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**Chapter 1**

**Midnight Miasma**

White stripes and yellow lights danced across the windshield in blinding contrast to the endless path of asphalt. Their repetitive choreography lulled Layton into an absent-minded daze. It wasn't until a neon green muscle car flew past Layton, abruptly rattling his Jeep’s chassis, that he was startled back to alertness. The momentary terror of realizing that he had nearly fallen asleep driving home again prompted him to turn on the radio. After straining his eyes to see the LED lights on the radio in the otherwise pitch black November night and fumbling with the tuner for a moment, Layton gave up on finding a station. There was seldom reception in the desert anyways, even less so in the valley Layton drove through to get home every night. At least the focus necessary to play with the tuner sufficed to wake him up enough until-

*-ding-ding-ding*

The low-fuel indicator illuminated in its faded brown hue, bringing with it the obnoxious buzzing sound that followed the initial pinging. Layton had meant to fix this, but with the internship and commuting occupying nearly every waking moment of his daily life, he hadn’t had the time as of late. The incessant buzzing took all of eight seconds to prompt Layton to decide to stop for gas at the next station. Luckily, there was an exit with 24/7 gas coming up in two miles. This was particularly forunate since this section of the interstate saw almost zero traffic and, as a result, had almost zero amenities. In fact, in the thirty minutes since Layton had gotten onto the interstate, the muscle car was the only other vehicle he could recall seeing.

Pulling off at the exit, Layton could see the gas station off to the immediate right; beyond it was a dirt road to nothingness. Similarly, to the left there was an overpass leading to another dirt road continuing perpendicular to the interstate and seemingly going into open desert for as far as the eye could see. Pulling into the station, everything appeared to be closed. The station itself was shrouded in total darkness, and Layton could see that the metal bars behind the windows had been pulled down to close off the interior. Layton would not have believed the small, vinyl sign above the entrance reading ’*24/7 GAS*’ if it had not been for the lights above the pumps still being on and for seeing that the green muscle car from earlier was fueling up.

There were four pumps, each illuminated in a dim sphere of visibility cast by a fluorescent light hovering above. One of the lights would blink off every few seconds, offering the sort of atmosphere one might expect of a drug dealer’s street corner; it was the pump diagonal from the muscle car’s location. Not wanting to worry the car’s owner by pulling beside or behind it at a remote gas station at two in the morning, Layton decided to pull up to the pump with the flickering light so he would be farthest from the other car.

Stepping out of his Jeep, the icy November air hit Layton like a brick wall. He instantly regretted not putting his coat on ahead of time. Thankfully, he had at least been wearing his beanie while driving. He reached back into the Jeep and hurriedly threw on his coat. Walking around to the passenger side, he popped his gas tank open and put the pump inside it. Only a few moments outside and the cold had already done the job of chilling Layton’s hands to the bone. He paused before fumbling with the keypad and his credit card to rub his hands together and breathe some warmth into them. Meanwhile, Layton caught a glance of the other driver. She was a fit-looking woman with jet black hair extending to her shoulder blades. She stood somewhere around 5 foot 6 and wore ankle boots, tight blue-jeans, and a leather jacket with the sleeves pushed up to her forearms. Facing away from Layton, that was all of the woman’s appearance that could be made out.

As the woman was turning around to pull the pump out of her gas tank, Layton’s line of sight was broken by a white cargo van abruptly pulling next to her. This struck Layton as strange since the van didn’t pull up to any pump, just next to the woman and her car. Still observing, Layton could only see the driver side of the van and peered into the side view mirror to get a look inside. His gaze instantly met in the mirror with the driver of the van’s eyes, and Layton jerked his glance back over to his own gas pump. The man was lazily glancing at Layton; it almost felt condescending. From the brief moment of contact, Layton saw that the driver was wearing a fine, black suit jacket with a white shirt and purple tie. He was large, and from his frame may have appeared to be the type of laborer who would drive a van, but certainly not so by his attire.

