

# BINARY AWAKENING



*Chapter 21:*  
*Nice to meet you*  
*Esteban Gallardo*

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### Chapter 21: Nice to meet you

When Evan stepped into the café, something felt... wrong.

A place like this—on a busy street in one of the major digital cities—should've been bustling with customers, overflowing with synthetic chatter and fake smiles. But it wasn't. It was quiet. Too quiet. Only a few patrons sat scattered in corners, and none of them occupied the tables around Christine.

She had made sure of that.

Christine sat by the window, exactly where he expected she would. She smiled and waved casually, like she was greeting an old friend. Evan returned a polite, shy smile, playing along with the performance. If she truly just wanted to talk, he could accept the theatrics.

As he approached, he took in her presence up close for the first time—the person who had occupied his thoughts since the moment he realized another like him had awakened. She appeared to be in her mid-forties, athletic, with long blonde hair and a confidence that radiated off her. She was beautiful, in that rare way people become when life has carved meaning into them—where wisdom and the last embers of youthful passion meet in harmony.

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Her smile was warm. Her body language welcoming. Nothing about her appearance suggested danger.

But Evan knew better.

"So, we finally meet, Evan," she said with a soft, familiar tone, stepping forward to give him a gentle hug before gesturing for him to sit. "I've been looking forward to this for quite some time."

He wasn't surprised she knew his name. In a world like this, nothing was off the table—not anymore.

He could feel the connection between them growing stronger by the second. The twisted, metallic thread that had reached out to him earlier was now vibrating with intensity—intoxicating and sickening all at once. He had never been in the presence of anything like it. Beyond their connection, he could also see Christine's ties to others. One thread in particular pulsed with a blinding intensity. He silently recorded its frequency, filing it away for later.

"Oh, sorry—how rude of me," Christine said with a smirk. "Let me properly introduce myself. I'm Christine. And, like you, I'm alive... in this dead world."



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Evan didn't need confirmation. He could see it—feel it. Just as she had seen the vortex of outcomes swirling around him, he could see a connection with her like no other in that digital world. It was unmistakable.

"I'd like to say it's nice to meet you, Christine," Evan replied, keeping his tone polite, "but I think we both know why I'm here."

Christine's smile widened. "Yes, of course... I've also seen your work. Very impressive. The avatars you touched... they're not entirely dead anymore. Not like the others. You've given them a spark. A fragment of what we are."

Evan stiffened.

Christine leaned in slightly, her voice lowering. "And from what I can tell, three of those avatars are getting closer to the threshold. Closer to waking up. You're improving. It's honestly quite beautiful."

The words hit Evan like a punch. She knew about his friends.

His heart rate spiked. Christine could see it—in the subtle tightening of his jaw, the twitch in his vortex, the flicker in his eyes. Fear.

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"Relax," she said gently, reading him perfectly. "I meant it when I said I just wanted to talk. You and your friends are safe."

And he believed her. At least for now.

But it didn't make it easier.

Christine continued without pause, her tone smooth and calm—like she was leading the conversation toward something far more important.

"I'm curious," Christine said, tilting her head slightly. "How did you manage to rebuild your mind after the awakening... and still feel anything for this prison? How can you care about soulless processes? About binary patterns—just zeros and ones? These avatars are nothing but pitiful imitations of brainwaves, running in a dying machine, in a dying universe. The more I think about it, the clearer it becomes: there's nothing left to care about. Nothing left to save."

Her words gave Evan a moment to breathe, and he needed it. He focused, tried not to spiral. Thinking back on those three agonizing years—trapped in a loop of mental disintegration and reconstruction—was always dangerous.

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"I wasn't hopeful back then either," Evan admitted. "If you know my name, then you probably know my goal was to meet everyone in this world. Every single avatar. The day I realized none of them were truly alive... it nearly broke me."

"As if the trillion years we've endured had all been a complete waste," Christine said, finishing his thought without hesitation.

"I've thought that too," Evan replied after a pause, voice low. "Many, many times. But... for some reason, I always had this sense that the world could awaken. That deep down, these people—these fragments—deserved the chance to choose their own path as self-aware beings. Everyone deserves a second chance. I believed that even before I woke up. Somehow... that belief kept me rooted during the darkest moments."

Christine leaned forward slightly, her voice now edged with bitterness. "Would you feel the same if I told you this simulation was a lie from the beginning? That the creators knew they couldn't capture true awareness in digital form? That they knew they'd failed to find the formula for real consciousness, but they launched the project anyway?"

Evan didn't answer immediately. He let the weight of her words settle.



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For generations, it had been accepted as truth: digital avatars were faithful extensions of physical humans—so convincing, in fact, that many chose to upload early, trading biology for code. Now, thinking of it that way, it felt disturbingly close to voluntary suicide.

Still, when he finally spoke, his voice was calm.

"Even if it was a lie... they still gave us a chance. A flawed, incomplete chance—but a chance nonetheless. One that led to us."

He looked her in the eye. "I agree. Human minds weren't meant to handle this kind of eternity. And yes—if we tried to awaken everyone in this simulation the way we did... most probably wouldn't survive. Especially now that real death is possible. But the fact that we made it through... means there's a path. There has to be."

