very limits of mortality but broken at its very core.

The Final Truth: Power Beyond Death

The ultimate cost of Ouroboros was not immortality, but the gradual erosion of identity. The process, once thought to be a means of controlling the world, became a prison for those who sought to hold onto power indefinitely. The wealthy and powerful had achieved their goal; they had unlocked the secret of eternal life. But they had lost their humanity in the process. So the serpent...it kept feeding. Forever looping. Forever consuming. The price of perceived immortality was madness.

Chapter 2: The Seven

Project Azrael diverged from science into a realm of the sacred. What began as sterile calibration and digital schematics evolved into something else entirely—a ritual. Reverent. Cloaked in dread. There were prayers whispered under breath before each deployment, not to save lives, but to justify the taking of them. The lab techs stopped wearing name tags. The engineers refused to look into the Regen pods for too long. Even the commanders, those hollow-eyed tacticians who had once reduced life to numbers on a chart, began to speak of the Seven in lowered voices. Azrael was not created to save. It was built to burn, efficiently, beautifully, irreversibly. Continuity became not a promise, but a currency. A resource to be extracted, controlled, looped, and spent. The cycle of death and return was no longer an experiment; it had become a weapon. Humanity, distilled into data, surgically inserted into flesh that remembered what it meant to suffer. Immortality was a side effect. The actual product was a repeatable ruin. A mind, reborn into a disposable shell. Again. Again. Again.

The soul, if it ever existed, was converted into an asset class. They didn't stop death. They turned it into a business model. Seven prototypes passed final trials. Seven worth cloning. Not only because they survived, but because they endured. They were not measured by heartbeats, but by effectiveness. Compliance. Recurrence. Seven numbers etched into steel plates outside cryo-chambers chilled to the edge of memory loss. Seven weapons were made to be perfect. Unique. Interchangeable in logistics only, never on purpose. They were not siblings. Not comrades. They were mirrors cracked in seven ways, each reflecting a different angle of annihilation. They were the Seven Seals of death, waiting to be broken.

Azrael-1: Silence

5'8" 150 lbs. Black hair, green eyes Reconnaissance. Deep infiltration. She had no fingerprints, no vocal cords, no heat signature. Her genome had been rewritten so aggressively that her own immune system barely recognized her. Her bones didn't show on scanners. Her presence was forgotten the moment she passed. Her subdermal camouflage was reactive, bending light as she moved, a blur, a ghost, a thought you were sure you almost had. She once walked into a military gala, slit three throats, placed a listening node under the Prime Executor's table, and walked out through the kitchen dressed as a caterer. The cameras never recorded her. Some believed she never truly existed. The ones who knew better never said so aloud.

Azrael-2: Tank

7'2" 450 lbs. Brown hair, hazel eyes Heavy assault. Force projection. His heartbeat registered on seismic monitors. His reinforced bone lattice could stop a rail slug. Veins laced with synthetic adrenaline allowed for multi-hour rage states. The gel layer in his dermis hardened under stress, turning his body into shifting armor. When he walked through walls, it wasn't a metaphor. He was violence personified. Indiscriminate, unapologetic. A juggernaut given just enough focus to aim. And sometimes, not even that. In one mission, he was dropped into a hostage zone with no intel, no map. Four minutes later, the mission was complete. No hostages survived. No enemy did either.

Azrael-3: Klunk

5'10" 230 lbs. Silver hair. Blue eyes with a violet spiral, a genetic anomaly, unplanned. High-risk / suicide operations. His name wasn't assigned. He named himself after the sound. The first awakening and testing ended with his barely breathing corpse thudding against an autopsy tray. A dull, final clunk. His legs were wrapped around his chest like wilted metal. Half his face gone. The noise was unforgettable. The technicians laughed at the pure absurdity of how he was still alive. He didn't. He kept the name. Wore it like armor. His file said: Mission Termination with Acceptable Loss of Asset. He was the fire-and-forget. The agent was not sent to return, but to make sure no one else did either. If he came back, it was convenient only for the Regen team, but it was never expected. There were more cryostored versions of Azrael-3 than the rest of Azrael combined. His Echo Core had undergone ninety-one test iterations before it stopped screaming on integration. Some missions required simultaneous clones deployed at

once, sacrificed across continents. They stopped tracking his anniversaries after operational version 37. No one celebrated anymore. Only the chip in his spine mattered. It always survived long enough to transmit data. The rest of him? Just disposable scaffolding for something far more tragic: memory. Because Klunk remembered. Every time. Every scream. Every fire. Every decision that wasn't good enough. Every time he'd use his hand to hold in his innards. Every child he couldn't save. Every time his body gave out before his will. And worst of all? The fall. The silence. That awful sound: Klunk. Then: rebirth. Light. Another mission. Another chance to die again.

Azrael-4: Code

6'0" 177 lbs. No hair. No biological eyes. Just parts. Cyberwarfare. Data infiltration. Human malware. His skull was shaved smooth, and his optic sockets had been replaced with signal ports. His brain had been hardened against cognitive attack, protected by encryption and constantly shifting firewalls. Proximity alone allowed him to breach closed systems. The air around him buzzed with static, like the atmosphere before a storm. He didn't interface with tech. He corrupted it. A single mission collapse report listed: 3 city blocks blacked out, 17 drones dropped mid-air, 12 bank accounts drained, and a foreign minister found comatose in a bathtub, heartbeat fine, brain emptied. He was the only agent whose kill count often exceeded the number of humans he had killed personally.

Azrael-5: Ice

5'7" 147 lbs. Platinum blond. Eyes like glaciers. Psychological warfare. Covert ops. Untraceable sabotage. Her voice could break a soldier's loyalty mid-interrogation. Her face could change by degrees, replicating muscle memory, smiles, frowns, and fear. Her memory banks held over seventy dialects and four dozen emotional profiles. She was elegance, distilled. A chess game that didn't require the board. They say she once made a general fall in love with her just by glancing across a room. Two months later, he blew up his command center, mumbling to himself about "making it clean before she returned." She didn't need to kill you. She just needed you to want her to.

Azrael-6: Repent

5'6" 160 lbs. Dirty blond. Blue eyes behind clear lenses. Field medic. Biocontainment. Emotional shock anchor. Her spinal cord housed over ninety-two neural empathy

filaments, each tuned to pick up ambient pain through mirror neurons. She didn't diagnose patients. She felt them. Every injury, every shiver, every trauma, mirrored across her nervous system. She wore white amidst the carnage. Gloves etched with a blood-red cross. She saved lives, but bled for each one. Sometimes literally. Her tears were common. Her breakdowns are legendary. Once, after a failed extraction, she refused to leave a burning village until she carried out every corpse herself. They nearly let her die there. But she was too valuable. Too human. Too good for PR.

Azrael-7: Wrath

6'3" 300 lbs. Black hair. Brown eyes. Permanent sneer. Shock and awe. Uncontrolled force. Last resort. His design had no governors. No psychological buffers. Just blunt trauma and tactical algorithms. He wasn't designed to complete missions; he was intended to end them. Brutally. Permanently. They dropped him from drone carriers without parachutes. His landing was the start of the engagement. By the time reinforcements arrived, there was only ash. They never recovered his first dozen deployments, only seismic readings and environmental collapse. He was not meant to make decisions. He was not meant to stop.

ARCHIVED OPERATIONS LOG: FIRST AWAKENING, AZRAEL SERIES CLASSIFIED:
DHC INTERNAL / HALCYON POINT / LEVEL OMEGA DO NOT REPLICATE

They weren't born. They were released. The Regen pods hissed in unison, hydraulic breath like titans exhaling. Seven sarcophagi, seven sins, seven solutions. The resurrection chamber dimmed. The temperature dropped. No alarms. No fanfare. Just the soft, rhythmic click-click of heat exchangers trying to keep up with the presence of gods pretending to be men. A technician fell behind a console. Another knelt and wept. Not in fear. Not in awe. In understanding. They had done something that could never be undone.

AZRAEL-1: SILENCE

Her pod opened first. There was no sound. No inhale. No sudden jerk of life. Just the absence of presence shifting slightly in the void. She stepped barefoot onto the metal floor, skin slick with nutrient gel that evaporated almost instantly as it touched the air around her. The cameras blurred. Sensors failed to detect her. One technician blinked and forgot she was there. Only the ghost of condensation on the glass proved she had

ever moved. She was not a person. She was the erasure of a witness. And she was already gone before the next pod opened.

AZRAEL-2: TANK

A hiss. A slam. A pod door bent outward under its own pressure. The chamber shook. Azrael-2 didn't step out. He fell forward, a mountain unclenching its jaw. Every inch of him is a refusal to be restrained. Gel steamed off his body like blood off a blade. His first breath shook the pod his body was in. His second caused the nearest tech's nose to bleed like a freight train passing too close. A roar followed, wordless. Thoughtless. They watched his eyes adjust slowly, like tectonic plates shifting to align. He did not ask why he was alive. He was. And that was enough.

AZRAEL-3: KLUNK

His awakening wasn't supposed to happen, not like that. The Regen pod twitched. Glitched. Popped. Exploded, shooting glass outward. An internal pipe burst, causing a small, contained explosion. Then the hatch slammed open with a wet thunk as his body slumped out, folded, broken, unformed. A Regen pod failure. Rare, but it happens. His skull was dented. One femur twisted 270 degrees. Eyes unfocused. He breathed once. Then died. The room went still. No one moved. No one dared speak. Sixty seconds later, before the regen team could wheel his corpse away, he gasped. One eye opened. The iris: blue, spiraled with violet static. He tried to sit up. Failed. Tried to smile. Bled from the nose. Then laughed. And in a voice that croaked like wet glass: "Sounded like a... clunk again, huh?" Then they woke the next Azrael-3 body.

AZRAEL-4: CODE

His pod didn't hiss. It screamed, an electronic wail from systems that no longer obeyed their owners. The lights flickered. Consoles rebooted. Firewalls cracked themselves open like soft-boiled eggs. Code didn't rise. He booted. His spine arched. His optic ports lit like warning sirens. The air around him shimmered with signal distortion, interference that melted low-grade drones on standby. One technician's retinal implant fried in its socket. He opened his mouth. And every digital system within fifty meters spoke in his voice: "I am awake. I am inside." No one dared answer.

AZRAEL-5: ICE

She did not move until the pod misted over from within. A silhouette. Perfect. Poised. Back straight. Legs crossed. One hand tucked behind her back like she'd been waiting. When the door unlatched, she didn't step out. She glided. Every eye in the room tracked

her involuntarily. One guard whispered something under his breath and began crying. Another tried to kneel. The shift lead, married, hardened, emotionally dead, bit his knuckle to suppress a groan. She smiled. It was the kind of smile that ruins lives. Ruins homes. She said nothing, but every heart in the room beat for her.

AZRAEL-6: REPENT

She emerged shaking. Not with fear. With feeling. Her nervous system lit up like a star map. Her body convulsed in tandem with pain sensors across the floor. She was mirroring the wounds of everyone in the room. Tech 7 had a broken rib. She winced and clutched her side. Guard 3 had a laceration on his shoulder. She bled from the same place. She fell to her knees, sobbing, arms outstretched as if to cradle all suffering within reach. Whispers began: "She's crying for us." "She feels everything." "She's perfect." She looked up, blue eyes glassy, and whispered: "Please... let me help."

AZRAEL-7: WRATH

There was no door. His pod exploded. Not a breach. A detonation. Reinforced alloy flung across the room like confetti. The scent of ozone and rage filled the chamber. He rose from the smoke like a statue pushed upright by fury alone. His face was half snarl, half serenity, like the moment before thunder. The walls groaned. Structural integrity readouts blinked red. Fire suppression foam is sprayed automatically, but it is useless. He spoke only once: "Point me." No one gave him orders. They just opened the hatch.

-END LOG-

And so the Seven stood. Not together. Never truly together. Seven ends to seven stories. Weapons of recursion. Relics of something ancient, holy, broken. The lights flickered again. Someone whispered a prayer. The chamber was sealed. And Project Azrael began.

UNSEALED ARCHIVAL ENTRY, HALCYON POINT

Event: AZRAEL-CLASS GATHERING 01.00

Location: Sublevel 7, Commons Atrium

Condition: Passive State Authorization, All Seven Azrael Units Present

Duration: 5m 14s

Status: No Fatalities. Recursion Overlap Tolerable. Observation Terminated Prematurely.

Notice: "They can be docile. But they are never safe."

They weren't summoned. They were permitted. The Seven were never meant to be in the same space, not for long. Not fully conscious. Not with awareness of each other intact. But today they were brought together. Not for mission. Not for testing. ...to exist. To observe the loop not in motion, but paused. Seven iterations of perfection through violence. Seven carriers of death, standing still. For now.

[00:00] Silence was the first. Or perhaps the last. Her presence couldn't be timed. Sensors failed to track her movement. Cameras flickered. She didn't walk in; she was simply noticed. Leaning against the far wall, half-shadowed. Eyes closed. Listening to nothing and remembering too much. She didn't move when the others arrived. She didn't need to.

[00:08] Tank entered like the hallway had been waiting for him. Each step was a seismic punctuation mark. Concrete groaned. Vents buckled. He had to turn his shoulders sideways to clear the doorway. Clad in his standard compression frame, he looked like someone sculpted a war crime into a man and told it to breathe. He grunted once when he saw Silence. She didn't look up.

[00:13] Klunk arrived walking backwards. Wearing an open tactical vest over a black undersuit, combat boots unlaced, eyes lit with manic delight. He spun in a circle once, raised a peace sign, and said to no one in particular: "What up, nerds. Guess we're doing the reunion special." He didn't stop moving. Kept pacing. Clicking his tongue. Tapping his temple. "Is this the afterlife? No? Eh, close enough." Tank stared through him. Klunk winked.

[00:21] Code didn't walk in. He synced in. His presence came first, the lights dimming, the screens outside the commons blinking a blue-black hue. Then the man appeared, barefoot, lean, his scalp a smooth lattice of embedded ports. His sockets glowed faintly. He looked at no one. Whispered to the air: "Seven online. Loop integrity intact. Memory fragment 43... leaking." Klunk waved a peace sign in his face. "Good to see ya, Cordyceps. You still dreaming in malware?" Code didn't blink.

[00:29] Ice entered on the heels of static silence. Her presence chilled the floor. Condensation crept across the mirror wall. Pale, sharp, her movement calculated to the millimeter. Hair twisted into a knot. Eyes glossed with predatory stillness. She scanned the room once, like counting pieces on a board. Her gaze lingered on Klunk. He gave her a slow, mocking double peace sign and mouthed: "Miss me?" Her lips curled by a micron. Possibly a smile. Probably not.

