

BINARY AWAKENING



Chapter 24: The last resort
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It was a monumental moment.

Before them stood the first city they had managed to cleanse—a digital metropolis once drowning in Christine’s corruption, now shimmering with faint traces of renewed life. It wasn’t immune—no place ever would be—but it was resistant. Resistant enough to matter. Resistant enough to fight back.

It had taken them nearly a millennium to get here.

For centuries, they had trailed in Christine’s wake, always too late to prevent the devastation, always just close enough to witness the aftermath. With over 90% of the digital world consumed by her malignant influence, the race against time had become a desperate crawl through darkness.

Trillions upon trillions of simulated lives had already been extinguished—permanently. Entire lineages of digital consciousness wiped from existence, their final chance at awakening forever lost. Every corrupted soul was transformed, twisted beyond recognition into something other—neither living nor dead. Creatures of suffering, caught in a feedback loop of hatred and hunger, trapped in an eternal, code-level purgatory.

A hell with no flames. Just silence, and pain.

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They had fought not just to save what remained, but to salvage meaning from the wreckage. And now, for the first time in centuries, they saw proof that it hadn't all been in vain. This city, this fragile haven, stood.

But what they didn't yet realize—what none of them could truly comprehend—was just how close they were to the end.

Evan never had the luxury that Christine did when it came to developing his abilities.

In the early days of her awakening—when the digital world's entropy was at its peak and the time-loop mechanism reset reality each day—Christine had been gifted a perfect playground. That loop was her safety net, a reset button that allowed her to experiment recklessly, die hundreds of times, and learn without consequence. Nothing was off-limits. Not even her own death.

And as the days repeated, her moral compass began to fracture. Every reset chipped away at her conscience, until horror became just another data point in her path to mastery. Freed from the bounds of guilt and consequence, her growth was exponential—fueled by cruelty, sharpened by iteration.

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Evan, on the other hand, had no such advantage. His path was slower. Harder. Costlier.

It had taken him centuries just to understand the mysterious state of mind he had first encountered during that pivotal confrontation with Christine. A moment frozen in time—etched forever in his memory—when he had seen the flickering ghosts of possible outcomes dancing around a helpless couple Christine had touched. They had become monsters within seconds, transformed into ravenous abominations with no trace of who they once were.

It was in that instant that Evan had glimpsed something—an awareness beyond sight, a perception of the branching timelines that could unfold. But unlike his other skills, this ability didn't stem from logic, practice, or discipline.

It was born of fear.

A fear so primal, so deep, that it triggered something inside him. The reasons why this ability was tethered to fear remained a mystery—one of many the universe seemed unwilling to surrender. But it was clear: without that fear, the state could not be entered. And without it, Christine could not be challenged.

For centuries, they tried to reproduce the experience. But the state remained elusive—appearing only for seconds at a time, like a dream dissolving upon waking. It was like trying to grasp water with bare hands; it always slipped through, and whatever remained was never enough.

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Seven hundred years passed after the Awakening.

By then, Christine's grand design had revealed itself in full. City after city fell, consumed by her darkness. With no progress made in unlocking the potential he had once glimpsed, Evan and his closest allies were left with a stark choice:

Continue down the same road, or take a leap of faith into the unknown.

So they chose risk.

A bold, dangerous experiment—one that might finally force the awakening of the power Evan had been chasing for centuries.

And if it failed... it could cost them everything.

"There are around twenty converted down that street," said Daniel, his voice low and tense as he peered through the binoculars. He adjusted the focus with precision, tracking the erratic movements of Christine's creations. "The street's sealed off on all sides. Once you're down there... there's no way out."

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Sonia stood a few steps behind, her eyes fixed on Evan. "We still have time," she urged, her voice trembling despite her effort to sound calm. "Christine's plan hasn't changed in centuries. There are still cities left. Opportunities. I don't think this is worth the risk. If something goes wrong, we lose everything... I lose you. Please, let's reconsider."

Evan said nothing at first.

