

We Existed Once

We Existed
Once

Janae

I call it a drive, as if naming it makes it normal. As if I'm not running from something I can't remember, toward something I can't see. Every night, the same fire ignites in my chest, familiar and unbearable. I lace up my beat-up Converse, grab my keys, climb out the window, and drive. I'm not chasing anything. I'm responding to a feeling I don't have words for yet.

I don't do this whole sneaking out thing to be one of those 'rebellious teenagers'. It's not like I'm doing anything morally *wrong* per se. Thing is, I've never gotten caught, and I never plan to. My parents aren't the type to notice anyways. They've got their own issues—mostly between themselves. I go unnoticed at home, my existence shadowed by piles of homework and arguments a child should never have to hear. Usually, I pop on my headphones and keep turning up the volume until I think my ears will burst. Last year, I asked for a new pair of headphones for my birthday. You can probably guess how that conversation went.

"I'm sorry, hon, but I'm just not sure if we can afford that this year," My mom said, sympathetically.

"Oh for goodness sake, buy her the damn headphones, Laura!" My dad chimed in from the other side of the house.

Mom rolled her eyes and sighed. "Richard, you and I both know that that's not possible!" She was angry that he came into a discussion that didn't involve him. He tends to be pretty good at that.

"Well why not? It's the girl's birthday, after all!"

"Mom, it's fi—" I attempted.

"Just because it's her birthday doesn't mean she needs new headphones, Rich,"

"That's *exactly* what it means! God, why can't you just relax for once?"

“Well, maybe I would if you would make some more money!” she scoffed. “She’s turning sixteen. When I was that age, we had to *pay* to listen to our music . . .” she continued.

I slipped away back into my room, invisible as always. They left me with nothing but a blanket of guilt to wrap myself in. The arguments were usually something like that: an endless ping pong game of yelling that no one ever actually won. Ten minutes later, the house would fall silent again, as if what they said to each other meant nothing.

Those types of nights, are why I drive. Sure, the house is silent and empty at night, but it’s just different in my Toyota Camry, driving down a dark ribbon that doesn’t seem to end. The road is my sanctuary; I have the choice to turn right when nothing else in my life will. When I first snuck out to drive, I always followed a set path. Turn left onto Broadway, pass the set of five scraggly trees, and keep going straight for a few miles until you reach the old record store. I’d make another left and park in the front of the store, staring at the flickering *Closed* sign in the window. After a few minutes, I’d return the way I came, back to the place I dreaded the most.

These past few weeks though, it’s been getting better. Or should I say, colder outside. I love November; the days become shorter and the nights feel longer, which gives me more time to drive. The trees become vulnerable and naked, devoid of the leaves that once sat on their branches. The only thing that contrasted the grayness outside, were my stark green eyes, which I had unfortunately inherited from my father. Recently I’ve been experimenting with new paths to take when I drive, exploring different sides of the town. I’m finally realizing that I can go anywhere I want. I could run away and no one would notice.

Ramon

The outer edges of Symeria are my home. It's where I track anomalies, analyze patterns, code new programs and re-run technology, hoping that maybe I'll find something new. It also happens to be where my home is. I live alone in an abandoned antique shop, so far away from the town that you'd think it was part of a different city. But that part isn't important. Today, I finally proved myself correct. After six and a half months, I finally found something new. Although, it wasn't entirely what I was expecting.

There was a loud beeping on my tracker this morning at around 4:50 a.m., waking me up from a deep sleep. I felt like a puppet being controlled by the sound of the tracker. I immediately shoved the quilt off of me and sped over to the ear splitting sound. The pulsating red light was something I had never seen before. It was bright, and the noise it made was extremely irritating. My heart raced as I picked the tracker up, the familiar cold metal sending chills down my arms and back. I furrowed my eyebrows as I tapped *Examine* on the holographic menu it pulled up, nervous to see what it had found. The menu expanded, pulling new information from multiple databases and plastering it all over the screen. I set the tracker down on the floor and stared at the bubbles of information it showed. It looked like one of those corkboards with hundreds of sticky notes crowding every corner. To any normal person it would look like an unintelligible mess, but I designed this myself. I noticed something at the top of the menu. It read:

| **Janae Ella Raymond** |

A girl. The tracker scanned a girl. Of course it did. Because it doesn't work. If the tracker worked, it would show an anomaly; a pattern or break in The Network. Not an innocent girl. I worked so hard to build this tracker, God only knows how long it's been. I thought that if I could get this to work, I could figure out what's been going on in my life. Maybe try to fix it and go back to being the boy I was six months ago.

Flash forward to right now. It's 7 a.m, and I've been researching this girl all morning, writing down connections and anything else that comes to mind. I can't seem to get a summary of her, though. It's as if she never existed in the first place.

Either Janae is lucky, or she's exactly what I've been looking for.

My stomach growls at me, interrupting my research session. I should probably grab something to eat. I throw off my blue light glasses and they clatter on the table. I grab my heavy duty jacket because, surprise, it's cold outside. I always hated November. Everything starts to die a little: the trees, the light, even the warmth in the air. Winter creeps in like it's trying to smother what's still alive. The days shrink, the nights drag on forever, and I can't help but feel like the cold is a reminder of everything that's gone. Don't even get me started on snow. Yuck.

I think my hatred for snow stemmed from growing up somewhere where it didn't exist. In Mexico, snow was never even a thought. There was only heat and the constant need to be outside. My brother and I spent entire afternoons chasing a football through the humidity, our shirts clinging to our backs, the air heavy but familiar. I never felt trapped by the heat. If anything, I begged my mother for just a few more minutes before coming inside. "*iVas a tener cáncer de piel!*" she'd warn—telling me the sun would surprise me with cancer one day. But it felt so good against my face, and the sweat that ran down my chin felt like tears that didn't yet know how to fall.

Hunger always followed the sun. It reminded me of the pozole my abuela used to make—rich, thick, and impossible to recreate. She never wrote the recipe down, kept the spices a lifelong secret. There's no record of it anywhere, and sometimes I think that's the cruelest part.

If I could get anything back from her, it would be that. And a hug of course—one where I actually knew that it would be the last one from her.

I search for my keys for what feels like the twentieth time this week. I can't seem to keep them in one place. After I find them in a place that doesn't make sense, I open the front door, the rusty bell above it jingling as I leave.

I'm hit with a gust of wind. Sharp and icy, straight to my ears. I get inside and slam the door, shivering at the icy gust of air that was brought with it. The *Little Trees* air freshener hanging on the review mirror is almost a year old now and surprisingly, it still smells like Piña Colada. I rev the engine once, then twice, and on the third try, like always, she starts up. The engine coughs to life, and I can tell my car is just as tired as I am. I've been living off of gas station snacks from Ronda's for the past six months. Partially because it's the closest source of food to the antique shop if you don't want to drive for an extra hour. I've resorted to stealing ever since I found out that no one cares. I tried to pay one time and the man at the counter just stared mindlessly at the isles behind me. I waved in the air and around his face to see if he would register me but he didn't. He just scratched his bald head and helped the customer who was buying a thousand Twinkies. Okay. She was buying two Twinkies. But that's still more than any human should ever consume.

I think about that day a lot. It was strange and sort of soul-crushing. I felt completely and utterly *invisible*. Alone in the world without an ounce of acknowledgement. After six months of that, it starts feeling almost unbearable.

There's two cars in the parking lot when I get to Ronda's: an old Ford F150, which I believe belongs to "*The Bald Man*", as I like to call him, and a 2005 Toyota Camry that I hadn't ever seen before today. I walk inside Ronda's, triggering the *-diiing dooong-* of the sliding doors. I'm met with the stench of bleach and slushie mix. The circles of twirling colors ten feet in front of me are mesmerizing. I grab my usual things: a family size bag of Santitas tortilla chips, ingredients for peanut butter sandwiches, a pack of plastic water bottles, a few sweet treats, and

a premade breakfast sandwich. Every time I grab a breakfast sandwich, it's soggy and cold—I've gotten used to it enough that it's almost comforting. I walk behind the counter to grab a few plastic bags. *The Bald Man* is half asleep behind the cash register. His real name is Cody, but I like *The Bald Man* better.

I slip out of Ronda's like I didn't just commit a federal crime. Before I can make it to my car, I notice a girl sitting on the curb outside of the gas station. I glance at her for a second. Her head is down, pressing into her knees. I stare at her awkwardly, bags in my hands. Although there's no use in talking to her, I can't just leave her here like this. I decide it's best to just try to say something.

There's a few beats of silence before I tenderly ask, "Are you good. . . ?" My voice comes out crackly and tired. It's the first time I've spoken since . . . God, I don't know how long it's been. Her head snaps up. My eyes grow wide and my heart stops. I'm met with the most beautiful green eyes I've ever seen. Their emerald hue breaks the pattern of the dead winter colors around her. She stares at me like she can really *see me*, not just some absent minded look that happened to land on me. Except, the parts of her eyes that are supposed to be white are completely red, and her face is damp, like she just walked out of a sauna.

"You . . . you can see me . . .?"

"You can hear me . . .?"

Janae

I'm hitting the road again tonight. The stress has been getting to me lately, and I don't even know why. I have two new pimples on my forehead and they're driving me crazy. I suppose it's because the yelling at the house is getting worse, and the homework has been getting more heavy. I swear to God they give me too much work to complete at home. It's a Friday night, so my parents are almost certainly drunk and asleep on the couches. Usually they go out, partying together every Friday night to 'relieve their stress'. Thanks to Trish, mom's sober best friend, they're always able to get home.

It's really cold out tonight. Or, I guess I should say this morning. It's only 1:30-ish and I'm going out much earlier than I usually do, but I think I'll use that time to explore Symeria more. It's strange: I've lived here my whole life, and yet, I barely know any street names. I put on my favorite gray hoodie, grab my keys, slip on my converse, unplug my phone from where it was charging, and head towards my window. Next to the window, hanging on the wall is my mirror. I steal a glance in it and I'm repulsed by what I see. Maybe it's just the lighting, but my eyes look so tired. *I look tired.* My eyebags are only getting worse and my hair is all tangled. I frown and direct my attention to the window. My heart beats faster as I unlock and slide it to the left. This part is always the scariest because I don't know what could be lurking behind the window. The baseboard creaks as I step onto it. I pop my head through the window and look around apprehensively. The moon illuminates the grass underneath me, and the nearest lamp post seems miles away.

I step down about two feet to reach the ground and shove the window back until there's about one inch left between it and the house. I'm giving it room to breathe, and also a grip for when I return, so that I'll be able to open the window back up.

The town is quiet. It's the kind of quiet when everyone silently knows that it's about to snow, but it isn't quite snowing yet. It's that anticipation, the feeling of not knowing when it's

going to happen, that makes the snow so special. I kind of wish it were snowing right now because it would make this moment even more magical. I cross the rocks in the front of my house to get to my car, and they seem 20 times louder than usual. The same thing happens when I shut the door. It's like everything is screaming as loud as they can, saying, 'Hey! Janae is sneaking out! Come on and catch her in the act!'. My heart races at the thought of being confronted.

As soon as I drive away down the street, I'm taken to a whole new world. The air feels lighter, there's no weight on my shoulders, and best of all, I'm alone. It's a funny feeling—being alone. It feels like I'm the only person in the world, but I don't have anyone to share that solitude with. Streetlights kiss the road rhythmically, lighting my path every 20 yards. I make a few right turns, then a left, and then a U-turn to spice things up. I just might be the only one outside driving right now. At least, it feels that way. I let go of the wheel with one hand and stick it out the window, letting the crisp air freeze my hand off. I stare at my reflection in the rearview mirror and for once I don't look as tired.

In my peripheral, I spotted a wide open dirt road. I jerk the wheel, turning onto the rocky pathway. I bumped up and down with the car. The tires made that familiar popping sound, like they're upset with the way the pebbles are placed.

The dirt road led to an empty lot in the middle of nowhere. It was dark, but not totally pitch black. The mountains surrounded me, making me feel totally secluded. I turned the key counterclockwise and the engine hummed off. The headlights remained on as I sat there and decided whether or not I wanted to go outside. I turned off the headlights and opened the car door, slamming it behind me. The air was frigid, and I shivered upon exiting.

I walked over to the front of the car, my shoes crunching the gravel beneath me. I sat on the hood, scooting myself closer to the windshield. I laid down slowly, cautious not to hit the wipers on the windshield. Doing so, it occurred to me that there was no light pollution out here; I could see each and every star. If I wanted to, I could stay out here all night and count them

until they disappeared underneath the sunlight. It looked as if someone had burst open a paint can, splattering stars in every direction across a canvas of indigo.

Putting the key back in the ignition makes me feel heavy because I know that my only destination from here is back home. I'm not ready to go back home, but I suppose it's getting late. Or early? I'm not sure which tense to use.

