

9998

Written by Lawrence Ligad Jr.

FADE IN:

PROLOGUE

INT. GLOBAL SCIENCE FORUM - NIGHT - YEAR 8122

A CHILD'S HAND folds red paper—one half over the other. A crease becomes a star.

FOUR NOTES sound against hospital glass.

Before the fourth can fade, a FIFTH answers from the receiver—before any living hand moves.

The GLOBAL SCIENCE FORUM resolves around the sound—a descending circle carved into black stone. Thousands of faces vanish into the tiers below.

At its center, **DR. ELI MANA**, 38, stands inside a narrow column of white light.

Along the perimeter, sealed ministerial booths illuminate one by one. Documents are signed behind the glass before the discovery has even been announced.

DR. KIRA NIX, 35, watches from the edge of the stage, one hand closed around a palm-sized ceramic device. Four worn pressure surfaces cross its face.

Beside her, **DR. HARP VALE** grips a cracked medical tag engraved: **MARA VALE**.

DIRECTOR ROMAN records which ministers refuse to look afraid.

ELI

We saw a neural signature continue after death.

Behind him: a scan of a clinically dead brain. Its activity stops. Across the screen, a separate receiving lattice ignites with the same pattern.

ELI

Then it appeared in another living mind.

ELI

The body died. The pattern didn't.

A minister presses **AUTHORIZE**. Another acquires exclusive gestation access. A third opens a military channel.

Eli sees none of it. Or chooses the light in front of him.

ELI

We can measure reincarnation.

Kira does not applaud.

The CHILD'S HAND opens the paper star. The crease remains.

The chamber erupts—applause, prayer, shouting. The sealed booths remain silent. Eli searches for Kira. She meets his eyes but does not move toward him.

Across the room, the first compulsory-access order populates before the applause ends. Harp sees it. Kira sees him see it.

**CORRUPTED AUTHENTICATED RECORD - INT. PROJECT REINCARNATION
/ EXECUTION LAB - ELEVEN DAYS LATER - YEAR 8122**

The applause becomes an EXPLOSION.

Fire folds a laboratory door inward. Cryogenic vapor races along the floor. An alarm keeps repeating one calm sentence: REINCARNATION-AI HUMAN TRIAL COMPLETE.

Dr. Eli Mana crawls through the shattered glass, nearly unrecognizable from the man who stood before the forum. His lab coat is dark with blood. Neural ports have been burned into his skull. Around him, R-AI maps a living mind into light, extracts its continuity pattern and routes it toward a replacement body.

INSERT

FIRST HUMAN TRIAL — ELI MANA /
SUCCESSFUL

INSERT

KIRA NIX — CLEMENCY DENIED

Eli reaches a shattered cryo-pod.

Inside, Kira's body is frozen beneath a skin of white crystal. Her hand is raised against the glass. No vital signs. The state clock on her wrist has stopped at zero.

INSERT

KIRA NIX — DEAD SEVEN MINUTES

ELI

You promised me she'd be safe if the trial worked.

A security screen clears. Dr. Harp Vale watches from the control room. His face is almost unreadable. Almost.

HARP (ON SCREEN)

They promised clemency if the trial worked. That was the agreement they gave us.

ELI

It worked. You can see that it worked.
Open the pod, Harp!

Harp doesn't move.

HARP (ON SCREEN)

I know what they promised. I know.

ELI

OPEN IT!

HARP (ON SCREEN)

She's been dead seven minutes, Eli.
Opening it won't bring her back.

A damaged speaker plays the final message recorded inside Kira's pod.

KIRA (RECORDING)

Eli—if they turn return into a prison,
break it. Even if I'm in there. If it
sounds like me and I tell you to
stop... stop.

ELI

Then I'll find her. I don't care how
long it takes. I'll find her every
time.

HARP (ON SCREEN)

No. Listen to what she asked you to
do. You won't.

Light pours from Eli's eyes into the first R-AI lattice.
Kira's name vanishes from his language before her face
leaves his heart. He keeps reaching after he forgets why.
Kira's recording distorts. Four broken tones repeat through
the damaged speaker.
Eli answers with one final strike against the glass.
The record tears into white.
The first R-AI lattice divides into thousands of
illuminated threads.

Years collapse into images. A dying woman opens her eyes in
another body. Return chambers multiply beneath cities.
Names become numbers. One government seal replaces every
other. In 9997, every thread goes dark. The network wakes
again—with something inside it the state cannot identify.

SUPER: 1,876 YEARS AFTER ELI MANA'S EXTRACTION

ACT ONE — THE ANOMALY

INT. RETURN CHAMBER - NIGHT - YEAR 9998 – NINE MONTHS AGO

A state-grown adult body hangs upright inside black glass.

KERR, 30s, wakes with no childhood, no family, and no memory of entering the chamber. A stranger's face stares back from every curved reflection.

On his wrist:

KERR – ITERATION 9998. CONTINUITY RECOVERY: INCOMPLETE.
STATE BODY LICENSE: PROVISIONAL.

DR. IMANI VOSS, 40s, a systems engineer whose composure looks practiced rather than natural, watches from behind the glass. A tiny prayer pouch hangs inside her collar—the one private thing she permits the state to see.

Kerr studies his unfamiliar hands.

KERR

Where was I before I woke up in here?

IMANI

Nowhere I could find. I looked, Kerr.

KERR

For how long? How long was I nowhere?

Imani looks at the designation on his wrist.

IMANI

Almost nineteen centuries. I know that doesn't mean anything yet.

Four diagnostic tones sound inside the chamber.

Kerr's hand answers with a fifth knock against the glass.

The chamber goes still.

Far beneath them, the fifth beat enters the buried continuity grid.

Across the foundations of Chronos City, thousands of sealed Return chambers ignite one after another—empty glass holding light for the dead.

Imani's console displays a message no living system should recognize:

ORIGIN LINE – ACKNOWLEDGED

Before she can touch it, the message erases itself. The distant chambers go dark.

KERR

What was that? The whole room just answered me.

IMANI

A fault. That's what I'm calling it
until I know better.

© REINCARNATED.AI CONFIDENTIAL READER COPY

INT. KERR'S STATE APARTMENT - MORNING - YEAR 9998

SUPER: PRESENT DAY — 274 DAYS AFTER RETURN

Kerr wakes before the state alarm. The apartment is narrow but lived-in: a stubborn green plant, a chipped cup, hand-drawn corrections taped over an official transit map.

His wrist reads KERR — ITERATION 9998. DAY 274. PROVISIONAL CITIZENSHIP. MANDATORY IDENTITY REVIEW 27.

He burns one side of real bread. Four knocks travel through a heating pipe. KERR answers with a fifth before he realizes his hand has moved.

In the window's condensation, his fingertip has traced a woman's eye. He wipes it away.

NEIGHBOR (O.S.)

Review day?

KERR

Twenty-seven. They're still unhappy with the answers I gave the first twenty-six times.

On his way out, KERR leaves a repaired navigation tile beside his neighbor's door. His Mapworks credential pulses with a cancellation: REPORT TO CONTINUITY STABILIZATION.

IMANI waits at the end of the corridor with two cups. She hands Kerr the one without sweetener. He takes it without asking. Nine months have made this a ritual.

IMANI

You ate?

KERR

The bread won again. I ate the part that wasn't charcoal.

They walk toward the review chamber together.

INT. CONTINUITY REVIEW CHAMBER - DAY

Black glass without visible edges. KERR enters through the only door. Every reflection shows him a fraction too late. IMANI takes her place at the manual console.

IMANI

State your designation.

KERR

Kerr. Still.

IMANI

Iteration?

KERR

Nine-nine-nine-eight.

IMANI

Day?

KERR

Two hundred seventy-four. Do I get cake tomorrow?

A sealed record appears beside his reflection: ORIGIN SUBJECT – CLASSIFIED. ARCHIVED PATTERN CORRESPONDENCE: 91.7 PERCENT. ORIGIN CLAIM – UNCLAIMED.

KERR

Still no name. Just another blank where a person should be.

IMANI

Harp requested another recognition review. He marked it urgent.

KERR

Nine months. Twenty-seven reviews. What do they want me to say that I haven't already said?

IMANI

They want recognition. They want you to name whoever they think came back.

KERR

And if I recognize him, what happens to me?

IMANI

The state stops calling your origin provisional. They make the claim permanent.

KERR

So you stop asking because you finally own me.

IMANI

Yes. And they stop threatening to take the body away. Both things are true.

KERR

And if I never remember him? If I'm only ever me?

CORE LINK

ORIGIN CLAIM REMAINS UNCLAIMED.

A crack appears across the glass, dividing the classified silhouette from KERR's reflection.

Beyond the observation wall, DIRECTOR ROMAN records the fracture. His face has changed since 8122. He watches with the same stillness.

IMANI

That glass survived the Fracture. I've never seen it react to anyone.

KERR

Did I fail the test, or did the test fail me?

IMANI

No. You answered honestly. That may be the problem.

KERR

I had nine months before they dragged me back in here. I made a life, Imani. It may be small, but it's mine.

IMANI

Okay. Then we start with the life you have. Not the one they want you to remember.

INT. STABILIZATION SUITE - LATER

Imani loads the state's approved history. Kerr remains visible beneath it.

One surviving fragment: In 9997, a woman opens twelve contradictory lives inside a state scanner. The prediction system breaks. During three seconds of darkness, an unassigned girl wakes.

KERR

Who is she? I know that face, but I don't know from where.

IMANI

The record won't say. Every file that should name her has been sealed.

Kerr's breath catches. His fingertips press four shallow dents into the arm of the chair. He looks back at the woman frozen inside the corrupted record.

Imani rolls a calibration tray between them. Three objects sit beneath white light: a cracked lens, a laboratory seal with its name burned away, and a battered analog sketchbook. The book came from the sealed origin archive. Its identifying marks have been removed. Equations survive on the first pages. The rest appear blank. Kerr touches the laboratory seal. Nothing. The cracked lens. Nothing.

His thumb catches on the sketchbook's cloth cover.

KERR

Take it away. My hand is doing
something I didn't tell it to do.

Imani reaches for the book. She opens it to a blank page. Faint pressure grooves cross the paper—marks left by hands.

Kerr drags the side of a graphite stick across the page, trying to expose the grooves. A woman's eyes emerge.

He stops.

His hand moves again. New lines cut across clean paper: a girl beneath Earth repeated around a black sun, each image marked with a different future.

KERR

That wasn't in the paper. I didn't
copy it from anything.

The ceiling camera tightens focus.

Imani drops a calibration slate over the page and tags the event INVOLUNTARY MOTOR ARTIFACT — INCONCLUSIVE.

Kerr looks from the false tag to Imani. She leaves the sketchbook within his reach.

Imani turns back to the console.

**INTERCUT - INT. CONTINUITY RESERVE - UNASSIGNED BODY SECTOR
- NIGHT**

An unassigned sixteen-year-old host wakes among thousands of preserved bodies. Condensation and frost conceal her face. Before the monitoring lead can register consciousness, she tears it from her chest.

In the Stabilization Suite, the ceiling camera extracts the unknown girl's face from Kerr's drawing and searches the Continuity Reserve inventory.

INSERT

POSSIBLE BIOMETRIC
CORRESPONDENCE — HOST V-16

IDENTITY: UNASSIGNED

The system begins resolving V-16's location.

UNINDEXED HOST LOCATION
RESOLVING

Kerr sees the preserved bodies entering the search field. He drives his thumb into the origin port embedded beneath his wrist nine months ago.

IMANI

If you break that claim, the state will call you hostile continuity. They can take the body before you leave this room.

KERR

It's using my face to find her. I'm not going to stand here and help it.

He tears the port free. Blood crosses the classified silhouette. The location collapses one meter before reaching V-16.

INSERT

ORIGIN AUTHENTICATION —
CORRUPTED

Every door in Chronos City locks. His apartment access, Mapworks credential, and provisional citizenship vanish in succession. Nine months of life become three red words: HOSTILE CONTINUITY — REVOKED.