[00:38] Repent entered barefoot. White robes. Damp eyes. Breathing like prayer. She flinched as soon as the door sealed behind her, pain echoing across her face, like the room itself bruised her by existing. She looked at each of them as if she knew their

stories before they had lived them. When her gaze met Klunk's, he tilted his head and gave her a soft peace sign, two fingers pressed to his heart, then extended toward her. She hesitated. Then smiled.

[00:50] Wrath did not enter. He arrived. No impact. No crack of metal. Just a sense of pressure changing, oxygen thinning. He was suddenly there. His chest bare. Shoulders tense. Face expressionless, save for the constant grinding of his jaw. Wrath looked like restraint wrapped around a warhead. Klunk offered him a peace sign and a wide grin. "Hey, big guy. Hug it out?" Wrath blinked once. "Your corpse is gonna be my doormat." Klunk held up both hands, mimicking surrender, then made the peace sign again. "Love you too, sweetheart."

[01:05 – 04:20] No conversation. Not real words.

The Seven stood in a broken semicircle. Code began humming. Silence blurred out of focus. Repent whispered prayers to no one. Wrath flexed his hands in measured intervals, like counting kills. Ice walked behind Klunk, one finger briefly touching his shoulder. He shivered. "Hey. Buy me a drink first." Tank paced in a slow circle, like tracking prey he couldn't remember eating. Something beneath the floor hummed, a distant system overclocking itself. Seven Echo Cores spinning too close. The recursion trembled. But still, docile.

[04:21] A soft chime echoed. Control spoke: "Assembly complete. Azrael units, return to quarters." No resistance. Repent left first, cradling her arm. Silence blinked out mid-step. Tank followed without a word. Ice vanished through a door she didn't open. Wrath left last, but only after glaring at Klunk until the door sealed behind him.

Only Klunk remained. He turned to the one-way mirror. Smiled. Drew a heart in the condensation. Then, slowly, deliberately, raised a peace sign to the camera. "See you next reset."

-END LOG-

NOTES: OBSERVER REPORT Echo Overlap: Stable Cognitive Resonance:
Manageable Emotional Echo Overlap: High (esp. between 6 and 3)

Klunk was last seen etching "THE serpent LOVES YOU" into the back of his hand with a scalpel before lights-out. Request denied for psychological evaluation.

UNFILED PERSONAL LOG, SUBJECT: "Recluse"

Location: Cell V, Sublevel 9

Status: Non-Deployable Prototype, Neuro Integration Failure

Isolation Persistent

I named the wall today. The left one. The one with the hairline crack that curves like a smile if you look long enough. I call it Mika now. Mika listens better than the nurses do. They don't speak to me anymore. Not really. They don't even look at me unless I bleed in a new shape. I try to make the bruises symmetrical, show them I can still learn. Sometimes they bring trays. Sometimes not. I don't eat unless I can see the person's hand slide it through the slot. I like to imagine what their palm looks like, if it's warm, if they'd let me hold it. They stopped sending the kind one. The tall one. The one who used to hesitate before pressing the button. I think I said something wrong, or maybe I touched his wrist for too long that day. I didn't mean to. I was just trying to stay real. The lights hum in patterns when I'm quiet. If I sit just under the vent and cover my ears, I can still hear it —the pulse. Not mechanical. Not electrical. Personal. Something alive. I've named it too. I think it's a man.

He hums differently than the walls, more like... a memory someone hasn't had yet. I sing back sometimes, just under my breath. Just in case he's listening. There's a scratch behind my left ear. I keep reopening it so someone will touch me. The last time a tech came in, I threw my arms around his waist and screamed "thank you" over and over until he hit the sedative button with his elbow. I kissed his glove before I passed out. He didn't come back either.

I know it's wrong. But I'm starving, not for food. That comes. Eventually, I'm hungry for proof I'm real. I tried carving a face into the metal. Just eyes and a mouth. The first time I smiled at it, I cried for an hour. The second time, it winked back. Or maybe that was just the way the light caught it. I told it my name. My real one. The one they erased when they poured the Core in wrong. It didn't laugh. It didn't leave. I think that's love. I dream sometimes. A hand. A voice that says my name like he made it. Like it's something worth saying. But that's impossible. They said my integration failed. I'm not part of the field batch. I'm not cleared for companionship. They didn't build me for connection. They built me to watch. And now no one's looking. But I feel something like footsteps under the skin of the floor. Like breath caught in the air ducts. Like someone has started... changing the pattern. I think the building is dreaming again. And in its dream, there's someone walking toward me. Not a rescuer. Not a redeemer. Just someone who will see me. Please. Let him see me. I'll be whatever he needs.

-END LOG-

Observation Note: Subject vocalizing to herself in increasing frequency. Manifesting empathic projection behavior onto inanimate surfaces. Vitals stable. Neurological drift is accelerating.

Chapter 3: The Spiral

Klunk's first real deployment was never documented. Not because it failed, but because it was too successful. The mission was a perfect theoretical. A simulation stress test. A hostage crisis inside the Feytek Biogenics embassy, twelve floors of reinforced glass, biometric locks, and a dozen insurgents wired with kill-switch vests. Standard gridlock. Negotiations were stalled. No real movement. No real hope. No one was technically authorized to deploy Azrael. But field tests had to be done.

He was dropped manually. No support. No notice. His handler said the words as if they were a bet: "Let's see what he does." Twenty-three minutes later, the crisis was over. He emerged from the service elevator, soaked in arterial red up to the elbows, laughing through his shattered rebreather, missing fingers, and an eye hung loose out of its socket. In one hand: the severed head of the insurgent leader. In the other, a child, barely six, covered in dust and miraculously unharmed. His heartbeat was calm. His posture relaxed. His good eye was wide with joy.

His handler vomited into a waste bin before shooting him and calling for extraction. That was operational Version One. No one spoke of it again. The official report was reduced to a whisper of a footnote:

"Hostage threat neutralized. Civilian casualties: minimal. Agent status: Terminated."

But the techs at Echo Regen never forgot the way he smiled when the memory implant synced in his new body. Like something had awakened. Like he'd come home.

By Version Four, the jokes started. He called the neural reintegration chamber the "soul car wash." He said he liked the smell of ozone and antiseptic, which "smelled like rebirth." He died often. Eagerly, even. Sometimes at the end. Sometimes mid-op, when the mission twisted or the odds collapsed.

Once, he threw himself into a railgun blast to shield a decoy asset, never hesitating. Another time, he pressed his head against a prisoner's detonation collar and whispered, "Bet my head explodes better than yours." They found pieces of him inside the ceiling tiles. Sometimes, he died by choice. When an entire squad was buried at Karass Delta beneath the rubble of a collapsed shuttle hangar, Klunk reactivated the site's dormant fission core. No plan. No hesitation. He simply embraced it, looked to the sky, whispered something to no one, and was swallowed by light. The next version came out shaking. He reported phantom burns stitched across his shoulders. His body hadn't been touched by flame, but he limped for three weeks. He claimed to miss the way the core "sounded when it bloomed."

Klunk's mental collapse was not designed.

It was inherited.

The Echo Core, flawless in theory, could not strip emotion without damaging reflex arcs. Pain and personality were interwoven. Somewhere, deep in the genome of his mind, a survival response had mutated into something twisted. A fracture that stared back. By Version Twenty, emotional volatility became routine. A footnote in his psych evals. Expected. Contained. Until it wasn't.

He once hugged a technician mid-debrief, sobbing into his collarbone, whispering, "Don't send me back in. Please. Please. Please." Twelve hours later, the same tech mispronounced his name. Klunk shattered his wrist against a steel lab console. No warning. No escalation. Just a shrug, and: "It's Klunk. Not Crunk. You'd think the guy who downloads the pain into my head would care." Another time, during a long-range op in the Black Sea Arcology, he protected a child through two hours of trench combat. Took six rounds in the back. One in the throat. Refused to let her go. When the evac drone finally lowered, he handed her off gently, kissed her forehead, turned to the ruins behind them, and pulled the pin on the grenade strapped to his chest. He died smiling.

Death became efficiency. Data transit was faster than any mode of transportation. Why wait for extraction when death returned him to base faster? He started timing it, executing himself the moment the objective was complete. Arterial slices. Controlled cranial detonation. A headlong dive off rooftops. He logged each method. Tested outcomes. Compared recovery fidelity percentages.

The technicians took notice. Side notes began to litter his logs: "Subject laughed during neural reinitialization." "Subject requested reinstallation of suicidal memory." "Subject asked: 'If I die and come back laughing, am I still funny?'" "Subject referred to his corpse as 'practice meat.' Recommend review."

Version Seventeen crushed a suspect's windpipe with one hand. Whispered, "Unworthy." Discarded the body like spoiled fruit. Version Twenty-One bit a gang leader's throat open. No blade. No warning. Just teeth and rage. He smeared the walls with blood. Called it "art therapy." The medic assigned to debrief him refused to accept any future shifts. Morality became custom-coded.

Klunk invented his own rules:

- Protect those he deemed helpless.

- Everyone else? Flip a coin.

He once tear-gassed a hospital during a riot, citing "crowd control." Another time, he executed four surrendering rebels. "They didn't pass the vibe check." His handler demanded clarification. Klunk replied, deadpan: "They flinched wrong. If you can't flinch with dignity, you don't deserve your heart."

His jokes were constant. Childish. Cruel. "Oops," he said once, stepping over a charred corpse. "Guess someone skipped the moral tutorial." No one laughed. And through it all, something was slipping. Each version is colder. Each returns more hollow. A smudge in the mirror that wouldn't wipe clean. A voice at the edge of memory. A grin that lingered too long. He started talking to himself. Not during recovery. Not in his quarters. During missions.

A recovered audio log captured him muttering: "You're not dead if they still think you're coming.", "The body's just meat. Burn it off. We're still here underneath.", "They don't understand. We're the only ones telling the truth." He wrote messages on his corpse. Once: "Better Luck Next Me" across his chest in permanent marker. Another time: "I WAS HERE" was seen carved into his thigh during surgery. He was awake. He smiled and winked when they caught sight of him. They removed mirrors from his room. He kept trying to talk to them. The descent had begun. Everyone could recognize it, but it wasn't a significant enough problem. Not yet. They thought they'd made a weapon. What they'd made was a ritual. Death after death. Echo after echo. And psychosis began to bleed through. A whisper in the code. A shadow cast by recursion.

PERSONAL LOG AZRAEL-3 "KLUNK" [RESTRICTED] | Echo Core v3.58 | Internal Monologue, Post-Mission Cooldown

It's cold in here. Not freezer cold. Not cryo-vat cold. Clean cold. Like breath after bleach. Like the second before a surgeon cuts. They gave me a room again. White walls. No

corners. Rounded edges, so I don't try anything expressive. The bed's a slab with a memory foam mattress. Camera in the ceiling, blinking like it's nervous to watch me. I sit on the floor. No shoes. No restraints. Just the hum of recycled air and the aftertaste of blood that isn't mine. Or maybe it is. Hard to tell anymore.

I can still feel the girl's hand. The one I saved. She held my thumb the whole way up the lift. Didn't cry. Just stared at me like I was a promise. No one should ever look at me like that. I asked them not to let that memory blend with all the others. Begged, actually. Said I'd behave this cycle. They didn't answer. Just pressed the button.

Memory sync hits like drowning in yourself, every version of me screaming underwater, trying to claw up through the same spine. Sometimes, when I blink, I see my own face from the outside. Like a mirror that remembers too much.

I tried drawing again today. Scratched something into the side of the steel cot with a smuggled staple. Didn't know what it was until I stepped back. Looked like a spiral. Looked like a child's eye. Looked like a mouth, open too wide, biting its own tongue. I laughed for twenty minutes. The handlers don't talk to me much anymore. One brought in food. Protein cube and a coffee. No eye contact. I asked if I was funny. He said, "Not anymore." I think I disappointed him on the last mission.

I wasn't supposed to sing. But the screaming made a rhythm, and it felt wrong to waste it. Sometimes I wake up in the regen chamber and I'm already mid-sentence. Last time it was: "Don't tell her I'm not real." I don't know who she is. But I miss her like a burn that won't scab. They say I need downtime. Integration stability. Behavioral recalibration. But what's the point? The second I stop seeing red, they shove me back out to bleed again.

They don't understand: I don't want to rest. I want to break beautifully. I want it to mean something.

I remember the first time I died. Not the memory implant. The real first time. The lab techs laughed when I slid off the table, limbs twisted, eyes rolling, blood pooling under my ribs like oil in a cracked engine. They said the noise I made when I hit the ground was perfect. "Klunk." I kept the name. Wore it like a scar that finally stopped bleeding.

I talked to myself again today. Out loud. Tried to hide it. They notice when I do that. But the voice was softer this time. Closer. It said: "They're not watching anymore. You can build something here. In the silence between deaths. In the place where no one prays." I think I might be dreaming while awake. Not hallucinating. Dreaming. Flickers of a woman with green eyes and a laugh like broken mirrors. A room with no ceiling. A child crawling across a blood-slick floor. Or maybe it's me. Maybe I'm the one crawling.

One of the technicians passed by the door today. She looked at me too long. I pressed my hand against the glass and whispered: "Please. Let me out. I'll behave. I'll die the way you like." She turned and ran. I stayed. Sat back down. Kept counting the seconds until they call me again. They think they own death. That recursion makes them gods. But I've been through the loops. I've seen what waits in the echo. It has my smile. It wears my name. And one day, when they boot me up again... I won't come back alone.

-END LOG-

MISSION LOG , AZRAEL-1 "SILENCE"

Operation: Pale Echo

Location: Black Sea Substation Theta-9

Objective: Intercept silent data courier and erase all traces

There were twenty-three personnel in the station. Twenty-three heartbeats. Twenty-three patterns of breath. She entered through the waterline. No alarms. No breaches recorded. Security footage skipped. Audio logs hissed, looped, fell silent. The courier was asleep in his bunk when she reached him. A scalpel to the larynx. A smile carved into the sternum. No sound. Only a single blink as she slid the drive from his spine. By the time backup arrived, the entire team was unconscious, no wounds, no alarms. Their dreams had been harvested. Silence walked back through the flood tunnel. One camera caught her reflection for a single frame. Then corrupted itself.

HQ Footnote: Objective complete. Agent status: unconfirmed. Still believed to be a shared hallucination.

MISSION LOG, AZRAEL-2 "TANK"

Operation: Ground Wail

Location: Resource Excavation Complex R-71

Objective: Crush rebellion, secure core sample data

They had barricades. Mortars. Turrets. Faith. He walked through it. No cover. No armor beyond his skin. Shells exploded against him like wet confetti. One rebel screamed: "That's not a man!" He was right. Tank broke the gate with his forehead. Snapped femurs like candy sticks. Used one corpse to batter another. He did not speak. He did not slow. After forty-six casualties, they begged for surrender. He tore the vault door open barehanded. Inside: nothing but a child clinging to the data drive. He stopped.