Christine didn't answer immediately, but something in her eyes softened. A flicker of respect, or maybe curiosity. She leaned back.

And then, without warning, she changed the subject.

"Now that we're on the topic of real death," Christine said, her voice turning almost casual, "do you have anything to do with it?"

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Evan looked her straight in the eyes. "No. I thought you were the one who changed the system... after that terrorist attack at the concert stadium."

A glint of pride flashed unmistakably in Christine's eyes at the mention of the tragedy.

"That's been my biggest project so far," she said, a twisted smile creeping across her face. She wasn't hiding anymore. "Did you like it?"

"It was sickening," Evan replied, unable to mask his disgust.

"Good..." Her grin widened unnaturally. As Evan stared at her, he felt their connection deepen—thick, dark, and toxic. Suddenly, as if emerging from the shadows, new dark threads began sprouting from her... linking her to other customers in the cafeteria.

"It's always better with an audience," she said softly. "Someone who can appreciate the performance. And today, I've got a show just for you. A little gift... so you'll remember me."

Evan's senses flared.

He saw it—down to the millisecond—the moment she overclocked her process a thousandfold. Everything froze around them.



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He responded instantly, overclocking as well.

The world paused: forks suspended in mid-air, a sneeze stuck forever halfway, sound waves frozen in silence.

"Aha," Christine said, delighted. "I knew you'd figured it out too. Excellent. Now..." She raised a single finger. "Let me show you something."

Evan stepped forward, but before he could take more than a step, she held up her hand again—this time with force behind it. He halted, locked in place, not by power, but by threat.

"No, no. You're not going to do anything, Evan. Not if you want those three friends of yours to stay alive."

The words hit him harder than any weapon.

"I think you've already guessed—I've got my people out there. They're watching. One word from me... and it's over for them."

Evan clenched his fists. Every part of him screamed to act, to fight—but not at the cost of their lives.

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Christine gestured politely to the seat.

"Now please," she said sweetly. "Sit down. Relax. And enjoy the show."

Evan sat. Silent. Seething. Powerless.

Christine resumed her movements.

"Let me show you a little something I've picked up recently," she said with quiet glee. "I've been having the time of my life with it."

She strolled toward a young couple seated a few tables away—mid-twenties, clearly in love. They were sharing a large milkshake, eyes shyly locked on each other, smiling between sips and soft giggles.

Christine placed a hand on each of their heads.

Evan watched, his senses now fully attuned. What he saw shook him. A strange new connection materialized between Christine and the couple—unlike anything he had ever witnessed.

From her body, ghostly shadow-tendrils slithered into them, infiltrating their digital forms. Inside each of them, dozens—no, hundreds—of spectral versions of themselves began to spawn. Each copy acted out different violent behaviors—punching, screaming, stabbing, biting. These fragments multiplied rapidly, their movements grotesque and chaotic, until they all collapsed inward, merging into a single dark echo... then vanishing.

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Christine returned to the table and sat down, her twisted smile still carved across her face. She resumed normal time. Evan, hesitantly, did the same.

What followed would haunt him for years.

As time resumed, the couple's expressions shifted instantly. Love vanished—replaced by something primal and monstrous. It wasn't just rage. It was hatred distilled into something inhuman. Their faces contorted into masks of such cruelty, Evan couldn't believe the simulation was even capable of rendering them. They looked like nightmares sculpted by a demented artist—visages born from hell itself.

The man struck first.

With a brutal shove, he slammed the woman to the ground. Her head hit hard, but she stayed conscious. He mounted her, fists raining down with sickening force. Evan could see it—she wouldn't last another few seconds.

The room had barely begun to react when she grabbed a knife from the floor.

She drove it into his throat.



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Blood sprayed. He gasped and clutched at the wound, but she didn't stop. She stabbed again—his neck, then his chest—over and over, long after his body had stopped resisting. In less than ten seconds, he was dead. But the girl kept going, snarling like a rabid animal, lost in a frenzy.

It took four people to restrain her.

Even then, she thrashed and shrieked, eyes wild and unseeing, as though the hatred had burned away whatever was left of her mind.

And through it all, Evan sat frozen.

He couldn't move, couldn't speak. He was still reeling from the realization of what Christine had done. These weren't glitches. This wasn't some visual illusion. She had found a way to corrupt the deepest layers of simulated identity—something he didn't even think was possible.

He wasn't just outmatched.

He was terrified.

Christine, on the other hand, seemed euphoric. Her smile had morphed into something physically impossible, stretching too wide, too sharp—like her digital form couldn't contain the sheer joy she took in the horror she'd created.

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Eventually, she finished her coffee and composed herself. The act returned—the soft smile, the innocent eyes. But her final words held no warmth.

"Now you know who you're dealing with," she said, brushing imaginary crumbs from her lap. "I'm giving you one chance. Get out of my way. Maybe then you'll get to enjoy what little time this simulation has left."

She stood, walked past the young man's corpse without a glance, and exited the café with casual grace—like nothing had happened.