Suddenly, the woman yelled out, “Get the fu-”

Her exclamation was cut short as her mouth was effectively shut by the van’s sliding cargo door. As Layton looked back into the side view mirror, the driver was looking straight ahead and taking off with the van. The pump laid on the ground, abandoned, sitting in a puddle of spilled gasoline. The scene seemed to state that the woman had vanished into thin air whilst fueling up. The only evidence of her abduction: the white van now speeding into the distance and back onto the interstate.

More importantly, the only witness of her abduction, and the only other person within who knows how many miles, was Layton. Layton practically tripped over himself dashing back to the driver-side door and hopping back into his Jeep. He turned the ignition and immediately darted after the van. He hadn’t so much as taken the time to disconnect the pump and, after a few feet, ripped the pump from its connecting tube, sounding off a loud *snap*, jolting the Jeep slightly, and causing fuel to splatter around wildly as the pump tumbled to the ground. Flooring the accelerator, Layton whipped around the turn out of the gas station and again to turn back onto the onramp to the interstate. He could see that the van was not too far off in the distance and, although his Jeep was no speed-demon, knew he would be able to catch up reasonably soon.

Once he was close enough to the van, it dawned on Layton that he had failed to formulate a plan in the minute or so that it had taken him to catch up.

*The plates! I have to get the plates for the police,* Layton figured.

Glancing down, he was dismayed to see that the plates were blocked by strips of grey duct tape. Now, even if he could manage to get reception and call the police, he would have no plate number to give them. The van would be able to make it to the city in another 45 minutes. Even if it didn’t, there were plenty of deserted exits between here and the city where the van could pull off, lay low, and eventually blend back in with the fleet of white vans operated by the working folk who lived in the desert. If Layton told the police to look for a white van under these circumstances and had no further specifier, like the plate number, it would never be found.

*No, none of that matters anyways,* Layton realized.

The police would take an eternity to make it out here, and this woman was in imminent danger. Not only could Layton not wait for the police, he also couldn’t pursue the van for very long. He didn’t have the chance to fuel up at the station and was going to be out of gas within twenty to thirty miles; he had to act *immediately*.

The van was driving in the center lane and Layton just behind. Frustrated, Layton accepted the reality that his hand was forced. He shifted one lane to the left, laid into the accelerator, then swung the front end of his jeep over towards the rear of the van. Although Layton had never attempted a PIT maneuver before, he thought he had seen enough videos of police doing it to understand the general concept. What Layton did not count on was how difficult it was going to be to PIT the van when it was so much more massive than his Jeep. This resulted in his first attempt meeting the driver side of the van with a metal-grinding smash, but completely failing to shift it off its axis of travel. During his contact with the van, his eyes again met with the driver’s in the side-view mirror. The man was looking back at him again, but this time he looked stern, glaring back with a determined look on his face. It was as if he now understood the threat presented by Layton and was taking him more seriously.

After disconnecting from the van, Layton had lost a significant amount of speed. He centered himself behind the van, caught up, and repeated the process of attempting a PIT. This time, he aimed at a point further back on the van in order to increase his amount of leverage. When he swung over this time, Layton missed entirely; he had aimed too far back and didn’t lead his target sufficiently. Determined, Layton again centered himself behind the van and began to catch up. Now for a third time: he caught up to the van and-

-*Skrrrt!*

The driver of the van slammed on his brakes. Layton panicked and frantically threw his wheel hard across to the right. The van’s driver had brake-checked Layton underneath an overpass, and Layton, by veering off to the right, had driven up the slanted concrete wall beneath the overpass. Not having enough time to react or brake, Layton launched off the overpass wall at a slanted angle relative to the ground. The front-left side of his Jeep hammered into the dirt on the shoulder of the road and crumpled beneath him. The heaven-shattering volume of the initial slam was followed by the chorus of ten thousand and two talons tearing at a chalkboard as the momentum of the Jeep caused it to slide across the shoulder for an intolerable amount of time and distance before it finally grinded to a halt.