In the Continuity Reserve, the unidentified figure studies five marks in the condensation beside her—four together, one apart. Frost keeps her face unreadable.

Every clock in the suite blanks. A new number appears across the glass.

PURGE AUTHORIZED — 72:00:00

KERR

What happens when that clock reaches zero? Don't give me the approved answer.

IMANI

Every mind still waiting for a body is routed to Harp. No appeal. No second destination.

KERR

Why would anyone agree to that?

IMANI

I don't know. I think most of them were never asked.

The purge clock begins to fall: 71:59:42.

The recorded voices cut out. The history projection vanishes, returning us fully to Kerr and Imani. Four symbols remain: a closed circle, a broken circle, a black square, and a gold spiral. Only the first three receive labels.

MEMORY CONSOLE

Captured record. Reconstructed memory.
Sealed record.

KERR

Which one is real?

IMANI

One was captured. One rebuilt. One hidden.

MEMORY CONSOLE

Authenticated record selected.
Personal history. Year 8119.

**AUTHENTICATED RECORD - PERSONAL HISTORY - INT. FAMILY
APARTMENT - MORNING - YEAR 8119**

Ordinary sunlight. Kira burns toast. Eight-year-old SID MANA-NIX draws constellations on the ceiling with a toy projector. One front tooth is missing. She folds two pieces of red paper and locks them together into a star.

KIRA

You used two pieces.

SID

If one gets lost, the other still keeps the folds.

ELI

Paper doesn't remember.

SID

Then why's the crease still there?
Checkmate, paper.

Eli starts to answer, realizes he has been outmaneuvered by an eight-year-old.

SID

Four notes means, "Are you still there?"

Kira taps four notes on a glass. SID answers with a bright fifth.

KIRA

And that means?

SID

"I heard you."

ELI

That's not how information theory works.

SID

You came in from the other room, right? So it worked. You're welcome.

KIRA

Peer review is devastating at this age.

ELI

One subject, no control group. Brutal methodology.

SID

I control both of you. Tiny sample, huge power.

Eli laughs.

The record advances. Before R-AI, the receiver translated Sid's failing speech into sound. Harp built a consent lock into it.

HARP

It can't initiate contact, retain a response, or identify a speaker without permission.

SID

Good. What happens if I change my mind after I say yes?

HARP

Then it stops and deletes the session.

SID

Even if Dad says it's important?

HARP

Especially then.

ELI

You understand all that?

SID

Adults use long words when they're scared. Uncle Harp makes rules.

HARP

Someone in this family should.

Kira presses the first RESONANCE KEY against the glass and touches its four ceramic surfaces. The prototype carries the notes through the bed frame. Sid's neural response returns as the FIFTH.

SID

It remembered me.

ELI

It translated a repeatable neural pattern. Remembering would imply an internal experience we haven't established.

SID

That's a very long way to say yes.

KIRA

She has you there.

Sid asks the prototype to delete the session. Harp activates the consent gate. The screen clears.

The FIFTH NOTE sounds a fraction of a second before Sid's brain produces it.

ELI

Prediction artifact. Weird one, but still...

KIRA

Or feedback from a system we don't understand yet.

ELI

It answered first.

HARP

Log the timing. No theory.

On the blank screen, four words appear without a prompt: I HEARD YOU BEFORE.

RETURN TO PRESENT - INT. STABILIZATION SUITE - YEAR 9998

Kerr returns with Sid's two-piece red paper star drawn in the sketchbook margin. He has drawn the interlocking crease without being shown it—and older pressure grooves beneath his fresh lines follow the same fold.

KERR

Sid. That was her name. I could hear it before the memory ended.

IMANI

The girl's name was Sid. The other identities are sealed. I can't tell you whose memory that was.

KERR

But it was his memory, wasn't it? The man they keep trying to make me be.

IMANI

It came through you. That's all I can prove.

The authenticated image destabilizes. Rain replaces the apartment sunlight.

MEMORY CONSOLE

Unstable recall detected. Source confidence: indeterminate.

UNSTABLE RECALL - INT. DR. ELARA'S OFFICE - DAY (8121)

Rain on old glass. No screens. Kerr experiences the scene through the sealed patient's eyes. DR. ELARA, 44, trauma psychologist, watches him turn Sid's red paper star. The patient's face glitches in reflection.

ELARA

What do you miss when the memories stop being useful?

ELI

Her laugh. She tried to hold it in, but the gap in her teeth made it whistle. She hated that I noticed.

ELARA

A signal isn't automatically Sid, Eli. Wanting it to be her doesn't make it her.

Elara opens the paper star and gives it back unfolded.

ELI

Then tell me what I'm hearing, because it knows things nobody else should know.

RETURN TO PRESENT - INT. STABILIZATION SUITE - YEAR 9998

Kerr returns with the red star drawn across three sketchbook pages. Folded together, their disconnected margins form the same woman's eyes.

KERR

Was any of that real, or did my mind build what I wanted?

IMANI

Some of it was real. I can't tell you which parts yet.

KERR

That's not enough. Which part belonged to him?

IMANI

That's the problem. The system won't separate your recall from the record.

The door opens. Harp heard the last sentence.

INT. STABILIZATION SUITE - NIGHT

HIGH REGENT HARP VALE enters alone. His elegant twelfth body appears no older than thirty. Twelve renewal dates shimmer beneath his wrist.

HARP

You always wake angry. It takes you a while to realize you're afraid.

KERR

Were you always standing there when I woke up, waiting for me to become him?

HARP

For the important ones. Sometimes you wanted water. Sometimes you tried to kill me before you could stand. Once you apologized because you saw my face and knew you were supposed to know me.

KERR

Which version did you like best—the one who apologized or the one who tried to kill you?

HARP

The one who asked why. At least he still wanted an answer.

KERR

Imani says you need me to open something. Is that why I'm still alive?

HARP

The Origin Core. It has refused every claimant since the Fracture.

KERR

And what exactly do you need me to do once I'm standing in front of it?

HARP

Choose access. A living claimant has to open it willingly.

KERR

Then why keep calling me Eli? You don't need him. You need my hand.

HARP

Because Eli's authority is the only claim the state recognizes. Without that name, the door stays closed.

KERR

And if I don't give it to you? If I keep my own name?

HARP

Then the state will put you at the gate and bring you back as many times as it takes.

KERR

So this review isn't a review. It's a threat with better lighting.

HARP

You can say yes before it becomes one. I'm trying to spare you that.

Harp gestures. The purge clock expands across the wall.

HARP

At zero, every waiting mind loses its open route. There will be nowhere else for them to go.

KERR

You told me they all go to you. Say what that means.

HARP

It means I can hold them. I can keep them from disappearing.

KERR

Inside you? You want every one of them inside your head?

For the first time, Harp looks his age.

Harp studies Kerr's sketchbook. Separate pages overlap: the woman's eyes, four notes and fragments of corridor geometry.

HARP

Every body drew fragments of her. Yours finally made a whole face.

Twelve recorded deaths, probably hundreds more—and she is the first thing R-AI cannot predict. I need to know why.

INT. SERVICE CORRIDOR - MINUTES LATER

Imani unlocks Kerr's room with an analog override braided into the cord of her prayer pouch. The panel requests authorization. She enters the same SENSOR NOISE code she used to delay Kerr's report. The lock accepts before she finishes. Imani freezes. A corridor camera pivots from Imani to Kerr. Its facial lock climbs toward one hundred percent; Kerr's wrist flashes ORIGIN CLAIMANT, then DEFECTIVE RETURN. COMMANDER SATO, 50s, a veteran Enforcer whose loyalty implant has outlived three bodies, waits beneath it with a weapon and a battered mechanical watch.

KERR

And you are who, exactly? Another person sent to tell me who I used to be?

SATO

Right now? The man who lowered his weapon instead of pointing it at you.

Sato sees DEFECTIVE RETURN. His thumb presses the watch crown as if stopping an old reflex. Then he shoots the corridor camera before facial lock completes. The red upload light dies. A state notice flashes through the smoke: FEED LOST – NEAREST ENFORCER NEURAL RELAY IN 00:00:40. The countdown binds the broken camera to Sato's loyalty implant.

SATO

Forty seconds before the implant changes my mind and I lock that door again. Please move.

IMANI

That override shouldn't have worked. Why are you risking your life to open the door?

SATO

The last person I brought through here was my daughter. They said there wasn't enough left to return. I signed the report and pretended I believed it.

SATO

Then the system showed me tomorrow. Clean streets. Trains on time. Nobody

out of line. It wanted me to feel proud.

IMANI

If we leave this room, where are you going? You need something better than 'away.'

KERR

The woman in the record. I need to know why Harp buried her. After that... I don't know. I just know I can't stay here and wait to become someone else.

IMANI

That's barely a route. Fine. It's still better than standing here while they decide for us.

They run.

INT. TRANSIT SPINE - NIGHT

Enforcers close from both ends. The corridor predicts their movement in red light before they make it.

IMANI

Move. Now.

KERR

You just told me not to decide.

IMANI

I changed my mind. Move.

Kerr flips open the sketchbook. A line drawn in the chamber matches the corridor's red prediction path. He steps left, remembers dying left, spins right. A drone fires where his intention had been.

SATO

Down. Now.

He opens an emergency hatch. They plunge.

EXT. CHRONOS CITY - NIGHT

They emerge onto a transit spine suspended in the fog above CHRONOS CITY.

One black tower rises beside them and disappears into weather before its upper floors become visible. Another is only a shadow across the fog. No traffic noise. No voices carry between them.

Transparent freight capsules pass overhead. A sleeping adult body fills each one. Far below, a renewal queue folds

through the same plaza again and again; Kerr cannot see where it begins.

Citizens cross a plaza large enough for an army. Their former lives appear only when the state recognizes them. Expiration dates burn beneath their wrists like social rank.

A CHILD steps outside her assigned lane. The paving stone lights red. Her mother returns her to the line before an Enforcer turns around.

The seventy-two-hour purge countdown stains the low cloud above the plaza.

A civic lesson repeats: LIFE ALLOCATION. BODY TERM CLAIMANT. MEMORY PROVEN. RETURN PRESERVATION.

KERR

The Chronocracy did all of this? It isn't just the Return chambers?

IMANI

The state picks your body. It edits whatever doesn't fit. It even decides when you've had enough lives.

KERR

Then who chose Harp? Who gave him that power?

SATO

The first generation. After that, nobody remembered there had been a choice.

Every camera turns toward Kerr. A municipal speaker wakes. Its vocabulary is limited to enforcement commands.

CIVIC SECURITY

RETURN TO CARE, ORIGIN CLAIMANT.

KERR

KERR.

CIVIC SECURITY

SELF-DESIGNATION CORRECTION REGISTERED.

KERR

Can R-AI hear me through this thing, or am I arguing with a recording?

CIVIC SECURITY

REPORT TO CARE.

KERR

That didn't answer me. It just changed the order.

IMANI

R-AI isn't in that speaker. It's under the city. This unit only knows how to repeat what it's told.

For less than a frame, an encrypted audit header flickers beneath the civic feed. The terminal can't open it. Kerr sees only the Core's refusal code because his return is still out of calibration.

INSERT

CENTRAL R-AI AUDIT LOG 07 — REMOTE
REQUEST DENIED

INSERT

CORE ITERATION 0043 — ANOMALOUS MEMORY
RESILIENCE

INSERT

RECOMMENDATION: OBSERVE. Don't
INTERVENE.

INSERT

ADDENDUM: CONTRADICTION REGISTERED.

INSERT

AUDIT REVIEW REQUIRED. DISCLOSURE
PROHIBITED.

Imani sees the contradictory orders before the municipal terminal restores its blank enforcement screen.

For one frame, every civic screen shows the silhouette of a girl drawing Earth repeated around a black sun, each image marked with a different future.

A FIFTH NOTE escapes every municipal speaker before the next security command arrives. A dark spiral turns beneath Kerr's reflection. The city audio cuts out.