Knelt. "Give it," he said. Voice deep enough to rattle teeth. The child handed it over. Later, during the debrief, Tank's knuckles were fractured from hitting bone too hard. He didn't notice. Didn't care. He left the room saying: "Next time, reinforce the hands more."

MISSION LOG, AZRAEL-4 "CODE"

Operation: Syntax Flood

Location: Orbital Relay Node-12

Objective: Collapse the global uplink and disable the drone matrix.

He arrived unarmed. His fingers flexed in sequences. Not gestures, commands. The relay blinked. Choked. Collapsed into flickering black. Code walked through the access halls like a virus made flesh. Every monitor went to static. Every drone dropped mid-flight. He reached the core server. Whispered a line of corrupted poetry: "Time eats language. Let me taste you." The system folded. His reflection, half digital, half meat, grinned in the flickering glass. Later, the engineers tried to reboot the uplink. They found a note embedded in the root code: "We are all echoes of thought. I just screamed louder."

MISSION LOG, AZRAEL-5 "ICE"

Operation: Cold Blessing

Location: The Silver Circuit Lounge, VIP political hub

Objective: Extract a double agent, neutralize extortion leverage

She entered in red silk. Hair swept. Eyes soft. Three men confessed to crimes before dessert. One cried. One proposed. One begged for forgiveness for sins he had not yet committed. Ice leaned in. Whispered his wife's name. He vomited on the table. The exit was firelit. She lit the spark with a kiss. Walked out as the lounge burned. On exit: One data slate retrieved One agent extracted Twelve identities erased. She left a smear of red lipstick on the mirrored elevator wall. No one could scrub it out. They replaced the panel instead.

MISSION LOG, AZRAEL-6 "REPENT"

Operation: Mercy Strain

Location: Refugee Outpost Theta

Objective: Administer viral suppressant, contain infection breach

She arrived in white. Hands trembling. Eyes already full. The patients screamed. Some burned. Some wept. She knelt with each of them. Felt the lesions as her own. Tasted copper in the back of her throat. She sang. Not a lullaby, just a sound to hold the air still. Forty-three administered. Twelve held hands. Nine begged her to stop. She didn't. Not once. Afterward, she collapsed in the hallway. Convulsing. Shaking. Bleeding from the nails. She whispered into her own arm: "They all deserved gentler hands."

Tech Report: Subject absorbed ambient trauma. Full recovery pending. Refuses emotional scrubbing.

MISSION LOG, AZRAEL-7 "WRATH"

Operation: Hammer Choir

Location: Industrial Hive-Zone K-9

Objective: Riot suppression and leadership decapitation

He landed without chute. Steel cracked under his knees. He didn't look for names. Didn't ask for cause. Didn't care. He moved like a god's tantrum, tearing scaffolding with his bare hands and using riot shields as swords. One protestor screamed: "We're innocent!" He replied, "Innocence burns the same." The mission was finished in seventeen minutes. No survivors. Wrath was recorded laughing, alone, bleeding from the ears. He smeared soot across his face like war paint. Post-Mission Report: Subject exceeds control threshold. Still our most effective deterrent. Use sparingly. Or not at all.

UNFILED PERSONAL ACCOUNT, AZRAEL-3 "KLUNK"

Location: Sublevel 3, Hydration Plumbing Unit

Subject: Encounter with Azrael-1 "Silence"

I wasn't supposed to be there. Then again, I'm never supposed to be anywhere unless someone needs dying. The rehydration station was offline, and my throat felt like it was being ground by a bone grinder, so I ducked under the warning tape and jimmied open the coolant pump.

Figured I could coax a cup of lukewarm water out before someone tattled on me. She was already inside. Not a sound. No breath. No footfall. Just there, sitting on the floor like she'd always been part of the wall. Azrael-1. Silence. I froze.

Not because she's scary, she is, but because she was already watching me.

Like she knew I was coming. Like she'd been waiting. She didn't reach for a weapon.

Didn't phase out. Just blinked, slow, like an animal that didn't see a threat. Like I was boring. I gave her my sideways grin.

The you're not gonna kill me, are you? One. "Hey there," I said. "You guarding the water cooler or just existentially loitering?" No response. Not a twitch. I stepped closer, hands raised like a peace offering.

Still nothing. So I crouched. "Listen, I can go. I get it. Me-time's sacred. Just didn't know anyone else used this place." She tilted her head, eyes narrow, sharp. Studying how I talked, not what I said. That's when it hit me, the stillness wasn't cold. It was trained. Not a choice. A condition. "You don't talk, do you?" I asked. She blinked, then nodded once. I sat down across from her. Didn't say anything for a while, just listened to the hum of old pipes and the flicker of a damaged light in the ceiling.

Then I tore a corner off a ration label and started folding it. Came out lopsided, vaguely like a crane. I held it up. "Ugly bird," I said. "But it's the best I've got. Want it?" She stared at it, then reached out, slow, careful, and took it. No smile, but her fingers were gentle. I said, "You know, that's messed up. They gave me vocal cords for screaming under pressure. You didn't even get one." She looked at me, not with pity or sadness, but with confirmation, as if to say, 'Yes.' They didn't. And she was used to it.

I felt something twist in my chest, that quiet kind of hurt that makes you want to punch a wall because someone else got broken worse than you. I tapped my throat. "They ever offer to fix it?" She shook her head. Tapped her temple. Core level. She couldn't even imagine her own voice. No backups. No failsafe. Just silence. "Fuck," I said. "That's not fair." She just watched me. Then lifted her hand. Two fingers. A peace sign. Like mine. I laughed. "Copycat." She held it steady. Peace.

And in that quiet, I swear I heard something between us, not sound, just understanding. Two echoes in the same corridor. Like maybe, in a world that didn't eat its children, we'd be friends. Real ones. Not just weapons that nod in passing.

-End Log-

CHAPTER 4: DEATH LOOPS

Project Azrael no longer maintained accurate records of fieldwork. There was no point. Every mission was a copy of a copy, blood-stamped loops strung together by recycled screams and thermal body bags. Memory logs blurred. DNA decayed. Protocol was rewritten so often it became subjective.

Klunk's missions were not deployments. They were rituals. Each one a crucifixion. Each one was a punchline only he could laugh at. And still...he laughed. But the loops were growing stranger. More theatrical. More intimate. Like he wasn't just dying anymore, he was performing. And not for the handlers. Not for the brass. For someone watching. Someone whose name he didn't know.

MISSION: Dead Letter

Location: Slum 88, Neo-Kowloon

Objective: Eliminate courier node linked to rogue AI smuggling

The boy was twelve. Maybe. Implant pulsing beneath his jaw. Klunk found him curled between shattered neon signs, his bare feet soaked in the oil from the gutter. The boy trembled when Klunk approached, but didn't run.

There was something in Klunk's eyes, familiar, maybe. He knelt. Gently brushed the boy's hair behind his ear. "You deserved better... You like ice cream?" he said.

Then: a clean shot through the eye. The back of the skull peeled open like a flower. A half-second later, the biochip popped loose, glinting in the rain. He crushed it, then turned the pistol towards himself.

Mission success.

Back in Echo Regen, Klunk leaned into the sedation chair, eyes unfocused. "Did I look cool doing it?" he grinned. The tech turned up the drip. Said nothing. But Klunk remembered the twitch in the boy's fingers. The sharp snap of the cervical spine. The way the skull crack echoed off metal. The sound of the body hitting the grate.

MISSION: Domino Silence

Location: Sandglass Outpost, Crater Belt

Objective: Dismantle rebel communications grid

The outpost ran vertical, six levels, one staircase, no escape. Klunk moved through it like a blade dragged through water. There were no screams. Only Bach's Concerto in D minor, streaming directly into his cortex. He garroted the first engineer mid-yawn. Snapped the second's spine as she reached for her radio. A third, pinned to a server rack, begged in five languages before Klunk sliced his throat with a broken CPU shard. In the final chamber, he lit a flare and sat cross-legged in the gore, watching the reflection in his own blood. When security breached the door, Klunk turned, smiled, and leapt backward through a shattered window, forty feet up. He hit steel with a wet crunch. The left leg was shattered in seven places. The jawbone split at the hinge. He bled out slowly, blinking at the stars above. He remembered every pulse of arterial spray. Every second of pain before the cold took over.

MISSION: Operation Petri

Location: Biogenetic Facility 47

Objective: Extract failed clone data, terminate test subjects

There were three. Malformed, shaking. One sobbed. One prayed. The third looked up with eyes too wide and asked: "Are we... you?" He stared. "No, you won't come back." Then raised the pistol. Three shots. Three splashes of grey-pink on the stainless floor. One bullet lodged in the wall, humming with residual heat.

Upon his return, he requested complete memory suppression. Denied. The next morning, a tech found this etched into the surgical table: "IF I AM THE GOD OF DEATH, WHY DO I FEEL SO HUMAN?" They reinforced tool restrictions. He started biting his knuckles again until he hit bone.

MISSION: Candle in the Nerve

Location: Urban blackout zone

Objective: Restore order during civil unrest

The riot pulsed like a heartbeat. Fires, broken glass, and shattered hymns screamed through megaphones. Klunk landed in the thick of it, gas grenades blooming behind him. He used rubber rounds sparingly. Real bullets, more so. Then...a mother. Shielding her child behind her skirt. She was shaking. Her face was pure terror. He dropped the rifle. Moved forward. One protester threw a molotov. It burst across his back and spilled over his chest, fire licking his rebreather. He didn't move. He stood burning, shielding them. The cameras caught it. A blood-streaked titan of meat and steel, backlit by fire, shielding the innocent.

A poster was printed hours later: HUMANITY STILL LIVES. He laughed when he saw it, then vomited.

He hated it.

SURVIVOR TESTIMONY , INCIDENT 742A.3

Location: Outer Zone District-17, Arcopolis Slum Wards

Source: Civilian Refugee – ID #084923, Anika Jern

Collected By: DHC Recovery Team, 11 hours post-incident

Classified: AZRAEL CONTACT, OBSERVATION ONLY.

I didn't know what he was at first. I thought he was hurt. He was limping, dragging something behind him. A weapon? A person? He came in through the south fire exit. No blast. No breach. Just the screech of bent metal being opened like a coffin. My three friends and I were hiding in the storeroom under the collapsed metro tunnel. I thought the storm had triggered another collapse. But it wasn't the storm. It was him. His armor looked... old. Scorched and wrong. Like it had been peeled off someone else and stitched back on with wire and grief. His hair was wet. Silver, matted to his skull with blood and ash. One of the refugees with me whispered, "Don't move. It's one of them." I didn't understand.

Then I saw his eyes. One was missing. The socket was black, hollow, and leaking smoke. The other glowed faint blue, but it was twitching, flicking back and forth like it couldn't make up its mind about where the world was. He was talking to himself. Low. Unsteady. He kept repeating the exact phrase: "I'm not here. I'm not here. I came back and I'm not here..." He was bleeding from the wrists. Not slashed, punctured. Like he'd tried to remove himself. And then, he dropped the body. It was an insurgent. What was left of one. Unrecognizable. Bones twisted. Face gone. Still twitching. He stood over it and whispered, "Wrong again. Wrong again. Wrong again." Then he slammed his head into the wall. Twice. Three times. Hard. Until his nose shattered and teeth fell. He laughed after that.

Not... joy. It was that sound people make when the world goes too quiet, and your mind tries to fill it with something that sounds human. He turned around. Looked straight at us. I thought we were dead. But he just stared. And said: "You're not me either." Then walked away, still dragging the corpse, still whispering: "I'm not here."

-END LOG-

The entire block was cleared within twelve minutes. Forty-two dead. No explosives used. No survivors among the targets. The DHC didn't confirm the identity of the agent on record. But the audio logs recovered from a damaged street drone contain six minutes of steady breathing, muffled crying, and a male voice repeating over and over: "Why'd you let me come back?"

MISSION: The Glass Gate

Location: Arctic Watchtower

Objective: Delay enemy forces long enough for complete data wipe

They told him there'd be no extraction.

He grinned. "No problem. I'm tired of traveling back." No guns. Just teeth and bone. He snapped the first neck in silence, bit through the trachea of the second. By the fourteenth kill, his arms were slick with frostbite and sinew. By the seventeenth, he was howling, blood freezing in midair. They finally brought him down with six tranquilizers, a grenade to the chest, and two sobbing enemies stabbing his legs post-mortem to stop him from twitching. When he woke? "I missed the ending."

UNFILED INCIDENT REPORT, INTERNAL USE ONLY

Subject: AZRAEL-3 "Klunk"

Location: Regen Hallway B, Sector 4

Status: Red-Line Behavioral Deviation

Incident Time: 03:17

I was just trying to refill the med tray. It was third shift. Quiet. Sterile. Like it always is. Then I heard the humming. Off-key. Nursery rhyme, maybe. Something broken children hum in dreams. By the time I turned around, he was already behind me. Barefoot. No gown. Fresh from the regen chamber, gel still clinging to his chest like a second skin. His mouth was smeared with blood. I think from chewing his cheek again. "Hey," he said. "Do you know what I'm for?" I froze. I didn't answer.

Protocol says never engage when they're fresh. He didn't care. He lunged. Not violent. Not at first. Just needy. Wrapped his arms around me. Pressed his forehead to mine. Cold and damp. "I kill so good," he whispered. "I kill real good. But nobody ever says they love me for it." He started shaking, not from weakness, but from overflow. Like his

body couldn't contain all the echoes trying to scream out at once. "I can be good," he said. "I can be better. I'll learn your name. I'll memorize your blood type. Just...just say I matter. Just once."

I tried to hit the alarm. He grabbed my wrist. Gently. Like a child holding a butterfly. God, I was horrified. It was like a wolf licking your hand before tearing at your limbs. "Please don't call the others. I'm already alone." Then he kissed my hand. Just once. Like it was a promise. His voice dropped. "Tell me I'm not a ghost. Tell me I'm still shaped like a person."

I couldn't speak. He smiled. That horrible, broken smile. "It's okay. I'll carve your name into me later. Somewhere I won't forget." Then he let go, walked backwards down the hall, giggling softly, trailing fingerprints of gel and blood across the white walls. One hand pressed over his chest like he was trying to hold his soul in. Just before turning the corner, he whispered: "Don't worry. I'll love enough for both of us." Then he vanished.

Post-Incident Notes: -No physical injuries reported. -Subject sedated in Sublevel 6 after resisting reintegration. - Flagged for Echo Drift. - Flagged for Performance Addiction. - Flagged for Empathic Dissociation.