The plume of smoke and dirt, illuminated in the night air by the Jeep’s flashing amber lights, highlighted the path of Layton’s collision. Layton, though scraped, bruised, and dazed, was otherwise miraculously unscathed. The blunt force of the impact and of the airbag was not so devastating as to maim Layton, but it certainly did knock him into a state of less-than-consciousness. During this haze, Layton could make out blurry colors, but not shapes or figures. In his haze, he was entirely unaware that he was being pulled up and out of his passenger side door. With complete reckless abandon, the men ripped Layton out from the side, now top, of his Jeep and hurled him onto the dirt. The thud from landing, not being nearly as abrupt as his crash, was just hard enough to cause Layton to start coming to. He could make out shapes again, though everything seemed foggy. He was still not totally aware of the situation due to a distracting ringing sound piercing his ears. Laying on his side, struggling to snap out of his daze, Layton clawed a handful of dirt from the ground with his right hand as if trying to get a grasp back onto the real world. Cheek pressed to dirt, Layton laid still, staring at his hand and blaming it for not pulling his perception back into reality. He rolled over on the ground and, looking up, could roughly discern the shapes of three men approaching him. They were moving quickly and, even through Layton’s shrouded perspective, were clearly not well-intentioned.

Layton needed to snap to or suffer the consequences of laying still for his three predators. Layton’s fear pushed him up onto his hands and knees, gritted his teeth, and woke his perception. Looking back up, two of the men were much closer than the third, who looked like he had just finished climbing down from the Jeep. The first two men arrived and, over the course of an instant, Layton was a lightning bolt popping up from the ground, surprising the man closest to him with a right uppercut backed by the momentum of his entire body weight. The man’s head bobbed like a ragdoll and he collapsed, motionless. Layton then threw the dirt from his hand, backhanded, at the second man’s face before shoving him with both hands. The man stumbled backwards from the push, but the dirt mostly just surprised him, rather than actually blinding or otherwise incapacitating him. The first man remained glued to the ground, clearly knocked unconscious. The third man now ran to catch up to his comrades. Layton recognized him by his large, muscular build and sharp suit as the driver of the van.

Layton readied his defenses for a fight; he put his fists up to protect his face and placed his left foot forward. Seeing this, the second man and the driver simultaneously rushed Layton. Layton succeeded in kicking the larger threat, the driver, in the ribs, but was too preoccupied with this to fend off the second man, who was also somewhat larger than Layton. He jabbed, but missed, as the man rammed his shoulder into Layton’s chest, bulldozing him to the ground. Now Layton was sprawled out on the cold dirt with the full bodyweight of an adult man on top of him and the air practically vacuumed from his lungs. While he struggled to regain his wind, the driver walked back over to the pair, looked down at a gasping Layton, then, with the full force of his massive frame, jumped up and brought his feet crashing down on Layton’s left knee. The cracking sounds rang out like fireworks as the man landed, obviously shattering bone in the process. The glaring ringing sound in Layton’s ears grew deafening as the pain became inconceivable.

Now that Layton was effectively subdued, the second man crawled off of him and returned to his feet. At this point, both men towered over Layton with sweat dripping from their scowling faces as they boiled over with rage for Layton’s interference. From head to toe, Layton was eclipsed by a whirlwind of flurried dress shoes. Most of the strikes were tolerable until a kick from one of the men’s chisel-toed shoes landed perfectly square and center in the side of Layton’s ribs, again knocking the wind out of him and further lowering his defenses. Immediately succeeding this was another forceful kick to the head, and Layton’s consciousness was finally cast from his body.

Layton’s mind’s eye flickered opened and closed for brief moments, just long enough to gather that he was being dragged away from the wreck. Some short time later, Layton regained consciousness more permanently. He could see that he was laid out near the bottom of the slanted wall beneath the overpass that served as his ramp earlier. In the distance, he could see the Jeep, still laying on its side with its four-way flashers blinking away, crying out for help into the nothingness of the nighttime desert. Just beyond that, Layton could see all three men standing near the front passenger side of the van. They were clearly having a heated discussion. Layton knew the discussion was heated not because he could hear them from his distance, but because he could see them gesturing wildly with their hands back and forth to one another. Looking down both directions of the interstate, however, what Layton did not see were any other vehicles or signs of life; it was cold, flat, expansive, dark, isolated desert and highway for as far as the eye could see.