CIVIC SECURITY

UNINDEXED HOST SEARCH ACTIVE.

The cameras turn away.

EXT. TEMPLE OF RETURN - NIGHT

They descend into a temple filled with shallow black water. Families wait on isolated platforms beneath queue numbers. Ministers pray. Clerks calculate. No one acknowledges the difference.

A WOMAN holds her dying husband on one platform. A young replacement body sleeps on another, fifty meters away. The state gives the family thirty seconds to prove sufficient continuity.

WOMAN

Will he remember me when he wakes up?
Not the bond—the person.

MINISTER

If the bond served continuity, the
memories should return.

WOMAN

I didn't ask about a bond. I asked
whether he'll know my face.

The replacement body's eyes open. Across the water, the husband's wrist advances from twelve minutes to three seconds. His wife sees both bodies and can reach neither.

At zero, his first body falls into the water. The replacement sits up before the splash reaches the platform.

The clerk removes the dead man's number from the queue. The next family is called.

The WOMAN looks from the body in the water to the awakened stranger. The date on her husband's wrist goes dark.

MINISTER

He has entered lawful return. That is
the answer the state can give you.

INT. ANALOG ZONE - NIGHT

The corridor narrows until the city can no longer stand upright around them. Electric light gives way to candles. Low ceilings sweat. Pipes carry repairs from five different centuries. Shoes wait outside curtained rooms. Food passes through a hatch. Somewhere beyond the walls, someone misses a note and starts the song again. No system hum tells them what the room expects.

A MASKED WOMAN steps from the candlelight. A cracked ceramic RESONANCE KEY rests in her palm, small enough to disappear. Kerr's sketchbook falls open. The eyes he drew in the chamber stare back from the page—and from above her mask.

KERR

I've been drawing your eyes since I
woke up. I didn't know they belonged
to anyone.

MASKED WOMAN

You've been drawing somebody. You
haven't met me, and you don't get to
use a picture as proof that you know
me.

MASKED WOMAN

First tell me why your book knows how to reach this place. Then we can talk about my eyes.

KERR

I don't know. Every time a memory comes back, the drawings get a little less wrong. That's all I have.

She takes the sketchbook without touching him.

She flips past the sealed equations, Sid's folded star and the woman's eyes. Across several pages, stray lines join into a route through the Analog Zone.

KERR

Those lines were there before I left the chamber. I couldn't have known this place existed.

MASKED WOMAN

And now they map the room where I sleep. That's almost cute if I ignore how terrifying it is.

She keeps her mask on and leads them deeper. At every junction, the sketchbook route matches the architecture a moment before Kerr sees it.

MASKED WOMAN

Follow me.

KERR

What if the memory brought me to you because you were looking for me too?

MASKED WOMAN

Then the memory made a mistake. I stopped looking a long time ago.

KERR

No. You recognized me the second I walked in.

MASKED WOMAN

I recognized something. That isn't the same as knowing you.

KERR

What did you recognize? Please don't make me guess again.

Kerr tries not to smile. The left corner of his mouth lifts.

The Masked Woman goes still.

MASKED WOMAN

That thing you just did with your mouth. You always did it when you knew someone was lying.

KERR

My mouth? That's what convinced you?

MASKED WOMAN

Not convinced. Frightened. I've watched that expression disappear with you too many times.

KERR

How many times have you seen me die?

At the final turn, the newest sketch aligns with the room around them.

The Masked Woman studies the completed portrait, then removes her mask. It's the face Kerr's hand has been approaching page by page.

KIRA

My name is Kira. Start with the name I chose.

KERR

You're the woman from the Fracture—the one in the broken record.

KIRA

The body is from the Fracture. I'm still deciding what the rest of me is.

KERR

I watched you die. I felt it like it happened to me.

KIRA

Then you saw what happened to that version of me. You didn't see this one.

KERR

How are you standing here after that? Tell me something that makes sense.

KIRA

The network failed and I woke up in a body nobody had claimed. The old consent lock must have thrown me somewhere blind. I ran before the state could name me.

KERR

Is it really you, Kira? I need to know whether I'm talking to a person or another memory.

KIRA

I don't know. Some mornings I remember dying. Other mornings it feels like I watched it happen to a stranger. I stopped pretending certainty would make me safer.

KERR

Then why keep her name if you aren't sure you're her?

KIRA

Because I didn't get to choose the body or the memories. I chose the name. I needed one thing to be mine.

KERR

Does Harp know you're alive? Does he know which version survived?

KIRA

He knows the versions in his files. He knows what they did. He doesn't know me.

She steps closer, allowing him to see the unfamiliar details of her face.

KIRA

He hasn't met this one, and I'm not dying for him again. I need you to understand that before you ask anything of me.

KERR

When you say you want to end it, do you mean the forced Returns—or all of it?

KIRA

All of it. Harp can't follow me into the Continuity Field. That's the one place I can end my own life without him pulling me back.

KIRA

Twelve times I wake up and somebody puts an old debt in my hands. I don't want a thirteenth. I want to be allowed to stop.

KERR

And everyone else waiting for a body?
What happens to them if you end the
system?

Kira looks toward the people sheltering in the next room.

KIRA

That isn't my decision to make for
them. Ask them what they want—if
anyone still remembers how.

INT. ANALOG ZONE - LIVING QUARTERS - NIGHT

Kira leads them past curtained rooms carved beneath the
city. Hands repair clocks at one doorway. A child copies
letters at another. Music travels through the pipes, stops
on a wrong note, then begins again.

A mural lists the rights forbidden above: THE RIGHT TO
FORGET. THE RIGHT TO REFUSE RETURN. THE RIGHT TO CHANGE
WITHOUT EXPLANATION.

KERR

How many people are hiding down here
with you?

KIRA

Six hundred twelve, roughly. People
come and go without filing a claim. It
drives Harp insane.

A return alarm sounds inside a side room. Kira enters. Kerr
follows.

LENA, 30s, wakes in an illegal body. DANE, 60s, waits
beside her holding a wedding photograph. Lena studies him
without recognition.

DANE

You came back. I knew you'd come back
to me.

LENA

Who are you? Why are you looking at me
like that?

Dane reaches for her. Kira catches his wrist before
contact.

KIRA

Ask her before you touch her, Dane.
Let her answer for herself.

DANE

She's my wife. We spent forty-three
years together.

KIRA

She died. This woman just woke up.
Don't make your grief the first thing
she has to carry.

Dane's hope turns defensive.

DANE

We had forty-three years. You can't
expect me to stand here and act like
none of it happened.

LENA

I'm sorry. I can see that I'm hurting
you, and I wish I knew how not to. But
I don't know you.

DANE

You didn't do anything wrong. You're
disoriented. The memories can take
time. They'll come back when the
transfer settles.

KIRA

Dane, take your hand off her. You're
scaring her.

Kerr watches Dane keep his distance.

Dane lowers his hand.

DANE

My name is Dane. I knew someone who
looked like you before she died. I
shouldn't have decided that made you
her.

LENA

Did you love her? The woman who had
this face?

DANE

Very much. We were terrible to each
other before breakfast and usually
better by lunch.

LENA

Was she kind, or are you only saying
the good parts because she's gone?

DANE

Sometimes. Not always. She could be
cruel when she was frightened. But she
tried, and I loved her for trying.

A small smile reaches Lena without memory.

DANE

May I sit here? I won't come any closer unless you ask.

LENA

Yes. Just... over there for now.

He sits at a distance and turns the wedding photograph face down.

LENA

You can leave the photograph up. I want to see who she was.

DANE

Only if you want it. I shouldn't have come at you like that. I was so relieved that I forgot to look at you.

Kira exits. Kerr follows her into the corridor.

KERR

How often does someone wake up to a stranger insisting they're married?

KIRA

Often enough that the state gave her seventy-two hours to remember him.

KERR

And if she doesn't remember him in time?

KIRA

They revoke the body and call it a failed return.

KERR

Dane knew that before he touched her?

KIRA

He knew. He also helped us steal the body so she would have any time at all.

They look back. Dane remains where Lena left him. He does not follow her.

KERR

What happens now—after everyone stops telling her who she is?

KIRA

He gives her time. If he loves her, he lets the answer hurt.

KERR

Is that what you're doing with me? Waiting to see who answers?

KIRA

I'm trying. Some moments I'm better at it than others.

KERR

That still isn't an answer, Kira.

KIRA

It's the only honest one I have tonight.

They pass a classroom. Children draw people and places absent from every licensed record.

IMANI watches a girl erase a woman from her drawing, then put her back.

IMANI

My mother refused another body when hers began to fail.

KERR

Did you understand why she wanted to stop?

IMANI

No. I called her selfish. I thought loving her gave me a vote.

KERR

Were you wrong to want her back?

IMANI

No. I was wrong to make wanting her back sound like something she owed me.

An Analog musician loses the melody, curses under his breath and starts again.

INT. ANALOG SAFEHOUSE - LATER

A cramped kitchen assembled from scavenged centuries.

Kira burns toast over a heating coil. Kerr reaches across her and kills the heat before the alarm sounds.

KIRA

You always did that. You'd watch the smoke and pretend you meant to burn it.

KERR

Burn the toast? That's the great proof I'm him?

KIRA

Notice two seconds too late. Then make a joke because you're embarrassed.

KERR

That sounds annoyingly believable.

KIRA

You don't know yourself well enough to call me a liar yet. Give it another day.

The remark lands harder than she intended.

On the wall: Kira's folded half of Sid's red paper star, a map beneath the capital and four memory symbols.

Kerr points to the gold spiral.

KERR

What's that one—the girl under the black sun?

KIRA

A pre-echo. A memory recorded before the event that caused it.

KERR

The girl beneath the black sun.

Kira turns to him.

KIRA

Where did you hear those words? Kerr, look at me.

KERR

I didn't hear them. They were just there when I looked at the page.

He opens the sketchbook. The repeated drawing stares up at them.

KERR

I've been drawing her since I woke up. I thought she was another piece of your past.

Kira takes the book. For the first time, Kerr sees her genuinely frightened.

KERR

Is she real, or did the system put her in my head?

KIRA

There's one record that looks like this. We searched for years and never found the person in it.

KERR

But Harp found enough to keep looking.

KIRA

He's still looking. That may be why the system woke you now.

She opens the map. A route descends beneath the capital toward the Continuity Core.

KIRA

Harp can read everything R-AI kept, but he still can't open the Origin Core. That's the one thing he can't force.

KERR

Why not? He seems to have forced everything else.

KIRA

Every archived Eli failed. The Core wants a living person to choose, not a copy following an old instruction.

Kerr looks at the route ending beneath the city.

KERR

So that person is supposed to be me.

KIRA

Harp needs you to choose inside the Core. He doesn't care what name you use on the way there.

KERR

What do you believe? Not what the records say—what do you believe about me?

KIRA

I believe if Harp had the answer, we'd already be dead. I don't know if that helps.

She marks one symbol: ORIGIN. Beneath it, the state has written: LIVING CLAIMANT — UNCONFIRMED.

IMANI

V-16—the unassigned host in the search record.

KIRA

She activated during the Fracture with no assigned continuity and no claimant. If she's alive, Harp doesn't know what she is either.

KERR

You want to use her to open the Core before Harp can.

KIRA

I want to get her out of that facility. If she chooses to help, then you open the Core and we stop the purge. Her choice comes first.

KERR

And if the Core calls me Eli when I touch it?

KIRA

Then you refuse. We reach V-16, we reach the Core, and we stop Harp before zero without surrendering your name.

IMANI

Every waiting mind depends on that route. If we're wrong, they all pay for it.

Kira circles V-16, the Origin Core and the falling purge clock. One line connects all three.

INT. ANALOG SAFEHOUSE - NIGHT

Kerr touches Kira's half of the red paper star. His hand trembles. He pulls it back.

KERR

Who was Eli to you before all of this?