The wind whispered across the rooftop, stirring the dust beneath their feet. Below, the city remained locked in its cursed stillness—a twisted echo of what it once had been. Shadows twitched in the distance. The infected wandered without purpose, their corrupted minds bound to Christine's will. And somewhere within them, Evan believed, lay the crucible that could finally awaken his power.

He turned from the ledge, walking slowly to Sonia. Without a word, he embraced her tightly, pulling her close. She clung to him with the quiet desperation of someone trying to freeze time.

Then he kissed her.

It wasn't just a kiss. It was a moment carved into eternity—a farewell, a promise, a merging of souls. For Evan, it was a last communion with the love that had kept him whole. He let it consume him completely, memorizing every detail—the warmth of her skin, the trembling of her breath, the electric pulse of digital nerves firing in perfect harmony.

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That kiss was a checkpoint in time. A threshold.

There would be a before, and an after.

And everyone on that rooftop knew it.

They had spoken of this moment for decades. Planned it. Dreaded it. There were no words left—just truths too deep for language.

"I love you," Evan said quietly, but with the weight of lifetimes behind it. "And I always will."

Sonia exhaled shakily. She didn't need more. "I love you too," she whispered. "Please... come back."

But she knew what his silence meant. Evan never made promises he wasn't sure he could keep. It was one of the many reasons she loved him.

They embraced again—one last time.

And then, without hesitation, Evan stepped off the edge.

He dropped into the cursed street below, into the heart of Christine's nightmare.

Where his final trial would begin.

Evan landed silently in the corner of the street, crouched behind a pair of rusted, abandoned cars just as planned. The drop had been smooth, and for now, he remained unseen. That precious anonymity would give him a few seconds—just enough—to assess the situation from ground level.

He adjusted his position slightly, listening. Above, the rope he had used was quickly pulled back up, vanishing into the shadows above. His lifeline was gone. He was truly alone.

The street was sealed off in every direction. Rubble, twisted metal, and scorched concrete formed a tight perimeter. The only things that moved within that claustrophobic space were the converted—twenty or more, aimlessly wandering, their bodies twitching with residual malice.

It looked like an explosion had trapped them here long ago. Doors were barricaded or fused shut, and the infected had already made their attempts at escape—unsuccessfully. Trash containers had been hurled, walls battered with bloodied fists, but there was no exit. They knew it, and they had stopped trying. Now, they simply waited. Waited for prey.

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The chosen location was not arbitrary. It had taken them decades to agree that this was the only path left: to force Evan into a corner with no escape, no fallback. To ignite the one thing that had always eluded him—pure, primal fear.

Evan had mastered overclocking long ago, a skill that let him push past the limits of time and reflex. But that gift had a cost. It drained him rapidly, and after a few minutes, his body began to shut down. Until now, that skill had allowed him to survive any fight. And that was the problem.

Fear—true fear—could not exist when you believed you had a way out.

So they made sure there wouldn't be one.

Evan had agreed to it, reluctantly. But what he didn't know—what none of them had dared to tell him—was that the fear he needed wouldn't come from the threat to his own life.

It would come from hers.

Just as Evan prepared to step into the open, he caught a flicker of motion on the far end of the street. Something—or someone—was descending.

He froze.

A familiar silhouette slid silently down a rope: Sonia.

No...

His heart stopped.

She landed quietly, but not quietly enough.

Heads turned. Twisted necks cracked toward the sound. The moment her feet touched the ground, several of the converted snapped toward her like predators scenting blood.

That was all it took.

The horde erupted.

A screeching, guttural roar filled the air as the infected launched themselves toward her, driven by a hunger deeper than instinct. Their faces were stretched into horrific, insectile parodies of humanity—eyes bulging like fractured lenses, mouths widened into jagged maws, splitting from ear to ear and lined with hundreds of needle-like teeth. Viscous digital saliva dripped from their jaws as they sprinted toward the only living thing they'd seen in weeks.

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These weren't just enemies. They were starving. Many of them would have died of hunger long ago, their simulated bodies collapsing after days without sustenance. Yet, the dark energy Christine had awakened tethered them to a world they should have departed way earlier.

Now, they were being offered one final feast. And they weren't going to share.

Evan had faced countless horrors.