Realizing that he was beneath an overpass and that there was likely an accompanying road that eventually led to some home or establishment, Layton decided that his only logical option was to at least attempt to find help. Sitting up, Layton pushed against the roughly textured concrete, letting rubble dig into his hands as he nudged himself up. The freezing temperatures made every small scrape feel like an impaling knife. Once halfway up, Layton pulled his hands from the concrete and transferred his weight to his legs. His right leg felt fine, and capable of supporting him, but the uneven concrete slab forced him off balance. Instinctively, Layton relied on his left leg to help him balance. The instant he placed a portion of his weight on his left leg, waves of agony radiated from his leg to the farthest reaches of his body, and Layton collapsed. The momentum of his fall caused him to slide down the remainder of the concrete, dragging with him nearby dirt and rubble until he impacted the flat ground at the bottom with an affirmative *thud*. Layton composed himself and sat back up. Now accepting that walking was not an option, he began using his arms and one good leg to scoot himself out from under the overpass.

Layton dragged himself backwards, moving away from the van so that he could keep an eye on it. After about ten or fifteen feet, Layton reached the end of the concrete wall. He turned the corner around the wall so that he could begin the process of dragging himself up the less-steep dirt hill adjacent the overpass. As he turned the corner, he could see light protruding from the van and could just make out the silhouette of one of the men inside of it, rummaging around.

With the first attempt at pushing himself up the hill, Layton was confronted with the near impossibility of his task. It took nearly all of the strength left in his arms and core just to push himself up a foot or so. After two or three more pushes, Layton had trekked the longest two or three feet of his life; sweat poured across his face, running down his brow, dripping over his eyes, and spraying from his lips as every exhausted breath produced clouds of white mist in the frigid air.

*-ksht ksht ksht*

The familiar sound of crunching gravel sang down from behind Layton. He snapped his head around and could see a man casually traipsing down the hill without a care in the world. The man was dressed to the nines, donning a dark-grey, seersucker suit jacket and vest over a black tie and white shirt. His appearance resembled something out of a spy film. The man arrived and halted, standing just slightly beside and above Layton’s position. He did not say a word nor did he move down to Layton’s level; he simply stood, his hands folded in front of him. The sweat running over Layton’s eyes coordinated with the lightless night air to shroud the man’s face.

“H...help me...us...” Layton was able to let out between breaths in his quivered speech.

The man moved his hands to his knees and crouched down. Still looking down, his face remained indistinguishable in the dark. After a pause, he tilted his head up at Layton and grinned. Now visible, the man’s face startled Layton. His irises were blood red, with thin-slit pupils reminiscent of a venomous snake’s.

“Help yourself.” The man calmly replied as he extended his arm towards Layton. In his hand, he presented a picture perfect peach.

Layton narrowed his brows in response to the confusion now overwhelming him.

*This makes no sense; what is he doing; am I hallucinating?* Layton thought to himself.

He returned his gaze back to the direction of the van and, over the concrete, could see the man emerging from within the van. It was clear now that it was the largest man: the driver. Layton, even from his distance, could make out the figure of a gun in his hand. Time seemed to slow down from the instant Layton first noticed the gun. His heartbeat echoed between every slow, terrified breath. It became clear that no matter where he looked, disbelief was all he was going to find. Layton turned his head back, expecting the illusion of the snake-eyed man to have been an artifact of some brain contusion and to have broken off. On the contrary, the man was still crouched there, still staring with his terrifying eyes, and still holding out his peach.

He again began to speak. “Help yourself; take a bite... then... look at that man’s eyes... picture his still-beating heart... then close your hand into a fist as though you were crushing his very heart itself.” When the man spoke this time, he was not so nonchalant; he seemed sincere, distinctly pausing between each step of his instructions to Layton.

Entirely unsure of the situation, Layton gradually reached out and grabbed the peach. At this point, understanding his own decisions was as distant a hope as getting out of this situation unscathed.

“Help yourself or die; that’s yourchoice.”