I drive back down the dirt road, down the highway, through the main streets, and onto my street. I park on the side of the road, cold and tired as ever. I cross the yard to get to my bedroom window and that's when I see it. My window is *locked*.

I'm dead meat. I'm totally in trouble. My parents definitely found out, I'm gonna get grounded, God, who knows what's going to happen? Will I go to jail? My heart is pounding in my chest and it's not helping. I tug on the window just to make sure it didn't shut because of the wind. It's definitely locked. Or at the very least, it's just really stuck. My only choice is to go through the front door.

I twist the metal knob, cautiously. It's locked, too. Thank God I have a key, I don't know what I would have done if I didn't. I don't see any lights on through the window, so maybe they're fast asleep? Maybe the window really just shut all by itself.

It's pitch black inside the house except for a single blinking green light in the corner of the living room. I'm pretty sure that thing is just the TV, though. I open up my phone and turn on the torch. The sudden brightness cuts through the dark so sharply that I have to blink several times just to see straight. I tiptoe down the hallway, the floor groaning beneath me like it's *trying* to give me away. But the house stays quiet. No sign of my parents passed out on the couch this time, they must've made it to bed. Good. One less thing to deal with. But now it was time for me to make it to *my* bed. I open the door and scan the bedroom. Exactly how I left it: clothes piled up in the corner, my textbooks scattered near my desk, and my Piña Colada chapstick remains on my bedside table. I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. I close the door behind me then turn towards my bed.

I freeze.

The blanket rises. Just slightly. Like someone's breathing underneath it.

For a full second, I can't move. My brain refuses to understand what I'm seeing. Then my hand starts shaking, and my heart is pounding so loud I'm sure you could hear it from a mile away.

There's someone in my bed.

I can't even gather the courage to move the blanket off. I want to say that I'm just imagining things. But this is *real*. I swear it is. There is someone

in.

my.

bed.

I stumble backwards so fast I hit the door and bolt out of the room. I run down the hall, trip on the stairs, and bang on my parents door.

"MOM! Mom . . .!" I'm breathing so hard, clutching my phone close to my chest, trying my hardest not to pass out completely. She doesn't budge. "DAD! Please listen to me. There's someone in my bed!" Still nothing. I flick on the light, pace over to their bed and violently shake my mom. "MOM. WAKE UP . . .!" It's like they can't even hear me. I'm practically sobbing now, heart still running marathons.

"WHY CAN'T YOU HEAR ME?" I scream, tears streaming down my cheeks. I collapse onto the floor, hoping they'd hear my sobs instead of my screams. I whip out my phone, hands shaking as I dial 911. This is my only option, right?

The phone rings once.

Then twice.

Then three times.

By four, I'm hyperventilating, and at five I decide to give up.

That's when I hear a voice.

“Hello?” I ask shakily, standing back onto my feet. But the voice isn’t human.

“Your call could not be taken. Goodbye!”

I scream out in frustration, my head spinning. *What the hell is going on?!* My parents are sleeping so effortlessly through my cries, just like they had when I was a baby. I picture myself as a toddler, stuffed bunny in hands, tears streaming down my face, all because I had asked for a bedtime story. I tried to do it myself, but my imaginative bedtime stories were never enough to comfort my cries.

I’m pulled back to reality, my heart pulsating raging blood through my system. I ran to the front door. My last resort is to go to the police station. There is *literally* someone else in my bed. How could my parents not wake up to their own daughter's blood-curdling screams?

I’m terrified as I drive down the road. Ten minutes ago, the road was my sanctuary—now it’s my only path to safety. I don’t even know what they’re going to do. What if they think I’m pranking them? I mean, what just happened to me was so surreal that I don’t think I would believe me, either. I press harder on the gas pedal, furrowing my eyebrows out of anger instead of confusion. I’m angry that my parents didn’t wake up. Angry that they didn’t care.

I arrived at the police station and parked my car not so parallel to the lines. There’s hardly anyone in the parking lot at this hour anyway. I yanked my keys out of the ignition so hard I thought I might’ve snapped them. The closer I walk to the doors of the police station, the more petrified I get.

“Hello, hi, so um, there’s a person. In my house. In my bed.” I stare wide-eyed at the dude behind the counter. He looks more tired than *me*. It’s like he also found a person laying in his bed. He just stares at his computer, unanswering.

“Hello?” I repeat. I wave a hand in front of his face. His head hangs over his shoulders and his stubble looks like it itches.

“Officer Orem,” a loud voice booms from behind me. I turn around, and the officer in front of me snaps up to look, too. The sheriff—I’m assuming—tells him, “We need you back on case four-fourty-three.”

“You got it.” He responded. He turned back to his computer and started tapping away. This couldn’t be. Had I actually become invisible? This must be a dream. This *had* to be a dream. “Is this some sort of sick joke?” I yelled out into the police station. “Someone, please, shoot me if I’m dreaming! Take me out of this Hell!” I shouted.

But no one heard me. Not a single soul. The police station was more empty than ever, my screams bouncing off of the walls and slapping me cold on the face. What was I to do? More tears streamed down my face as I rushed out of the police station. If the police couldn’t help me, then who could?

I cried and cried and cried as I drove through Symeria. I was too tired, too stressed, too confused to understand whatever could be happening. Why was everyone ignoring me? And why on God’s green Earth was there someone in my bed? My heart and head pounded against each other, as if my whole body had been thrown off by the situation.

I’m dehydrated, tired, confused and scared. I just needed to sleep. I would’ve done so in my bed. But I can’t.

I have to remind myself that there is someone else in my bed.

I drive for what feels like years. I know it’s likely only been an hour or so, but I convince myself otherwise. I spot Ronda’s, one of the crappier gas stations towards the end of the city. The parking lot is completely empty, so I decided to pull in there. The sky is becoming lighter and I know soon it will be morning. I sit on the curb right outside of the gas station, blowing into my cupped hands to hopefully feel less cold. I lay my head down into my lap. My knees press into my forehead and I can feel the blood rushing underneath my skin. My eyelids fall heavy, and sooner than later, I’m pulled out of reality.

Ramon

“I have working eyes, of course I can see you.” The girl says. I raise my eyebrows.

“No. Miss, you don’t understand. For the past six months I’ve been *invisible*.” I lean into the air, just slightly closer to her. “No one would make eye contact with me, and they stared past me like I was just some ghost in their own perfect world.” I said, trying to explain the gravity of the situation to her. But she could never understand.

“This morning,” She starts, then quietly looks down at nothing in particular. Perhaps the concrete is less intimidating than me. “Everybody suddenly ignored my presence. And . . . I—” Her voice breaks, and my face softens. I pace over to the girl cautiously and sit next to her, setting my things down in front of my shoes. I watch as a tear streams down her chin.

“I’m sorry, it’s just—It’s been a very rough morning for me.” she says. I turn my attention to the sky. The sunrise is a powdered dust stretching across the horizon.

“Yeah. I can tell.” I clear my throat. “What’s uh—what’s your name?” I ask. She tucks a piece of her brown hair behind her ear.

“Janae. My name’s Janae.” Time stops and her voice fades out of my mind. Blood rushes to my skull, flooding my thoughts with something I never thought would be possible. Everything my tracker said, everything I thought was a failure—it was *correct*. I am talking to her: Janae Ella Raymond. That’s the girl. *How is this even possible? What are the chances?* My mind runs wild with confusing questions I won’t be able to answer.

“Hey!” She interrupts my thoughts.

“Huh?” I respond, snapping back to reality.

“It’s rude to stare you know.” She fumes at me, half joking. She fixes her hair, brushing through it with her fingers.

“Sorry. . . I didn’t mean to . . . I was just—” I trailed off, not realizing I was blankly staring right at her.

“What was your name?” She interrupts.

“Uh. Ramon.”

“Nice to meet you, Ramon.” She says and looks down at her phone.

“Look, Janae, I—” I pause. *How do I even bring this up to her? How do I tell her that she’s an anomaly?* She blinks at me. I blink at her.

“What?”

“You . . . You’re special, Janae. There’s something in this town, and I uh . . .” I bounce my leg up and down, trying to find my words.

“Are you okay?” She asks me. What a bold question to ask. Because I don’t know if I’m okay. I don’t know what the hell is going on anymore.

“I’m a coder. When I became invisible to everyone, I hid away in an abandoned antique shop and I’ve been tinkering with technology ever since. I made a tracker—a device that could maybe help me analyze what’s been happening with . . . us.” I pause, unsure of what to say next.

“Go on.” She says.

“My tracker went off this morning. You, Janae, popped up as the subject. Likely, if I’m not mistaken, it happened when *you* became invisible to everyone—unheard from your family, your friends. Anyone, really.” She pauses in thought, taking this information in.

“Are you sure there isn't another Janae in town? That can't be me.”

“Ella Raymond.” I say, finishing her name. But then she does something unexpected. She makes a buzzer noise with her mouth.

“That’s not my middle name. You’ve got the wrong person.” Panic spreads across my face, expanding across my eyes and lifting up my eyebrows.

“That’s not even possible, I . . . I—” Her giggles interrupt my train of thought.

“You should’ve seen the *look* on your face!” She laughs more, her tears dying down and seeping into the crevices of her cheeks. “I mean, I’m the one who should be worried like that because this *stranger* knows my full legal name but, God, *you* were so worried! You really

thought that I wasn't Janae I mean, who even names their kid Janae anymore, am I right? I just—" She rambles in between chuckles before her smile fades. I narrow my eyes at hers and furrow my eyebrows, before feeling a smile tug at the corners of my mouth. Before I know it, I'm also smiling.

"So your name is Janae Ella, right?" I ask, putting my head down out of embarrassment .

"Yeah. That's me." She says, her smile spreading across her face again. "Wait, but for real, how do you know my full legal name?" She puts a hand between us like a stop sign. I sigh, realizing that was the first time I had laughed in a long time.

"Like I was saying earlier, I'm a coder. I don't have everyone's full legal names in a database laying around. I'm not a *creep*." I pause. "Symeria, however . . . *they're* the real creeps." She smiles, and I can tell there's been a weight that was lifted off of her shoulders.

"Well what do you suggest?" She looks up at me, emerald eyes blinking into my soul.

"Hey. I-I don't wanna sound too forward with this, but . . . would you want to come with me to the antique shop? I've had this feeling about you, and I think that we could actually get back to normal if we work together. I finally met someone else that's been . . ." I pause for the lack of a better word. ". . . *erased*, you know?". I wanted to ask her to run off with me, come start a life away from the world that didn't acknowledge us as real. But I had just met this girl, and my heart was already racing just sitting next to her. Janae sniffs and covers her face, taking a deep breath. I let her breath for a minute. I was an emotional wreck when I was erased, too. She lets out a loud huff, and then jumps up from the curb. She plants her hands onto her hips.

"Alright, *Ramon*." She adds a dramatic accent to it, like she's trying to pronounce it 'authentically'. Memories of my father flashed behind my eyes. I thought about when my father would say my name. He always rolled the R like my name was meant to be respected.

My name was the only part of me he ever seemed to respect.

“Let’s do this.” She pauses, then clenches her stomach as I listen to an audible grumble. “Uh, but first . . . do you mind if we grab some food?” She reaches her hand out towards me. I’m pulled up by the sheer force of her yanking me up.

“Woah, calmaté,” I say. She skips inside the gas station and I puff out a chuckle. She looks around the isles like a kid in a candy store. I find her in front of the energy drink refrigerator, looking at all the colorful choices.

“So you’re telling me that I can just take anything and they won’t notice, right?” she whispers.

“Sorry, I couldn’t hear you,” I cup my ear sarcastically. “You don’t have to whisper.” She smirks and brings her face to my cupped ear. I regret my decision because the next second my ear is met with a blaring,

“SORRY!” I squeeze my eyes shut, revolting at the sound. She giggles and my heart skips a beat.

“Yes, you’re *invisible*. You can scream as loud as you want or steal anything you want.” I say. She looks down and plays with the ring on her finger.

“Yeah, I guess I am . . . invisible. Or how did you say it again? Erased?”

“Yep.” She snatches a blue RedBull and stares at it.

“Do you think I’ll ever be back to not being invisible again?” She starts heading out the door.

“That’s why I need *you*, Janae.” I point at her energy drink. “And that’s not gonna cut it for breakfast. Go grab some real food. You’re stealing it, after all.”

“What do you mean?” Janae asks, picking up a soggy breakfast sandwich.

“That’s an energy drink. I’m pretty sure I saw a study about those giving people heart attacks.”

“No . . . you said you needed me.” She pauses, scratching behind her ear. “What exactly does that mean?”

“I just—you’re the first person I’ve talked to in months.” I stop talking because I realize the two ways *I need you* could be taken. “I didn’t mean I *need* you.” I blurt out. “But like, you’re erased, and I’m erased, so like . . .” I paused, locked eyes with her, raised my eyebrows, and then awkwardly began walking away. Heat rose up my cheeks.

“So where’re we going?”