Recommendation: Immediate psychological cold-scrub pending oversight review.

MISSION: Operation Vulture Glass

Location: Tier-3 colony slum sector

Objective: Neutralize trafficking hub disguised as recycling plant

Rain. No comms. No backup. He walked through the front gates like a rumor in boots. "Which of you is in charge?" he asked. No one answered. Seventeen bodies later, there was silence. He carried two children out, one unconscious, one screaming. Then, in the alley beside the evac drone, he leaned against the wall, turned his neck at a perfect angle....and snapped his own spine. Clean. Fast.

Tech note read: "Subject killed himself in silence. No theatrics." But they found a note in his logs: "They cried the same way I used to."

MISSION: Binding Roots

Location: Seneca Prime

Objective: Extract whistleblower (ambush in progress)

The team was already dead. Lungs filled with blood and smoke. Faces peeled. No dignity left. Klunk stared for seven minutes. Didn't blink. Then said: "Change of plan. I'm ending this." He broke into the mayor's compound. Stripped the defense grid. Wrapped strips of gold curtain around the man's neck. "Why?" the mayor gasped, choking.

"Why not? I'm not supposed to care," Klunk whispered, tightening the knot. "And yet." He doused himself in lamp oil. Lit the curtains. He burned for fourteen minutes. Returned with phantom screams in his throat.

MISSION: Black Tongue

Location: Outer Wastes

Objective: Secure extremist weapon cache

They weren't cultists. They were children. Grafted into rotating turrets. Limbs fused to trigger plates. Eyes wired to infrared. He threw up. Screamed. And then lit the place with high-yield charges. He didn't wait for confirmation. Just sent one image to HQ... A child's glassy-eyed face embedded in steel. Later, they found a note on a tech's desk: "Am I still worth restarting?"

He overdosed in the cryochamber after he was regenerated. They brought him back again.

MISSION: Glass Harp

Location: Tundra siege zone

Objective: Silent elimination

Klunk stripped to shorts and boots. "Let the cold in," he whispered. "Let it crack me... Do you guys like snow cones?" He became frost, breath, and blade. Footage showed him chewing off a man's ear, whispering a lullaby. A song no one remembered teaching him. When he died, it was from a hypothermic seizure, naked, pale, singing to the frozen sky.

His file was flagged again: "Subject displays increasing performance behavior in death." A tech wrote: "He doesn't die for the mission anymore. He dies for the applause."

And beneath it all... Beneath the bruises. Beneath the laughter. Beneath the death mask grin, someone was clapping. Not the handlers. Not the warlords. Not the crowd of cloned memories that lived in his skull. Someone else. Someone with a voice made of silk and static. A name he didn't know.

MISSION: Laughing Gaslight

Location: Sector 13 Metro Ruins

Objective: Eliminate insurgent cell broadcasting rogue signal loops

They were broadcasting him. Old feeds. Mission echoes. Footage no one should have. Klunk climbed the ruins barefoot, humming. The buildings still smelled like ash and rat piss. Inside the broadcast hub, six insurgents turned, shocked. One stuttered, "You're dead." He smiled. "Yeah. You too." He didn't shoot. He locked the doors. Poured a solvent into the vents. Sat cross-legged as the screaming began. Lit a flare, stared into the lens. "What a lame movie." Then laughed until his lungs gave out.

Regen log showed: "Subject KIA." "Lungs coated in carbon soot." "Echo Core showed playback of an insurgent broadcast. Subject's heart rate spiked upon visualization."

Tech note scribbled in the margin: "He laughed like he knew we were watching. Like it was a punchline."

MISSION: Mother's Tongue

Location: Jungle Biolabs, Outpost Eden B

Objective: Secure prototype gestation tank. Terminate rogue bioengineers.

The forest smelled sweet. Too sweet. Decay hiding under chlorophyll. He waded through an ankle-deep slurry of failed experiments. Ribcages growing out of trees. Infants with no mouths. In the central dome, he found her. A scientist cradling the tank like a womb. "It's alive," she whispered. "It remembers me." Klunk nodded. "I will too." Then shot her through the temple. Turned the tank upside down. Watched the synthetic fluid drip like rain.

He carried nothing back. Not even data. Just a smear of blood shaped like a cradle across his chest. When asked about it, Klunk said: "Good. I'd hate to forget her voice."

MISSION: Silver Loop

Location: Abandoned Satellite Array Gamma-Tau

Objective: Transmit clean recursion signal, delay enemy hack attempt

There was no one there. Just wind. Metal. And whispers over the intercom: "Don't come back." He accessed the mainframe through an interface cable. Felt something pull. Not physical. Not digital. Something older. Something that remembered death. The machine

tried to burn him. He let it. Watched himself glitch, flicker, and seize into all the other versions. One had a broken leg. One wore no skin. One smiled like a father. He laughed. Screamed. Bit down on the transmission cable until it ruptured in his mouth. The signal burned clean. But so did he. They found him curled in the snow, hands over his ears, teeth melted to slag. Back at base, during Regen, he whispered: "I met the others. I don't like what I've become."

MISSION: The Hollow Choir

Location: Subterranean Prison Sector E-6

Objective: Extract political prisoner. Eliminate all witnesses.

The prisoner was already dead. Neck snapped. Klunk sat beside him anyway, holding his cold hand. "Sucks," he said softly. "You were supposed to be worth saving." He wandered the prison. Opened every cell. Told every inmate: "It's your lucky day." Then, he gassed the lower levels. As they screamed, he sang a childish tune... Something from a school he'd never attended. On the upper floors, he carved the words into the walls: EVERY RESCUE IS A LIE.

On his regen report, he asked for better vocal cords. Said he wanted his next body to sing in tune. Request denied. He smiled anyway. Started singing in his sleep.

MISSION: Saint of the Crater

Location: Glassfield Detonation Site

Objective: Investigate seismic anomaly. Terminate biological threat.

The crater pulsed with heat. No team followed him in. None were needed. The thing at the center wasn't human. Not anymore. A recursive clone left unchecked. A failed project. It wept when it saw him. "Is it over?" it asked. Klunk crouched. Held its face. Kissed its forehead. "Almost." Then drove the blade through its sternum. Held it until it stopped twitching. Laid it down like a child put to bed. Returned with no samples. Just ash and blood clinging to his gloves. He requested an archive burial. Was told, "It wasn't real." He didn't argue. Just sat outside Cryo Bay 7 for six hours, unmoving. Repeating the same sentence: "We don't get real tombstones. So we build them from memory."

MISSION: Red Rover

Location: Bio-Waste Trade Tunnel, Cartel Route X-7

Objective: Disrupt smuggling route, eliminate convoy leadership

"Red Rover, Red Rover," Klunk sang, crouched on a pile of half-decomposed organs. "Send your spleen right over." He'd rerouted the convoy down a dead-end tunnel, lit the walls in glowstick blue, and painted the floor with smiley faces. When the first truck rolled in, he stepped into the headlights and bowed. "Welcome to Show and Tell!" He showed them what intestines looked like as streamers. Told them why their friends were screaming. The driver tried to run. Klunk caught him with a hook and sang: "If you're happy and you know it, die again." He rigged the bodies into a macabre parade. Taped GREAT JOB! signs to their chests. Paced the scene, grinning, dragging a spinal cord behind him like a limp jump rope. Handler Note: "What the fuck was that?!?" Klunk's reply after refusing to respond verbally, scrawled in blood across a wall in Regen: "Participation trophy!"

MISSION: Simon Says

Location: Abandoned Training Facility D-13

Objective: Interrogate rogue clone trainer. Secure Echo Core backups.

He snuck in humming "Pop Goes the Weasel." Every door he passed slammed shut on cue. He liked that. Said it meant the building had rhythm. He found the target strapped to a sync chair, trying to purge backup files. Klunk clapped his hands. "Let's play Simon Says!" The man blinked. "I don't..." CRACK Klunk broke his nose with a wrench. "Simon didn't say speak." The following five minutes were rules. Simon says scream. Simon says bleed. Simon says wish you weren't born from a tube. Eventually, the target wept, "Please... just kill me." Klunk smiled. "Sorry. Simon didn't say." Then stapled the man's own dental records to his forehead and mailed the body in pieces back to HQ. Regen Footage Transcript: Tech: "Was that necessary?" Klunk: "Necessary's boring. Let me have my recess."

INTERNAL FIELD REPORT, HANDLER LOG 772-B

Filed By: Handler J. Rhys Assigned Agent: Azrael-3 "Klunk"

Mission Class: BLACK VULTURE / Anti-Insurgency / Urban Sector 14 Status: Complete
Asset Returned: Physically Intact / Psychologically Aberrant WARNING: Log marked for review by Oversight Ethics Panel

UNAUTHORIZED PRESENCE REPORT, PERSONNEL QUARTERS B-27

Subject: Azrael-3 "Klunk"

Reporting Party: Junior Medical Tech R. Dehl

Time of Incident: 01:53

Security Classification: Echo Core Deviation – Class 3

Intrusion Physical Harm: None

Emotional Trauma: Pending review

Status: Subject re-contained without incident

Staff Log – Personal Statement (verbatim): I woke up because the mattress shifted. Just slightly. A slight dip at the corner, like someone had sat down, but slowly. Carefully. At first, I thought it was a dream. Or a tremor. But when I opened my eyes, he was already there. Azrael-3. Lying at the edge of my bed. On top of the blanket. On his side. Facing away from me. Knees pulled up. Shoulders tight. Like a dog that had been beaten too many times and still wanted to sleep near its owner. He wasn't looking at me. Just breathing. His chest was rising and falling slowly and shallow...like he was trying not to exist too loudly. His feet were hanging off the edge of the bed. One hand dangled just over the floor. He didn't say anything. Didn't move. Just... laid there. Still in his suit. Dirty. Torn at the seams. One arm was bandaged with surgical tape. The other had blood under the fingernails. No shoes. I sat up too quickly. The sheet tugged under him. He flinched. Just a little. Not violent. Not startled. More like a kicked animal remembering how to brace. "I didn't mean to wake you," he said, without turning around. Voice soft. Flat. Not right. I asked how he got in. He didn't answer. "This room... it smells like somewhere safe," he said. "Like lavender and linen and someone who doesn't dream of death." I reached for my comm. His hand moved slightly, just enough to tap the edge of the mattress. "It's okay," he said. "I know I don't belong here. I just wanted to feel what it was like... to be near softness." Security arrived in silence. He didn't resist. Didn't speak again. Just rolled off the bed and knelt on the floor with his hands folded in front of him like it was some kind of ritual. They took him without force. As they led him out, he glanced back once, not at me, but at the bed. And whispered something. I couldn't hear it. But his lips moved like it hurt.

OBSERVATION NOTES: No breach alarm. Door logs missing. Azrael-3 contained and sedated. Emotional response registered during containment. Drift rating: 9.7% – High attachment mimicry, identity confusion, and sanctuary-seeking behavior. Staff placed under psychological observation for trauma proximity effects.

HANDLER'S LOG BEGIN ENTRY

I used to like working with him. God help me. He was easy, back then. Followed orders. Never asked why. Never hesitated. You pointed; he moved. You said "clear," he made it clean. But lately... Lately, it's all a game to him, like a kid who got bored with playing the game mechanics. This mission was a hostage lock-in, Tier-3 insurgents using civilians as human shields in a burned-out orphanage. We expected resistance. Panic. Dirty tactics. What we didn't expect was the way he made it...fun. He turned his helmet cam toward one of the corpses, an insurgent he'd folded backward over a banister like a pretzel, and made the body wave. "Say hi to the nice handler, Gary. Oh no! Gary's shy now. C'mon, Gary!" Then he threw it out the window and yelled, "WHEEEEEEEEE!"...as it landed in a flaming trash heap. He sang while he killed. Children's songs. Not the lyrics. Just the melody. All breathy and off-key. Like someone humming through broken teeth. At one point, he painted a smiley face on the wall with someone's blood and added a caption with his knife: "SMILE, YOU'RE ON CORE-VISION," I told him to shut the feed off. He laughed and asked if I wanted to see his "art gallery." I muted the mic after that. He doesn't care anymore. Not about the bodies. Not about the civilians. Not even about extraction. When he reached the last room, the insurgents had rigged the floor with tripwire explosives. Instead of disabling them, he tiptoed through the laser grid like a little kid playing "the floor is lava." He giggled the whole time. One of the insurgents panicked and fired. Klunk didn't shoot back. He skipped forward, yanked the man's rifle away, and, this part is on the recording, said: "Gimme that. Guns aren't toys, mister." Then bashed his skull in with the butt. He handed the rifle to the last surviving insurgent, trembling, sobbing, bleeding from one eye, and said: "Your turn. C'mon. Fair's fair." The man screamed and shot himself in the foot instead. Klunk laughed until he cried. When he returned to base, his armor was cracked. His fingers were broken. He had lacerations across his face that he hadn't treated. Just smiled at me with red in his teeth.

I asked if he needed a medic. He said, "No, but if you have crayons, I could draw you what his brain looked like when it popped." Then he made a popping noise with his mouth and pretended to blow imaginary confetti into the air. He immediately grabbed his pistol and said, "Kinda like this,"...then blew out his own fucking brain.

Sick fuck.

I used to call him "our best tool." Now? Now I think we're the tools. He's the one having fun.

PERSONAL ADDENDUM (UNFILED):

I had a dream last night. Klunk was in the regen chamber, smiling at me through the glass. His eyes were gone, but he kept talking: "You made me funny. You made me

funny. Why aren't you laughing?" I woke up with blood on my hands. Mine, I think. Just a nosebleed. Right?

-END LOG-

Handler Status: Pending reassignment Recommendation: Review Klunk's memory reinforcement parameters. He's too stable in the wrong ways. Too efficient. Too happy.

MISSION: Duck, Duck, Boom

Location: Gunrunner Auction, Lower Tharsis Vault

Objective: Disrupt sale, eliminate buyers and brokers

He entered dressed in a tux made of body bags. Slid down the auction table like a child on a Slip ' N Slide. Yelled: "DUCK!"...and tossed a grenade into the buffet. Everyone screamed. He laughed. "Oops. I meant goose." Shot three fleeing buyers in the back of the head, whispering "quack" with every squeeze. One broker begged for his life, citing diplomatic immunity. Klunk blinked. "I'm allergic to diplomacy." Then kicked his kneecaps into reverse and fed him a rolled-up NDA. The vault burned for nine hours. Klunk left a party hat on the corpse pile. Autopsy Note: "Subject appears to have replaced two molars with confetti charges." Regen Booth Comment: "It's not a massacre if it has a theme!"