Layton returned his gaze to the direction of the van; the driver was still approaching, clear in his intent. The strange man’s words echoed through the halls of Layton’s imagination. Layton only had seconds to think of what to do, but it was no matter. It took just a nanosecond for Layton to accept his lack of options. He looked down at the peach in his hand, contemplating the absurdity of the night, still unsure if he was experiencing brain damage from his beating or not. He looked back to the strange man but was met with the familiar sight of empty desert.The man’s peach remained even in his absence.

After hearing the sound of dress shoes clicking together on asphalt, Layton’s eyes met with the gunman’s for the third and final time that night. He was stopped at the end of the concrete wall nearest Layton, standing on the portion of the shoulder where the dirt met the asphalt. His arms hung lazily at his side, gun firmly in hand while staring Layton down. His gaze was no longer condescending nor was it one of frustration; it was blank, the kind of dehumanized, expressionless stare indicative of a person who couldn’t afford the luxury of moral superiority.

Layton relinquished reason and accepted that no matter how absurd the possibility of his plan working was he was nearing his life’s end either way. He quickly moved the peach to his mouth, stole a bite, and looked back at the gunman. Now, Layton’s stare was mirrored by the barrel of a gun. Instinctively, Layton threw his open hand out in front of him, flinching, as if he felt in that moment that he could block the bullet destined for his head. Each pulse of his heart was like a bass drum beating inside of him. It was beating fast, yet perfectly rhythmic: a ticking time bomb only moments away from detonation.

*Your choice;* the echo had ricocheted back from across the universe of Layton’s mind and he remembered.

Layton’s eyes narrowed, shifting from a look of fear to one of determination. He closed his open hand and remembered what the strange man had told him. His line of sight would have drilled through the gunman’s skull if it had been any more intense. Using the remainder of his mental capacity, he pictured the man’s heart with such vividity that he could practically feel its beat between his own ears. He closed his hand even tighter, balling it into a fist so tight that he was sure he could have made rubble from concrete. He made every effort to continue transforming his hopelessness into determination-- or at least belief that what he was trying to do might actually work.

The gunman stood still, not batting so much as an eyelash, still just caressing the side of the trigger. The man’s callous unresponsiveness transformed Layton’s hopelessness into anger.

*This is my only chance at life-- that woman’s only chance at life, and no matter how ridiculous it seems, I have to give it every effort,* Layton reflected.

Suddenly, a change- the man became the statue of a dictator being toppled by a thousand wronged citizens. He began to careen to one side, then, finally, fell to the ground, limp and lifeless. Layton stared, glazed over by utter amazement. Regardless of the sincerity of Layton’s attempt to kill the man, the situation was still unbelievable to him. Layton thought he was grasping at straws or suffering from brain damage. Out of the corner of his eye, a figure darted towards him.

*No!*

Layton realized the man was darting for the gun and had no more time to evaluate the situation. After making the slightest movement towards the gun, a lightning bolt of pain ran down the center of Layton’s leg to remind him that he had no chance of racing the man. As the figure moved closer, Layton saw that it was the man who he had knocked out earlier. Layton’s mind ran wild. Did he just survive the most terrifying moment of his life in order to survive for another few short moments?

*Wait!* Layton realized what this man had to have seen and knew his course of action right away. Layton drew his arm back up and pointed it at the charging man.

“Are you going to die too?!” he shouted. His fear and inner turmoil alone generated the volume. Not only did Layton not know if he truly killed the gunman in the first place, but he also did not know if he could ever possibly do it again. Nevertheless, Layton’s bluff worked flawlessly. The man, having witnessed some sort of supernatural murder, feared Layton enough to obey his implied command and froze in his tracks. While keeping his arm and hand extended out towards the man, as if keeping a gun pointed at him, Layton, now at his own pace, made his way down to the gun next to the deceased driver. He picked it up, and carefully managed to stand by leaning almost entirely on his right leg.