“I guess my house.” I say. “How old are you, by the way?” I ask, holding my breath.

“Seventeen.” She says in between bites of her sandwich. “You?”

“Well, at least we have *something* in common.” I say, holding open the door for her to leave Ronda’s.

“I’ll just follow behind you if that’s okay?”

“Yeah. Nos vemos.” I say.

“What?” She turns towards me.

“Oh—sorry . . .” I apologize. “Nos vemos means ‘see you’. I haven’t really talked to anyone in a while, I usually only use my native language when I’m alone.” I laughed nervously, afraid of what she would say about my culture. There’s a moment of quiet.

“It’s cute.” She says, and then walks away to her car without a second thought.

I’ve never felt more confused and nervous in my life.

Janae

“So you live in an antique shop?” I ask the boy who I just met. I’m still wrapping my head around it all: I met a boy today at Ronda’s and now I’m here, walking to his *house*. The boy’s name is Ramon. His hair is all puffy, and all I want is to run my hands through it.

“Yeah, I mean. I don’t *live* here,” he says with air quotes. “But in all technicality, yeah, I live here.”

“Wow, that’s a big word for a seventeen year old.” I say sarcastically.

“Excuse me?” He says. I roll my eyes and frown.

“I’m just teasing,” Clearly this guy doesn’t understand my type of humor and how I use it as a crutch. My mind begins running wild as he opens the door to the antique shop, the small bell above the door jingling as he does.

Am I going to live with this guy? What will my parents think? Oh, wait, they don’t care anyways. Well how am I going to survive? I don’t have any money! Oh, yeah, I can just steal things. But that feels wrong. I’m stealing. That’s not me. Wait, why am I with this guy in the first place? Could he be lying to me? Did I believe every word he said just because he was cute? How is it possible that people can just simply get erased? That’s literally not even possible. Wait, oh my God, I’m invisible. How do I live like that? Will it be this way forever?

And just like that, there’s tears coming out of my eyes again. It’s been so hard to process this all and I’ve been reflecting on the past because of it. When I was a little girl, I only really cried about things happening *around* me, so this wasn’t like me at all—to cry so much because of a situation *happening* to me. I shouldn’t be crying, but I’m just so scared. I’m not even trying to cry, the tears just fall silently without asking me first.

“I can tell you need time to process everything.” Ramon stops my thoughts.

“Huh? Oh, yeah.” I say, wiping my face. I take a deep breath and look up at him. He has dark brown eyes. Like, *really* dark brown eyes. Almost black, but just brown enough that you can say that they’re brown when people ask what color his eyes are. Then I’m looking at his eyelashes, because why the hell does he have longer eyelashes than I do? That is so not fair.

“You have long eyelashes.” I blurt out. *Oh my God did I just say that out loud?*

“Uh, thanks.” Ramon says, and chuckles. “Don’t you want to come inside?” I realize that I’m standing two feet from the door, staring at his eyelashes like an idiot.

“Oh, yeah.” I laughed nervously. He probably wishes that any other girl became erased so he wouldn’t have to deal with me.

I walk through the creaky shop doors and I’m met with a thousand lamps staring at me. I’m surprised that most of them still work, considering that this place is so called ‘abandoned’.

“Check this out,” Ramon says to me, and walks over to the corner of the shop. He snaps, and all of a sudden, every single lamp turns off. I whip my head around, nervous to where Ramon went. The sun shines through the windows, producing a hazy glow in the shop, but it doesn’t travel far. I spin around again, but everything ahead of me is just dark.

“Boo.” A voice says. My heart jumps out of surprise and confusion. *Why’s he doing this? Were my suspicions correct? Could Ramon really be a kidnapper?* I didn’t have time to react. I thrust the side of my body into him, completely forcing the air out of him. He grunts. “What the hell was that for?” My body switches into fight or flight mode, and for some reason, I’m choosing fight mode. I back up slowly, bumping into a table. I’m cautious not to break anything, but at this point it’s between these 50 year old tables or my life. My hands graze along the edge of a chair, picking it up and holding it against my chest like a shield. My lungs work up and down and my heart hammers against my ribs so hard that I can feel them becoming sore. Ramon’s silhouette contrasts against the light coming through the windows, and I can only make out the outline of his jacket. I’ll admit that I’m terrified.

“I . . . I have a chair!” I yell out shakily. My attempts at scaring him are useless, though. His silhouette inches forward, and I don’t dare waste another second. I threw it full force at him, not even thinking about what I would do next.

“¡Santa mierda!” He clambers to the ground. I’m not sure what those words meant and I don’t think I wanted to know. There’s a click after he falls, and the lamps come back on, each after the other, like how apartment windows light up in the city when the sun goes down. Ramon is on the floor, rubbing his side and wincing. I almost feel bad for a second, but then I remember that Ramon is definitely a kidnapper and I had to put him in his place. But the way he’s writhing in pain twists my heart in a way I can’t explain.

“I’m not gonna hurt you.” He says breathily, still rubbing his side. “But it seems you can’t say the same thing . . .” My heart drops to my stomach and I immediately feel remorseful.

“I . . . I just—”

“Thought I was going to kill you? Like this was some sort of set up?” He says, huffing as he gets up from the ground.

“Yeah . . .” I trail off.

“I get it.” He sighs, dusting off his shirt. “I was there once too. I’m here to help, not to harm.” He says, picking up the chair that I threw at him and setting it next to another side table. Something sharp pangs my heart, like a feeling of guilt and confusion. The damage has been done—I can’t take back throwing a chair at him.

“I’m really sorry.” I say. I take a moment to look around the antique shop, even though I’m still terribly embarrassed. The silence after my apology is grueling. I wanted more confirmation from him, but there’s just nothing. So I keep exploring. I drag my fingers across old tables, picking up layers of dust that are probably millions of years old. There’s so many broken cabinets, wooden desks, gold embellishments and vintage fabrics. It feels like I’ve taken a trip back to the 1960’s. There’s a rug in the middle of the shop that I’m drawn to, and I bend down to touch it gently. There’s beautiful swans peacefully swimming in the middle of a pond. It

tells a story that I want to learn every detail about. The border of the rug is made to look like a vintage painting, a specific golden brown trim running along the edges of the fabric. There are trees on the sides of the pond, bending down towards the water to hopefully get a taste of what it feels like to be a swan.

“That rug has been here forever.” Ramon says, taking me out of my trance.

“Really.” I say, more like a statement rather than a question. “I love it.”

“I’m glad you do.” He smiles faintly and adjusts the thin silver chain on his neck.

“Did you get that chain from here in the antique shop?” I force a slight smile even though his is fading.

“Actually, it was my younger brother’s. He was always more into fashion than I was . . .” He trails off. “I’m sure that he’s living a good life without me right now.”

I can’t tell if he’s implying that he passed away and I don’t want to dig, so I just say, “I’m so sorry.”

“Oh, no, he didn’t—” He stops, like he’s gathering his thoughts. “It’s just that ever since I became ‘erased’, I’ve had this theory that somebody identical has replaced me. I don’t know how it happened, but like I said, it’s only a theory.” He folds his arms, putting away his hands that hypnotize me. I think about what he said for a second because this means that the stranger in my bed very well could have been . . . *me*? I spiral for a split second, drowning in all the possibilities of what *could* have happened, what *is* happening, and what *will* happen.

“Can you show me your theories?” I ask. Ramon raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, uh . . . Okay . . . where do you wanna start?”

“I don’t know. But I might’ve just thought of something else that could help both of us out.” I say. I spot my RedBull I stole earlier on a side table near the front door. I must’ve placed it there before I attacked him. My mouth waters as I pick it up and crack it open. Ramon watches me for a few seconds while I take a few thirsty sips. I look away, embarrassed.

“Get in my car. We’re going somewhere I’m not supposed to tell anyone about.”

Ramon

She bites her fingernails, anxiously sitting in the passenger seat, and I find it kind of cute.

"Janae, there's something I need to tell you," I say. I'm really trying not to make this seem scary, but in all honesty, it just is. She shifts in her seat towards me, but I can't afford looking at her right now.

"What is it?" She asks. I struggle finding the right words, because there's a lot to it.

"I used to work for The Network." She stares at me, then her eyes back onto the road.

"What's that? A charity program?" She takes a sip of her RedBull and I sigh at her innocence.

"Symeria's government: they call it The Network. I'm not surprised that you've never heard of it because they try to keep their work hidden. They say it's 'best for all of us' if it remains mostly secret. The reason for this? I have no idea." I tap on the steering wheel, almost as nervous as Janae. "Most people who do know about it just assume it's our small town's government. But the truth is, The Network is *huge*." I can tell she's thinking about this. She tends to go really quiet when she's pondering, almost like she's zoned out. She drinks the last bit of her RedBull, tipping it high up towards the roof of the car.

"Why are you telling me this?" She asks me, crunching the can.

"When I turned eighteen, my father said I would be doing the same work as him. Turns out, that was to help govern the town of Symeria." I pause, realizing I still didn't answer her question. "Well if you put two and two together . . . I'm a coder, and I used to work for The Network. I was a coder for The Network."

"Oh, I see." Her tone becomes gray, like she's still trying to wrap her head around what The Network even is.

“Right. They have a specific building way out in the eastern edges of Symeria dedicated to the people that work for it. It’s pretty high tech if you ask me.”

"Interesting." She replied. "Is this going to help us find out why we're invisible?"

"Sort of." I replied. "This is still part of my theory, and there's something that I need to show you in order for you to partially understand it."

“So you’re going to take me to a super-top-secret-government building?” she asked a little excitedly.

“Sí,” I smirk back. She giggles and looks out the window. The Network’s buildings look just like any ordinary apartment complex like the rest of the city, only they’re way out from the other buildings, and it’s surrounded by dead grass, weeds, and a barbed wire fence. There’s a gate at the entrance of the fence that you need to enter in a code for. Luckily, they haven’t changed the code since they built this thing, and I have the code memorized.

I slow down the car, pulling off of the main road and onto the side road that leads to the parking lot of the programming building. It looks like a ghost town. The trees are dead, not a blade of grass in sight, and there’s rusty old scraps of metal everywhere. It’s changed a lot since I was working here back in May. I thought a government-owned building would have higher standards than this.

“Well, we’re here now. I hope you don’t get too creeped out.”

Janae

Ramon gets out of the car and enters the code. He makes sure to hide it from me just in case, even though there's no one out here and no one can see us anyway. While he's typing away—I'm assuming the passcode had to be insanely long to ensure security—I look around Ramon's car. The old fabric is torn and dusty, and I wonder if at one point, the seats were once soft and new. I notice a spiderweb of cracks creeping from the corner of the windshield, carrying the light in its sharp, uneven lines. There's an old Piña Colada *Little Trees* hanging on the rearview mirror which would definitely explain the scent. I'm not complaining though, Piña Colada is my favorite. I look at the glovebox and notice a small piece of white sticking out of it. I look up, notice that Ramon is still typing in the code, then decide it's safe to investigate. Pulling down the glovebox, a square white paper flies out and lands faced down. I pick it up, realizing that I'm holding a polaroid. There's a date: 03/18/14. I turned the picture over. It was warm and innocent, but holding it felt like a touching moment that Ramon could never get back. Of course, I'm assuming Ramon is in this picture, but I can't quite tell because the face next to the lady's is all blurry. It was a sweet picture—two smiles pressed close. Whatever happened on that day must have been important enough to keep a permanent picture of.

The gate creaks open, very slowly. Ramon gives me a thumbs up and hops back into the car. He sees me holding the polaroid and his eyes grow wide. He snatches the picture from me and studies it. I can see his eyes running wild with emotion that I can't quite decipher.

"Where . . . did you find this?" He asks me, looking into my eyes with a desperate need for confirmation. I point to the open glovebox.

"It was practically calling my name." I said, wistfully. I don't want to dig, but I do anyway because curiosity is a funny thing. "So is that your ex-girlfriend or something?" He purses his lips into a flat line, and I realize that maybe that wasn't the best comment to make, especially since I don't even hardly know Ramon. He shoves the polaroid into the pocket of his jacket, and

I'm certain that he's crunched it. He stays silent, grabbing the wheel and pulling through the open gates.

When I get out of the car, it feels like I'm in the middle of some hysterical dystopia. He opens the door that is about twice as tall as him, and by the grip of his arm, probably three times his weight. I timidly walk in, terrified that something will jump at me. About twenty feet ahead, there's two large metal doors that look like they weigh a thousand pounds. On either side of the doors, I'm terrified to see two security guards, stone faced and wearing all navy. On the pocket of their jackets is the embroidered word *Security*. The main doors behind me shut and Ramon signals me to follow him.

"Ramon," I whisper, scared out of my mind. I'm not scared that what I'm doing is illegal—it's more the fact that I can see the guards standing there so mysteriously like they're going to hurt me at any given moment.