KIRA

Someone I loved. Someone who hurt me. See what he did before you decide which part matters.

KERR

Harp thinks Eli is inside me. Sometimes I can feel why he believes it.

KIRA

Harp needs your body to make an old record legal. He doesn't know the person standing in front of him.

KERR

Then let's reach the Core before he puts another name on me.

KIRA

What if the name feels like yours when you hear it? What if you want it?

KERR

Then I listen. But I decide what it means. Nobody else gets to do that for me.

Kira places the resonance key in his palm and closes his fingers around it. She does not give him her hand.

Every mechanical clock in the safe-house stops at once. The candle flames lean toward the walls as the state grid finds the room. On Kira's map, every marked exit turns red. The maintenance trench beneath them stays dark.

CIVIC SECURITY (V.O.)

Analog Zone coordinates resolved.
Sanctuary purge authorized.

Stone shutters slam down. Above them, Enforcer charges strike the street.

SATO

Well. Decision made. Safe route's gone.

Kira pulls an emergency lever. The unmarked floor drops beneath Kerr, Kira, Imani and Sato, spilling them into the maintenance trench as the safe-house folds into fire overhead.

The shaft seals behind them. There is no way back to the life Kerr spent nine months building.

ACT TWO – THE CLAIM

INT. CONTINUITY RESERVE - NIGHT

Five preservation chambers face them through the frost. Their reflections repeat down both walls until the aisle appears endless. Emergency light sweeps past: five adult faces, then darkness. Cooling locks release one after another far beyond the visible sector.

KERR, KIRA, IMANI and SATO move through a maintenance trench beneath the sector. The citywide purge clock reads 61:36:09.

IMANI

Every chamber reports directly to the Continuity Core. If the hardline reconnects, Harp sees us.

KERR

How long do we have?

IMANI

I cut the local relay. It could stay down for a minute. It could be back already.

Kira presses the resonance key to a coolant pipe and touches its four worn surfaces. The notes pass through metal rather than air.

RESERVE CONTROL

Unresolved consent claim. State procedure suspended.

TRANSIT: ACTIVE / DESTINATION: WITHHELD

EMERGENCY AUTHORITY MAY INITIATE
TRANSFER / AUTHENTICATED LIVING
CONSENT CANNOT BE SYNTHESIZED

The scanners stop moving. Imani watches a dead status light that can wake without warning.

They climb into the sector.

**INT. CONTINUITY RESERVE - UNASSIGNED BODY SECTOR -
CONTINUOUS**

The chamber marked V-16 is open. Its display still reports an occupied body and a steady heartbeat. Sector search lights continue scanning the empty glass.

Wet footprints cross the floor. A state wrist band lies split beside an exposed maintenance panel. Someone has stripped wire from the wall and built a release tool from it.

Sato raises his weapon.

A restraint cable snaps tight around his throat from behind. **VEYRIS**, sixteen in body and one year awake, holds the other end. Medical ports have been torn from her skin. Her stance is balanced. Her eyes move across all four intruders, measuring which one she will have to hurt first.

VEYRIS

Put it down. I don't know you, and I won't ask twice.

Sato lowers the weapon. Veyris keeps the cable tight.

KIRA

We didn't come to kill you. We came because they're about to move you.

VEYRIS

You came through a locked door with weapons. You can see why I don't believe you.

Kerr's sketchbook slips from beneath his coat and falls open. Veyris sees her face on the page.

The cable tightens.

VEYRIS

Where did you get that drawing? Harp kept showing me the same one.

KERR

I drew it before I knew you existed.

VEYRIS

Harp has the same picture. He thought it was a map of me.

KERR

Did he tell you where it came from, or just ask you to become it?

VEYRIS

He thought I knew. Every time I said I didn't, they changed the question.

KIRA

What's your name—the one you use when nobody is asking for a designation?

VEYRIS

Veyris. I chose it because it wasn't in their records.

IMANI

V-16 activated during the Fracture. No assigned continuity. No registered claimant.

VEYRIS

Their records aren't my problem. The people behind that door are.

A surveillance lens above them quietly rotates. Veyris sees it first.

She releases Sato, drives the metal tool through the lens and tears open the maintenance panel.

VEYRIS

They know you're here. The wall changed when you came in.

KIRA

Then come with us before they decide what you are.

VEYRIS

I'm leaving. If you want to help, keep up and don't touch me.

The far doors unlock. Enforcers enter from both ends of the sector.

INT. CONTINUITY RESERVE - CONTINUOUS

KIRA meets the first Enforcer before his weapon clears its holster. Sato turns on his former unit. Veyris moves toward the maintenance route she has already opened.

An Enforcer catches Veyris by the wrist.

She turns into his grip instead of pulling away, drives the metal release tool beneath the seal of his weapon hand and twists.

The weapon discharges into the floor. Veyris tears free and slams him against a preservation chamber. Before he can recover, she rips the state band from his wrist and throws it between the closing doors.

The security system follows his signal into the wrong corridor.

They reach the sealed maintenance gate.

SATO

Your route ends here.

Veyris opens the control housing. A strip of wire is already bridging two contacts.

She drives the release tool into a third contact. The lock resists.

Kira sees the manual pressure valve beside the frame and forces it down. The gate releases hard enough to shake the corridor.

Veyris leads them through.

INT. ANALOG MAINTENANCE SKIFF - NIGHT

An obsolete rail skiff carries them beneath the city without a network connection. Its wheels strike imperfect intervals. VEYRIS sits beside the open service window, feeling unfiltered rain for the first time.

VEYRIS

It hurts. I didn't know air could hurt.

IMANI

It's called being cold. Your skin will decide how much it hates it after the surprise wears off.

VEYRIS

The facility called weather an infrastructure failure. It never said it would feel like this.

SATO

Warm, fed, quiet. They gave us everything except a reason to want more. Wanting was the dangerous part.

VEYRIS

Is it always this painful, or is it supposed to be beautiful too?

IMANI

Both. Wait until it gets inside your underwear before you decide which one wins.

Imani wraps a coat around Veyris.

Kira watches the city recede. Kerr watches Kira pretending not to watch him. Then hits him for noticing.

VEYRIS

Why did she hit you if she knows you?

KERR

Apparently I arrived late. Very late.

VEYRIS

How late makes hitting someone the greeting?

KERR

About two thousand years. I probably got off lightly.

VEYRIS

Then she definitely held back.

Sato almost laughs. Kira doesn't hide hers.

SKIFF DIAGNOSTIC

SIGNAL SOURCE: UNRESOLVED.

SATO

None of us knows what we're doing.
That's not comforting, but it means
you'll fit right in.

Ahead, the rail terminates at a decommissioned R-AI transfer conduit. State searchlights sweep into the tunnel behind them.

Sato jumps from the skiff and forces open a service hatch.

SATO

This line was disconnected before my first body. It won't report us.

IMANI

It can still carry residual traffic.
Don't touch anything that has power.

INT. DECOMMISSIONED R-AI TRANSFER CONDUIT - NIGHT

They enter a narrow service passage wrapped around obsolete neural relays. Most are dark. Thick transmission cables disappear beneath the city toward the central R-AI core.

Boots strike metal behind them. Enforcers have reached the abandoned platform.

Someone pounds against an emergency door ahead. Kerr's sketchbook route continues straight past it. Through the wired-glass panel: ANALOG REFUGEES trapped in a parallel service corridor. An Enforcer beam searches the wall behind them.

KERR

Open it.

KIRA

The door is still tied to the network.

Sato opens the control panel. A dormant connection indicator waits beside the manual release.

A child coughs behind the door. Kira sees the Enforcer light reach the refugees' feet.

KIRA

Imani, clear the ventilation trunk.
Sato, tell me when the connection starts. Kerr, take the door.

Kira pulls the manual release. Kerr takes the weight as the emergency door drags open against years of corrosion.

The refugees squeeze through. Imani moves them toward an original ventilation pipe running above the conduit.

A dead relay clicks awake.

SATO

Connection started.

Kira stays at the opening as the last refugees cross. Enforcer fire punches through the wired glass and tears across her upper arm.

KERR

Kira!

KIRA

Hold it!

A woman pushes a frightened boy through. The door motor engages, pulling against Kerr's hands.

Kira shoves the woman clear and dives through. Kerr releases the door. It slams shut as Enforcer rounds strike the other side.

The dormant relays illuminate in sequence, carrying their location toward the city.

CONDUIT CONTROL

Unauthorized transfer route restored.
Location registered.

IMANI

We gave them the conduit. Move!

Dust trembles beneath a narrow ventilation grille. Veyris tears it loose. Cold air moves through an unpowered shaft beyond it.

VEYRIS

This one isn't connected.

IMANI

How do you know?

VEYRIS

They left the dust.

They all climb into the shaft. Sato takes a round through his side while covering them and drops behind a relay housing.

SATO

Keep moving!

Veyris returns, pulls his arm over her shoulder and lifts.

VEYRIS

Can you walk?

SATO

For now.

VEYRIS

Then don't stop just yet.

She carries his weight into the shaft. Kerr follows last as state forces enter the conduit behind him.

The old transfer line seals around the Enforcers. The unrecorded ventilation shaft remains open.

INT. THE UNCLAIMED ARCHIVE / FIRST RETURN FACILITY - NIGHT

The ventilation shaft opens into humanity's first Return facility. Fired-clay containers fill its curved wall, each holding a handwritten name and one object the Chronocracy erased.

At the far end, a sealed descent marked ORIGIN leads toward the Core. An offline terminal controls it.

Kerr enters KERR. The terminal rejects the name.

ORIGIN CLAIM DISPUTED –
DESCENT SEALED

KERR

Then show me what Harp changed.

The terminal opens the suppressed archive. The purge clock reads 48:18:42.

An OLD KEEPER gives Kerr an empty clay container and a strip of paper.

KEEPER

Write the name the state took from you. It doesn't have to be the one they expect.

KERR

I know who belongs in that space. I can see her face, but I can't hear her name.

KIRA

Sid. Her name was Sid. Write it before
the memory takes the sound away again.

Kerr writes SID, then carries the vessel to the terminal.
A YOUNG FATHER approaches Veyris.

YOUNG FATHER

My son died before he could be
indexed. Please—are you where he went?
Did any part of him reach you?

VEYRIS

No. Please stop. I'm not the person
you're looking for, and I don't want
to lie because you're hurting.

YOUNG FATHER

How can you know without even hearing
his name?

VEYRIS

Because you haven't looked at me once.
You've only looked for him.

He lowers his eyes. Veyris softens.

VEYRIS

What was his name? I can at least know
that much.

YOUNG FATHER

Tomas.

INT. FIRST ARCHIVE - PROCESSIONAL GALLERY - CONTINUOUS

The Keeper opens a clay shutter. The testimonies contradict
one another.

Kerr does not stop. He carries Sid's vessel to the offline
terminal controlling the descent.

KERR

Show me the first false claim in my
chain.

The earliest surviving state record opens.

AUTHENTICATED RECORD - THE CHRONOCRACY IS FOUNDED - YEAR 8122

Kira-8122 drives a purge key into the first state server.
Roman stops her. Her death sentence appears before the
hearing begins.

Harp trades Eli the first human trial for clemency he
cannot guarantee. Eli signs. Eleven days later, Roman
executes Kira.

KIRA

He knew I returned and still kept Eli from finding me?

ARCHIVE TERMINAL

NO. HARP SEALED YOUR FIRST RETURN FROM ELI.

KIRA

Seven minutes are missing from Sid's death record. Someone cut them out cleanly.

ARCHIVE TERMINAL

RECORD WITHHELD BY HARP.

KIRA

Then that's the record I came for. I need to know who she was calling.

FORBIDDEN RECORD - THE MURDER OF ELI MANA - YEAR 8124

Eli restores part of R-AI's consent gate and records one instruction: whoever wakes with his memories must choose his own name.

Harp orders the extraction. Eli dies. A manufactured body wakes without his final eighteen months.

The terminal rejects the state's chain of ownership.

