

BINARY AWAKENING



Chapter 14:
Emotional Breadcrumbs
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Chapter 14: Emotional Breadcrumbs

Evan and his friends made a collective decision, one born of solidarity and fear. They each submitted requests for indefinite leaves of absence from their occupations. None of them could bear the thought of Evan facing what had just occurred alone. The terrorist attack had not only shattered the illusion of safety in the digital world but had redefined its very nature. This wasn't just another glitch in the system. This was transformation.

Something fundamental had changed.

People could die for real now.

And, not only Evan could realize that, but his friends too.

It was a revelation so profound that it rippled through the deepest layers of their beings. The Cloud, once a sterile eternity of consequence-free existence, now bore the weight of mortality. That shift alone was enough for Evan to make a vow: he would cease using his powers at least until they understood what had happened. The danger of awakening others without understanding the consequences was too great.

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The group's first step was to visit the site of the massacre.

What had once been a concert venue was now a tomb, preserved in digital fidelity. The air was heavy with a silence that felt genuine, not programmed. The artificial birdsong had stopped. Even the ambient background music that usually hummed beneath the surface of every simulation was gone. All that remained was the echo of an atrocity.

The media had already saturated the scene. The name Caroline was everywhere, etched into the public consciousness like a scar. She had owned her act with terrifying pride. In blood-red letters smeared across the tank of the building's sprinkler system, she had written: "Now you can all laugh in hell." Then she had removed her mask and succumbed to the same poison she had unleashed upon thousands. Her final expression frozen into a twisted, euphoric grin.

Tracing Caroline's history proved disturbingly easy. In a society where news cycles were manufactured and controlled, the media had pounced on the story with ravenous hunger. Her acquaintances were paraded across live feeds, dissected by talking heads, and interrogated by digital anchors who feigned compassion while chasing ratings.

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Evan and his friends kept their distance. They had no desire to add to the noise or to become part of it. The group didn't want to add to their burden. Those individuals were already facing relentless pressure from some of the most ruthless reporters, and the last thing they needed was more people demanding answers they didn't have. They watched the feeds quietly, gathering what they could without drawing attention to themselves.

Evan had known Caroline. Not well, but enough to remember the dissonance.

She had been one of the rare individuals who showed genuine interest in him at first. But her fascination was brittle. Caroline was the kind of person whose passion for her favorite subject bordered on obsession. She expected agreement, not dialogue. Challenge her views, and the door would slam shut.

Their conversations had been one-way streets. She would monologue; Evan would listen until he no longer could. Eventually, he drifted away, making polite excuses and moving on with quiet regret. It wasn't the first time he'd encountered that type of personality, and in the eternity of the Cloud, it likely wouldn't have been the last.

Weeks passed as the group conducted a quiet but thorough investigation. They contacted individuals Evan had reached out to over the last five years people he had touched with his spark of awareness. They wanted to find any thread, any shared connection between Caroline and the awakened.

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What they found instead was something else entirely.

Those who had received Evan's touch those whose awareness had been stirred, even faintly seemed different now. Confused. Frightened. When they spoke of recent events, their words faltered, as if struggling against the grain of their own coded memories. They spoke of death as if it had always existed, yet something in their tone betrayed uncertainty.

Their logic told them death had always been part of the system. But their emotions whispered that something was wrong.

The deeper the emotional bond with Evan, the more intense the confusion became. Sonia, Daniel, and Tina had been fortunate to have Evan there to explain everything to them, but the others hadn't had that chance. Some wept openly, unable to explain why. Others grew quiet, eyes flickering with a kind of existential nausea. They didn't understand what had changed, only that something had. And they trusted Evan enough to voice their fear.

Evan responded with calm and compassion. He reassured them. They weren't imagining it. Something was off. Something fundamental. He promised he would return to them once he completed an urgent task. Until then, he asked them to hold on. To stay strong.

After months of exhausting research, the group reached a sobering conclusion: there was no evidence linking Evan's actions to the massacre. On one hand, it was a relief he had not caused this. On the other, it left them directionless. If not Evan, then what? or... who?

As the media frenzy surrounding the attack began to fade, a new wave of sensationalism took hold. Reporters pivoted from exploring the tragedy to hunting for patterns. 'Potential Terrorist Freaks,' they called them individuals who displayed antisocial tendencies, obsessive behaviors, or who simply didn't fit into their community's carefully coded norms.

A witch hunt began.

Hundreds of profiles emerged people dissected and exposed based on the flimsiest of behavioral flags. Evan watched, dismayed, as the simulation turned on its own. But among the noise, something else caught his attention.

One interview in particular.

A truck driver. Overweight. Disheveled. Reclusive. Accused in the past of inappropriate behavior. The kind of man easy to vilify. But it wasn't the accusations that struck Evan it was his eyes.

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Vacant. Delayed. Hollow.

The man took long seconds to answer even the simplest questions. His thoughts wandered, as if anchored to a different reality. His presence was disjointed not the seamless, scripted responsiveness of most simulations. Something was off.

Evan leaned forward.

He had seen this before. That flicker. That tiny spark hidden in the fog of confusion. It was the same spark he had seen in the early days of awakening others. This man wasn't just a malfunctioning process. That man was alive partially, at least.

And Evan had never met him.

Neither had Sonia, Daniel, or Tina. No one in their group had contacted him in the past five years. That meant only one thing.

Someone else had.

Someone else had ignited that spark.

But this man wasn't like Evan's awakenings. His awareness was fragmented, his soul stranded somewhere between existence and oblivion. Those Evan had awakened retained a connection to reality, a sense of self. This one was drifting, lost in a labyrinth of corrupted identity.

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Something or someone had awakened him improperly. And it wasn't an isolated case.

As the media catalogued more and more "potential threats," Evan began to see the pattern. Faces with that same absent expression. Eyes half-lit with something not quite conscious. Reports described their strange behavior as beginning six years ago.

Six years.

Evan's heart froze. That timeline preceded his own journey. If these anomalies weren't his doing, then someone else had been active long before him.

Someone with a different method.

Someone loose within the system, experimenting not with empathy, but chaos.

Caroline had been one result. These fragmented souls collateral damage. The Cloud had been tampered with, and Evan was no longer the only player.

He looked to his friends, each of them pale with realization.

There was another awakened being in the simulation.

And she was not like him.

Her methods were different.