"They can't hear you or see you. Remember that." He says, looking back at me. I focus on following Ramon. He's right. This shouldn't be as intimidating as I'm making it out to be. Ramon crossed the room and led me to an elevator that I didn't even notice since it blends in so well with the walls so well. He presses the top button and the small LED light shines green. There's a beat of nothingness in the world as we wait for the elevator. I take one last look at the security guards near the door, a shiver creeping down my spine. I still couldn't get used to this whole *erased* thing. Finally the doors open, and I walk inside. The ground feels unstable, which is weird because this place seems so high quality. There's a ding, and the rickety elevator doors shut very slowly, like they're waiting for me to walk back out while I still have a chance.

The lights in the elevator are so bright it feels like I'm stepping into the sun itself, and surprisingly, it feels incredibly claustrophobic. The elevator is lined with cold stainless steel which surrounds all four walls, and against those walls are a few potted plants. I look at the steel and study the reflection of the plants, scanning the wall up and down, landing at the level of where my reflected eyes would be. But my eyes are not there. And that is where it hits me: I

don't see my reflection at all. I take a step back. I knew I was invisible, but I never really realized that I was *invisible*. God, I hadn't looked in a mirror ever since everything happened. My eyes widen, and Ramon notices. He softly grabs my hand, like he can hear what I never planned to say out loud. His hand is warm, unlike mine. I touch the wall, like if I did, I would somehow become visible by some magical force. My fingerprints leave white marks on the walls that fade away instantly like they were never there—a lot like me. I'm still convinced that this is just a dream.

But it's not. I'm holding Ramon's hand, cold and—wait. I'm holding Ramon's hand? I can't believe myself. I gasp and quickly wriggle away from his hand.

“Oh, I'm sorry.” He says, eyebrows raised. I stare into his eyes, nervously laughing.

“No it's okay I just didn't . . . It occurred to me that I was holding a boy's hand. A boy that I just met. And that's not good. For me. Because I'm a girl. And I just met you.” I squeeze my eyes shut, eager to just become more invisible than I already am. This is humiliating.

“Come on. We need to hurry before they find any trace of us being here. Because that's The Network for you—they'll find a way no matter what.” I pick at my fingernails, a coping mechanism I picked up at the ripe age of eight. I usually resort to them when I get anxious or embarrassed—a bad habit for sure. Ramon stares at his watch and doesn't say anything. In fact, it's the only thing that I can hear down here. I can't tell if the soft tick of his analog watch is comforting or unnerving.

The elevator lights suddenly click off and I'm surrounded in darkness. I'm about to scream in panic until Ramon reassures me by saying, “Don't worry. They tend to do that.” Thanks, Ramon. *Really* helpful. The doors roll open, and what I see is so bright I genuinely think that I died and went to heaven. Everything is white, towering and smooth, the walls rising so high I have to tilt my head back to find where they end.

“Stay close.” Ramon told me before walking out of the elevator.

The pathway that he walks onto is a wide strip of concrete that stretches out for miles. There are no railings. No walls. No promises. It doesn't sit on anything. It's just there . . . suspended. When I look down, my stomach twists. There's nothing underneath—no floor, no bottom, no sense of how far the darkness goes. It isn't just a huge shadow. It's absence: a hollow that looks like it could swallow sound, memory, even ideas.

"Ramon . . ." I said, absentmindedly.

"Just keep following me." He told me. The way he walked was fascinating. It was confident and cool, like he knew exactly what he was doing. Nothing like me.

Ahead of me, the main path splits. And then splits again. More walkways branch off like veins. At the end of every path stands a tall and narrow door, each one stretched upward towards the ceiling but never quite reaching it. They're all the same: stark, featureless, and sealed shut. No handles. No windows. Just vertical slits in the brightness.

The light above is relentless, but it does nothing to soften the terror of that open void below. Every step feels like a question I don't know how to answer, and every door feels like a decision I'm not sure I'll survive making. I can't tell if this place is meant to give me a way forward or to watch which version of me doesn't make it across. Once I get close enough, I'm able to read the holographic sign on the side of the door. It says *ARCHIVE* in an electric blue color.

"Archive?" I ask him, almost a whisper. Ramon taps the words and it makes a loud beeping noise. He taps a few other buttons that I don't pay attention to. Instead, I close my eyes for what feels like forever. I imagine myself warm and protected in my car, driving far away from all this chaos. I imagined myself scrolling through my Pinterest boards, envisioning the life I'll never have. I imagined myself doing homework, surrounded by piles of textbooks, notes I didn't understand, and endless due dates. I imagined my life how it was before all of this—when I existed.

“Janae, come on.” Ramon shouted. The door was opening now, even slower than the elevator did . It was like pressing the handicapped button on a doorway. Each inch that it opened, there was another creak that echoed against these empty walls. Upon entering, the lights came on. These lights were way less intense, almost dim. The further I walked inside, the more I was unclear about what was even in here. There were hundreds of blinking lights, all lined up in rows of big computers, flashing monitors and clunky technology I couldn’t decipher.

“Woah . . .” I whispered, fascinated. “What is this place?” I asked Ramon.

“This . . .” He said, walking in front of me, putting his arms out as if to hold the whole room in his arms, “. . . is the Archive Room.”

“Right.” I said. “I picked up on that.” We walked past miles of white tables carrying technology that all seemed too foreign to even exist.

“Don’t touch anything.” Ramon warned.

“Why not? We’re invisible.”

“Just . . . don’t, okay?” He said. “On the topic of being invisible . . .” He slowed down to a gigantic filing cabinet in the center of the room. “These are the Archive Files.”

“Wow, creative name.” I said sarcastically. He didn’t laugh, and instead ignored my comment.

“Each drawer is someone’s entire life here in Symeria. Every person who has ever lived here has Archive Files. Details of everything they’ve ever done, every minute detail about their life you could possibly think of.” He paced over to the front of the room, where he showed me a much smaller blue filing cabinet. “The blue cabinet is the filing cabinet of the dead. *Archivador de los muertos*.” He opened a drawer in the second row and pulled out an orange Manila envelope. There was a single paper inside that Ramon pulled out. “Ramon Gonzalez, age: seventeen, Date of removal: May 21st. Subject number: two three eight-five nine-three two.” My face went blank. This Network had everyone in their back pocket. They could snatch me up and use me just like that.

“So . . . you’re dead?” I asked him. I mean, that’s what this was, right? The blue filing cabinets at the front of the room meant that someone passed away, and if his name was in it, what else could that mean?

“No, I’m not dead. I’m . . . erased.” *Erased*. That’s what we are. Erased from society. Erased from our families, stripped from the lives we were already living. “A failed data set in Symeria’s perfect world. At least, that’s my theory. Follow me.” He walks over to a random computer—or not so random computer—and sits down at it. I sit in the seat next to him. Ramon does some clicky clacky nerdy stuff, then turns the monitor toward me. It’s a map. It looks sort of like a blueprint, actually. There’s a clear boundary around the map. In the corner, it says *SYMERIA V. 29*.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“No sé. Thought that maybe you’d have some bit of information that I don’t.” I hesitate before saying anything. Ramon trusts me enough to help him figure all of this out, even though I’m just as clueless as he is. I feel like a child looking at the math problem on the dinner table again. Except this time, I didn’t have someone screaming in my ear. It was an encouraging tone, not yelling at me, but genuinely asking for my help.

“I don’t know . . .” He waits for me to say something, and I keep my eyes glued to the map. “Well, the night I was *erased* . . .” I say with air quotes and then I pause, thinking back to this morning. “I came over here for a few minutes and looked at the stars.” I pointed at the rural ends of Symeria where I had found the random dirt path. I stared at it for a second, then noticed something pretty crucial. “Wait. Ramon, look.” I shifted the monitor towards him and pointed at the boundary that ran around the perimeter of Symeria. It was a jagged shape. “This is the border of Symeria, right?” I asked him. He nodded in agreement, so I continued. “I was over here.” I shifted my finger a whopping two inches to the left. Ramon furrowed his eyebrows.

“Interesting . . .” He hesitated, parted his lips, then closed them. He snatched the nearest pen next to him and took out a clipboard that just *happened* to be there on the desk. He began

writing something very quickly. He then opened some files on the computer and did more things that I couldn't keep up with. I could tell that a light clicked inside of him the moment I pointed out where I was. Did this mean I went outside of the borders of Symeria? And even if I did, why did it matter? I glanced at what he had written on the paper. Beside a bunch of scribbles, I managed to make out the word *unpredictable*. What did that have to do with anything?

“Janae,” Ramon started.

“What?” He takes a deep breath and fidgets with his chain. I prepare myself for what he’s about to say.

“Symeria fears you.”

Ramon

I could tell what I'd said scared her out of her mind — her eyes widening, her lips parting like the start of a word she couldn't force out.

"Symeria *fears* me?" she echoed, as if hearing it once wasn't enough to believe it.

"Yes." I paused, letting the word hang between us. "Symeria runs on patterns. That's the whole system. Break the pattern, and there are consequences. No one crosses the border without formal clearance. You crossed anyway, when you usually wouldn't have. You were flagged as unpredictable. And that—" I leaned back in my chair, feeling the weight of her stare on me, "—means you broke the pattern."

There was a beat where neither of us moved. I felt a prick of guilt for how sharp my voice had come out

"So you're telling me," she whispered, "that if someone crosses the border without permission, they get erased?" I hesitated. I wanted to say no. God, I wanted to say it confidently. But every piece of evidence pointed in one direction.

"Yes," I admitted, the word leaving my mouth slow and heavy, like I was only now realizing the truth with her. Her face twisted.

"So that's it?" she snapped. "I made one mistake, drove one mile too far, and now—" she stops. "Now I'm just *erased*? And you just sit here acting like that's completely and utterly normal? Like you've just accepted that you're completely invisible to everyone you've ever known?"

"Janae—" I attempted.

"No. Don't 'Janae' me." She leaned forward, eyes bright with frustration. "You've known this. You've been theorizing this. And you didn't tell me anything until now? You drag me into this creepy building like I'm supposed to just play along with it? Like I'm supposed to be just

another one of those erased people, right?" I felt the sting of her words more than I'd like to admit.

"I didn't *know* this would happen to you. I was trying to go easy on you—I was trying to be a person to help you—something that *I* never had. I know that it's a lot of information to handle all at once." I said quietly. "I didn't know anyone else like me even existed until today." She let out a breath, but it wasn't a relieved one. It was bitter and begrudging.

"So you thought keeping me in the dark was a better way to handle things?"

"I was still trying to figure everything out!" I fired back at her. "You think I've had years of practice of being erased? I should be *dead* by now—But I'm not. I'm just trying to keep you alive—keep *us* alive." Her lips parted, ready to snap back at me, but then she froze.

We both did.

A low hum rolled through the walls of the basement. It was soft at first, but it kept rising in pitch. The lights overhead flickered once . . . twice . . . and then steadied, but three levels too bright, like someone cranked up the voltage. Janae's voice dropped to a whisper.

"What was that . . . ?" I stood up immediately, realizing what this was. I've read countless manuals when I was working for The Network. I know what this means. Every muscle in my body tightened.

"Pattern enforcers." I said mysteriously. I realized after I said it that I must've scared Janae even more than she already was. I grabbed her arm before she could ask anything else. "We need to go." I said, my pulse hammering. "Right now."

We quickly paced over to one of the smaller hallway doors and this time Janae didn't argue with me. The sound outside of the Archive Room was growing sharper and more distinct.

"What is that?" She asked, terrified.

"Pattern enforcers," I muttered under my breath. "They check for disruptions."

"You mean . . . us." I didn't answer. I didn't have to. We slipped through the door and out into the dim hallway. The air felt colder out here, like the building itself was holding its breath.

Janae stayed just behind me, her footsteps light but trembling. I glanced over my shoulder. Her face was visibly more pale, but her jaw was set. She was angry, scared, and refusing to break.

At the end of the hall, a corner turned sharply left. That's where the exit elevator was, but the hum was also coming from that direction.

"Ramon," She whispered.

I wasn't thinking. I grabbed her waist and pushed us both toward the nearest maintenance closet. The moment she stumbled inside, I shut the door behind us with a soft click, plunging us into tight darkness. The air was warm, stale, and smelled faintly of dust and old wiring.

We were pressed up against each other—her breath against my collarbone, my hands braced on either side of her.

"What are you—" she began.

"Shh." I whispered. A red glow washed across the floor outside, spilling through the crack beneath the door. The drone's scanner. It moved slowly, methodically. Like it could feel our presence through the wall. Janae tensed. I could feel every inch of it—her shoulders rising, breath catching, her fingers curling instinctively into the fabric of my jacket. She was terrified, but she didn't shrink away.

If anything . . . she leaned closer.

Outside, metal feet clicked forward. The red light brightened, stretching longer and thinner across the floor like a blade. Janae's lips brushed against my jaw when she whispered, "It's right there . . ."