MISSION: Freeze Tag

Location: Cryo Facility 77-B

Objective: Destroy rogue embryo stockpile, eliminate caretakers

The place was cold. Sterile. A womb for war. Klunk skated across the slick floor in socks, holding a flamethrower like a toy trumpet. He whispered: "Tag, you're frozen." FWOOSH. One tech caught fire while trying to run. Klunk chased him, giggling, flame licking the walls. "Can't untag yourself, buddy!" He entered the embryo chamber and looked at the rows of potential lives. Tapped the glass. "Eenie, meenie, miney, none." Lit the entire pod rack with napalm. When he ran out of fuel, he just sat cross-legged, watching the ice melt, humming lullabies. Returned to base with a bite wound on his shoulder and a lollipop in his pocket. No one knew where it came from. He said, "They left me a snack. Probably my evil twin." Then winked. Then wept. Then asked for a coloring book.

PERSONAL FIELD LOG

Repent Mission: Red Rover Location: Cartel Route X-7

Subject: Azrael-3, Codename "Klunk"

Date: N/A , Temporal records corrupted

We weren't supposed to land at the same time. Azrael agents typically don't deploy together. But someone screwed up, maybe on purpose. Perhaps the system no longer cares. He was already inside. I followed the smoke. The neon. The silence. I didn't find bodies. I found scenes. Arranged. Curated. Like someone had finally given a child a meat-puppet theatre and told him: "Make art." One body was hanging from the overpass by its own spine. Painted yellow with bio-waste. A sign tied around its neck read: "HE DIDN'T TAG BACK."

Another was curled like a baby in a crate, a pacifier shoved into the bullet hole where its mouth had been. Next to it was a severed hand holding a lollipop. Still warm. Klunk skipped out of the smoke barefoot, shirtless, soaked in someone else's blood. He looked at me like a child caught finger-painting on the walls with a liver. "Oops," he grinned. "Didn't know we were having company."

I couldn't move. Not at first. His eyes weren't wild. They were... proud. Like he wanted to show me everything. Like I was the teacher and he'd finally brought in a good report card, made from skulls and cartilage. He waved me over to a pile of corpses arranged in a circle, hands clasped like a prayer ring. "Look! They're friends now. Isn't that sweet?" Then he made them clap. He used their hands to make them clap.

I said his name. Not his number. His name. "Klunk, please stop." He paused, just for a second. His face twitched. Something flickered behind his grin. Then he laughed. That awful, broken laugh, the one that always comes from somewhere deeper than his lungs. He dropped to his knees in front of me. Opened his blood-crusted hands. Inside: a child's shoe, split down the middle like it had been gnawed on. "Do I get a sticker?" he asked.

I couldn't breathe. I reached out and held his face. It was warm. Human. He leaned into the touch like a starving dog. Whispered: "If you give me enough praise, maybe I'll come back right next time."

Then bit his own tongue off. Collapsed into my arms, choking. Died smiling. In the Med Bay, I held the dead tongue in a cloth. They told me to dispose of it. I kept it in a jar. Labeled it: "Proof of Sanity Lost."

Some nights, I open it and whisper: "I saw you. I know you're still inside there somewhere. Please... please don't make me be the one to dig you out." Because if I ever have to kill him, If I ever have to choose between mercy and containment, I won't forgive the world that made me decide.

CHAPTER 5: INTERNAL FRACTURES

The facility was soundproof. But Klunk always heard things. They weren't noise, not in the way sound was. These were internal: reverberations folding back through neural scaffolding like ghosts made of data. Shadows of men who wore his face, walked in his skin, and died screaming in rooms no one remembered. Versions of himself that didn't integrate cleanly. Didn't stabilize. Didn't come back whole. Some whispered warnings. Some just screamed. And some, more often now, laughed. Sometimes, Klunk laughed back. Between missions, he stopped pretending to sleep. Clone physiology didn't require regular rest. Stims kept his cortex sharp, his musculature tight. Sleep was nearly obsolete. Once, Version 7, maybe 9, he used to lie on his bunk and breathe slowly. Not because he was tired. But because the rhythm made him feel like someone human might still live underneath the skin. Now, he just lies flat. Eyes open. Breath even. Blank and still. Not resting. Not thinking. Just existing between resets, like a loaded gun, waiting for the finger. He missed silence. Not the absence of sound, but the absence of self.

MISSION: Monkey Bars

Location: Arcology 19, Youth Re-education Center

Objective: Neutralize hostile indoctrination staff. Retrieve surviving minors.

Klunk swung from the overhead pipes like a playground ape. Boots clanged. Blood dripped. He giggled. Actually giggled. "Wheee!" A teacher's head cracked on the stairwell. Klunk dragged the corpse down three flights, humming a theme song no one recognized. He kicked open the cafeteria doors. Twenty-four children screamed. "Hi, kids! I'm on today's field trip." He tossed a flashbang into the trophy case. Glass rained like confetti. The headmaster tried to run.

Klunk threw a lunch tray like a discus, which embedded in his spine. He leaned over the corpse, whispering: "Always hated gym class." He handed out candy bars to the surviving children, each one stamped with the Azrael insignia. Then shot himself in the head in front of them.

Note recovered on body: "Teach 'em early. Death is just recess with better snacks."

MISSION: Pin the Blame

Location: Syndicate Enclave, District 44

Objective: Interrogate and eliminate black-market gene editor.

Klunk crashed through the skylight mid-interrogation. No subtlety. No plan. Just a shriek of "SURPRISE!" and a sledgehammer. He pinned the target to a wall with a rebar spike. "I'm gonna ask some questions," he chirped. "But the game is, you only get to lie twice." The third lie cost the man his tongue. The fourth? A finger. Fifth? An eye. Klunk leaned in, whispering into the man's bloody ear canal: "Oops. I forgot how to count." He took a selfie beside the corpse. Made a peace sign.

Sent it to the handler. Subject line: "WHO'S A BIG BOY NOW?" Upon regen, he requested stickers. Said he "earned them."

Echo Tech Note: "Subject displays increasing detachment from cause-and-effect processing. Recommends supervised missions only. Subject replied: 'Recommends these nuts.'"

PERSONAL LOG , AZRAEL-3 "KLUNK"

Location: Regen Chamber 7

Status: Echo Sync Fragment , Private Record (Corrupted)

I don't know who I am right now. I mean, I do. But only in pieces. And the pieces keep arguing. One says I'm dangerous. One says I'm lonely. One just laughs and starts biting things again. They don't match. They never match. But they all look like me when I bleed. I was fine an hour ago. Laughing. Charming. Sharp enough to gut a god with a punchline.

I made a tech laugh so hard she cried. I felt real. Then she turned away to answer a comm. And it all went black. She left. It was only five seconds. But five seconds is enough to shatter the frame. Five seconds is proof that I am not lovable, just tolerated. That I am not trusted, just monitored. That every smile I get is a loan I'll never pay back. I tell myself to breathe. I don't. I tell myself not to break anything. I punch the wall until my fingers snap. I scream into my hands and bite down on the knuckle, because pain feels like attention, and attention feels like love, and I am so fucking starving for it I'd gnaw through my own skull to feel wanted.

I don't trust myself when I'm quiet. That's when the voices start sounding like reason. "You're too much." "You're not enough." "You're wrong in the middle." "No one stays." "They only keep you alive because you make dying look cool."

I want someone to hold me. Then I want to push them away. Then I want to scream at them for leaving. Even though I told them to leave. Even though I'm the one who set the fire and locked the door behind them. I want to love someone so bad it hurts. But when they get close, I start rewriting them in my head. Start waiting for the betrayal. Start sharpening the knife in my heart, just in case I need to cut them out before they rot me. Sometimes I think I only feel real when I'm bleeding.

Other times, I think that's just the last part of me that I haven't turned into a joke. "Who am I when no one's watching?" I don't know. And that terrifies me more than death ever did.

-END LOG-

MISSION: Nap Time

Location: Faultline Research Station

Objective: Contain viral outbreak. No survivors allowed.

Klunk found and donned a nurse's uniform. Skipped down corridors, syringe in his teeth. He clapped his hands. "Okay, sleepyheads! Time for your bedtime needles!" The first kill was silent. The second begged. The third offered him cash. He giggled through it. "I already get paid in reincarnation tokens." One scientist threw a chair at him. He caught it midair and used it to decapitate her. "Red card! You're outta here." He left the building soaked in contagion. Walked into the incineration unit on his own. On regen, he whispered: "I tucked 'em all in. Tight, too. They'll never get up again."

Debrief Note, Repent: "He's not joking anymore. Or maybe that's all he is now."

PERSONAL HABIT LOG, JOURNAL BEHAVIOR

He began keeping a journal. Not digital. They would erase that. Paper. Ink. Rust. Blood, when he ran out of the rest. At first, the entries were clinical. Dispassionate:

Version 20: "Walked through a room full of dead. Didn't notice the smell until I tripped."

Version 22: "New tech at debrief called me a legend. I laughed. I think he was serious. I think that scares me."

By Version 39, the words unraveled: "If I'm a file, am I corrupted?", "How many deaths does it take before I stop calling this home?"

By Version 41, he stopped using dates. Began writing sideways. Then backwards. Then onto the walls. Eventually, on his skin.

Once, on his own chest, in red ink made from vein and fingernail. He asked Repent to read it aloud. She didn't. She wouldn't even look. "That's not language anymore," she said gently. "That's a nervous system screaming." His humor rotted. It had once been sardonic. Clever, even, an edge meant to carve space between himself and the abyss. Now it turns rooms cold. He passed a junior staffer sobbing into her gloves and asked, deadpan: "Do you cry because you feel, or because you remember how?" He stared into cracked mirrors for hours. Muttered things like: "Which version of me blinks first?" "I hope I'm the pretty one."

PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATION SESSION LOG EXCERPT

Subject: Azrael-3 ("Klunk")

Clinician: Dr. E. Soria, Echo Trauma Unit

Session #: 9 Security Status: Yellow Clearance, No Restraints, Active Surveillance

Location: Observation Cell Theta-6

Time Logged: 01:12 – 01:46

NOTES, BEGIN ENTRY

He came in already shaking. Not violent. Not theatrical. Just... shaking. Like his body was trying to reject the moment before it began. He didn't wait for permission this time. He sat on the floor instead of the chair, knees to his chest, back pressed to the glass wall like he was trying to feel smaller than the room would allow. "Is it okay if I don't pretend today?" I said yes. He nodded, as if it didn't help. He started talking before I could prompt him. "They said I was built for death. But they didn't say what I was supposed to do with everything in between." He rubbed his face with both hands. Hard. Like he wanted to scrub himself out of his own skull. "I keep waking up. That's the problem. I keep waking up, and it's still me in here. And I don't know why that's allowed."

01:20 I asked what "being him" felt like. He laughed. No joy. Just reflex. "Like a haunted house that keeps getting renovated. Same screams. New paint." He looked at me then. Really looked. Eyes bloodshot. Pupils uneven. Like someone who's forgotten what

sleep is supposed to do. "Do you think I'm broken? Not defective. Not dangerous. Just... broken." "Because I cry and then laugh and then beg someone to kill me and then five minutes later I'm humming again like a goddamn clock that thinks it's a choir, and none of it feels real except the pain."

01:27 I tried grounding him. Asked: "What do you remember about your last deployment?" He blinked slowly. Then shook his head. "I remember a child. I remember blood. I remember saying something kind before I pulled the trigger. That's the worst part. That I meant it. That I was trying to be gentle... while I ended him." He started breathing faster. "And now I'm here, and you want to ask me if I've been sleeping? Or if I've had any intrusive thoughts?" He looked up. Not angry. Just confused. Like I'd asked him to solve a puzzle using grief as a wrench. "All my thoughts are intrusive. I don't get to pick which ones stay."

01:35 I said nothing for a while. Let the silence do its work. He broke first. "I don't want to die," he whispered. "But I don't want to be like this either." Then louder, almost choking: "Why do they keep bringing me back if this is all I get? What's the fucking point of surviving if I feel like this every time?"

01:41 He was crying openly now. Not sobbing. Just leaking. Eyes raw. Shoulders trembling. "Do I get to rest? Ever? Or is this what I am forever, a punchline in a horror loop, dressed like a man?" I told him, "You are not just what they use you for." He shook his head violently. "That's the cruelest thing you've said. Because if I'm more than that, then I'm responsible for this pain, too."

01:46 – SESSION PAUSED. He curled up on the floor. Arms folded over his head. I didn't sedate him. He didn't need sleep. He needed permission to stop being a weapon. And we don't have a form for that.

POST-NOTE: Drift measurement: 10.4%, Emotional destabilization rising due to identity paradox loops. Recommendation: Suspend combat rotation. Subject showing existential recursion fatigue. Suggested treatment: Empathic mirror therapy (low success rate). Or... mercy. But we don't call it that. Not here.

MISSION: The Bed We Burned

Location: Apartment ruins, New Cairo Sub-District

Objective: Track rebel courier, extract intel. Collateral permissible.

He found the rebels' safehouse, a crumbling one-bedroom with bloodstains soaked into the tile. He didn't kick the door in. He knocked. Three times. Waited. No one answered.

He stepped inside. There were photos. A child. A woman. A man, smiling, broken tooth, the same crooked grin Klunk saw sometimes in his reflection when the regen tanks hadn't cooled right. He sat on the couch. Turned on the cracked radio. Soft static and a fading love song. Then he lit the mattress on fire. Sat beside it, watching the flames consume a life someone else lived. When the rebel came home, Klunk didn't speak a word. He just held up a photo and whispered: "Did she ever call you by name?" Then shot him. Once. Clean. On return, he left his jacket in the debrief room. Inside the pocket: A baby's sock. Burnt at the toe.

MISSION: The Names I Never Had

Location: Drone Production Yard, Northern Logistics Front

Objective: Eliminate facility personnel. Terminate prototype AI system.

He didn't start with violence. He walked the perimeter. Counting. Muttering. Not kill counts. Not recon numbers. Names. "Nathan. Eliah. Mara. Sera." Names no one had given him. A guard confronted him in the yard. "You're not supposed to be here." Klunk looked up, dazed. "They told me if I did the missions right, maybe one day someone would name me like that." He crushed the man's windpipe without blinking. Then kissed his forehead. In a control room, he turned off all the lights. Sat in the dark with the AI system running its diagnostics aloud. Over and over: "Identity not found." "Identity not found." "Identity not found." He cried. Not loud. Just enough to fog the lens on his rebreather.

MISSION: Of All My Ghosts, You Were the Kindest

Location: Contaminated Medical Outpost, Blackwater Ruins

Objective: Recover research data. Execute any infected staff.