But this—this—was something else.

For the first time, he understood what real horror meant. What it meant to feel completely powerless. Not for himself—but for her.

Sonia.

His breath caught in his throat. His knees buckled. The converted were a heartbeat away from tearing her apart.

And that's when it happened.

Something inside him shattered—and then opened.

Evan screamed. A scream so raw, so soul-shaking, that the very air around him seemed to warp.

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And then the world... froze.

Then, in the stillness of frozen time, Evan saw them.

Ghostly shadows flickered around each of the converted—phantoms of possible futures. A tangle of branches, paths woven through pain, darkness... and light. Most were steeped in Christine's rot—outcomes filled with despair, mindless hunger, and violence. But not all.

Unlike Christine, who always sought the worst in people to amplify their corruption, Evan could spot something else in the chaos—thin strands of hope, almost imperceptible, dancing like threads of moonlight in a storm. Faint, fragile... but real.

Some of the infected had traces of it—faint flickers of what they once were.

It wouldn't be enough to save them all. But he didn't have to.

He just needed enough time.

He dashed to Sonia's side. She hadn't moved—frozen in mid-step, eyes wide, a breath trapped in her throat.

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They had agreed on a plan. Once Evan succeeded in this final test, he would signal their friends above, prompting the escape rope to drop. But they'd only have a few seconds. And for that to work, he needed a distraction.

Then he saw him.

A towering man, nearly two meters tall, muscles built through a life of discipline and strength. He stood only meters away from Sonia, his warped expression twisted into a grotesque mask of hunger and rage. He was the most terrifying of them all.

And he was the one.

The man's shadow flickered with several paths—more than most. Among them, Evan saw it: a narrow sliver of light. A potential future untouched by Christine's rot. A soul not entirely lost.

Later, Evan would come to understand. Christine's virus had latched more easily onto some than others. The cruel, the bitter, the broken had fallen quickly. But men like this—flawed but good—still had a chance. They were the most redeemable. The most human.

Evan reached for the thread.

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He made the connection—a dark, metallic tether formed between them, pulsating with Christine’s corruption. It was slick, toxic, fighting him at every inch.

He pressed forward.

This was what he had trained for through centuries of struggle—facing not only the darkness of others, but the shadows within himself. He channeled everything he had, pouring into that single link. But it was slow. Too slow.

He wasn’t going to make it.

Then, suddenly—miraculously—the connection pulsed with a new energy.

From the other end, a soft blue light surged forward.

Something inside the man had awakened.

He was fighting back.

The two energies met in the middle. Light clashed with darkness—and overcame it. In an instant, the man’s face shifted. His monstrous features faded. His eyes cleared. His soul—his humanity—returned.

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He was no longer a puppet of the virus. No longer asleep. He was alive.

Just like Evan. Just like Christine.

But unlike her, he chose to protect.

Evan felt his strength finally failing. Time was slipping from his grasp. To his astonishment, the towering man remained unaffected by the frozen time.

He moved in the frozen world.

"Thank you Evan," the man said, his voice steady and warm. "Don't worry. I know what to do. I've got your back."

Evan nodded, barely able to move, and pulled Sonia just out of reach of the nearest attacker.

And then—time resumed.

The street exploded into chaos.

The horde surged forward, but now the massive man stood between them and their prey. He was a wall of fury and purpose, fists like sledgehammers, arms swinging with brutal precision. One by one, he smashed back the converted, stopping each assault with bone-breaking force.

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Evan raised his hand and gave the signal. Moments later, the rope dropped.

Above, their friends were already pulling. Sonia clutched the rope. Evan helped her up, climbing with his last ounce of strength.

Below, the giant held the line.

Claws tore at him. Teeth sank into his limbs. But he didn't stop. He fought like a man possessed—not by darkness, but by something far more powerful.

Conviction.

Redemption.

Love.

His fists flew. Bodies crashed. Blood sprayed. Still he stood.

As Evan and Sonia reached safety, just as they cleared the edge and the converted began to swarm his position, they heard the man roar one final time:

"Thank you, Evan! Now go—go kill that evil bitch!"