"I know," I whispered back, my breath fanning her cheek. "Don't move." Her heartbeat thudded against my chest, fast and hard, but steady enough that I felt myself matching it without meaning to. The drone paused, and so did we. The light flickered, like it was confused. Janae's fingers slipped higher up my arm, gripping me tighter. I didn't know if she meant to, or if she was anchoring herself, but the warmth shot straight through me. Another mechanical

whirr, a glitchy chirp, and metal clicks that faded away along with its red light. We held our breath as its shadow drifted away from the door crack.

Five seconds.

Ten.

Fifteen.

The hum faded into the hallways beyond.

I didn't move. Neither did she. For a moment, the only sound was our breathing—hers shaky, mine trying not to be. Then Janae whispered, her voice small but firm, "Ramon . . . what would've happened if it found us?"

I swallowed, trying to be as brave as possible. "It would've finished the job."

She exhaled, her forehead brushing against my chest as she did. "Then don't let go of me yet." So I didn't.

After a few minutes, I could finally feel our breathing becoming normal. I eased the door open an inch at a time, peering into the hallway. Empty. The dim fluorescent lights hummed softly, too calm for what had just happened.

"Come on," I whispered. Janae stepped out first, her hand still wrapped in mine. She didn't seem to notice she was holding on, and I didn't dare point it out. We moved quickly and silently, our footsteps echoing just enough to make my nerves spike again. The corridor stretched, long and pale, turning toward the exit sign's faint green glow.

"It almost saw us," she said quietly to herself. "If I was just a little further out—"

"You weren't. I made sure you weren't." She glanced up at me, some expression I couldn't decipher flickering across her face. Something between gratitude and fear. But before either of us could acknowledge it or say another word, the hum returned. It was distant, but it was fast.

"There's more than one?" Janae stiffened.

“There’s always more than one,” I muttered. “Keep moving.” We broke into a stride, Janae becoming only a blur at my side. The exit elevator loomed ahead of us, metal and dark. I slammed the button a million times, like it would somehow make the elevator arrive faster. Luckily for us, it was practically already opening.

This elevator was different from the other ones since it comes from the basement and goes straight outside. Both sides of the elevator are doors. That way, people can go straight from the basement to the outside world. The ride back up to reality was painfully slow. Neither of us said anything and simply waited to become free.

The doors opened, and the cold November air rushed in—cold, sharp, and real. Janae gasped at the sudden chill. Maybe it was a gasp of relief. I think I gasped too. It was a relief to finally escape the prison that we somehow spent all day in. I stood there, hands on my hips, catching my breath and staring at the building. But Janae wasn’t staring at the building. She was staring at *me*. She approached me slowly, and her voice dropped, softer, “Back there . . . in the closet . . . you didn’t let go.”

I felt my throat tighten. “You asked me not to.”

She swallowed, eyes flicking to the ground, then back up. “You didn’t seem like you wanted to, either.” She looked towards the ground, her cheeks glowing a red I could see even in the November night. I could feel my own cheeks burning from a mix of embarrassment and joy. For a moment, everything stilled—the cold air, the urgency, the sunset fading away faster and faster. Her hair was a little messed up from where she had been pressed up against me. And then I realized she was standing too close.

Or not close enough.

But before we could say anything, there was a loud electric snap that came from the direction of the building. Janae grabbed my sleeve. “We need to go.” I nodded, forcing myself to pull my thoughts back to survival.

“This way.” I headed back towards the car. We ran along the side of the building, careful to stay in the shadows being stretched by the lowering sun. The parking lot finally came into view, and my car stood exactly where we left it, dark and waiting.

Only when we reached it and slammed the doors behind us did either of us breathe again. I could see Janae’s hands trembling in the corner of my eyes.

“Ramon . . . if this is what being erased is like . . . I don’t know if I can make it.”

I looked at her—really looked at her—her fear, intelligence, determination, and her vulnerability. She was real. She was so real that I can’t believe she even got erased.

“You can,” I said. “Because you’re not alone in this.” I smiled, but not too big. Her eyes softened, and for a moment, the car felt too small for everything we both yearned to say to each other. I turned the key three times before the engine coughed back up to life, carrying us back to reality.

Janae

I wake up to the smell of old wood and something warm and familiar—like dusty books. Maybe even a hint of cedarwood mixed with . . . boy. For a second, I think I’m back home, like this really all just was a bad dream. But then my eyes open.

I’m in an attic. An antique shop attic. And . . . in his bed.

“Oh, hell no,” I mutter. The blanket slips off of me, and I realize in horror that I’m only wearing the tight tank top I had underneath my hoodie yesterday. Somehow, I must have taken it off during the night. The black tank top is the thinnest one that I own. One strap is twisted and the other is falling off. I attempt to pull them back up to meet my collarbone and I fail. I look down in horror to realize that my leggings that I wore yesterday are sitting on the floor, and underneath the covers are my bare legs, only covered a few inches by my boxers. I run my hands through my hair, catching in all the tangles. My mascara is almost certainly smudged, my lips feel crustier than ever, and I don’t even want to *think* about what my breath smells like.

That’s when the floorboards creak. Ramon freezes when he sees me, and I swear — for a split second — he forgets how to blink. “Oh— uh—” He shifts his weight, staring very intently at the floorboards. “You’re awake.” I yank the blanket to my chin.

“Oh my God,” I groan, mortified. Heat rises up my neck, blushing my cheeks. He’s never seen me like this before. No one has.

“I uh . . . you literally fell asleep mid-sentence last night.” Right. Last night—The Archive Room, the files, the borders, and being pressed up against Ramon in the closet. I hated myself for wanting to relive it all. “I couldn’t leave you in the car so . . . I brought you here.”

“In your bed?” I hissed, snapping back to reality. I pulled the blanket up past my nose this time.

“I . . . yeah.” Ramon says. His cheeks are a deep painful red and it was obvious that he was flustered. He paces across the room and sits on a wooden trunk. The embarrassment fades a little, but the vulnerability doesn’t.

“Did I say anything? Like, before I passed out? I can’t remember anything, I was exhausted.” I questioned.

“A lot,” he says. “You were asking about Symeria. And the border. And—”

“And why it erased me.” My voice sounds small. He nods. A quiet settles between us, heavy and fragile.

“What did you say?” I whisper.

“N-nothing.” He stutters.

“Yeah, right,” I scoff, and he tenses up.

“Janae, Symeria is based on patterns. You know that by now, right?” I nod, and my chest tightens. It’s not a feeling of fear or guilt, but rather something like an aching—a longing for closure, a yearning to know that my life is more than just a big puzzle. He looks up at me, eyes locking with mine. “You broke something they didn’t expect. That’s what scared them.” He pauses. “I just—” He scratches the back of his neck, like he’s seriously thinking about this. “I’m fascinated by it, really. It’s sort of inspiring to see you behave how you did.” There’s a long stretch of silence because I wasn’t expecting this sort of comment from Ramon. I was expecting another ‘you’re a glitch in the system’ lecture.

“Oh.” I say, and it sounds stupid and weak. *Oh? You couldn’t think of anything better to say?* The silence between us expands again, but this one is different. He looks at me like I’m impossible—like I’m not even supposed to be here, in his bed, erased just as much as him. But then his expression shifts. It’s a mix of confusion, vulnerability, like something he doesn’t want to say.

“What?” I ask.

“There’s something I found last night,” he says. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

“What did you find?” He hesitates, not because he’s unsure, but because I think he knows what he’ll say will change things between us.

“I found . . . someone else,” he says slowly. “Like us.” When he says those words, my heartbeat drops to my stomach.

“Someone erased.” I whisper, more to myself than to him. He nods.

“Or at least . . . the remnants of them. Last night, when I left you up here in my bed, I left to go on a drive—clear my head, you know?” He plays with the hem of his knitted long sleeve, looking intently at it. “Well, I was driving past this house when I noticed something was off: Everything in that neighborhood looked exactly the same.” My eyes grow wide. “One house in particular, though, had a light flickering through the window. It was strangely uncanny and I couldn’t just walk away from it. I don’t know why I felt like knocking, but I did. I knocked on the door numerous times, but eventually I decided to just walk in since you know—no one can see me.” I listen carefully to his words, intrigued by where this could be going. “But inside, there was nothing special to see. I looked in the rooms, clothes were hanging in the closet, shoes lined up next to the door, flowers sagging lifeless on the counter. It was like the person who lived here was just . . . a life that was unplugged.” A chill runs down my spine. “There were also glitches.” He says

“Glitches . . . ?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“What do you mean by glitches?”

“It’s kind of hard to explain. We can go there, like, right now. I-If you want to, of course.”

“Can we find them . . . ? I mean, the other people that were erased?”

“We can try, but I’m almost certain that . . . they’re not here anymore.”

“Like . . . dead?” He stares at me like I know the answer to that question. I take a moment before responding to him. This is pretty heavy stuff. I clamber out of the tangled sheets, my tank top riding even higher than I’d like to admit. I tug at my bottoms, desperate to cover up in front of Ramon. I noticed him quickly looking away, ultimately looking down at his shoes. He messed with his hair, cheeks beet red, and it made me grin, despite everything. “Where’s the bathroom?” I ask. He points to the door, as if that would help. I think my confused expression made him speak up.

“Down the stairs, the left door by the counter. Got a silver knob.” He muttered, his eyes trailing down my body. I was a bit humiliated to say the least.

The attic stairs creak as the weight of me shifts on each step. I cross the antique shop, threading myself through cabinets and tables, my feet melting in my favorite swan rug that was spread across the main floor. Like Ramon had said, there was a door with a silver knob on the left, and it was, in fact, next to the counter. I flick the bathroom light on, and it makes an annoying buzzing sound. The single light bulb above the mirror barely lights up the room. I look into the mirror, disappointed. I know I wasn’t going to see anything, but for some reason, I still expected to see *something*. I still couldn’t get used to the fact that I was truly *invisible*.

I rubbed my eyes until it hurt, hoping that maybe if I rubbed them hard enough, everything would go back to being normal. Go back to being that dream I had hoped this all was.

But it wasn’t a dream.

I was *erased*.

I splashed my face with water, wiping everything that my tears had attempted to.

Ramon

I knocked on the bathroom door and told Janae I'd be waiting for her in the car. She asked if she could drive and I told her that she could. To be honest, I'm a little nervous to see her driving, even though that's like, her whole thing. I've had some time to reflect on what's been happening but the only thing that keeps popping up in my mind is Janae tangled up in my sheets. She looked so cute—like a kitten lost in a sea of blankets. I try to shake the thought of her laying in my bed, but I can't help my affection for her. She's gorgeous. Even when she wakes up in the morning all messy, all I can think about is how perfect she is. Her hair, although tangled, flows flawlessly down her face. Her smudged makeup gives a glimpse at her natural features, but her imperfections are what I love the most. She feels real and honest, at a time that I can't even trust myself to be real. There's no way for me to hold back my feelings for Janae, I just hope it doesn't interfere with us finding ourselves to get back to being normal.

Janae taps on the window of the driver's side seat. I must've locked the door. I click the unlock button and she dives right in. She sticks out her hand in a flat palm and curls her fingers, indicating she wanted something.

"Keys," She demanded.

"¡Ah, claro!" I said. I fumbled with my jacket pockets to find my keys. Reaching inside of the pockets, my fingers grazed the polaroid. I tried to stop myself from pulling it out to look at it, but I couldn't. I pulled it out slowly, staring at the blurred face that I once called mine. I traced the edges of her smile, longing for just a few more minutes with her.

"Ramon." Janae says, snapping me back to reality. "You good?" She asked, eyes sympathetic, hands on the wheel. I breathe out a sigh of something I don't know how to describe. Not relief, but just . . . a sigh.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm good."

"You know, you can't hide the mystery polaroid from me forever."

I'm taken aback by her forward comment, but she's right. I can't hide it forever. She deserves to know why I snapped when she found it in the first place.

"My mom and I were very close." I said, flipping the photograph over. "March 18th. This was her 38th birthday. I didn't know that a few weeks later she'd walk out on all of us." I take a deep breath, but I can feel myself shaking. "She came to me with a bloodied up nose as she kissed me goodbye. I hadn't realized it at the time, but the blood was something that came from my father." I pause, trying to find my words. Janae sits in the driver's seat silently. "I was so incredibly proud that she left dad—for her own safety—but this feeling of anger always crawls back up my spine. She just . . . left us. And I still don't know how to forgive her for that. I still love her, and I hate that I do. I don't know where to put that love now, or what it says about me that I haven't been able to let it go." My voice tweaks at the end, and Janae stays silent. Her hands are loosely wrapped around the wheel.

"I think it says you've carried her with you for so long that she's become a part of you. And maybe the hardest part isn't loving her, but realizing that letting her go feels like losing a piece of yourself you're not sure you'll ever get back."

"Dang. Yeah. Maybe you're right." I begin to shove the polaroid back into my jacket pocket, but Janae grabs my wrist and stops me. "What are you, uh . . ."