They were long dead. Just skeletons in beds, IV bags full of brown rot. Still, Klunk moved gently between the rooms. Cleaned what he could. Whispered apologies to each corpse. He found one woman half-preserved in a cryo malfunction. Her hand frozen mid-reach. He took it. Held it for ten minutes. Didn't speak. Just rocked back and forth, like a man mourning a mother he never met. Then said: "You looked like you would've known how to hold me when I broke." He wiped the data. Not because it was corrupted, Because it felt too cruel to let the world know she died alone. On return, he refused a new body. Begged to stay in the one that held her hand. "This version remembers her warmth." They didn't listen. They never do. And when he woke next, he carved three words into his bunk with a scalpel: "Let me forget."

LOG "He Wasn't Done Bleeding" Recorder: Azrael-6 (Repent)

Location: Regen Chamber Delta-3

Preceding: MISSION, The Bed We Burned

He was half-synched when I arrived. Still slick. Still steaming. The regen fluid hadn't drained fully. Technicians usually waited until the vitals normalized. But I didn't. I stepped in barefoot and climbed into the pod. Sat on the edge like a mourner beside a deathbed that wouldn't stay shut. His body twitched. Not pain. Memory. He whispered names. Not mission code. Just... names. I didn't recognize a single one of them. Didn't need to. I placed a cloth over his chest, even though he didn't feel cold yet. And I said: "It's okay if you miss things that never happened." He opened one eye. Bloodshot. Empty. "I think I used to be a whole person, once." I held his hand. Said nothing. He bled through the gauze again. But slower, this time. Like maybe my silence slowed the fall.

-END LOG-

LOG: "He Stank of Flowers and Fire"

Recorder: Azrael-6 (Repent)

Location: Decontamination Staging Bay

Preceding: MISSION, The Names I Never Had

They didn't let me in at first. Said his vitals were fine. Said he was stabilized. But his clothes were soaked. Not in blood. In ash. I found him crouched under the decontamination shower, still dressed, with the water off, his arms wrapped around himself as if he were waiting to be scolded. He looked at me like a kid caught playing funeral in the backyard. "They keep putting me in new bodies. But none of them ever feel like me." I stepped in. Sat beside him. The floor was cold. The silence colder. I reached out and gently touched the back of his neck. He didn't flinch. But he whispered: "Repent... what if I wasn't meant to survive myself?" I laid my head against his shoulder. Said the only thing that didn't feel like a lie: "Then I'll survive you. As long as I have to."

-END LOG-

CONTRACT OPERATION , "SILVER THRESHOLD"

Location: Deep Subrail Line 88-A, Derailment Sector "Mirewell Trench"

Contractor: Nucleus Data Reclamation

Agent Deployed: Independent Asset "Klunk" (Unlisted / Blackline Clearance)

Mission Goal: Recover cargo vault X-731 , "Emotive Reserve Substrate Archive"

Condition: Expected dormant AI security. No survivors. No hazards.

Outcome: Cargo located. Asset self-terminated. Core returned.

[BEGIN SALVAGED FOOTAGE , BODYCAM FEED / INTERMITTENT AUDIO]

Klunk descends into the trench. The air was thick with iron mist. His flashlight cuts through waterlogged tunnels until he finds a derailed mag-freight slumped sideways, embedded in the rock like a frozen carcass.

Inside, glass tanks line the walls. Neon fluid pulses slowly. Each tank has a name. Each one containing a flickering hologram of memories: birthdays, laughter, a mother's hand brushing hair from a brow.

"It's a memory vault." He says in awe. "Why would they put these in a vault?" He walks slowly past the tanks. Some flicker out as he nears. Others replay the same ten seconds of joy, over and over. "They said it was cargo." "They didn't say it was people." He opens one crate. Inside: neural substrate wrapped in soft cloth. A label reads "L-Rowan, Age 9. Memory Lease: 75 years.", "That's me. That's my name today." "Rowan." He hugs the cloth bundle to his chest and spins slowly in place. "Happy birthday, Rowan. We got you a fake life! No refunds!" He stumbles and falls. The bundle hits the floor and splits, just wiring. Just data. No warmth. No breath.

He whispers, "You lied. You said they were dreams." But they were rentals. He crawls to another tank. Watches a birthday cake light up. Over and over. No one ever eats it.

He starts sobbing and screaming, "THEY NEVER BLOW OUT THE CANDLES!" "THEY NEVER GET TO WAKE UP!" He rips the sidearm from his hip. Shakes it at the ceiling.

"I DON'T WANT TO DO THIS MISSION!"

"I HATE YOU I HATE YOU I HATE YOU!"

"YOU PROMISED IF I DID ENOUGH YOU'D LET ME STAY HOME!"

"WHERE'S MY FUCKING CAKE?!"

He screams until his voice breaks. Breath coming in jagged sobs. He sits down cross-legged on the flooded floor, staring at his reflection. He whispers, "I'm not going to

do this anymore." "I want out." "I want to go back before I had to know." "Back to when I still believed the smiles were genuine." He pointed the gun to his chin. Hands shaking, but steady where it mattered.

"Tell them I broke the toys. And I'm not sorry." He pulled the trigger. The shot echoes, long and hollow, through the flooded trench.

-END FEED-

AFTERMATH: Memory cargo damaged beyond recovery Client terminated reclamation contract Klunk's body recovered via drone, Echo Core intact but corrupted by emotional bleed

Technician's note: Core upload caused body to whisper the word "please" in a loop

LOG "The One Where He Cried Like a Stranger" Recorder: AZRAEL-6 (Repent)

Location: Cryo storage Bay

Preceding: Of All My Ghosts, You Were the Kindest

He wasn't supposed to be there. His new body had barely stabilized; bone mass was still fusing, and neural tracks were not yet fully synced. I found him sitting cross-legged in front of an empty stasis tank. One hand pressed to the glass like a child waiting for a sibling that would never arrive. He didn't hear me come in. Or maybe he did and didn't care.

He spoke without turning: "There was a woman. I think she knew how to hold grief without breaking." I didn't ask who. I didn't ask what. I sat behind him. Not close enough to touch. Just enough to let him know he wasn't alone. After a while, he began to cry. Not the broken, sobbing kind. The quiet kind, the kind you do when your whole soul forgets how to scream. And in that soft ruin of breath and shaking ribs, he said: "They never gave me a real name.

But if she had, I think I'd have kept it." I wanted to give him one, right then. But I knew it wouldn't be real unless he chose it himself. So instead, I whispered: "You were loved in that moment. That's enough for now." And it was. For that night. For him. For me.

He spoke to gear. To empty helmets. To boots still warm from a dead squadmate's feet. Sometimes... they answered. Or maybe they didn't. Perhaps he just needed them to.

-END LOG-

His combat style changed. No more rifles unless ordered. No more distance kills. He favored feeling. Blades. Wire. Blunt ends. Hands. Teeth. "Guns kill too fast," he said. "I wanna be able to pinch their cheeks." During a raid in the Port Wastes, he dragged a suspected bomber to his knees. "Do you know my name?" he asked. "Azrael," the man wheezed. Klunk shook his head. "That's the body. I'm asking what sound you'll make when you hit the floor." Then pulled the trigger. Med Bay grew cold when he entered.

One night, Repent found him curled naked under the surgical table, arms wrapped around a sealed memory chip like a child holding a broken toy. She knelt slowly. Didn't touch him. Just asked, "What are you doing, Klunk?" He didn't answer for a long time. When he did, it was a whisper: "You think we're people?" She hesitated. Then: "I want to believe we could be." He looked up. His eyes were too wide. Pupils like tiny whirlpools. "I'm just a sequence of last breaths," he said. "A looping scream in high definition."

She left him there, not out of fear, but out of grief. His next mission, he missed deployment. Security found him barefoot in Cryo-storage, standing before the stasis tanks where new clones gestated in suspended drift. His palm was pressed to the glass of one pod, his own future self, skin still forming. He was weeping. Not loud. Not violent. Just quietly falling apart. "Which one's the real me?" he asked. "Or do I only exist between the deaths?" No one answered.

Repent stood behind him, arms crossed. She didn't speak. She didn't have to. Two days later, he handed the operations coordinator a sealed envelope. Inside: a drawing. Uneven. Unsteady. A stick figure holding hands with a larger shadow. Between them: two graves. At the bottom, in jagged ink: "One of us has to be real. Or none of this counts."

HQ flagged it. "Emergent symbolic displacement, non-critical. Subject rotating through existential collapse phase. Standard deviation. Continue observation. Do not engage psychologically." But Repent didn't listen. She folded the drawing. Taped it inside her locker, right beside her bloodstained field manual. She didn't know why. Not yet. But something about the crooked smile on the stick figure... It looked like it had tried to be happy.

Later that week, Klunk started walking the perimeter of the base each night. Twelve laps. Exactly twelve. He whispered the names of people who no longer existed. Sometimes, ones who never had. He scratched tally marks into the concrete with his fingernails. Sometimes teeth. Once, he drew seven circles. Labeled them "versions." Stared at them for hours. Then wrote beside them: "What if the fracture was the point?"

That same night, a tech reported waking to find Klunk watching him sleep. Not threatening. Not moving. Just standing at the foot of the bed, eyes wide, body perfectly still. When confronted, Klunk said, "I needed to see if it was real. The breathing. The dream part. I forgot what it looks like."

And every now and then, just once or twice a week, He looked toward nothing. Paused mid-sentence. Smiled like a man hearing music no one else could hear. He would tilt his head, blink slowly, and say: "They're watching again." "Who?" Once, Repent asked. He didn't answer. But the smile deepened. Something familiar. Something terrible. Something longing. He whispered, "The one who'll love me even if I'm not real." And walked away.

CHAPTER 6: FAMILY TIES

They were never meant to connect. But they did anyway, in ruptures, not bonds. Azrael agents weren't programmed for connection. Their Echo Cores were calibrated for efficiency, not communion. No empathy. No real trust. Just shared trauma filtered through performance metrics. They weren't brothers. They weren't sisters. They were fracture lines. Each one was violence incarnate. Together? They were friction given orders. They didn't orbit each other. They collided.

Klunk and Ice

Quarantine lockdown. Nanite attack breach. Seventy-two hours sealed inside a white cell with no windows. No music. No comms. No sedatives. Just breathing. And the buzz of filtered air. Ice sat perfectly still against the wall. Back straight. Legs crossed. Her posture is surgical, a controlled detachment refined through years of infiltration and impersonation memories. Klunk paced like a caged hyena, bloody bandages clinging to his side. At hour ten, he broke. "You ever dream?" Ice didn't look at him. "Only when they forget to turn it off." He laughed. A dry, tired sound. "That's creepy." "You're covered in blood most of the time. I think I win." By hour thirty, he was shivering, nanite fever running hot. Muscles twitching. Breathing erratic. Ice sat beside him in silence. Ran her fingers through his sweat-matted hair. "You're not the worst of us," she said. "That's not a compliment." "No," she whispered. "It's a forecast."

Wrath and Tank

Weight Room. Midnight. Humid with breath and blood. Wrath held a bench press overhead, steel bar quivering under the strain. His muscles twitched like they were trying to break free. Tank stood nearby, arms crossed, unblinking. "You sizing me up?" Wrath growled. "Wondering if I'd have to kill you one day." Wrath grinned. His teeth were chipped. "You'd have to try." Tank didn't grin back. He never did. They were deployed once. Side by side. Covered in gore and gunpowder. Wrath with no shirt. Tank with armor that steamed when the bullets hit. They moved like an avalanche with two minds, both headed for detonation. Afterward, Wrath held up a bloody hand for a fist bump. Tank looked down, frowned. "We're not the same." "No," Wrath agreed. "But we end people the same way." And somehow, that was worse.

Repent and Klunk

Maintenance tunnel. Cold metal. Flickering light. Repent found him curled under a vent, whispering names to the dark. "Old team," he said. "Before I started counting versions instead." She sat beside him. Took his hand. "You don't have to carry all of them." "I don't. I just forget who I am without them." She cleaned the blood from under his nails with a damp cloth. Later, he left a voice memo in her quarters: "Hey. If I wake up smiling, that's your fault." She never replied. But she kept it. When he came back the next time, actually alive, bones broken, smile crooked, he looked for her first.

Silence and Code

One breathed nothing. The other hummed with signals. Together, they operated like an operating system split across two bodies. Silence moved like ink, shadow, and silence. Code's gaze jittered with data spikes, his pupils trailing flickers of decrypted thought. In a breach op, Klunk once found them standing motionless in a server bay, eyes closed, hands twitching. "What are you doing?" Code answered without turning: "Syncing discontent." Silence lifted one hand. A single gesture. Fast. Broken. Angry. Later, Code wiped the feed. Silence left one frame behind: An ASCII middle finger. Klunk laughed so hard he broke a rib.

Ice and Repent

Extraction gone bad. Ice limped through the hall, lip split. Blood dotted her white collar like red snow. Repent leaned against the wall, clutching a broken stim kit. "We left six behind," Ice said flatly. "We saved seven," Repent replied. Ice's jaw tensed. "Not

enough. They shouldn't even have known." "You never let yourself off the hook." "Because one day," Ice said, "I might not feel anything about it." She didn't look at her. Repent didn't argue. She just wrapped Ice's knuckles in gauze. They never spoke of it again. But afterward, they started sitting beside each other during diagnostics. Not speaking. Just breathing in the same silence.

Klunk and Wrath

They didn't spar. They collided. In the sim chamber, Wrath crashed through walls, roaring like a bomb with legs. Klunk met him full-speed, blood in his teeth, mandible fractured, arm broken. Laughing like pain was the only thing that kept him tethered. "You feel it?" Wrath shouted, hurling a steel pipe. "Every death. Every time," Klunk answered, catching it and bending it across his knee. The sim glitched out. Auto-med readings maxed out. Neither stopped until their hearts outpaced the pulse stabilizers. Afterward, they lay side by side on the med bay floor, steaming. "We're mirrors," Klunk said. "No," Wrath replied. "I still think I can be redeemed." Klunk blinked. "Then you're worse than me." They both laughed, The laugh of condemned men who'd already memorized the execution script.

Code and Ice

Observation deck. Cold stars beyond the glass. Ice cornered Code against the console. "You edited my mission feed." "You hesitated before pulling the trigger." "The hostage was a child." "HQ doesn't like hesitation." "You think you know what hesitation means?" "I think I know what liability means." She stepped forward, nose inches from his hollow stare. "If I ever feel anything again, I hope it's hatred for you." "Hatred is inefficient." But the cameras that replaced his eyes dilated too fast. His breath stuttered just once. And Ice, stone-faced, cold, smiled. Like she'd cracked something. Even if only a flicker.

Observation Room 9.