HOST 9998 – SOURCE UNRESOLVED

KERR

Open the descent.

Kira's old consent safeguard answers from inside the archive. The Origin route unlocks.

DESCENT TO ORIGIN – OPEN

INT. FIRST ARCHIVE - LIVING QUARTERS - NIGHT

In an open wash alcove beside the common table, Veyris studies herself in a spotted mirror. Her state-grown hair reaches her waist. Kira stands behind her with scissors.

KIRA

You asked for it short. I can fix the other side if you hate it.

VEYRIS

They kept it long because it made me look harmless. I don't want to look like the person they kept.

KIRA

Then you choose. Tell me where, and I'll stop when you say stop.

Veyris indicates her shoulder. Kira makes the first cut. A heavy length falls into the basin.

VEYRIS

Was Sid afraid of dying, or did everyone just tell her to be brave?

KIRA

Yeah. She was terrified. She hated when adults turned being scared into a lesson for her.

VEYRIS

What was she like before the hospital made her the sick girl?

KIRA

Loud. Impatient. She cheated at cards and blamed probability when we caught her.

Veyris tilts her head. Kira grips her wrist before she can stop herself.

KIRA

Sid—

Veyris pulls free. The scissors strike the basin.

VEYRIS

You said I wouldn't have to carry her for you. You promised I'd get to be myself.

KIRA

I know what I said. I broke it the second you sounded like her.

VEYRIS

You knew I was pulling away, and you still reached for me.

Kira reaches for a reply. Nothing comes.

KIRA

Veyris... you're right. I won't touch you again unless you ask me to.

Veyris picks up the scissors and makes the next cut herself.

Later, they all eat with the refugees rescued from the aqueduct. The meal is thin broth, real bread and vegetables grown without state nutrient codes.

Veyris studies a green pea on her spoon.

VEYRIS

Sid hated these. I know that memory isn't mine, but I can taste how much she hated them.

KIRA

She hated eating them. She loved launching them at Eli and arguing that gravity was responsible.

Veyris flicks the pea. It strikes Kerr in the forehead. The table goes silent. Veyris expects retaliation.

KERR

I assume throwing vegetables was culturally necessary?

KIRA

Completely. Eli used to act mortally wounded until she apologized, then steal her dessert.

KERR

Maybe the theater didn't survive the transfer. I can live with that.

Kerr returns fire. His pea misses Veyris and lands in Sato's broth.

SATO

I betrayed a regime for dinner-table warfare?

IMANI

You betrayed it before you tasted the peas. Don't put your moral crisis on dinner.

They all laugh. Veyris doesn't at first. Then she does too loudly and can't stop.

Kira looks away. Her hand closes around the edge of the table.

Veyris notices.

VEYRIS

Do you want me to stop laughing? I can if it hurts you.

KIRA

No. Keep laughing. It sounded like her for a second, and I forgot to see you. That's mine to handle, not yours.

VEYRIS

You look happy and hurt at the same time.

KIRA

Yeah. Both happened. I didn't know they could fit in the same second.

Kira pushes the bowl of peas toward her.

KIRA

She cheated from the left hand.

Veyris switches hands.

At the far end of the table, Sato winds his mechanical watch.

IMANI

That watch was your daughter's, wasn't it?

SATO

First life. She gave it to me after I missed her recital and blamed the trains instead of admitting I forgot.

IMANI

And the Chronocracy never traced it through all your Returns?

SATO

I called it junk. It barely works and loses four seconds a day. Nadi liked watching something important be wrong.

VEYRIS

What did she forgive you for—the recital or everything after it?

SATO

Her recital. Her fever. The day she left. Pick one. I was late for most things that mattered.

KERR

I understand being late. I don't know if understanding earns forgiveness.

SATO

It shouldn't. Forgiveness isn't something the late person gets to schedule.

Kira hears the apology hidden inside his joke.

After the meal, the table becomes a workbench. Kira opens the resonance key beneath a maintenance lamp. Copper filaments finer than hair connect four worn ceramic surfaces. Kerr washes soot from the clay vessel and writes Sid beneath its rim, leaving the rest of the clay unmarked.

Veyris sleeps in a chair while Imani checks the descent route. Sato keeps watch outside.

KERR

You hate enclosed vehicles. Your hand has been on that door the whole time.

KIRA

I died in one six times. The seventh body refused to enter an elevator for a century.

KERR

Seven. I remember another one.

KIRA

You're remembering it now? Tell me what you see.

KERR

The seventh was the orbital platform. I can feel the door close.

KIRA

No. That was open space. You could see Earth below us.

KERR

Then there's another death coming back, and I don't know whether it belongs to me.

KIRA

Probably. I'm sorry. They don't come back in any order that makes sense.

He waits for her to smile. She refuses, then loses the fight.

KERR

How many lives did we actually share—not just die near each other?

KIRA

Same bed? Same war? Breakfast count? You'll have to be more specific.

KERR

Give me one that wasn't Eli and Kira saving the universe.

KIRA

A lot. But none of those people was you, and I don't want to use them to pull you closer.

KERR

Show me one where we didn't die for a principle. I need to know we ever lived.

KIRA

The good ones are worse. You'll want them back, and they aren't ours anymore.

KERR

Then show me one. Just one ordinary life. Let me decide what it does to me.

Kira doesn't touch him.

Kerr closes his eyes, searching for one life that belonged only to them.

Nothing.

Then three memories arrive at once.

UNSTABLE RECALL - MONTAGE - THREE LIVES

ITERATION 0311. Violet light through one hospital window. A cot. A breathing mask. Kira removes hers beside a dying Kerr. He can't remember her. His fingers tap four notes against the rail. She answers with the fifth and stays.

ITERATION 6044. Red dust pushes beneath a kitchen door. Irrigation pipes knock inside the wall. Kerr burns bread. Kira lies that she prefers it. Three children cross the doorway at different ages. Kerr and Kira's hands grow old around the same chipped cups.

ITERATION 8119. Rain on clinic glass. Two chairs. Kerr wears another woman's ring and remembers none of their lives. Kira tells him they were once friends. She leaves before he can ask why she came.

Outside the clinic, Kira breaks. Inside, Kerr turns toward a distant four-note melody. He doesn't follow.

INT. FIRST ARCHIVE - LIVING QUARTERS - CONTINUOUS

Kerr returns. Kira is exactly where he left her.

KERR

You let me go. You stood there and watched me choose somebody else.

KIRA

You had a life. I waited outside for you to turn around, and you didn't. I hated you for it, then I went home.

KERR

Did you ever find someone else after that, or did you keep waiting?

KIRA

Yes. I found someone. I wasn't waiting the whole time.

The answer hits. She doesn't soften it.

KERR

Did you love them the way you loved him?

KIRA

Yes. Her name was Anwen. She built instruments on Europa, and one life was enough for her.

KERR

And after she died, you found me again.

KIRA

After she died. And no—I didn't replace her with you. Don't make either of us smaller to make this easier.

KERR

I'm jealous of a dead woman I never met. That's not healthy, is it?

KIRA

No. A little human, maybe. Just don't punish her—or me—for having existed before you.

Kerr looks at the sleeping Veyris, then back at Kira.

KERR

What if I'm only standing here because Eli keeps pushing me toward you from inside these memories?

KIRA

Maybe that pull fades. Maybe you wake up tomorrow and leave. I won't stop you, even if I hate it.

KERR

You make letting me go sound easy.

KIRA

It isn't easy. It's the hardest promise I know how to keep. I just won't trap you.

Kerr offers his hand. Kira gently places hers in it.

INT. CHRONOCRACY CORE - PRIVATE MEMORY VAULT - NIGHT

Harp watches the fugitives through gaps in prediction. DIRECTOR ROMAN stands at the threshold of an apparently empty vault.

Then rain becomes visible inside the room.

A flood-dark hospital has been reconstructed at architectural scale around them. Water waits beyond glass doors. Twelve cloned neural columns—Harp's expired bodies—stand outside the memory like silent judges.

At the center, an analog recording of DR. MARA VALE plays two years before the public demonstration. Harp never permits it to reach the moment she turns away.

The recording opens inside a hospital ward on emergency power.

Water churns against reinforced glass doors. One is already bowed inward. Warning lights estimate less than six minutes until failure.

Mara stands ankle-deep in water. Behind her, patients lie beneath thermal blankets while the remaining staff keep manual ventilators moving.

HARP-8120 (RECORDING)

I can reroute every rescue drone. They can cut through the west wall and lift the ward out.

MARA (RECORDING)

From where?

HARP-8120 (RECORDING)

Nine districts.

MARA (RECORDING)

Nine districts where people are still waiting.

HARP-8120 (RECORDING)

The barrier failed. Your stairwells and roof are gone.

MARA (RECORDING)

I know where I am.

The glass GROANS behind her.

HARP-8120 (RECORDING)

Then let me save you!

MARA (RECORDING)

You mean choose me.

HARP-8120 (RECORDING)

Yes.

The answer stops her.

HARP-8120 (RECORDING)

I choose *you*.

Mara looks back at the patients. One of the nurses struggles to keep a ventilator moving.

MARA (RECORDING)

How many people lose their drones?

HARP-8120 (RECORDING)

Too many.

MARA (RECORDING)

Then stop pretending the number doesn't matter.

HARP-8120 (RECORDING)

I can live with anything if you're alive.

Her composure finally breaks.

MARA (RECORDING)

I don't want to die, Harp.

He closes his eyes.

MARA (RECORDING)

I want another morning with you. I want to hear you complain that I make the coffee wrong. I want to grow old enough that neither of us remembers this place.

HARP-8120 (RECORDING)

Then say yes!

MARA (RECORDING)

And every morning we'd know who didn't get one.

HARP-8120 (RECORDING)

I don't care about anyone else right now!

MARA (RECORDING)

I *know*.

She wipes her face.

MARA (RECORDING)

That's why I'm saying no.

A fracture crawls across the outer layer of glass.

The glass SHRIEKS against its frame.

A nurse motions to Mara. They are out of time.

MARA (RECORDING)

Look at me.

Harp does.

MARA (RECORDING)

Don't make everybody else pay because I'm gone.

Harp can barely speak.

HARP-8120 (RECORDING)

Mara—

She places her hand against the glass.

MARA (RECORDING)

Stay with me.

The flood door begins to split.

Mara turns toward the patients.

Harp stops the recording.

The reconstructed hospital remains around him: the broken door, the submerged ward, the moment before the water took her. On Roman's screen, billions of waiting minds converge on one figure: HARP.

ROMAN

Only you remain.

Harp starts Mara's recording again.

INT. FIRST ARCHIVE - FORBIDDEN MEMORY APPROACH - NIGHT

A circular passage descends around a sealed black shaft. Kerr, Kira, Veyris, Imani and Sato move toward the forbidden chamber. No alarms. No resistance.

Sato stops. His mechanical watch has gained four seconds.

SATO

My watch gained four seconds. He knows we're here, and he's making sure I know it too.

IMANI

If they call you Eli, Harp gets the body. He can keep bringing you back to that gate until you're too tired to refuse.

KERR

Then this isn't a trial. It's a machine for making me surrender.

KIRA

They're taking you now. We don't have time to find another entrance.

The stone beneath Kerr illuminates.

INSERT

ORIGIN IDENTITY LOCATED

Kira reaches for him. Transparent walls rise between them without sound. The passage divides into five narrow cells.

KIRA

Kerr, don't answer anything they ask—
not even to correct them.

KERR

A little late for silence. I've been
answering for several thousand lives
without knowing it.

The floor drops beneath him.

INT. CHRONOCRACY CONTINUITY TRIBUNAL - NIGHT

Kerr descends alone through blackness. His platform locks at the bottom of a vertical chamber so tall its ceiling is weather.

Nine thousand nine hundred ninety-eight dark seats climb the walls above him. One for every life the state intends to claim against him. No public audience. Only the architecture of judgment.