"You can't hide her anymore, Ramon. Letting go doesn't necessarily mean running away." She snatches the polaroid from my hand, even after tightening my grip to stop her from taking it. There's a clamp on the top of the sun visor, and she slides the photo into place.

"She's still with you even if she chose not to be." A glassy film covers my eyes, and for the first time in a long time, I actually feel seen, despite being . . . invisible.

Janae turns the key, and when it doesn't work, she gives me a side eye.

"Three times." I replied. So she tries again. And then again. I can see color flush onto her face when the engine kicks on. It probably feels like forever since she last drove. Getting onto the road must feel amazing. Janae has no idea where we're going, but she drives confidently.

"So where do I go?" She asks.

"Middle-ish of Symeria, over by the record store, but not quite, if you know where that is. I'll help you the closer we get." There's a few beats of silence.

"You said you saw a neighborhood, right?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Are all the houses a cream color?"

"I don't really remember. I only came to this neighborhood last night to clear my head so I wasn't paying attention to colors. And besides that, it was dark outside."

"I think . . ." she says. "I know where to go."

"Okay, uh," I pause. What do I even say? Her tone made the comment seem so mysterious. "That's great." She pressed on the gas pedal harder, accelerating the engine to a point I don't even think I've reached. Now I really *was* nervous.

"Janae, slow down!" I exclaimed, unable to think of anything better to say. There was a hint of hurt in her eyes, but her overall expression was sort of *determined*. I almost admired it. It's just the fact that she was going insanely fast and I was actually scared for my life. The trees outside the window warped into rushing blurs, slipping past faster than my eyes could catch. Janae's knuckles were white. We took sharp turns, almost crashing into mailboxes, until we took a very specific right turn. Janae brought the car to a sudden halt. My body flung forward, and the seatbelt locked, stopping me from moving any part of my body. It dug into my neck, creating a red mark that I was sure would show up soon.

"This is my home." She said to me, her knuckles still glued onto the wheel. Time froze at that moment. The birds I saw flying from a distance paused in their frame, the leaves dancing in the trees from the wind stood still, and the clutter of the world disappeared. For those five

seconds in the car with Janae, it was the most alone I had ever felt. Then suddenly, I saw Janae had turned towards me, waving her hand in front of my face like I had just blacked out in the middle of a softball game.

“What?” I exclaimed.

“You like, zoned out for a minute there. I seriously got scared.”

“What are you talking about? You were glued to the wheel for five seconds after we parked.” And in that moment, I realized something. I was *glitching*. Just like the glitches I had told Janae about only moments before this. Janae’s eyes are wide out of confusion and worry, my hands are shaky, and I can feel a bead of sweat trail down my spine.

“Janae, I just experienced a glitch.”

“What do you mean? Are you okay? What does that mean for us?” She spoke faster than I could comprehend.

“I . . . I don’t know. But I still need to show you what’s going on inside this house. So you can see for yourself.” Janae took a deep breath.

“Okay.” She concluded, reaching for the door. I step out of the car, my feet hitting the sidewalk quicker than I thought they would. The neighborhood looks *normal*—nothing like I saw last night.

“This is the house I investigated last night.” I said, pointing to the house labeled 3051 next to the front door.

“No way.” She says, folding her arms and walking to the front door. “This is my neighbor’s house. That’s my house over there.” She says, pointing to the home across from the one I investigated. “The Stanleys are an old couple—they can’t be *erased*. How could something like this happen to them?” I followed closely behind her, blowing into my cupped hands to keep them warm. She timidly opened the door, and the same floor lamp was still flickering from what I saw last night. There’s other little things that I hadn’t noticed before when it was dark outside.

On the counter, there's two plates of pasta, half eaten. The bar stools near the counter are scooted away, like someone stood up a second ago. Janae points something out.

"All these family photos . . . the others' faces are crystal clear, except for John and Marie." She says in a low, melancholy voice, touching the photo on the refrigerator that was held on by a magnet.

"Wait, what?"

"Family photos. Their faces are blurred." She pauses, and then, quickly, "It reminds me of your polaroid." I stand beside her, looking at the photo. I sigh, an endlessly exhausted sort of sigh.

"That's what happens when you're erased." I said. I could tell Janae's heart throbbed.

"How *were* you erased?" She asked cautiously. It occurred to me that I had never even told her, and maybe that was for a good reason. Her eyes were wandering across my face, trying to decipher whatever expression I was wearing.

"I chose not to go into work one day."

"Really? That's it?" I nodded and swallowed hard, tears forming in my eyes.

"The next day I was completely invisible to everyone I saw—my own father looked past me and worked with someone else that looked identical to me. He told him he was proud of him . . ." I paused and took a deep breath. "Something I had never heard before." Janae looked at me with sympathetic eyes.

"You broke . . . an expectation."

"Yeah. And I think what hurts the most is," A tear rolled down my cheek, and out of embarrassment I wiped it away as fast as I could. "He was proud of someone that wasn't me." Suddenly, and I don't know how else to explain it, the whole layout of the room shifted. Like everything became static, frames right before our eyes were shifting and being torn apart. Janae clutched my arm. The front door shifted between open, closed, open, closed, like the house couldn't decide what it wanted to be. The walls shook violently and static crept in the corners

of the house. We were completely misplaced on the other side of the kitchen now, chairs tucked away neatly. The pasta on the counter was *gone*. The couches in the living room were rearranged, photos on the fridge missing, and the lamp finally stopped flickering.

The silence that followed was uncanny.

“That was a glitch.” I told Janae, as if experiencing one wasn’t enough confirmation. She didn’t answer me, and I could feel her heavy breathing on my arm.

“I never even thought that was . . . possible.” She says.

“That’s what happens when you’re erased.” I said again, alluding to what I had said earlier. There’s a long stretch of silence before I break it. “Come on. We need to get going. Glitches are never good.”

“Why are glitches so bad? And where are we going?”

“Two words.” I tell Janae over my shoulder. “The Network.”

Janae

He rushes out the door, signaling me to follow him. The clouds above were brewing and rumbling now; a cold gray blanket that stretched across the sky. Across the street from where I was standing was my *house*. The one that I was cozied up in less than 48 hours ago. Everything remained the same from when I ran away: the gravel in front of the sidewalk, bushes on the side, the wreath that stays up year round because no one wants to change it. I mean, why would it be different? I'm sure they don't even notice that I'm gone. I was almost tempted to walk inside, to trash the place like there was no tomorrow. Then I realized I really don't know if there is a tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow is a word for people that can still see themselves in their reflection. I walk back to Ramon's car, my heart heavy.

"So what's The Network gonna do for us *this* time?" I asked Ramon, sliding the seatbelt over my chest and clicking it into place.

"If I'm not mistaken, significant glitches are logged, which means that we can find the glitch that we *just* experienced. The log should record location, time, and hopefully . . . lead us to where the Stanleys are." He pauses. I can feel the thickness in the air between us. "Of course, if there's no information . . ."

"That would mean the Stanleys are dead . . ." I cut in, finishing his sentence. Ramon said nothing after that, and neither did I. I stared out the window as a raindrop kissed the sideview mirror. The first raindrop hit the windshield, with a soft *tick*. Ramon leaned forward, squinting his eyes. There was another raindrop, then another, and then a dozen more.

"Lovely." He muttered, tightening his grip on the wheel. The rain was coming so suddenly that the wipers couldn't keep up. The world outside blurred into streaks of gray and blue, like an unfinished watercolor painting. The horizon glitched where it met the mountains that surrounded us. It was like a string of white noise trailing along the edges of the sky. I set my

eyes on the road ahead of us, trying—and failing—to ignore the tension in the air between us since we left the neighborhood. My head was spiraling. The glitches, houses folding in on themselves, my own neighborhood in danger. But the thing I kept going back to was Ramon’s face when he talked about being erased and the shame from his father that followed. How someone else was praised by his father more than Ramon ever was. My chest physically throbbed at the idea of Ramon being so hurt by one of his own parents. I related to him in a way, and I felt sick to my stomach that I did.

We hit a bump in the road, and the engine sputtered. Ramon froze.

“No, no, no.” Ramon panicked. His car lurched forward, lights flickering across the dashboard as it did. There was smoke slipping underneath the hood of the engine, immediately getting carried away by the wind of the storm, disappearing into the atmosphere. The engine roared once, twice, then gave a loud hollow cough before completely giving out.

The car was dead. Completely.

It kept coasting for a few more feet before rolling to a stop on the empty road. The wipers had stopped in the middle of the windshield, rain pouring down like Niagara Falls. The moment the car stopped, the rain doubled, like someone had turned up the sky’s intensity. As if they were *trying* to flush us out. Now without the engine humming, the air was even thicker. The only thing I could hear was the metallic slap of the rain hitting the car and my own heart beating. Ramon slapped the steering wheel angrily, releasing the silence. “You have got to be *kidding* me right now!” He screamed, pressing his forehead against the wheel.

“It’s okay,” I said, even though it wasn’t. Not even a little bit. The trees alongside the road shivered in the wind, and their branches glitched like a bad rendering of a 3D model. *Was it supposed to do that? Is this glitching thing normal now?*

“I’m gonna check the hood.”

“What? Ramon, no. It’s raining outside and you could get seriously hu—”

“Janae,” he whispered. “We’re erased. It couldn’t hurt me. I have to see the engine. Otherwise . . .” He trailed off. *We’re stranded*. I finished the sentence in my head. He squeezed my hand before I could stop him, and then he was out in the rain. Cold air rushed in as the door slammed shut behind him. I lifted my knees up to my chest and watched Ramon do his thing. This was my second time seeing Ramon seriously angry. It felt somewhat comforting how he was so gentle with me, even while he was under pressure.

I realized then that the rain wasn’t falling normally anymore. It stuttered midair, some droplets freezing completely, others duplicating like a broken reflection. Ramon lifted the hood, blocking any view of him that I had. It only solidified my fear of something happening to him.

“Come on, come on . . .” he muttered, deep in the engine. There was a spark. Then another. The engine clicked, and for a second I thought maybe he had actually fixed it.

“Ramon . . .” I warned. “Get back in here!” I don’t think he heard me because I could hear him reaching deeper into the engine. I was expecting an electric shock, but what happened was worse. A glitch hit him through the engine. The hood slammed closed, giving me a clear view of his terrified face. A ripple of static rolled down the road like lightning made of pixels. It struck him with a violent zap. Ramon jerked backward with a sharp gasp. His body stiffening for a split-second made my blood turn to ice.

“RAMON!” I screamed. I threw the door open, rain slapping my skin instantly. It weighed down my hoodie, making me feel like I was carrying a thousand pounds on my back. I slipped on the wet asphalt in an attempt to make sure he was okay, tearing my leggings and exposing a cut somewhere unidentifiable in the moment. The pain stung horribly, and all I could do was stifle it. He stood there, holding a cable, staring mindlessly into the hood. His hands were trembling.

“Don’t touch the car.” He rasped. Water slipped down his neck. “It—It’s carrying the glitch; like static electricity.” His voice shook—Ramon never shook. I stopped inches away from him, chest heaving.

“Are you okay? Did it hit you? What happened?” I asked him. He tried to say something, but his knees gave out. I caught him before he hit the ground somehow. Rain drenched the both of us, and I shivered in the cold crisp air, but Ramon’s skin was burning hot, like the glitch had left heat behind. His forehead pressed against my shoulder, and I could feel his ragged breathing. My mind slipped away to the pain in my open wound, but I couldn’t let *my* pain distract me from *Ramon’s*. For the first time since I met him, he actually sounded scared. Terrified, even.

“It was like, it wasn’t electricity,” he sniffed. “It felt wrong. Like something inside of the engine *reached* for me.” My heart thumped painfully. This boy who never flinched, never backed down even once—he was shaking in my *arms*.

“Hey,” I said softly. “You’re okay. You’re okay, I promise.” He swallowed hard, lifting his head just enough to meet my eyes. Rain slicked across his lashes. “You have long eyelashes.” I chuckled, remembering I told him that like an idiot within the first 10 minutes of meeting him. He smiled, and his brown eyes looked less stormy, a little less hurt than they were before.

“I think I’ve heard that before . . .” He teased me, and then went right back to being serious, letting out a sigh before he continued. “You came out here,” He whispered hoarsely. “In the glitch. In this—just to get me?” I stared back at him, my chest tightening.

“Of course I did.” I tucked a piece of drenched hair behind my ear. “Y-You’re all I have.” The world around us glitched again—trees bending sideways, raindrops freezing midair—but in that moment, everything around us felt painfully and terrifyingly real. He closed his eyes, leaning into my touch like he needed it.

“We have to leave,” He told me. “Now. Before things get worse. Before the glitch spreads even more.” I nodded, still holding him steady.

“To The Network?” I asked him, wincing at the growing pain in my leg.

“Yes, yes. To The Network. We need to get to *The ReLog*.