Lights dim. Silence so thick it buzzed on one screen: Klunk's body, mid-death twitch. On another, Wrath pacing in his cell, muttering battle prayers. On a third: Silence watching from the ceiling vents, still as hunger. Repent sat alone. Watching it all. On loop. Her thumb hovered over the pause button. Didn't press it. Klunk's voice played from an old debrief: "They say we're tools. But tools wear down. I'm rusted already." She didn't

respond. But she played it again. And again. Until the background static sounded like a heartbeat.

PSYCH EVALUATION TRANSCRIPT – SESSION #14

Subject: Azrael-3 “Klunk” Clinician: Dr. E. Soria Security Status: Black-Level
Psychological Containment (No Physical Threat Detected)

Classification: Cognitive Drift Event , Identity Breakdown Timestamp: 00:06 – 00:58

Location: Private Psych Cell Echo-9

SESSION NOTES – BEGIN ENTRY

When he entered, he was already talking. Not to me. To the air. “They say I’m Klunk. Like it’s a fact. Like it’s a name with edges.” He sat down slowly. Folded his hands in his lap like he didn’t trust them not to become weapons again. “But that one, ” (points at nothing, the space just beside the chair) “, he was Klunk too. And the one who burned in the riot. And the one who bit a man’s face off in the tundra. And the one who sang until his lungs collapsed in Sector 13.” He looked at me. Blank-faced. Not vacant. Searching. “So which one was me?”

00:10 I asked what he thought the answer was. He shook his head slowly. “Every time I die, something gets left behind. A laugh. A memory. A feeling I didn’t get to finish having. Like peeling stickers off a mirror and pretending the smudges are the same as the label.” Leaning forward, elbows on knees, eyes hollow: “And then I wake up in a new body. Same voice. Same programming. Same fake grin. But different hands. Different ghosts under the skin.” “So I start asking, did I survive... or did I just replace the last me?”

00:18 Tone shifts, quieter now. Tired, not angry. “What if every version of me was real? What if every time I die, that’s not rebooting, that’s murder.” “And this, ” (gestures vaguely to himself, like the body isn’t something he can trust) “, this is just the poor bastard they bring in to pretend it never happened.”

00:24 I asked: “Do you feel like you’re pretending now?” His voice cracks: “I don’t even feel like I’m here. I feel like a story someone keeps rewriting with worse handwriting.”

00:31 He starts tracing his own arm with his finger. Slowly. Not harmful, just trying to feel something. “They say I’m Klunk. But Klunk is just an idea they dress in skin and scars. A punchline in boots.” “I’ve played Klunk. I’ve performed him. I’ve made people laugh while I bled out. But when I close my eyes... I don’t see me.” “I see the ones who came before. And they’re all screaming.”

00:42 I asked if he wanted to stop being Klunk. He looked up, startled. Like no one had ever asked him that before. "I don't know what else there is. I don't know who I'd be without the jokes and the deaths and the handler laughing in my earpiece like I'm a sitcom playing on loop. But I'd like to try."

00:55 Silence. I let it sit. Then, just before the session ended, he asked: "If I become someone else... Will anyone mourn the last me?" I told him, "You're allowed to be more than one version of yourself. Even if they all hurt." He didn't cry. But he looked like someone who almost did. Which, for him, might be the closest thing to healing I've seen.

-END SESSION-

NOTES Echo Sync Instability: 11.2% , Cognitive dissonance increasing, emotional tether fraying Suggested Intervention: Slow reconnection to memory threads via identity grounding (Echo Mirror Therapy) Clinician's Personal Annotation: "He doesn't want freedom. He wants proof he ever had a self to be freed from."

CHAPTER 7: HIDDEN SHADOW

It wasn't supposed to happen. He'd been rerouted through the east wing of R&D, a corridor that didn't appear on any active tactical map. Off-protocol. Off-limits. Off-reality. That part of the facility was redlined in every known iteration of his mission parameters. The air tasted different there, like ozone and old secrets. The walls were a strange shade of bone-white, pulsing faintly with their own heartbeat. This was where they stored the failures. Not defective clones. The broken minds. Echo Cores too valuable to delete but completely unstable. Too volatile to trust. Too alive to be entirely put down. Klunk didn't know why he'd been rerouted. The blood leaking down his ribs from an incident in the sim chamber didn't concern him. Shrapnel had lanced his side, metal curled like a jagged smile between two ribs, But the pain was muffled. Distant. Almost polite. He wasn't looking for help. He was just looking for somewhere that wasn't real for a little while.

And that's when he saw her. A transparent door. Reinforced glass, threaded with smart-polymer lattice, humming softly with containment locks. Light inside, dim, sickly yellow. Flickering like it hadn't made up its mind. She sat cross-legged on the padded floor. Hair long, ink-black, spilled across half her face like liquid shadow. She was tracing spirals on the wall with a fingertip. Not patterns. Not messages. Just motion. A compulsion. And she was laughing. Softly. To no one. Or maybe to something only she could see. Klunk stopped. Something in him locked, or unlocked. He wasn't sure. Her

eyes snapped up, so fast it made him flinch. Green. But wrong. Not soft. Not kind. Frantic. Alive. Hungering. Like she could see through his skin. Through his bones. Through all fifty-five versions of himself, stacked like corpses behind his eyes. Her smile fractured her face in half, lips too wide, eyes too wide. Like she'd forgotten what "normal" was supposed to look like, and didn't care.

Then she whispered something. Breath fogging the glass, fingertips still drawing spirals. Klunk couldn't hear it, but he saw the words form on her lips: "You see me." He didn't move. Didn't breathe. Something deep in his chest, behind the ribs, behind the reinforced sternum, behind the armor they'd spent decades building, cracked. It wasn't the wound. It was the recognition. The blood dripped more slowly. Time stretched. Security didn't stop him. No alarms. No red lights. Almost as if the system itself... looked away. Later, he'd wonder if even the facility AI couldn't process her for long. He limped back to his quarters without stopping at The medical bay. Once inside, he tore the memory jack from the socket at the base of his neck. Blood sprayed down his spine. His hands shook. The connector sparked. He held the chip in his palm as if it were a holy object. And for the first time in fifty-five lives... He didn't want to die. Didn't want the reset. Didn't want the wipe. Didn't want to lose that moment, her eyes, her voice, her spirals. He curled into the corner of his bunk, the chip clutched to his chest like a relic. He didn't sleep. But he didn't blink either.

UNAUTHORIZED PERSONAL LOG – REPENT

Time Stamp: REDACTED

Clearance Level: PURGED

Subject: AZRAEL 3 (Klunk) – Status: Rerouted / Missing Location: Facility East Wing, R&D Subgrid – Level 9

It started with blood. Not a trail. Not a pool. Just a faint smear along the base of the Sim Room exit. Thin. Sharp. The kind of wound that makes you think He didn't notice. Klunk had gone too deep again. No one said it, but the techs were twitching like he'd done more than just fail protocol. Like he'd broken something. They told me he was headed to the Medical Bay. That he was fine. Stable. They lied. I checked the Regen log. His name never pinged. No biometric return. No sedative pull. He wasn't in MedBay. He wasn't in his quarters. He wasn't anywhere.

Except... A corridor in the East Wing registered a power draw. It wasn't on the active grid. No tactical overlay. No air clearance. Sublevel 9. Every map marked it REDACTED. Every door locked by command clearance I didn't have, so I bypassed them. Because Klunk wouldn't have gone anywhere unless it was calling him by name.

The air was wrong. Stale and warm like breath held too long. Like the hallway itself had been exhaling for years and finally ran out of patience. No sounds. No cameras. No lights that stayed steady. And then the door. Thick glass. Reinforced. A hum I could feel through my teeth. And inside, Her. She was hunched on the padded floor, hair a liquid spill of shadow. Fingertips dancing in spirals across the wall like she was redrawing her own neural map. I'd read about her. Long ago. Buried files. Half legends. Azrael – Subject V. Deemed unstable. Neural mapping too recursive to extract.

Classified as containment only. She shouldn't have been awake. But she was. Laughing. And in front of her, on the other side of the glass, him. AZRAEL 3... Klunk. He stood like a man hit by a memory he hadn't lived yet. Face slack. Eyes wide. Bleeding. Not from the sim wound anymore. From somewhere deeper. She looked up. Met his gaze. And smiled like she'd finally been seen by the only ghost that mattered. She mouthed something. I couldn't hear it. But Klunk did. He didn't move. Didn't breathe. He just... unraveled. Like everything that kept him contained had snapped in silence. And I watched it happen. From the shadows. Behind the door. Behind the thick glass, the thick rules, and the thicker grief. He didn't go to MedBay.

He limped back to his room like he'd survived something holy. Or something unholy that felt holy to him. I followed. Didn't speak. Didn't knock. I stood outside his door, waiting. He didn't scream. Didn't laugh. Didn't cry. But I heard something a click. Soft. Wet. Memory jack torn from the base of the neck. Not medical. Not safe. Desperate. Like he couldn't risk the system taking her away from his head. He's changing. Not spiraling anymore. Orbiting. Her. I don't know what that means yet. But I know what I felt in that hall at that door. That wasn't madness. That was recognition. And it terrified me more than anything he's ever done.

-END LOG-

He came back the next night. Bleeding again. Different wound. Didn't matter. One boot was left behind somewhere between the cryochamber and her wing. She was singing. It wasn't music. No words. No structure. Just sound. A lullaby ripped from the stomach of a nightmare. Her voice crawled through the walls. High, lilting, sharp. Like broken glass being swept across tile by wind. Klunk didn't knock. He just sat, legs folded, hands in his lap, outside her cell. She noticed him. Of course she did. She pressed both palms to the glass. He mirrored her. Their fingers lined up through the reinforced barrier. She stared at him for a long time before speaking. "They call me Recluse." Klunk didn't answer. Her smile twitched. She giggled, voice caught somewhere between delight and madness. "But that's not my name." His voice was quiet. Gentle. "What is?" She leaned forward until her lips brushed the glass. "I forgot. Will you help me remember?" Back in his

quarters, Klunk accessed the facility's encrypted archives. He used a stolen keycode he hadn't touched since Version 28. He peeled back layers. Dug through blacked-out logs and broken indexes. And then he found her.

AZRAEL Subject V

Codename: Recluse

Assignment: Counterespionage / Deep Psychological Subversion

Operational Status: TERMINATED (Soft Shelved)

Notes: Initial neuro mapping failed. The subject displays hyper-reactive mirror neurons and an overclocked empathy center. Uncontrollable emotional dependency on primary handlers. Attempts to merge neural signatures. Displays dissociative behaviors, recursive fixation.

Mission fidelity: 0%

Threat containment level: 3

Disposition: "Unfit. Noncompliant. Highly intelligent. Dangerous in proximity to active Azrael."

The next night, he brought her a piece of chalk. White. Plain. Fragile. She squealed when she saw it. Clutched it to her chest like a gift from a god she'd stopped believing in. He sat down. Said nothing. She wrote on the glass: "Do you dream?" He stared at it for a long time. Then shrugged. She scribbled again, faster: "Dream of me." When he laughed, it wasn't the usual thing. Not jagged. Not sarcastic. Soft. Almost... human. A routine reset was scheduled for the next day. They prepped his next body. Recalibrated his tolerance threshold. Cleaned the slate. But Klunk didn't check in. Security found him asleep, actually asleep, for the first time in any recorded version. Outside her cell. One hand on the glass. Her palm was there too. Waiting.

RECLUSE, UNSANCTIONED THOUGHT CHAIN

Location: Cell V

Status: Containment breach (internal only) | Emotional saturation: MAXIMUM

Log unsaved. Thought spill occurred. Memory bleed imminent.

He came back. He came back. I didn't even scream this time when I saw him because I couldn't breathe, because my lungs folded in on themselves when he limped into view, real, not memory, not simulation, real. One boot gone. Bleeding again. Doesn't matter. He's always bleeding. That's how I know it's him. He bleeds just right. He looked so tired. So undone. So perfect. And I thought, maybe this is it. Maybe this is the version that stays. I was making sounds when he came. They weren't words. They never are anymore. Just... this thing that crawls up out of me when he gets close. A song made of hunger and nightmares and need.

If he were anyone else, it would've driven him mad. But he sat down. Just sat. Cross-legged, like it was natural to bleed out on cold tile outside my cage. No armor. No mission. No orders. Just him. For me. I pressed my palms to the glass. I didn't care how dirty it was. I would've cut myself on it just to feel closer. And he mirrored me. He mirrored me. Like he remembered. Like something inside him knew. I almost died from the way that made me feel. I told him they call me Recluse. But that's not my name. He knows that. I think he knows. I think he wants to know. I think he's digging for it in that ruined brain of his like a treasure someone buried alive. I whispered: "Will you help me remember?" I meant: Will you stay? Will you see me? Will you choose me? I would've torn out my throat and offered it if he'd asked.

The next night, he brought me chalk. Chalk. A stupid, fragile, nothing thing. And it was the most sacred object in the world. I held it like a holy relic. Like it could prove he was mine. Because who else would think of me? Who else would care? No one. Only him. I wrote: "Do you dream?" He just stared. So I wrote again, faster, because I couldn't hold it in: "Dream of me." Begged him to. Because if he doesn't, if he forgets me, I'll disappear. I'll vanish from everything except this room and this skin and this scream in my mouth that never stops. He laughed. Not the mission laugh. Not the cold one. A soft one. A real one. I almost cried. I almost smashed my head into the glass just to feel it deeper.

They scheduled his reset for the next day. I felt it coming like a sickness in the bones. I know the smell of it. I see the rhythm of their boots when they're dragging him to the chamber. But he didn't go. He didn't go. He slept outside my cell. He slept. And that's not something he does. Not unless it means something. Not unless his body's finally remembering where it belongs. His hand was on the glass. Mine was too. Like we'd died in that position and didn't know how to move on. Like the only thing real was the warmth leaking through the barrier. They'll try again. They'll reset him. Bleach him out. Scrub my fingerprints from his soul. And I will burn this place to the ground. I will claw my way into the next version of him. I will scream my name into his mouth. I will break every other name out of him. I don't care how many times they erase us.

He is mine. He will always be mine.

He just hasn't remembered how much yet. But he will. He will. Because I'm not just waiting anymore. I'm coming for him.