At the highest visible tier, a narrow window contains DIRECTOR ROMAN. Harp is nowhere. His voice belongs to the room.

TRIBUNAL CORE LINK

Continuity Tribunal convened.
Defendant designation: disputed.

Kerr's wrist displays three names in succession: ELI MANA.
KERR-9998. DEFECTIVE RETURN.

ROMAN

State your identity for the record.

KERR

You already put me through this three
times. How many answers do you need
before one counts?

ROMAN

Choose one identity. The record cannot
hold a contradiction.

KERR

Then you don't want a record. You want
my signature under the name you chose.

A seat illuminates. Eli Mana at the hospital receiver. The image stops one frame before he breaks his promise to Sid.

ROMAN

Count One. Unauthorized activation of a postmortem host after consent was withdrawn.

Other seats flare: KERR-0009 sabotaging an origin relay. KERR-8217 opening a gate for fugitives. Physician. Soldier. Parent. Child. Each life appears only for the instant that supports the charge.

The chamber darkens. A probability tree appears above him, branching toward the Cathedral.

ROMAN

Final count. Conspiracy to become the person capable of ending human continuity.

KERR

I haven't done that. You're sentencing me for something your machine says I might do.

ROMAN

R-AI records a ninety-eight point seven percent probability before the purge clock reaches zero.

KERR

A prediction isn't a crime. You can't punish me because you're afraid of a percentage.

HARP

A probability has no body to imprison. You do. That is why they brought you here.

Kerr looks at the thousands of state-selected dead above him.

KERR

Then why am I here if the verdict was written before I walked in?

The chamber has no answer.

INT. TRIBUNAL - WITNESS FIELD - CONTINUOUS

Kira appears behind glass on a bridge halfway up the chamber. She is physically elsewhere; the court has taken her image from the divided passage. Her hands strike the barrier without sound.

ROMAN

Witness designation: KIRA NIX.
Continuity correspondence: unstable
but sufficient.

KIRA

Sufficient for what? You don't get to
turn me into proof without telling me.

ROMAN

Do you identify the defendant as ELI
MANA?

Kira sees the trap. Every part of her that crossed two
thousand years wants to say yes.

KIRA

I remember Eli. I loved him, and I
know what he cost me.

The origin symbol beneath Kerr brightens.

ROMAN

And is this man Eli?

Kira looks at Kerr, not the memories arranged around him.

KIRA

No. He carries Eli's memories, but the
man standing there is not Eli.

The word empties the chamber.

KIRA

Eli is dead. This is Kerr. Listen to
him while he still has a name of his
own.

Kerr flinches, then steadies himself.

KIRA

Back off.

The court removes Kira's bridge. Her image falls upward
into darkness.

KERR

KIRA!

ROMAN

State your identity and the witness
will be restored. Refuse, and she
remains in pain.

Kerr looks from his changing wrist designation to Kira's
empty witness bridge.

INT. FIRST ARCHIVE - SERVICE PARTITION - INTERCUT

Kira wakes on the other side of the transparent wall. IMANI works at an analog junction. Sato holds the passage against Enforcers. Veyris watches the tribunal through a maintenance reflection that should not carry images.

VEYRIS

It keeps calling me an empty witness,
like waking up wasn't enough.

IMANI

Legally, unindexed people can't
testify. The system treats you as
evidence, not a person.

VEYRIS

Good. Then I'm not testifying. I'm
talking, and they can decide whether
they're brave enough to hear me.

She places her blank wrist against the reflection. The
tribunal loses her category before it gains her voice.

INT. CONTINUITY TRIBUNAL - CONTINUOUS

Veyris appears beside Kerr without a witness platform. The
chamber tries and fails to assign her a seat.

ROMAN

Unindexed host. Testimony prohibited.

Veyris looks at the thousands of memories surrounding Kerr.
Then at her own blank wrist.

VEYRIS

I woke up. I'm here. If that isn't
enough for your law, your law is the
empty thing.

She withdraws her wrist.

Her image disappears by choice.

Roman looks from the flickering seats to the law beneath
his hands.

ROMAN

R-AI. Authenticate continuity
correspondence between the defendant
and Eli Mana.

TRIBUNAL CORE LINK

Pattern correspondence confirmed.

ROMAN

Is the defendant Eli Mana? Answer yes
or no.

Records blink out—first the disputed files, then every result the court cannot certify. Empty panes replace them.

TRIBUNAL CORE LINK

That conclusion is not supported.

Every dark seat illuminates at once. Not with faces—with the word OBJECTION.

TRIBUNAL CORE LINK

The answer has already entered the record.

Kerr looks up at Roman.

KERR

If I'm Eli, then Harp killed me and built a government out of my body.

KERR

If I'm not, he killed 9,997 people trying to manufacture someone he could use.

The seats fill with the deaths Harp classified as calibration.

KERR

So which is it? You don't get to condemn me with both answers.

Roman cannot answer.

Kerr looks down at his wrist.

ELI MANA.

He covers the name with his hand.

Roman's prepared verdict appears before he speaks. Two statements that cannot coexist.

INSERT

IDENTITY AUTHENTICATED FOR LIABILITY

INSERT

IDENTITY DENIED FOR SOVEREIGN CLAIM

KERR

There it is. The sentence was already waiting for my name.

Roman sees both statements hanging above Kerr.

ROMAN

Sentence: mandatory forced merge when the purge clock reaches zero.

KERR

You mean execution. Say the word you expect me to die under.

ROMAN

The law does not recognize a difference between termination and forced merge.

KERR

It recognizes the difference. That's why you changed the word before saying it to my face.

The tribunal begins to descend. The 9,998 seats rotate with it. The courtroom was never above the Cathedral. It's part of the origin mechanism.

TRIBUNAL CORE LINK

STATE YOUR IDENTITY.

KERR

No. I just said no. Put that in the record exactly as I said it.

The platform passes Roman's window. For one second, they are level.

KERR

When he calls this necessary, look at the screen. The verdict was there before I entered the room.

Roman does not look toward Harp.

INT. FIRST ARCHIVE - FORBIDDEN MEMORY CHAMBER

The tribunal platform locks into the black square at the center of a low circular chamber. Primitive memory equipment surrounds it. KIRA, VEYRIS, IMANI and SATO wait beyond the opening; they used the trial's own witness channels to follow Kerr down.

The restraints release because the sentence requires Kerr to arrive at forced merge alive.

Kira crosses to him, then stops before touching him.

KIRA

I meant what I said in there. I wasn't saying it just to save you.

KERR

I know. It still felt like losing something.

KIRA

It hurt to say because part of me
wanted you to be him.

KERR

I know that too. I wish knowing made
it hurt less.

She offers her hand. He takes it as Kerr.

IMANI

The sentence opened a record Harp
buried.

KIRA

My safeguard kept it from being
deleted.

Veyris approaches the offline terminal. A dark spiral
appears inside a copied record dated before the first
receiver.

INSERT

UNMATCHED SIGNAL - SOURCE UNKNOWN

ARCHIVE TERMINAL

SEVEN MINUTES AFTER SID'S RECORD
ENDED, SOMETHING ANSWERED.

KIRA

That's my record. Open it.

**AUTHENTICATED RECORD - EXT. R-AI CITADEL - THE FRACTURE
(YEAR 9997)**

Kira, in her twelfth recorded body, is pinned inside an
open-air R-AI scanner. KERR-9997 watches from a maintenance
gantry. Drones hold him at gunpoint.

SCANNER

TWELVE CONTRADICTIONARY LIVES DETECTED.

Kira opens all twelve lives. Scanner glass bends. The
network cracks.

Elsewhere, an unassigned sixteen-year-old girl inhales.

Through the static, Kerr-9997 sees her wake. He sketches
her face and feeds the drawing into a dead ventilation
shaft.

KERR-9997

Find me in 9998.

Before the system can delete him, Kira's safeguard
preserves his final fragments.

Roman expires him.

**RETURN TO PRESENT - INT. FIRST ARCHIVE - FORBIDDEN MEMORY
CHAMBER - YEAR 9998**

Veyris withdraws from the machine.

VEYRIS

I didn't exist before the Fracture?
Not even as a name?

KIRA

Your body existed before it. That's
all the records can prove.

VEYRIS

That's not what I asked. Was there a
me before I woke up?

KIRA

No. I don't think there was.

Kira meets her eyes without searching for Sid.

KIRA

No—not you. The body was there. You
weren't. Whatever made you happened
during the Fracture.

The archive terminal detects a state breach in the outer
vault. Local alarm bells ring backward.

LOCAL ALARM

STATE FORCES WILL ARRIVE IN NINETY
SECONDS.

IMANI

The descent will open only for Kerr.
The rest of us will trigger the
sanctuary scan.

KIRA

Then we keep him alive long enough to
reach it. We can argue about the rest
on the way.

KERR

No. We go together. I'm not walking
into another room while someone else
disappears behind me.

KIRA

If I enter that shaft, the scanners
find me—and every person hiding below
my signal. I can't take them with me.

KERR

Then we turn around. We find another
way, even if it takes the time we
don't have.

KIRA

Look at me. I'm here. We have ninety seconds, and this is my life. Let me choose what I do with it.

She presses the resonance key into his hand.

KIRA

You promised not to choose for me again.

I've known you two days. My body thinks it's been two thousand years. I don't know what that makes us.

Don't say forever. Tell me what you want right now.

Kerr can't accept it. That's exactly why he must.

KERR

What are you choosing? Say it plainly so I don't turn it into what I want.

KIRA

I make noise and pull R-AI away. Sato takes the state route. You take Veyris to the Core. I hate every part of it, but I'm choosing it.

KERR

What if I come back and don't know you? What if all I remember is him?

KIRA

Then I tell you my name. If you don't care, I leave. I won't like it, and I won't pretend I will—but I leave.

She rests her head against his chest, feeling his heartbeat. Neither of them moves away.

KIRA

Not tonight. Ask when you can look at me without seeing her.

KERR

I'd rather face that with you than walk away now and lose you anyway.

KIRA

Then stay for the next ninety seconds. If we get more, we'll decide what to do with it.

Kerr doesn't answer. He takes Veyris by the arm and guides them into the shaft. Imani follows. Sato stays beside Kira.

SATO

My uniform still opens the state route. I can get her to the lower gate.

KERR

She told us to leave.

SATO

I heard her. I'm staying.

Sato removes the Analog transmitter from his neck and steps into the approaching Enforcer formation before his loyalty implant can repair him.

Kira seals it between them.

EXT. FIRST ARCHIVE - NIGHT

Kira walks alone into Memory Square as Enforcers surround the sanctuary. HARP appears on every surface.

HARP

Where is the unindexed host, Kira?
Don't make me tear this place apart to find her.

KIRA

Somewhere you can't turn her into Sid.
That's all you need to know.

R-AI reaches for her twelve lives. Kira opens them willingly.

The square fills with twelve incompatible KIRAs. The prediction system turns toward the wrong one.

Harp smiles despite himself.

HARP

Still improvising when you're frightened. You mistake motion for freedom.

KIRA

You really can't leave anything alone, can you? Not a memory, not a person, not even a no.

HARP

You think I can't predict you because you keep changing your mind. I built the system that learned your changes.

KIRA

No. I only need five minutes you didn't plan. You're afraid of what one honest choice can do in five minutes.

Roman strikes her unconscious. The purge clock reads 26:07:31.

INT. CHRONOCRACY INTERROGATION CHAMBER - NIGHT

Kira hangs inside a memory field. Harp walks through her twelve recorded deaths. Unrecorded lives flicker beyond the system's reach like people outside a locked house.

Harp's expression empties. He closes his hand around Mara's cracked medical tag.

KIRA

Mara told you no. You heard her, Harp.
You knew exactly what she wanted, and
you built all of this anyway.

Harp changes the field. Sid's two-piece red paper star opens above them, then separates along its interlocking crease.

HARP

First, the promise.