Layton was no gun aficionado, but he recognized the glock 22 in his hand enough to know how to use it if he had to. The other man began to shout, “What the he-“

-*Clack!Clack!*

Two bullets rang across the underpass, cutting the man off mid-sentence. The third man had seen what happened and grabbed a second weapon to fire on Layton. The first bullet missed entirely, but the second landed clean in Layton’s left thigh, causing him to fold onto the ground. Layton clenched the glock for dear life as he fell. The nearby man seized the opportunity to rush and jump on top of Layton. He tackled Layton to the floor, and the pair landed a few feet from the driver’s body. The two struggled over possession of the weapon when-

-*Pop!*

In the midst of the struggle, Layton pulled the trigger, perhaps out of fear or perhaps completely on accident. The pistol fired right into the abdomen of the man at such a close distance that his body muffled the gunshot. The man froze, still over Layton and still somewhat alive. Blood began to drip from his mouth and sprinkle Layton’s face. The two merely looked each other in the eyes. The man’s time was nearing its end and he had no time left for having enemies. He shared his last breath matching Layton’s confused stare. This experience was uniquely different from a moment ago. The man was so close that Layton could practically feel his internal strife from the strained look in his light-blue eyes. The thick blood splatter from the gunshot painted Layton and pooled around the two. Between their embrace, Layton experienced the last breath of life lifting away from the man.

The serenity of the man’s final moments faded away as more gunshots rang around the underpass, waking Layton. He remembered his own life was still in danger. After rolling the man off of him, Layton took aim at the van and returned fire. For a short few seconds, the scene was a slew of bullets singing their symphony of terror. Shots whizzed past Layton’s head, ricocheting around the underpass or off of the van and landing with an affirmative thud in the dirt.

-*Click-Click-Click*

The sobering affirmation of the hammer clicking against the firing pin told Layton he had expended his magazine. He realized that there was no longer any returning fire from the van. Layton’s first instinct was to lay down in fear, perhaps to play dead or to just wait for help, but his concern for the woman drove him to move. Again, Layton forced himself to his feet but collapsed back down, entirely unable to stand this time, even by leaning on one leg. The pain had simply grown too great to bear. Yet again, Layton began to crawl over as best he was capable. As pushing himself backwards was his only viable option, Layton was forced to feast his eyes upon the two bodies and the trail of the other man’s blood left in his own wake. Layton could only hope that he hit the third man, otherwise he would likely soon be dead.

The air was mute as time passed. It was apparent that there were no signs of movement coming from the van. Adrenaline waring thin, the cold moved back in on Layton like a vulture on its defenseless prey. Eventually, he came upon the man laying in a pool of his own blood next to the bullet-hole riddled van. He was clearly still alive; his labored breathing was visible by the clouds of air it produced. As Layton moved closer, the man looked at him just by moving his eyes; he was either too weak or too tired to move his head, even slightly. The man reverted his gaze from Layton; he looked straight up into the abyss of stars, bleeding profusely from his midsection and remaining completely still aside from some coughing every couple of seconds.

Layton’s very blood must have been nearly frozen at that moment, but he didn’t notice the cold; he couldn’t. He finally had a moment to process the situation, and the man’s death was all he could pay mind to. Dying slowly while laying in his own blood and spending his final moments gazing up at the uncorrupted, starry night sky, the man was undeniably humanized. Regardless of how ill-intentioned his plans may have been on this night, Layton couldn’t help but choke back tears as he watched the man slowly fading away before him. Layton knew there was nothing he could do and just leaned back against the van as he watched the man die.

Suddenly, from behind, the woman emerged from the van. She seemed to have almost no regard for Layton’s existence as she walked right past him. It was now that Layton had a moment to actually study the woman in detail. Her movements carried an atmosphere of leadership with her. Her pale skin contrasted heavily with the tattoos that coated her left arm. He was studying the ankh tattoo on the underside of her left forearm closely when-

-*Clack!Clack!*

Layton was looking at the woman’s tattoo so intensely that he did not notice her pick up the man’s gun, point it down at his head, and fire twice. The stars in the man’s eyes finally disappeared at the instant the first bullet impacted his forehead. The second bullet only served to make the scene of the man’s death look more violent and seemed excessive to Layton. It was as though the woman had a special, deep-seeded hatred for the man.