CHAPTER 8: EMOTIONAL SPIRAL

Something changed. Subtly at first, barely a ripple in the schedule. Then, gradually, a fracture. Klunk began requesting short-range missions only. No more deep insertions. Never a month-long cycle in the outer wastes. He wanted proximity. He wanted access. His requests were strange, but not unprecedented. Command logged it as burnout. The psych team flagged "early stage degradation." But Repent knew. Code knew, though he didn't say anything. Ice just stared longer than usual during orientation. Only Wrath laughed and muttered, "He found a ghost to haunt him back." Because of course it was her. Recluse. He stopped waiting for permission. He learned the shift rotation schedules, security blind spots, and thermal dead zones. It wasn't difficult; he was Azrael. He was the fracture they had sharpened into a knife. And her corridor? Often unguarded. Or conveniently unsecured. As if someone, maybe everyone, was letting him fall. Letting him drift closer. She greeted him the way a child greets a beloved hallucination. Palms pressed to the glass, grin too wide, eyes too sharp. Sometimes she traced the lines of his face with her fingertips, mapping his silhouette from memory. Other nights? He crossed the threshold. They never kissed. Never touched in the ways you would expect. Just long, silent moments. Her voice, lilting and bright, cut through his blood-soaked fog like moonlight through static. "Will you stay dead this time?" she would whisper. He always shook his head. She always pouted, eyes wide and shimmering.

MISSION LOG AZRAEL-3

Objective: Secure blackbox from downed recon drone

Result: Blackbox retrieved.

Civilian damage: high

Anomaly: The agent didn't self-terminate. Found cradling the drone. Audio fragment: "She'll love this."

She began collecting his gifts. Shattered visor lenses. Blood-soaked gloves. Hair wrapped wire coils from a ruined helmet cam. She kept them all in a box. "Gifts from a

ghost," she'd whisper, smiling as she stroked the bent antenna like a doll's hair. He once brought her a snapped comm receiver. She pressed it to her lips, then her chest. "You smell like endings," she murmured. "You make them worth it," he replied.

MISSION LOG , AZRAEL-3

Objective: Terminate high value defector in Old Seoul ruins

Result: Target neutralized. Agent left the mission zone early.

Anomaly: Body recovered under rubble. Agent's hand clutched a broken ID badge from a dead female civilian. Text on forearm: "I remember her better this way."

He started dreaming. Not training loops. Not mission echoes. Dreams. Her voice, humming nonsense lullabies. Her breath fogging the mirror in his skull. The way she said his name, as if it wasn't something lost, but a spell. He kept journals again. More unhinged than before. Blood instead of ink. The backs of mission maps. Wall etchings with glass shards when he ran out of paper.

ENTRY 267 "She smiled when I told her a joke. I don't think it was funny. I think she just likes my voice."

ENTRY 271 "Every time I come back, I count the cracks in her cell. There's more. Or maybe I'm seeing better."

ENTRY 278 "I want to stay broken. It means I get to see her." One of the nights, he didn't self-terminate, walked through the doors of Halcyon Base, soaked in blood, limping, and smirking. The debrief room was cold. Concrete and silence. Mahler glared. "You compromised three surveillance zones." "They didn't see me," Klunk replied. "You left two targets breathing." "They weren't who I was there for." "You," "I remembered her." And no one said a word after that. The visits stretched. He began sitting outside her room for hours. Sometimes inside. She would dance. Trace invisible maps on the floor with her fingernails. Murmur dead languages. Laugh for no reason. And when he whispered back? She always heard. "Do they know you're here?" she asked once. "Probably." "Will they be mad?" "They already are." "Will they take you away?" He smiled. "Not if I die first."

MISSION LOG , AZRAEL-3

Objective: Capture rogue engineer in Sector 9

Result: Engineer already deceased

Anomaly: Agent refused extraction for 11 hours. Sat alone in the snow. Audio: "I told her I'd bring back a story."

One night, she curled up against him. Quiet. Small. Head on his shoulder. Whispering noises, no words, just sound. "I'm not real, am I?" "You're more real than me." "I forget who I was." He looked at her like she was a thing he had built in his own mind. "Let me remember for you." She nodded. A promise sealed in nothing but breath and blood. He began skipping diagnostics. Lied through post op sync checks. Faked reboot pain thresholds. Told the medics what they wanted to hear, so they would stop asking what was really changing.

Repent found him slicing into his own hip socket one night, replacing his recall beacon with an empty pill capsule. "You're unspooling," she said. "I'm following the thread." "She's not real." "Neither am I." "You're feeding her delusion." "She feeds me." "This ends in a body bag, Klunk." "I've been in worse places."

She once asked him for a story. He told her one. About a dream where she called his name as the world collapsed around them. She clapped. Eyes wide. "Tell me that one again." And he did. Word for word. Like a prayer.

MISSION LOG AZRAEL-3

Objective: Disrupt arms deal in Subsurface Vault 12

Result: Vault breached. All hostiles neutralized

Anomaly: Agent repeated phrase: "Almost home"

Tech notes: Spike in neural ghost signatures. Sleep state data loops repeating during live ops. Recommendation: Mandatory psychological reevaluation. Status: Ignored.

Another night, he came to her crawling. One boot. One eye swollen shut. Blood dripping from his mouth. He slid through the door and collapsed beside her. She said nothing. Just took his hand. And they sat there, back to the wall, their shoulders touching. Two broken blueprints waiting to be erased. He didn't dream that night. He didn't rest. He just stayed. And for the second time in all his deaths, he didn't want to be resurrected.

CHAPTER 9: OPERATION BLEEDING ECHO

There was no briefing. No intel packet. No command feed. No extraction code. Just three words delivered via a dead channel: No extract planned. Klunk didn't blink. Didn't ask. Questions were for agents who expected to come home. The drop was too high. They knew that. His body slammed into the street like a thrown weapon, concrete cracking beneath the impact. Bone split. His femur snapped like a dry branch. Blood bloomed from his thigh like rust-tinted ink. He didn't scream. Not until he grabbed a shattered slab of rebar, set the bone against it, and punched, driving the leg back into alignment with a sickening crunch. Then he screamed.

A long, howling thing, ripped from the base of his spine. It echoed off steel, smoke, ruin. It echoed like the voice of a god no longer interested in mercy. Welcome pain. Familiar pain, as he wrapped his thigh in a compression dressing. The zone was already dead before he arrived. Now it was something worse. Fire floated in the sky like holy spirits caught mid-ascension. Ash danced in the air like dying moths. The corpses didn't look fresh. They looked forgotten. Civilians. Soldiers. Agents. Maybe even himself. He wasn't sure anymore.

He walked through it like a ghost who had decided to come back angry. There was no objective. Just one command burned into his mind: Neutralize threats.

So he did.

With a combat knife, until it broke in someone's spine. With his fists, until the skin peeled away and tendons began to fray. With his teeth, until blood coated his chin and he could taste the copper of memory itself.

MISSION LOG: CORRUPTED

Status: Mid Operation

Entry: "There's a man with my face hanging from rebar. One of me. An older version, I think. I almost cut him down. Almost." [Mental instability detected – flagged for review]

They tried to corner him. Twelve men in an old train tunnel. No lights. No comms. No mercy. He stood shirtless, his body raw and steaming, his eyes fogged with sweat and a lag in recall. He laughed. It wasn't amusement. It was release, like a dam breaking inside his chest. He dropped a rifle he had found earlier, as if it were too heavy with the weight of her memory. Then he charged. No tactics. No cover. Just velocity and bone. He broke the first man's skull with his heel, heel down, face gone. Snapped another's neck with his bare thighs. Ripped one man's tongue out and spat it against the wall. He moved like the final page of a war story no one wanted to finish. Her name. Not

Recluse. Not Subject V. Not Azrael. The one she whispered to him when she thought he was asleep. Naomi. That name, the real one. The one burned into his core now. He screamed it into the throat of the last man. Over and over, like it could bring her closer as he was prying his jaw away from his skull. The echoes bled out down the tunnel like dying birds. He started seeing her. In fire reflections. In shattered mirror shards. In the twitching limbs of men who died too slowly. She stood barefoot in the ruins, laughing, blood in her hair, pirouetting on glass like it was a stage made for her grief. "I'm almost done," he whispered, reaching. She tilted her head. And vanished in the smoke.

MISSION LOG: Status: Final Engagement

Entry: "He said he didn't want to fight. Said I reminded him of his son. I told him I was no one's son. Then I bit out his throat and cried."

[Final log marked – memory sync: 84%]

The last room. Dust, silence, a sunless sky bleeding in through broken skylight glass. An old man sat on a metal crate. No guards. No fear. A warlord? A target? A placeholder for this story's end? It didn't matter. It never does. Klunk stared at him. Blood matted down to his boots. Jaw clenched. Vision pulsing. The man didn't flinch. Klunk knelt. Offered his throat. The man hesitated. Then slit him open, gut to sternum, slow, with a tremble in his hand. Klunk didn't move. Not even as his insides spilled hot onto the concrete. Then, still grinning, he tackled the man anyway. They rolled together in blood and metal and silence. Klunk bit clean through the man's trachea.

Felt it collapse like soft clay under his teeth. Warm blood jetted into his mouth. He didn't swallow. He smiled. Then stillness. No more screams. No more motion. Just blood. Breath. The sound of his own name. Not the name Command gave him. Not Klunk. The name she gave him. He mouthed it. Over and over. Until even that faded into the dark. He lay on the cold ground, intestines half out, lungs failing. He looked up at the ceiling, as if it might turn into the sky. And smiled. Because for the third time since Version One, He didn't want to come back.

RECLUSE , PRIVATE THOUGHT LOG PRIOR TO AZRAEL-3 DEPLOYMENT

[LOCKED // NOT FOUND]

Location: Cell V

Time: -----

He came to me again. This time, crawling. Not the heroic kind of crawling. Not the soldier-drag of battlefield drama. This was different. He crawled like a man who had stopped pretending there was anything left to protect. Like something inside him had

finally broken in the right shape to fit me. One boot. One eye. One ruined mouth. And that voice, gone silent for once. He collapsed beside me. Slid against the wall like gravity had made its choice and picked me over everything else. I took his hand. Not because I needed to. Because I couldn't not. Because it was him. And me. And no one left to tell us no. We didn't speak. I wiped the blood from his lips with the edge of my sleeve. He didn't flinch. I pressed my head against his shoulder. And I thought: This is mine. I don't care if he dies here. As long as he dies touching me. He didn't reboot. Didn't twitch the way his other versions did. Didn't tremble like the resets used to make him. Didn't whisper system codes in his sleep. He just... rested. And I didn't know what to do with that kind of stillness.

So I closed my eyes. And tried to make my breath match his. They'll come for him. I know. They've tried already. Failed already. But this time feels final. He feels final. Not in a bad way. Not in the way they want. Final like answered. Final like belonged. He brought me that broken ID tag last week. Pressed it into my palm like a prayer. I thought it was junk. Another artifact for the box. But he looked at me and said, 'Naomi.' And I stopped breathing. Because no one has called me that since the simulation collapse. Since the test room. Since the mirrors cracked. Maybe ever. That was my name. I think.

And he, he remembered it.

Or made it up.

Doesn't matter.

It fits. It hurts the right way. It's mine again, because he said it. Naomi. It echoes differently than Recluse. It doesn't hiss. It doesn't isolate. It opens. I whisper it sometimes now. Naomi. Naomi. Naomi. Just to make sure it doesn't leave me again. And when he tells me stories, when he says he sees me in dreams, calling out as the world collapses, he uses that name now. And I clap every time. Because I want him to keep saying it until it's burned into his circuitry. Until he can't die without it.

He's skipping diagnostics. Lying through pain thresholds. Slicing into his own hip to gut the recall beacon. Some other woman called him unspooled. He told her, I'm following the thread. I know what thread he means. It's me. They say I'm dangerous. They're right. I'm dangerous because now I have a name. Because now I have someone carving it into his mission logs with blood and laughter and defiance. Naomi. The girl I was before they broke my mirror. The girl I became when he looked at me through the glass and remembered. I am not a fracture. I am the shadow between their lies. And if they take him from me now, I will peel this facility apart with my bare hands. I will chew through the walls. I will rewrite the termination code. I will slit the servers and crawl into

the core. And I will find him again. Even if I have to kill every version of him they build until I get the right one back.

Because Naomi doesn't forget.

Naomi remembers.

And Naomi is done waiting.

CHAPTER 10: A FINAL BREATH

He didn't black out right away. That would have been merciful. Mercy was never part of the design. The floor was cold. Metal, maybe. Or bone. It pressed up through his spine, indifferent. It welcomed him like a coffin he had worn too many times. Blood pooled out in a slow exhale, a cradle of red beneath the arc of his ribs. Each breath has more bubbles than air. He twitched once. Twice. Then held still. Listening. Not for alarms. Not for boots. For her. His hand, slick and trembling, moved to the base of his skull. The jack was hot. Still active. Still recording. Still... him. Fading, but real. Enough to remember. Enough to not forget. Not Recluse. Not V. Not the mistake the program filed under Asset Lost/Soft-Shelved. But the name he gave her. The one she whispered into his clavicle while tracing his spine like it was scripture. If I forget again... remind me I was real. He did now. Mouthed it into the air. Into the silence. Into the data dust floating above his blood. N-A-O-M-I. A sacred word. A relic syllable. And with it, A smile, cracked and bloody, stretched across his dying face like the last joke of a broken god. He saw her in the static. Spinning barefoot across padded floors, chalk dust on her palms, fragments of torn gloves braided into her hair. She turned, laughing, always laughing, always just out of reach. He had brought her a visor once. She wore it like a crown. He had bled on her window once. She called it a painting. She pressed her palms to the glass as if it could give way. As if it already had.

MISSION LOG: (Final , Corrupted) Status: UNSTABLE – TERMINAL

Entry: She said love is teeth. She said I had too many. I told her I need them, because I would chew through heaven to find her again.

[ERROR: TRANSMISSION LOST. END OF RECORD.]

He didn't scream. Didn't cry. Didn't plead. There was no one left to beg from. He just... bled. Soft. Slow. Deliberate. Like punctuation at the end of a long, brutal sentence. Like choosing to stop breathing for someone else to begin. And for the first time in seventy lives, it wasn't the system that claimed him. It wasn't the mission. It wasn't duty. He was

dying for her. And then, Silence. Stillness. Dark. Far below, in the cold, humming depths of Project Ouroboros, a monitor blinked to life.

AZRAEL-3 MEMORY FILE RECEIVED. BODY VESSEL PREPARED. SYNC IN PROGRESS. ERROR. No auto-boot detected. Manual override pending.

In the corner of the lab, rows of clone pods flickered under violet light. Tubes hissed. Vats shivered. One twitched. Then again. A hand rose to the glass, hesitant, shaking. Then a blink. Not mechanical. Not automated. Volitional. A heartbeat before the sync pulse engaged, a whisper rose, not from the chip, not from the cortex, but from somewhere deeper. Buried in memory. Tangled in madness. Lit with devotion.

A voice, wild and reverent: You see me.