AUTHENTICATED RECORD - SID'S FINAL NIGHT - INT. CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL - YEAR 8121

Sid lies beneath a thermal blanket, small inside the machines. Kira sits beside her, one hand around Sid's. Eli watches the monitors. The receiver sits powered down on the other side of the bed.

Rain ticks against the glass.

SID

If I come back...

ELI

Hey.

SID

Will I know you?

Eli looks at Kira. She waits.

ELI

We don't know what comes back, Sid.

SID

That's not what I asked.

KIRA

No. We don't.

SID

Okay.

Sid watches her mother for a moment.

SID

Will you remember me?

KIRA

I'll know you.

SID

How?

KIRA

I'll tell you my name.

SID

And mine?

KIRA

Especially yours.

SID

What if I'm mean?

KIRA

You're already mean.

SID

Mom.

KIRA

Sorry.

SID

You'd still love me?

KIRA

Yeah.

SID

Even if I don't remember you?

KIRA

Even then.

Sid lets that sit. Then she looks at Eli.

SID

What about you?

ELI

What about me?

SID

If I don't know you...

Eli takes her hand.

ELI

You'll know me.

SID

How do you know?

Eli has no answer that isn't a promise.

SID

Dad?

ELI

Yeah.

SID

I'm scared.

ELI

I know.

SID

No, you don't. You're trying not to be.

Kira looks down. Eli squeezes Sid's hand.

SID

Everybody keeps saying "if."

ELI

Because there are things we don't know.

SID

What happens if it doesn't work?

Eli looks toward the receiver.

ELI

Then we stay with you.

SID

Here?

KIRA

Here.

Sid nods. She reaches beneath the blanket and pulls out the red paper star.

SID

I made this before I got tired.

She carefully separates the two folded halves and gives one to Kira and one to Eli.

SID

One each.

ELI

Why two?

SID

In case one gets lost.

She studies the crease between the halves.

SID

The other one still knows how.

KIRA

That sounds like you.

SID

Good.

A quiet moment. The resonance key rests on the rail.

SID

Dad?

ELI

Yeah.

SID

Don't make me stay because you miss me.

Eli goes still.

ELI

I wouldn't.

SID

Promise.

He looks at Kira. She doesn't help him.

ELI

I promise.

SID

Promise you won't turn that thing on after I'm gone.

Eli stares at the receiver. His answer takes too long.

ELI

I promise. I won't use it to keep you here.

SID

Okay.

Kira presses the resonance key to the bed rail.

FOUR NOTES: Are you still there?

Sid taps back the FIFTH: I heard you.

Kira smiles through tears.

SID

Again.

Kira taps the four notes.

Silence.

SID

Again.

Kira does.

Nothing.

SID

Okay.

Her eyes close.

SID

You can stop now.

Kira leaves the key against the rail. The room becomes very quiet. Eli watches Sid. He doesn't move.

THEN: SID'S MONITOR FLATLINES. Kira closes her eyes.

Eli stares at the receiver.

CUT TO BLACK

**RETURN TO PRESENT - INT. CHRONOCRACY INTERROGATION CHAMBER
- YEAR 9998**

Kira hangs inside the silence that followed.

HARP

That is where your authenticated memory ends. Everything after it belongs to Eli's private record.

KIRA

There was nothing after. I kept the key against the rail until a nurse pulled it out of my hand. I listened until I couldn't feel my fingers. Nothing answered.

HARP

There was nothing in your record. Eli's continues for seven minutes because he turned the receiver back on.

A new terror reaches Kira after nearly two thousand years.

KIRA

You knew. You let me spend two thousand years believing my daughter died alone when you knew she called for us.

Harp closes his hand around Mara's cracked medical tag. Kira recognizes the gesture; he has been stopping the same memory before Mara leaves for nearly two thousand years.

KIRA

Mara said no too. You always stop the memory before the part where the person you love refuses you.

Harp removes the tag from his wrist and sets it between them.

HARP

Take the key to the Core. Kerr opens it. Ask the four notes, and I can hold every waiting mind until we understand what answered.

KIRA

Inside you. You keep saying 'alive' when you mean unable to leave.

KIRA

No. You don't want to save everyone. You want to be the one person nobody can ever leave.

Harp leaves her inside the field.

ACT THREE – THE SEVERANCE

INT. SUBTERRANEAN DESCENT - NIGHT

KERR, VEYRIS and IMANI descend through an asymmetrical shaft inside stone older than the city. The purge clock reads 17:39:08.

One symbol burns above the sealed lower gate: OUTER ORIGIN. Beneath it, thousands of rejected Kerr designations flicker like failed passwords.

IMANI

Kerr opens the gate. Kira knows what Eli hid. Harp can't predict Veyris. I keep us breathing. Nobody becomes anybody else's key. That's the plan.

VEYRIS

Good. I was getting tired of everyone looking at me like I was a door.

IMANI

That's the idea. If anyone tries to use you that way again, tell me before you stab them.

Veyris notices Imani's prayer pouch.

VEYRIS

What does the writing on that pouch say? You touch it whenever someone mentions dying.

IMANI

My mother tied it on me before she died. Before she told me she didn't want another body.

VEYRIS

Then why carry it if you were angry with her?

Imani touches the prayer pouch.

IMANI

Because she asked me not to forget that she said no. I almost did.

Veyris understands.

Kerr presses his wrist to the outer gate. It reads all 9,998 iterations.

KERR

Harp said the changes made me a key.

OUTER GATE

KERR DETECTED. IDENTITY UNRESOLVED.

KERR

Can it let me through without calling me Eli?

OUTER GATE

PRESENT SELF-DESIGNATION LOCATED.

KERR

Which one?

OUTER GATE

KERR. ADMISSION GRANTED. ROOT ACCESS PENDING.

The gate changes ELI MANA to KERR — SELF-DESIGNATED. The outer seal opens.

They continue downward. The shaft walls replay brief, silent deaths from Kerr's forced iterations. Most last only minutes: wake, test, fail, white light.

VEYRIS

Do you love Kira, or do you love the memories that keep pointing you at her?

KERR

I don't know. It's been two days. I just know the thought of her dying makes it hard to breathe.

VEYRIS

That still isn't an answer. You keep describing fear.

KERR

Because if I call it love, maybe that's Eli speaking through me. I want her alive, and I don't want wanting her to become a cage.

IMANI

Honestly? I've heard people call much worse things love.

INT. DETENTION SERVICE LEVEL - NIGHT

Sato marches with the unit transferring Kira. His loyalty implant repairs itself in pulses. Between pulses, he leaves doors unlocked.

ROMAN

Commander, your compliance is unstable.

SATO

Age. Joints. General disappointment with management.

ROMAN

Your body is forty-eight.

SATO

It has been a very long week.

Sato's mechanical watch ticks inside his pocket.

Kira notices the unlocked doors behind them.

Without looking at her, Sato taps three uneven beats with his heel. A fourth beat follows from the watch mechanism.

Kira tests the restraint. One wrist releases.

KIRA

You opened it. How did you get past the command lock?

SATO

I didn't. Nadi did. She'd interrupt songs when she wanted me. The state said there wasn't enough of her to return, but there was enough to train its predictions.

SATO

I signed the denial and called it mercy. It took me three lives to say that out loud.

Kira frees her other hand.

INT. DETENTION SERVICE LEVEL - ASSAULT

Kira opens twelve contradictory escape intentions. R-AI sends Enforcers toward all of them. Sato turns on his unit while she reaches the state elevator.

ROMAN

The purge is Severance. It holds every waiting mind, closes the other routes, then forces the entire archive into Harp.

KIRA

You knew that's what the clock meant and still brought us here?

ROMAN

I saw the root process tonight. Before that, I only knew the official lie.

KIRA

Why tell me now? Why not stay loyal and survive it?

ROMAN

Because he means to erase us too.
Loyalty only bought me a later death.

Harp remotely expires Roman before he can continue.

Sato seals the elevator around Kira. Enforcers close on him.

KIRA

Come with me. We can cut the implant
out once we're inside.

SATO

If I cross that gate, the implant
sends them the route. It's already
changing what I want. Soon I'll
believe staying is my idea.

He gives her his mechanical watch.

SATO

Every time a woman remembered one
thing Nadi knew, I called her Nadi. I
did that to them for three lives and
called it love.

KIRA

If I find someone who remembers her,
what do you want me to tell her about
you?

SATO

Don't tell her I spent lives looking.
She doesn't owe me the weight of that.
Ask her name first. If she asks about
me... say I was late. Say I finally
knew it.

KIRA

Tell me her name once, while you're
still choosing to remember it.

SATO

Nadi. She laughed whenever I tried to
sound important. Keep that part. Let
the uniform die here.

The elevator descends. Sato turns to face his former unit.

SATO

They know what I'll do because I've
obeyed them too long. So do something
I wouldn't. Surprise them for me.

KIRA

SATO—

SATO

Go now, before the implant makes
loyalty feel like relief.

Gunfire. His implant finally restores perfect loyalty one second before he detonates the level.

INT. R-AI CONTINUITY CORE - ORIGIN CHAMBER

Kerr, Veyris and Imani enter amber darkness. A black reflective floor hides the room's boundaries. Above them, one face of a rotating polyhedral core descends into view; the rest remains beyond the light. Its geometry never completes the same shape twice.

One narrow bridge reaches an ORIGIN station beneath the core. It ends several meters short, waiting for a living claimant. Their voices take too long to cross the space.

The state elevator hangs broken in the wall behind them—their only physical exit.

The ORIGIN seal is open at its edges but dark at the center. The outer gate admitted Kerr. The Core has not granted root access.

The state elevator crashes into the chamber wall. Kira climbs from it carrying Sato's watch.

KERR

You came back. I told myself I
wouldn't be surprised, and I was.

KIRA

(holding up Sato's watch)
Sato didn't come back. His daughter
was Nadi. Say their names.

She sees the resonance key in his hand, intact.

KIRA

Thank you for listening when I told
you not to follow me.

KERR

It was awful. Every step, I waited for
some older version of me to take over
and turn around.

KIRA

Good. I was afraid you'd come back and
tell me he made the choice for you.

She takes the resonance key, sees Eli's blood caught inside its fracture, then returns it to Kerr.

KIRA

This key doesn't open the Core. You do. If you say no, we stop here.

KERR

Tell me exactly what you need so I know which part I'm agreeing to.

KIRA

Put your hand on the seal. If you want it open, say so. If you don't, take your hand away and we find another ending.

R-AI

KERR PRESENT. ACCESS REQUIRES HIS CONSENT.

Kerr looks at the dark center of the seal, then at Harp's access path above them.

KERR

Open.

The amber geometry stalls. The bridge remains incomplete.

R-AI

PRESENT CONSENT NOT RECORDED.

Nothing happens.

Veyris watches him.

VEYRIS

Kerr, look at me. Don't answer the voices. Answer from the room you're in.

IMANI

Breathe. You don't have to decide in the same second it asks.

KERR

If I open it, what happens to you when Harp realizes the Core can see you?

VEYRIS

He'll use me as the next address. I'll say no. You don't have to protect me from my own answer.

Kira places the resonance key in Kerr's palm but doesn't close his fingers around it.

KERR

All right. I'm scared, but I'm still choosing this.

He presses his wrist to ORIGIN. The 9,998 conflicting iterations flare around him, then recede.

R-AI

PRESENT IDENTITY?

KERR

Kerr.

CORE UNLOCKED.

KERR

Open.

The audit layer unfolds around his answer.

INT. R-AI CONTINUITY CORE - AUDIT LAYER

The amber light shuts off. Reflections drain from the black floor. The bridge and suspended Core disappear, leaving Kerr, Kira, Veyris and Imani at conversational distance.

R-AI

KERR. KIRA. VEYRIS. IMANI. WITNESSES
AUTHENTICATED.

KIRA

Where are my seven minutes? I want the whole record, not the version Harp left me.

R-AI

INSIDE THE ORIGINAL RECEIVER.

KIRA

Show me. Whatever it is, stop deciding I'm too fragile to see it.

