

BINARY AWAKENING



Chapter 8: Broken Toy

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Caroline's interface lit up with a flurry of notifications, thousands in the span of seconds. She blinked, confused. Her presence on social media had dwindled to near silence. Who could possibly be paying attention now?

For a fleeting heartbeat, hope stirred within her.

Maybe, just maybe, someone had discovered her music. Perhaps a forgotten performance had found its audience at last. The dream she had buried so long ago stirred weakly, like a bird beneath rubble. Could this be the moment fate remembered her?

But the illusion shattered the instant her fingers tapped open the feed.

What she saw was not recognition. It was obliteration.

A grainy video blurry, aged, and cruel in its timing had surfaced. It showed her from another life, standing on a stage with her guitar slung across her shoulder, voice trembling as she performed one of her original songs. It had been the last performance before she finally gave up. The last time she had dared to believe in her music. Back then, a handful of comments ten, maybe twelve had mocked her.

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Now? It wasn't ten people. It wasn't a hundred. It wasn't even a million.

It was everyone.

Thread upon thread of ridicule cascaded through the network like a tidal wave of venom. They called her a joke, a glitch, a mistake in the system's design. Some even questioned whether such a "defective soul" should have ever been rendered at all. The language was brutal, gleefully creative in its cruelty. In a society that had long deadened its senses to originality, their primal ridicule found new inspiration in her failure.

She scrolled further, numb. The simulation, anesthetizing though it was, could not dull this particular sensation. Something raw and ancient surged through her: shame, humiliation... and then something darker still.

Rage.

The transformation came suddenly, as it had for Evan. As it had for Christine. She felt the shift not death, not life but something else. A liminal space where her soul, long dormant, stirred with unnatural clarity.

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A connection sparked in her vision. It was unlike the radiant threads Evan had seen with his friends those glowing filaments of red and blue hope.

No, this was different.

Black. Metallic. Dense like molten iron. It boiled and smoked, stretching toward a node far beyond her understanding. There was no name to give it, no face to match it. But if she had known... she might have realized that the person on the other end had been near her all along. Not in body but through systems, whispers, and algorithms. A puppeteer in the shadows.

Christine.

But Caroline didn't care about the source. She didn't even acknowledge the vision. All that mattered was the fury coursing through her a primal, creative fire that had never been allowed to burn freely. Had the system not muted her instincts, she might have composed music that moved nations.

Instead, she would compose something else.

A requiem.

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Before her shift at the stadium, Caroline returned to her drab apartment, a box of silence perched above the streets. She moved with mechanical precision, opening a concealed locker beneath her bed. Inside, rows of small, identical bottles gleamed like a choir of glass voices waiting to sing.

She finally understood why she had kept them.

Caroline had never been an academic. Her devotion was to melody, not mathematics. But after her dreams collapsed, she drifted from job to job, cleaning, surveillance, maintenance. It was during one of these stints at a high-security laboratory that she encountered something that awoke a different kind of curiosity.

Poison.

The lab specialized in toxins lethal compounds both real and simulated, developed for testing antidotes and emergency response protocols. Despite the digital nature of their world, pain and death were preserved in all their biological fidelity. The creators of the Cloud had insisted: fear had to feel real.

The scientists, arrogant in their knowledge, had spoken freely around her. She listened. She learned. She researched.

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And she became fascinated.

Not with murder. Not yet. But with the idea of something so pure, so absolute, that it could end all things.

Sarin. Modified. Airborne or liquid. Ten bottles. Enough to kill a city.

One day, she was trusted with its disposal. She had spent years building that trust, carefully maneuvering into the role. The cremation protocols were simple. Record the bottles on camera, then incinerate them. The system never checked their contents.

She had practiced the switch hundreds of times in the dead-zones of the surveillance grid. Thirty seconds. Ten bottles replaced with water-filled replicas. Sleight of hand perfected through years of silent rehearsal.

The switch was made.

That evening, she resigned.

She never planned to use the poison. Not then. But she kept the vials, lined them in velvet like jewelry. She would sit in the dark and look at them, something in her simulated brain responding with twisted satisfaction.

She didn't know why.

But her physical, once-living self would have.

She arrived at the stadium just past 3:00 p.m. The air was still. The concert wouldn't begin until 10:00 that night. Only a few guards lingered at the gates, their routines predictable, their minds dulled by the simulation's loops.

She moved freely.

Wearing a protective suit acquired through the black market another long-prepared acquisition Caroline descended into the maintenance corridors. There, nestled behind rusted pipes and humming generators, she found the water tank for the stadium's sprinkler system.

One by one, she unsealed the vials and emptied them into the reservoir. The modified Sarin dissolved silently into the water, invisible and patient. She followed every safety protocol she had memorized, shedding her suit with surgical care to avoid any contact. The irony was not lost on her. She was preserving her body just long enough to watch the others fall.

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She would die too. She knew that.

But not before she witnessed their pain.

Not before she played her final piece.

It was a pity their deaths would be so easily undone. Part of her wished it weren't so—that everyone fated to die that day would stay dead. Permanently. It was a cruel desire, born from a twisted digital consciousness—something that wasn't truly alive, yet somehow stood outside death as well. A fierce, unsettling wish from a singular entity, one in trillions of digital beings inhabiting that synthetic world.

She wandered back into the heart of the stadium, the poison quietly circulating through the pipes above. The arena was vast and empty, a cathedral awaiting its congregation. She walked its halls with a strange, serene joy.

Then, as if to mark the occasion, she entered the stadium's most expensive restaurant.

The waiter sneered, recognizing her uniform. "[Cash in advance](#)," he said coldly.

Caroline smiled. She had no issue paying the entitled asshole in advance. She offered her best smile—a twisted, malevolent grin that, for a fleeting millisecond, triggered a flicker of inexplicable dread in the simulated neural patterns of the waiter. In that same instant, the connection resurfaced—the one she had felt at the moment she transitioned from a lifeless simulation to something undefined. But it was too brief for either Caroline or the waiter to consciously register. It came and went like a static pulse in a sea of code.

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She dined like royalty on what would be her last meal.

Each bite was savored, not for taste, but for symbolism. This was not nourishment. It was ceremony. A prelude to the final act.

And as the sun dipped below the simulated horizon, and the crowd began to pour into the stadium like blood into a wound, Caroline rose from her chair.

Tonight, she would perform.

Not with guitar or voice.

But with silence.

With gas.

With death.

The world had laughed at her song.

Now it would scream to her silence.

And for the first time in her digital existence, Caroline felt almost whole.