“Okay.” I responded, even though I had no idea what he was talking about. His eyes trailed down to my leg.

“Oh, my God, Janae!” His expression shifted from weak and vulnerable to sympathetic and urgent. “Your leg is cut wide open! Did you slip?” He exclaimed.

“Yeah, yeah I did. But it’s not even that bad, I promise.”

“Janae, it’s completely soaked your leggings and there’s blood dripping down your ankle.” I winced at the pain and realized maybe it *was* more than just a few scrapes. Ramon touched my ankle, sending a shock through every last bone in my body. His touch felt so familiar, yet still so nerve racking, and it mixed with the sting of the open wound. He scooped me up like I was a baby and I gasped. He’d never carried me like this before—no one had, actually. He brought me over to the passenger seat where I had left the door open. Then he did something so unexpected. He took off his jacket—although heavy and soaking wet—and put it around my shoulders.

“What are you—”

“I know, I know. Please just let me do this.” This was the first time I was seeing his bare arms. His biceps were so perfectly sculpted, each vein was in its place, and the light bounced off every curve like the sun was a paid actor. I directed my eyes to the sky above Ramon. It felt nice to not have raindrops pounding my back for a few seconds. He reached past me for the glovebox, almost leaning completely over me, and popped it open with a soft thud. He pulled out a plastic red box, and I realized that it was a first aid kit—something you could get for cheap at a convenience store. He pulled out an alcohol prep pad and I widened my eyes.

“No,” I shook my head. “No, please, no,”

“I’m sorry,” Ramon said, lifting the cuff of my leggings to my knee. The cold wind hit my leg and I stiffened, followed immediately by the dreaded prep pad. He pressed it gently onto my legs and I winced at the pain, taking in a sharp breath. It stung deeply and harshly, like I could feel each blood cell screaming. “Good job, good job. It’s okay.” Ramon whispered. Tears formed

in my eyes, and I could feel the nerves in my leg going haywire. I leaned forward to see the damage. The blood that had dripped to my ankle had dried now. Holding the wipe with one hand, Ramon reached in the box for the roll of gauze. He bit the top of the roll to hold it as he stretched it out. I watched in awe as he patched me up, rolling the gauze around and around and around again. It was almost hypnotizing. Rain fell from his hair, defining each natural wave in it. The rain made his shirt stick to his build, defining each line, every muscle. I couldn't help but stare. Who knew patching up a bloody wound could be so attractive?

Ramon gently pulled down my legging to my ankle and looked up at me, grinning sympathetically. His eyes were so beautiful: like the richest soil in the world, like varnished mahogany, like steaming coffee in the morning. I could feel my cheeks becoming hot so I looked away and thanked him. I touched my leg cautiously.

"Now, I'm not a nurse, but I will say that I think I did a pretty good job." He chuckled.

"Yeah, it was very professional." I agreed. There was a beat of silence before Ramon began walking away, rain still pouring down on him. He shivered in the cold and I timidly propped myself out of the car.

"Well. I guess this is goodbye to your car, right?"

"Yeah," He sighed, still walking away from me. "We're about a mile from The Network's building. We can make it but we need to hurry." We jogged away together in the freezing rain, leaving the car in the glitches behind us. It was then that I realized that despite everything going wrong—everything scary, every unanswered question, every worry that's been spiraling in my head—I wouldn't let go of Ramon. Not now, and not ever. No matter how hard the fear clawed at my ribs, I promised myself that I would keep going—for Ramon. I wanted to ask him to run away with me, find a place where we could be invisible together. But even after all that we just went through, I couldn't pull together the courage to announce it.

Ramon

After hours, we finally reached the building. My body ached horrendously and I wanted more than anything to hibernate in a heavenly bed full of pillows. It looked different in the rain—it was haunting, as if The Network wasn't *already* haunting. Janae stood beside me as I typed in the code at the front gate. Her nose was a bright cherry red that she kept wiping. Her little sniffs confirmed that she was freezing, and most definitely tired from jogging all the way here. It was like the universe was trying to burn her out completely. She tried not to show it, but I've spent enough time with her that I know the difference between 'being cold' and 'trying not to fall apart'. This was both of them.

When the gate opened, it felt like I could breathe again—it felt like the *world* could breathe again. As soon as I stepped foot into the building, warmth flushed my cheeks, causing goosebumps down my arms and crawling up my spine. I closed my eyes and felt the warm air as it surrounded me like a warm blanket. We walked next to each other past the guards, the stainless steel walls, into the elevator. Although it was warmer in here, the bright lights and reflectiveness everywhere made it seem like a freezer. The ride to the basement seemed to last three seconds, and sooner than I thought, we were walking on the same white pathways between the voids of nothingness. Last time I could tell it scared the living hell out of Janae, but I didn't comfort her at all—I just did my own thing. There was a pang of guilt in my stomach. So this time, I told myself to wait for her. I stuck out my hand, eager for her to grab it. Her hand was colder than mine and the second she grabbed it, chills pulsed throughout my body. Some of the stress and tension that I was holding onto relieved when I felt her touch. We both exchanged short smiles, before walking on.

"ReLog . . . ?" Janae questioned sensitively. We were at the door across from the Archive Room.

“Yes. It’s where glitches are logged—I’m pretty sure. I honestly haven’t had a ton of time to explore this part of The Network.” I said. What I didn’t tell her is that ReLog always creeped me out. The door opened and we were met with darkness. There’s rows of screens sleeping like dead eyes, waiting for something to wake them up. Janae’s voice was barely above a whisper when she said,

“So can you find the Stanleys file?” I hesitated to nod, and my hands shook a little when I reached for the main terminal to the right side of the room. I typed in

| LOG - GLITCH SEQUENCE |

which pulled up a long string of information and details. I typed in Stanley and the system gave an error. There’s obviously more than one Stanley family. I had to be more specific.

```
| AD = 341 N 210 W Wood Cove Ln, Symeria |  
| VAR = <true> |
```

The screen flickered once, twice, and then the file opened. Two names, two time stamps, two statuses.

| TERMINATED |

And that was it. No explanation . . . just gone. Janae stayed silent, stiff as a rock. I heard her breath catch in her lungs. She stared at the screen, and I stared into her eyes.

“So . . . they’re really dead.” She said, and my throat closed up.

“The real versions of them. There’s counterparts living their lives.” There’s a visual log and I click the link. It pulls up a file: a one minute clip of John and Marie eating breakfast at a fancy diner. “So these are their counterparts in the real world. Not our world—our erased world.” There was a ghostly gray filter over the footage—like an old 1940’s film. Janae stayed staring at the screen, devoid of any expression except the one in her eyes—hurt.

“It’s all just . . . so confusing.” Her voice cracked, and God, that got me. Something in my chest twisted, like someone hooked a wire around my lungs and pulled hard. I swallowed.

“Let’s check the other logs.” I tried to keep my voice steady, but even I could hear the tremble. I froze when I saw my name in one of the panels.

	RAMON GONZALEZ - GLITCH SEQUENCE	
	LOCATION = vehicle	

My heart pounded in my chest. Janae looked at me. “That . . . That’s yours.” I didn’t want to open it. I didn’t want to see myself being pulled out of reality for those five seconds in the car. But Janae’s hand brushed mine—light, like it was almost accidental.

“You don’t have to watch it if you don’t want to. I’m here if you wanna see it, though.” God, she had no idea how much those words meant to me. I clicked on it, and what pulled up on the screen was terrifying. The screen lit up with footage from the inside of my car, parked near Janae’s neighborhood. It still had that black and white filter over it, like security camera footage. Janae was at the wheel, gripping the steering wheel tightly, me in the passenger seat. Within moments, my face *changed*. My eyes became motionless, no sense of emotion in my body, and I completely *froze*. For three whole minutes, this went on. Janae talked to herself for a good portion of the footage, mostly looking out the window, before she realized I had become motionless. Terror washed over her face. She waved her hand in front of me, and like clockwork, I snapped back, and the footage ended.

“Oh my God,” Janae whispered. I hated that Janae had to see me like that. I hated it. I clicked away before she could say anything else, but it didn’t stop the cold from crawling under my skin. If glitches kill people—erasing them completely—then why wasn’t I dead yet? Why did I get to walk out of a glitch when the Stanleys didn’t? Before the panic could completely settle, another log popped up onto the queue.

| **JANAE RAYMOND - GLITCH SEQUENCE** |
| **LOCATION = housing sector C** |

“I-I didn’t glitch,” she tried to say. “I broke patterns, but I wasn’t—” The video footage, which somehow opened without me clicking on it, cut Janae off before she could even finish her thoughts. We both froze, terrified to touch the screen. It was a video of Janae’s bedroom. It was empty, so I assumed that this is the time when Janae snuck out. We studied the video carefully, even though nothing was happening. Then suddenly, there was a blip of light, and the bed in the corner of the room that was empty suddenly had someone under the covers. Someone with long brown hair. I realized then, that this girl looked exactly like Janae, but it wasn’t her. Just like that other person had replaced me in the workplace the day that *I* was erased.

A counterpart.

Then the footage ended.

My theory was correct—people identical to the erased will replace us, living our lives separately and perfectly to keep the pattern of Symeria.

Janae was completely stripped of words. Her eyes glistened in the dim light, and I could tell she was about to cry. I knew she was strong enough to keep it in, but a part of me wanted to let her cry.

“No,” she muttered underneath her breath. “No.” She pursed her lips inward, trying to hold everything together. I placed my hand in hers and gently trailed along her fingers.

“I’m sorry for all of this.” I said in an attempt to comfort her. She pointed at the screen.

“Look,” she said.

“Live footage?” I exclaimed.

“Click it.” So I did, and what was shown was even more terrifying than anything else we had seen. This was horrific. Janae’s parents hovered around her—not tense and arguing like she had described—but laughing and talking. Existing like families are supposed to. She made a strange sound. Not a word, not a breath, but like something inside of her broke, and she couldn’t hide it quick enough. Her counterpart lifted her head in the footage, waving at someone out of the frame. She smiled in a way Janae never did. Not anymore, at least.

“Why . . . why does she—why do *I* look so happy?” Janae whispered, her eyes glassy.

“Why does she get that life? Why does she get that version of my family and I don’t?” I’ve never heard her voice so small.

Thunder cracked outside, but we never saw the flash that came with it. Janae looked like she wasn’t just watching a glitch—she was watching a version of herself she would never get to be. Or maybe the version of herself that she *ruined*. She stepped back from the screen like it physically pushed her away.

“I don’t—” her breath shook. “I don’t want to see anymore.”

The worst part was that I wanted to shield it from her. To drag her away, shut down the terminal, and take her to some place where the world couldn’t hurt her.

But the ReLog kept humming. The rain outside kept pouring. Reality kept unraveling. And for the first time since this whole thing started . . . I wasn’t sure we’d survive this story.

The terminal faded to black.

Janae

Ramon didn't say anything for a long time after the terminal went black. Neither did I. The ReLog room crept me out. It wasn't dark, but it was definitely vague. It was dimly lit, and not the cozy kind. The air felt colder in this room than in the Archive Room—sharper.

I couldn't stop staring at the screen where I . . . my counterpart . . . had been. *My* bedroom. *My* smile. *My mom's* unfamiliar love for her husband, something I'd never witnessed first hand. A life that could have been mine, if the universe hadn't done whatever cruel math led me here instead. When the live footage cut out, it felt like losing something I'd never had.

Ramon finally exhaled. "Janae?" he said quietly, like he was afraid of saying my name too loud. "You okay?"

"No," I said, because lying felt impossible right now. "Are you?" He didn't pretend either, just shook his head, his jaw tight. On the far side of the room, a holographic screen the size of a TV showed the glitch from his car—the moment he spaced out this morning before visiting the Stanleys home. His eyes were unfocused, like he was somewhere else entirely. Behind the frozen frame being shown was the file name.

SUBJECT R-GONZALEZ — DESTABILIZATION EVENT

I wrapped my arms around myself and paced over to the holograph. The room felt too big, despite being populated with an endless amount of screens, computers, data, information—technology words I can't even begin to pronounce. It felt too loud, even in its silence.

"What does the destabilization event mean?" I asked. Ramon didn't answer straight away. He rubbed a hand over his face, settling just below his nose. He was tired—so utterly exhausted that it hurt.

"It means," he said slowly. "That something went wrong with me before I ever met you."

Hearing that made my stomach twist and I stared at him. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve been erased for six months, Janae.” Of course, I knew that part, so I didn’t really have an answer for him. I just stared even more at him, admiring the way his shirt clung tightly to his shoulders. The top two buttons were undone which invited just enough curiosity into my mind. He kept going. “The house we investigated today—the Stanleys,” he said. “Their files . . . all black. Like they were erased *quietly*. No warning.” He swallowed, and I moved closer. “What if I was supposed to be next?” My chest tightened.