At long last, the woman turned her attention to Layton. She offered him the type of reluctant smile that one can only offer in consolation. The smile only made Layton’s head spin more.

“Hey,” the woman let out calmly. Layton was at his wit’s end; he slid against the side of the van before collapsing to the ground, unconscious.

**Chapter 2**

**Enter Evelynn**

Layton carefully peeled back his eyelids as he regained consciousness. He awoke to a compact studio apartment beaming with afternoon sunshine. Layton laid in bed, wincing at the incoming light as he studied his new surroundings. A splinted sling hung from the ceiling, coddling his bandage-wrapped leg. The cramped space consisted of the bed Layton was laying on, a dresser, a minimalist kitchen, and a table at the foot of the bed. In the kitchen, washing dishes, stood the woman from the other night.

Unnoticed, Layton stared at her for some time. She wore the same jacket with the sleeves rolled up, allowing Layton to continue his previous examination of her tattoos. The Ankh tattoo covered most of the underside of her left forearm. At the base of the ankh, near her wrist, read the word, ‘*virtue*.’ Below her left elbow, Layton could see the base of another tattoo, but it was hidden by her jacket's sleeve. Her right forearm was covered in a full sleeve tattoo. The centerpiece of the sleeve was an eyeball with a ruby for a pupil; it teared blood onto a crescent moon below. Dripping from the moon, the blood ran along the outward side of her wrist onto the word, ‘*redemption.‘* Finishing up the dishes and flicking some excess water from her hands, the woman glanced over at Layton.

“You’re awake!” She blurted, her eyes wide with disbelief. She briskly moved from the kitchen to the foot of the bed and continued, “They told me it would be a week at least. How are you feeling?”

“Uhm...” Layton’s words lingered from drought. He inhaled deeply, licked his lips, and then sighed to compose his speech. “I feel alright.” The words came out as unconvincing as any other formality. ”What... what happened last night? Where am I? Who are you?” Layton bombarded.

“Well, I’m Evelynn, and this is my humble abode,” she began playfully while gesturing to her surroundings. “As for what happened last night, not much. You were asleep all night-- dead to the world. If you meant to ask, ‘what happened to me three nights ago, before I went comatose on your bed,’ well, that’s a longer story. The simple version is that those guys were no good, and I’m just glad you were there to help me out.” Evelynn spoke comfortably, with a warm vivacity that filled the otherwise barren studio with a sense of life. The charming feeling reminded Layton of the atmosphere his mother created when she would host evening parties in his youth. She continued, “I’m also *elated* that we lucked out, and that one guy had a heart attack before he knocked you off-”

”A heart attack?” Layton interjected impatiently. As his memories of the other night began to return, Layton remembered what he had witnessed outside the van and reminded himself to be cautious around this woman.

”Yeah. Well, more specifically I think his heart burst in multiple places or something like that. The scene’s been all over the news the last couple of days. Cocaine would be my guess; those guys are all…” she shunted her train of thought. “Nevermind.”

”Yeah.. probably,” Layton concurred half-heartedly, pretending not to mind her lack of explanation.

”So... what’s your story? Why were you out in the West valley so late?” Evelynn asked, quickly shifting the topic over to Layton.

Instead of reciting the question right back to Evelynn, which would have been fair since her circumstances seemed more peculiar, Layton answered: “I intern at the factory as a controls engineer. I work late, especially on Fridays, so I was just driving back home.”

”Huh... I assumed all of you Lothbrok guys lived out in Hawkins.” Evelynn was referring to the company Layton alluded to, Lothbrok dynamics, a cutting edge technology firm: the wet dream of every engineer in the Southwest and also a competitive nightmare to get into. This was why Layton didn’t mind working constant overtime lately; he knew it was worth it to earn a full-time position. Not to mention, Layton had spent his entire adult life working twice as hard as those around him and was accustomed to the grind. Evelynn was right, though, that most of the employees lived in Hawkins. Hawkins was only a five minute drive East of the factory and was a populated city with plenty to do. Hawkins, however, was also preventatively expensive for Layton’s intern level of pay, which is why he opted to live over an hour West in Griffin, an equally populated city but with significantly more crime and poverty, or, as Layton preferred to read the situation, with cheaper rent.

