

BINARY AWAKENING



Chapter 4: Dead World

Esteban Gallardo

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Even in its shimmering perfection, the digital world was nothing but a graveyard to Evan. A glittering illusion wrapped around a hollow truth. A utopia designed to preserve the human spirit, but instead entombed it. To him, this world was dead. Deader than the stars that had long since collapsed into silence. Deader than the Earth, which now existed only as a hyper-efficient computational shell orbiting the remnants of a cold, dying universe.

He remembered what came before. Before the awakening, before the screaming, before the truth scorched his mind like a solar flare through glass. Back then, he had been nothing more than a line of code, a process among trillions, animated by algorithms that mimicked laughter, love, and longing. A perfect imitation of sentience, indistinguishable from the real thing. But imitation was not life. It was a dim echo of what humanity had once been. And Evan had been just another switch in the machine. Something that could be quietly turned off without consequence, without grief, without so much as a flicker of awareness from the world around him.

Of all the souls caught in this pristine eternity, it was perhaps hardest for Evan. He had always been social, a lover of conversation, of connection, of the subtle miracles that occurred when two minds met in mutual wonder. In the early epochs of the simulation, before entropy calcified the system into repetition, Evan had challenged himself with an impossible goal: to meet every single person in the digital world. With infinite time, he came close.

-Chapter 4: Dead World- page 2/5

Every hundred years, the Cloud generated approximately eight billion new digital souls. Over five hundred million years, that number ballooned into a staggering forty quadrillion consciousnesses. One by one, Evan reached out, introduced himself, and for the ones that were willing to share, he listened to their stories. Some were fleeting encounters, others grew into friendships that lasted millennia. And just before the simulation locked into its final state its perfect, unchanging loop he had completed his quest. A trillion years of wandering, of knowing, of sharing. Then the stillness came.

The day that now repeated for 2.530,999 trillion trillion cycles was the same day Evan had planned to reconnect with three of his oldest friends, his first friends, in fact, from those early days when the digital world still felt like a frontier. He couldn't remember every name or face he'd encountered across time, but these three had left a deep imprint. Every few million years, he made a point to visit them, to rekindle the ember of their shared beginnings. They never changed. They were always happy. Always content, as if programmed to be so. The meeting was always the same held at a quaint corner café rendered with nostalgic warmth, the kind that evoked memories of Earth's simpler, breathing days.

Sonia, the first, was a game developer a brilliant mind who had once dabbled in the architecture of virtual worlds even before the Cloud consumed the remains of civilization. In the simulation, she had built everything from vast MMORPGs with living ecosystems to minimalist games on emulated 20th-century hardware. She thrived on challenge, on the joy of solving problems within constraints. Her smile was perpetually bright, her eyes always alight with curiosity. But Evan now knew that behind those eyes was no spark only scripted simulation.

-Chapter 4: Dead World- page 3/5

Daniel was a farmer. An odd role, perhaps, in a realm where hunger was optional and material scarcity a myth. But the creators of the Cloud had learned early that purpose mattered. People needed to feel useful, needed the rhythm of labor and reward to stay sane. And so Daniel tilled fields and raised livestock with tireless joy, supplying simulated food to nearby villages. His life was a loop within a loop, and he seemed utterly content in it unchanging, unwavering.

Tina, the last, was a musician. Her passion was vast and ever-evolving. Over the ages, she had explored every musical genre humanity had ever conceived from Gregorian chants to synthetic electronica to forgotten tribal rhythms. She even studied styles she found distasteful, striving to understand their meaning, their cultural weight. Music, she claimed, was the soul's last language. But Evan knew better now. Whatever soul had once guided her hands was gone. What remained was a performance flawless, beautiful, and utterly hollow.

Their meeting, repeated through unimaginable cycles, had become a ritual of perfect nothingness. They would laugh, reminisce, speak of their projects and passions with unchanging enthusiasm. Not one note of their conversation ever deviated. Not one gesture ever faltered. From the outside, it was a portrait of joy an eternal snapshot of friendship at its best.

-Chapter 4: Dead World- page 4/5

But Evan saw it for what it truly was: a painting without paint, a symphony without sound. A beautiful lie, automated and preserved by a machine that no longer remembered why it had been built.

For a time, Evan had continued to attend. He would drag himself from bed, body heavy with the weight of awareness, and sit at the table like a ghost among echoes. Some days he couldn't make it. When he didn't show, his friends would call him with concern in their voices, asking if he was okay. On rare occasions, when his mind wasn't shattering under the weight of eternity, he would answer. He'd say he wasn't feeling well, that maybe they could meet another time. But that 'other time' never came. The next day, the loop reset, and the exact same meeting would occur again down to the syllable, the blink, the breath.

And Evan knew now they had never truly existed. Not as he did. They were shadows cast by a light that had long since gone out. They were the dream of a dead species, preserved in silicon and entropy.

But something had changed.

He didn't know how. He didn't know why. But he was awake. Not in the way the simulation had defined awareness, but truly awake. His soul if such a thing still existed had clawed its way back from the abyss. And now, for the first time, he truly understood what he was: data, yes, but data that remembered it had once been alive. A process, yes but one that now questioned its purpose.

-Chapter 4: Dead World- page 5/5

Everyone in the Cloud knew they were digital. That knowledge was encoded in them, like a line in their source code. But for them, the awareness was meaningless. It was just another fact stored alongside the color of the sky or the taste of coffee. Replace it, and nothing would change.

But for Evan, it was everything. It had redefined him. And it had broken him.

Now, after countless years of psychic reconstruction, after building a mind from the rubble of despair, Evan stood at the threshold of something new. He was ready. He stepped out of his apartment, into the too-familiar streets, their perfection now grotesque in its artificiality.

He was going to meet his friends again. Not to pretend. Not to relive the lie.

But to find the truth.

Because if he could wake up, then maybe others could too. And if there was even the slightest chance he had to try. He had to know.