“Ramon, no—”

“What if meeting you just delayed it? Hell, I should be dead by now,” The pain in Ramon’s voice killed me. It scared me more than anything I’d seen today on these damn screens.

“Then we can fix it,” I said before I could think the sentence through. “We find out why. Why you’re still here. We find out how we can do it. We’ve already made it this far and gotten so much progress.” He gave me a small, helpless laugh. Not happy. Not even remotely close to being happy. Just tired.

“You don’t have to stay,” he said apathetically. “You never asked for any of this.”

“And neither did you!” I exclaimed, my voice cracking. I slowed toward Ramon, picking up his hands and cupping them in mine the best that I could. He was weak, and I know it wasn’t just from the glitch. Ramon is giving up. Giving up on this erased life. Giving up on *me*.

“I didn’t ask to be here,” I stated, a lump catching in my throat. “But I’m here. And you’re here. I never would have made it this far without you.” I pause. “You’re the reason I’m still hopeful that we’ll be back to normal.” Ramon blinked like he didn’t know what to do with that. I wouldn’t know what to say to that either.

The monitors in the middle of the room buzzed. One of them flickered. Another one rebooted itself. Something deep below us rattled in a way that made every hair on my arm raise. The ReLog system was starting to tense. Like the glitches we had seen were collapsing in on each

other, the white noise returning in the cracks and crevices, crawling up the building and threading through wires in the ceiling. Ramon noticed too, his tired eyes now alert—unprepared.

“We need to leave.” Ramon said. “If they system is destabilizing, it might—”

A sharp beep cut him off: like a fire alarm. A new holograph popped up in the main control center hanging from the ceiling of the ReLog room.

UNRESOLVED ANAMOLY DETECTED

LIVE FEED AVAILABLE

My stomach dropped, heart racing.

“Ramon,” I whispered. “That’s . . . that’s happening right now.” He stood up, eyes anchored on the screen. There’s static. Then a flicker. A shaky camera angle inside of the building in the same ghostly gray filter. A shadow of two people staring at a large control center in the middle of the room. The screen glitched, then zoomed in, capturing more details. Slowly. Steadily. It settled on the figure to the right, her arms crossed, back facing the camera.

I felt all the heat drain from my body. Because the person in the feed—with their back turned toward the camera—

it was me.

Ramon inhaled sharply. “Janae, we have to go.” He tugged on my arm, and I saw myself being pulled. It was like looking into my life from a third person perspective. I broke out in a cold sweat, my breathing heavy. “Janae. . . Janae . . . !” Ramon’s voice echoed through my mind. The screen glitched again, and suddenly, the feed *cut*. It was dark. The silence followed. Then—

The entire building shuddered. Like it was fearful of such an anomaly. The lights flickered. And the overhead speakers crackled with a robotic voice:

SYSTEM CORRUPTION DETECTED. PLEASE EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY.

Ramon grabbed my arm.

“We need to move.” He said, an icy tone to his voice. I didn’t argue. Because the last thing I saw before the screen shut down entirely was the name that had appeared under the life feed.

SUBJECT J-RAYMOND — CORRUPTION SOURCE

Ramon

We raced out of the ReLog room. The hallways shook so violently I thought the floor might split underneath us, dragging us to our final death. The alarm that buzzed wasn't just loud, it was *angry*. It vibrated my teeth and made lights in the distance flicker in seizure-like bursts.

"Ramon, slow down!" Janae shouted behind me, stumbling as I pulled her forward.

Slow down? If I slowed down, we'd die.

"We have to get to the Core Room before they completely lock this place down. It's our only hope." I shouted, trying my best to carry my voice above the blaring alarm. The building groaned, like something inside of the walls was being torn apart in agony. All I could smell was metal and the dampness of the basement. We reached the door at the end of the bright pathways. This was the only door that was different from the rest. Engraved in the middle of the door read:

SYSTEM CORE - AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

My hand shook as I hit the keypad. It scanned me. A beat of silence.

Access Denied.

I yelled in frustration, hitting the scanner hard. Janae backed up a few feet, whether that was because she was scared, or she wanted to give me space. I knew I had to try again. Hit the keypad, let the scanner trace its eyes along every corner of my body. Silence filled the room. Three seconds . . . four . . . five . . .

Access Granted.

I heard Janae's sharp inhale from behind me. The door slid open with a hiss of icy air. The Core Room was always off. Too white. Too bright. Too cold. It was worse than the pathway room in between the other rooms. But today, it felt like judgement. Screens hovered in the air,

hundreds of them, each one flickering through surveillance views. Real homes. Real streets. Real people. And then, the system recognized us. Two screens expanding, filling the room. Her. And then me. Not us now. Not the erased versions—the counterparts. The happier Janae, the unbroken Ramon. Living safe, ordinary, predictable lives. The lives that fit the pattern. Janae’s breath hitched, and I caught a lump in my throat that I tried so hard to swallow. I didn’t need to look at her to know she was staring at her other self. The one that was sleeping peacefully in her room, a home that wasn’t suffocating her.

“I don’t understand.” Janae says, her voice cracking. Seeing her in pain twisted my lungs. “Why would the system keep this? Why would they keep our counterparts?”

“I can only assume it’s for resets. If the erased become unstable enough, The Network probably has the option to *completely* overwrite us with *them*.” Janae’s head snapped toward me.

“What do you mean *overwrite*?”

“It puts them back in our place,” I said, throat tightening. “The original timeline. The original pattern. It’s like we never even glitched at all.”

Janae’s voice dropped. “And what would happen to us?” I didn’t want to say it. But the Core Room could not lie to either of us.

“You and me . . . ? Forget it all.” I can feel my eyes becoming foggy. “We would never meet each other.”

“That’s not true!” She yelled, pushing my chest, although I stayed in my place. “God, Ramon, why didn’t you tell me earlier?” She exclaimed. I could tell she was breaking, but it was different this time. I betrayed her trust. Because she’s right: I should have told her.

“I . . . I was afraid. Of this. Of everything.” My voice was small. I *felt* small. All of this . . . I couldn’t handle it anymore. A robotic voice murmured *OVERWRITE PROTOCOL AVAILABLE*. A screen behind Janae flashed with information that faded in, then faded out. It looked like a cheap PowerPoint that they had put together.

OVERWRITE PROTOCOL AVAILABLE — SUBJECTS: J-RAYMOND / R-GONZALEZ

Seeing our names on the screen made me scared. Really scared.

WARNING: CORRUPTION LEVEL CRITICAL

I didn't know what that even meant, but it couldn't have meant something good.

FAILURE TO OVERWRITE WILL RESULT IN FULL ERASURE.

This is what I had tried to explain to Janae. Full erasure. Janae's face went pale. She took one step back, then another, and then bumped into me. She snapped around to meet my eyes.

"Ramon . . . what did I ever do wrong?" The question stabbed me

"Nothing, Janae. Absolutely nothing." I said, my voice breaking despite my best efforts.

"You broke a pattern, that's all." She shook her head, tears forming.

"That can't be all."

"It is." My voice cracked. "The Network only cares about consistency, borders, routes, and habits. You stepped outside your assigned loop, so it flagged you as an anomaly."

"I know," Janae cried, squeezing her eyes shut, pressing her balled up fists into my chest.

"I know." A deep hum filled the room. The platform in the center lifted up. A holograph prompt appeared, glowing in the air. Janae and I both turned our attention to the words.

OVERWRITE?

RESTORE ORIGINAL TIMELINE

- OR -

CONTINUE SYSTEM CORRUPTION

Janae backed away from the prompt. "No. No, no, no—Ramon, this can't—"

“It’s giving me the *choice*.” I said. The words tasted like blood. She froze, and tears slid silently down her face.

“Ramon,” she whispered. “Don’t erase us. Please.” My chest fractured. I stepped toward her, and she didn’t move. She looked like someone bracing for execution, like someone trying to accept their fate but still processing it all. And in a way, that was absolutely true.

“If I overwrite,” I said softly, “you go back to your world. The one where your family ignores you. The one where things are scary, but familiar.”

“But,” she started. “Then I lose you,”

I closed my eyes. “Yes.”

“And if you don’t overwrite?”

“Then the system collapses,” I whispered. “And . . . we go with it.” Everything around us shook harder now. Panels bursting, sparks raining like hot orange snow. The world we knew was falling apart.

“I don’t want to die,” Janae’s voice trembled.

“Janae . . .” I reached for her hand, and she let me take it. She held onto me like she was drowning. And maybe that’s because she was. My lungs felt too small. My heart was too loud. Her fingers were trembling in mine.

The system wanted an answer. Now.

“Ramon . . .” she whispered.

“I’m right here,” I said.

“You have to choose.”

“I know.” I looked at her. Not at the glitching girl, not at the anomaly. But at *her*.

The girl who drove like she was running from the world.

The girl with beauty like no other.

The girl who made me feel more alive than I’d ever been.

I lifted her hand to my chest. My pulse hammered against it.

“If this is the only reality where you and I exist together,” I said, a tear rolling onto my jaw, “then I’m not erasing it.” Her eyes filled. Her breath caught in her throat.

“Ramon—”

“I choose us.” I whispered, and I tapped Continue System Corruption. The screen went white. The building roared. Every siren shrieked at once. Static filled the air, walls collapsed on top of each other, and nothing was visible. She clung to me terrified.

I wrapped my arms around her, and the world *shattered*.

Janae

At first, I thought I woke up. There's light—too much of it. White like overexposed film. White like a blank page someone forgot to write on. White like silence pretending to be a color. I blink, but nothing changes. The world doesn't sharpen, it just softens.

"Ramon?" My voice sounds far away, like someone is saying it in another room. I reach out, and the air feels thick, syrupy, slow-motion. Like I'm underwater, like my fingers are dragging through a dream. Then I see him.

He's blurry at the edges, as if someone is erasing the sides of him with their thumb. But his eyes . . . His eyes are crystal clear. Brown, warm, and terrified. Watching me like I'm the only thing left in the world.

"Hey," he whispers, and it echoes strangely. Too close, or maybe too far. Mostly everywhere. Something in me knows. Even before the ground begins dissolving under my feet. Even before the white starts blinding me.

I know.

"You chose," I say. My lips tingle like they're not fully attached to me. "Didn't you?" His throat bobs up and then back down. He tries to speak, but he looks scared, and that's all I need to know.

He nods his head. If he had overwritten anything, we would have been fine. Alive. Separate. Strangers, but alive. We'd never meet in the real world. I'd go back to the yelling, he'd go back to the silence. We'd survive.

But he chose this. He chose *us*. Just once. Even if it meant we wouldn't survive at all. The thought hits me so hard, I lose balance. My knees buckle, and I stumble forward. But he's already there, arms catching me even as they flicker and glitch, softer and softer.

"I couldn't lose you," he says, voice breaking like glass. I tried to laugh—ease the tension—but it came out more just as a breath. A trembling, aching breath.

“Ramon, we’re going to disappear soon.”

“I know,” His thumb brushes my cheek, though I can barely feel it. Like a breeze pretending to be a touch.

“And you still chose this?”

“You’re the only thing that’s ever felt real.” A tear slips down his face. The light catches it, scattering it into pixels that drift off into nothingness. “I wanted, at least once, to be able to choose you . . .” He blushed, and so did I.

The air around us is unraveling now. Our bodies flicker, pieces missing and then returning and then missing again. It doesn’t hurt. It feels like I’m letting go.

Letting go of that pressure of my family. School. Friends. The Network. Letting go of being *this*.

“Ramon, I . . . I don’t want to forget.”

“You won’t,” he says, even though we both know that’s not how erasure works. But he says it anyway. For me, and perhaps for himself, because we have nothing left but words.

The ground beneath us fades.

“I’m scared,” I admit.

“Me, too.” He cups my face with both hands. “If this is all we get,” he says softly. “Then I’m glad it was you.”

My breath trembles out of me. Tears burn my eyes, but they never fall—they glitch, freeze, dissolve mid-air.

“Promise me that you won’t forget one thing.” I said, waiting for his response.

“What is it?”

“That we existed once.” The void drowns out the edges. It drowns Ramon. It drowns me.

“I won’t.” He says softly, like those two words could shatter everything.

Everything slows. Everything fades. Ramon leans closer, like he’s afraid the space between us might disappear before he does. His forehead rests against mine. I lift my hand, or at least I try

to. It flickers, half there, half memory. My fingers brush his jaw, and he closes his eyes like the touch alone is enough to break him.

So I kiss him.

It's gentle and careful. Like we're afraid of hurting something that's already been broken. He kisses me back like it's a promise he can't keep, or maybe an apology, or a thank you.

But then it starts to slip.

The feeling thins. The warmth fades. But the meaning stays, pressing into my chest even as the rest of me begins to unravel. When we pull apart, he's smiling through tears that never quite fall. The void drowns out the edges. It drowns Ramon. It drowns me. And in that fraction of a second, before the universe forgets that we ever existed, I see him looking at me like I'm something worth remembering.

And I let myself believe it.