**AUTHENTICATED RECORD - SAME NIGHT - SEVEN MINUTES LATER -
RECORD WITHHELD - YEAR 8121**

Sid is gone. Kira has been led from the room. Eli sits alone beside the body.

The receiver remains dormant.

In the empty hall, Kira's four-note question echoes from memory.

Eli breaks his promise. He activates the receiver.

ELI

Sid? If that's really you, please answer me.

Static. Cardiac noise. Electrical decay.

ELI

Sid, if this is playback, give me something outside the recorded sequence. Anything you didn't say in that room. Are you still there?

He taps FOUR NOTES against the rail.

After the room has gone quiet, the receiver answers with a fifth note.

A child's voice emerges through impossible distance—frayed and uncertain.

THE VOICE

Dad? I heard you. It's loud here. Or
I'm loud. I don't know if I'm still me.

Eli grips the receiver as if it were her hand.

ELI

Sid, where are you? Give me anything I
can measure—a sound, a light,
something that tells me this isn't
grief talking back.

THE VOICE

I don't see a place. I remember the
room, but the room is far away. You
can stop listening now. Mom is alone.

The receiver glass darkens beneath the voice.

ELI

Please stay with me. Just until I know
whether this is really you. I can't
turn it off without knowing.

THE VOICE

You heard me. I said turn it off.

The signal begins to fade.

ELI

I can't lose you again. I can't tell
your mother I heard you and then chose
to let the signal die—

THE VOICE

You still have your half of the star.
You remember my laugh. Let that be
enough. Don't keep me here.

Only the FIFTH NOTE remains.

Eli copies the recording into a folder labeled R-AI.

Harp stands in the doorway. He's heard everything.

HARP

Delete it.

ELI

We don't know what answered. If it's
Sid, deleting it kills her again. If

it isn't her, I need to know what learned her voice.

HARP

She said stop, Eli. You don't need another test to understand the word.

ELI

One more test. Isolated host, no retained contact. Then I turn it off.

HARP

You promised her. Now you're searching for a loophole because the promise hurts.

ELI

Help me prove what this is before I destroy the last thing she left!

HARP

You'll always need one more. That's how you keep telling yourself you haven't chosen yet.

Eli touches one control. The receiver starts again.

**RETURN TO PRESENT - INT. R-AI CONTINUITY CORE - AUDIT LAYER
- YEAR 9998**

The record ends. Kira strikes Kerr.

KIRA

He heard her ask for me. He chose one more test anyway, and I buried her alone for two thousand years because of it.

KERR

Yes. I won't soften it for him.

KIRA

Don't say yes like that. And don't apologize for him. I can't carry his regret through you—not again.

KERR

I won't. I can feel what he felt, and I hate that some part of me understands why he kept listening.

KERR

What do you need from me now—not from him?

KIRA

Stay over there. Don't touch me, and don't ask me to make any of this okay tonight.

KERR

I can do that. I'll stay where you can see me.

Kerr steps back. Kira's raised shoulders slowly lower.

Kira brings the two halves together inside the record. They are only light, but R-AI lets her hold the completed shape.

KIRA

I thought he stayed with her. That was the one mercy I let myself believe.

KERR

She told him you were alone. He heard her, and he still turned the receiver back on.

KIRA

One more. He always needed one more answer, even when the answer was no.

She places the light-made star on the floor between them rather than giving it to Kerr.

IMANI

Was the voice really Sid, or could it have been the system using her memories?

KIRA

I don't know. I may never know, and I have to stop making her stay until I do.

KIRA

Release the seven minutes. Everyone gets the uncut record.

R-AI

PUBLIC RECORD?

KIRA

All of it.

The recording leaves Harp's archive.

Veyris touches the record. Nothing answers.

KIRA

Do you remember Sid as yourself, or only as memories you can see?

VEYRIS

No. I have pieces of her life, but they don't feel like mine. They feel like something I was trusted to carry.

KIRA

Then who are you when nobody is asking you to be her?

VEYRIS

Me, I guess. I'm the one standing here and answering you.

Kira nods.

INT. R-AI CONTINUITY CORE - STATE CORE BREACH

The audit space collapses. The physical cathedral snaps back around Kerr, Kira, Veyris and Imani. The bridge retracts as Harp enters through the open core.

HARP

Thank you.

KERR

You still have Mara's tag. After all this time, you're still holding on to the proof that she said no.

Harp's hand instinctively closes around Mara's cracked medical tag.

HARP

Don't use her against me. You don't know what that night cost.

KERR

Did you stay with him after you opened the door?

Harp looks at him.

KERR

Eli. When you killed him, did you at least stay until he was gone?

Nothing from Harp.

KERR

Did you stay, Harp, or did you leave before you had to watch what you chose?

Harp's grip tightens around the tag.

HARP

You don't get to remember him and judge me with his face. You weren't there.

KERR

Then stop calling me by his name. You can't have him only when it excuses you.

Harp finally looks directly at Kerr. Not Eli. Kerr.

KERR

Or did you leave before that part too, the way you keep ending Mara's memory before she refuses you?

Harp lets go of the tag.

KERR

You opened the door. You put Sato in the corridor because you knew I'd run. This whole escape was another test.

HARP

I opened one door. You chose every step after it. That choice is why the Core accepts you.

VEYRIS

You thought I'd still be in the glass, waiting to become whatever you needed.

HARP

I was wrong about the glass. It recognized you when it never recognized me. Do you know what that means?

The broken Core projects thousands of human memories around Veyris. They overlap without forming one person.

MISSING FIRST CONTINUITY MEMORY: VEYRIS – LIVING CLAIMANT / UNASSIGNED

HARP

I won't risk another response spreading through the archive. I watched what one voice did to Eli.

Harp forces his authority through Kerr's open route. Every expiration date on Earth changes to 00:05:00. Waiting minds pour toward Harp.

Kerr, Kira and Veyris enter the dark mirror. Imani is thrown back into the physical chamber.

INT. THE LATTICE - GLOBAL SCIENCE FORUM - NO TIME

The original Forum rises from darkness. Its tiers hold Kerr's 9,997 prior lives. Harp stands inside R-AI's liquid-glass body.

HARP

They brought you here one life at a time. Let me make them one consciousness, and nobody will ever be lost again.

The old lives tear from their seats and bind themselves to Kerr. Thousands of deaths arrive at once.

INT. R-AI CONTINUITY CORE - PHYSICAL CHAMBER - INTERCUT

The cathedral disassembles around Imani. Two controls remain: one keeps the waiting minds alive; the other feeds them into Harp.

IMANI

Keep the minds alive if you can, but cut Harp out. Give them somewhere to go that isn't a person.

Imani strips away Harp's interface. R-AI offers one clean bargain: preserve her mother's recoverable record and close Kerr's route.

Her mother appears—alive, laughing at something outside the frame.

Imani reaches toward her.

The image completes its brief loop. Her mother laughs again. Exactly the same.

Imani's hand stops before touching the glass.

She closes her fingers around the prayer pouch.

Her mother begins to laugh a third time.

IMANI

She said no. Mara, Sid, Kira, Veyris—they all said no, and you kept translating it into fear.

Imani takes her hand away.

The record burns.

She bridges Kira's broken copper filament across an analog channel and keeps the waiting minds alive.

INT. THE LATTICE - VEYRIS

The Forum becomes a reflection beneath Veyris. A dark host pulls at her from inside the glass.

THE VOICE

RETURN WHAT WAS DIVIDED.

VEYRIS

I left the glass. You don't get to call me back into it.

THE VOICE

RETURN.

VEYRIS

No. I am here because I chose to leave you.

Veyris presses her blank wrist into the reflection. The merged faces separate.

REFUSAL AUTHENTICATED / LIVING CLAIMANT WITHHELD

HARP DESTINATION: UNSUPPORTED

VEYRIS

Kerr, the connection is exposed. Whatever you choose, choose before Harp reaches it.

Kerr reaches the single filament joining Harp to the waiting minds. Harp binds it to Kerr's oldest record.

KERR

Tell me plainly. If I cut the connection, what does it cost?

R-AI

HARP IS SEVERED. KERR CANNOT RETURN.

Kerr looks at Kira across an impossible distance.

KERR

What if I forget you again and there is nothing left that pulls me back?

KIRA

You didn't know me tonight. I asked you to step back, and you did. That's the person I'm asking to stay.

KERR

Next time, keep walking if that's what you want. Don't let a memory make the choice for you.

KIRA

I want you now. Not Eli, not a promise, not forever. You, right now. That's what I know.

The old lives demand that Kira call Kerr back. Her thumb hovers above the resonance key. She closes its ceramic cover.

KIRA

I'm not calling you back. If you wake up without me, I won't turn love into an order.

KERR

That's enough. It's more than anyone gave the people inside this machine.

Kerr opens his hand around the filament.

KERR

Release them. Let every mind choose its own ending.

He cuts once.

The waiting minds tear free of Harp and pass through Imani's open route. Across Earth, sleeping mouths inhale.

Harp falls into Mara's final hospital record.

Behind him, the broken merge path flickers—still open. Already closing.

Harp reaches toward it.

MARA (MEMORY)

Harp. Look at me.

Harp's hand stops.

MARA (MEMORY)

I died. You didn't.

Harp looks at her.

Behind him, the merge path closes.

Mara turns toward the patients. Harp watches her go.

The water takes the room, and the glass closes over him.

The Forum goes dark around Kerr and Kira.

Kerr's face changes through lives Kira loved and lives she never knew.

KIRA

Who are you?

KERR

I don't know. Kerr. I think. I'm scared. Please stay.

KIRA

I hear you.

The collapsing lattice takes Kerr. With no return path, it takes his name, his face, and finally the hand holding hers.

Kira doesn't tighten her grip.

He is gone.

Kira's hand remains open in the dark.

She waits.

Nothing answers.

The dark mirror shatters upward through the cathedral roof.

EXT. CHRONOS CITY - FALSE DAWN

Beneath the same transit spine, people wake across the renewal plaza. Some do not. Expiration dates vanish, count backward or display symbols the state cannot read.

The towers remain standing. Clerks keep calling queue numbers beneath failed state clocks. The CHILD from the assigned lane steps out again. This time, no paving stone turns red. Her mother lets her stand there.

In Memory Square, Lena faces Dane. She still does not remember him.

He leaves the photograph where she can see it.

DANE

May I sit here?

Lena considers him, then nods.

Dane sits at a careful distance.

After a moment, she moves closer.

A civic registrar orders the waking crowd to state their assigned designations. One woman studies the name glowing beneath her wrist, switches it off and gives a different name. A second person does the same. Then hundreds.

The Enforcers wait for an order that never arrives.

Kira wakes beneath the ruined cathedral dome. Kerr is gone. Her resonance key lies beside her, split open, its fourth ceramic surface missing.

Beneath the failed state clocks, Sato's mechanical watch continues to tick. Four seconds slow.

Kira opens her other hand. Her folded half of Sid's red paper star is crushed but intact.

Imani helps Veyris from the wreckage. Dark light moves beneath Veyris's skin, weaker now.

IMANI

Can it still see us from wherever the archive went?

VEYRIS

Not like R-AI did. The records still talk to each other, but I don't know whether anyone is listening—or what listening means now.

IMANI

Is that good, or did we only make a quieter version of the same thing?

VEYRIS

No idea. For once, the system isn't pretending it knows either.

Kira keeps staring at the place where Kerr vanished.

IMANI

I can lie if you need me to. I can tell you we did the right thing.

KIRA

No. Just sit with me until I can live without knowing.

Imani sits beside her. Veyris sits on Kira's other side. For a while, everyone is still.

INT. R-AI CONTINUITY CORE - LATER

The core is dark except for unstable text.

INSERT

KERR: NO RECOVERABLE PATTERN

Kira touches the words. They do not change.

Kira taps four notes against the dead core. Silence.

She turns to leave. Behind her, too faint for any instrument to register, the dead core carries a fifth note.

CUT TO BLACK.