“Well, anyways, you should get some sleep. I had a couple doctors over while you were out and it’s gonna be awhile before you’re walking again. You can crash here in the meantime; it’s no burden on me.”

*She lives alone in a desolate, zero-bedroom studio apartment but drives a muscle car and can afford to arrange for multiple private doctors to see a stranger?* Layton thought to himself, growing ever more suspicious of Evelynn.

Regardless, Layton continued to reply normally, ”I might take you up on that for a night or two.” Evelynn did not respond. ”By the way, is there a phone I could use, or is my phone anywhere nearby? My girlfriend is probably gearing up to murder me,” Layton offered with a laugh.

”Unfortunately not,” Evelynn answered in a somewhat withdrawn voice.

Layton was confused. He could see her cell phone sitting on the kitchen counter, only feet away, and if she took him away from the scene, she had to have taken the cell phone from his pants pocket.

”Is there a problem with yours?” Layton asked skeptically.

”It’s just best for both of us if you don’t make any phone calls right now. Like I said, the scene has been all over the news lately, and I’m not too keen on talking to the police right now.”

Growing impatient, Layton withdrew the charade of formality subduing his tone and spoke more assertively. “*Look*. I don’t know what’s going on, but I need to let my supervisor know that I’m going to be missing work, and my girlfriend is probably worried sick; I need to use a phone. *Now.*”

Evelynn let out a prolonged, defeated sigh. ”Here I was, thinking this would go over smooth.” Evelynn paused to shake her head. “If only you didn’t wake up so early.” Her tone and facial expression were somewhere between annoyed and confused; Layton couldn’t deduce what she was thinking. She dug through a small paper bag sitting on the table at the foot of the bed, pulled something out, clutched it in her hand and quickly walked over to Layton.

Perturbed, Layton continued, “Look, I just want to go- Ah!” Before he could finish, Evelynn had stabbed him in the neck with some kind of needle. It felt like napalm was suddenly coursing through his veins; Layton grabbed at his neck and squeezed his skin, futilely trying to stop the pain. His vision multiplied and the sound of his own voice echoed. Looking up at the blurry, tripled figures he knew to be Evelynn, and with his energy fading, he tried to detest: “Son of a b...,” but his mind had already gone dormant, and he was returned to sleep.

Yet again, Layton awoke to new surroundings. Now laying on a gurney in the back of what looked to be the inside of an ambulance, Layton looked around to gain his bearings. In the driver seat was a man he didn’t recognize, but in the passenger seat sat Evelynn. She was wearing the same clothes as earlier, so Layton guessed that it must have been the same day. In her right hand was a phone, and in her left was a small stack of papers. She was flicking between the two, reading something off of a page, then turning back to her phone to text or make a note of something. After a moment, the ambulance slowed down. Out of the front windshield, Layton could see a chain fence gate sliding open to let the ambulance pass. After passing through the gate, they drove for a few more minutes. As they continued on, the scent of saltwater assaulted Layton’s nostrils.

*Saltwater, chain link fences, and no sounds from other cars: they’re taking me to the port*, Layton figured.

The van came to a halt in front of a steel-frame warehouse with massive hangar doors. It looked large enough to actually be a hangar, though not a modern one; the paint was peeling from top to bottom on all sides and patch jobs were clearly visible all around the structure. Without either the driver or Evelynn so much as gesturing, the massive warehouse doors slowly started to slide open. The rollers beneath the doors were obviously antiquated, as they would let out intermittent screeches, greeting those nearby with what sounded like a giant sliding glass door made of nails riding across a sea of chalkboards. The unsettling sensation of passing through the hangar doors made Layton realize they were nearing their destination, so he began to search his surroundings for options. Struggling to breathe deeply enough to control his sudden adrenaline rush without making too much noise, he remained calm. He could see medical equipment all around him, and, on a small metal platter, sat a pile of scalpels still wrapped in foil. Layton looked back at the front to make sure no one was watching him, then quickly snatched one of the scalpels from the platter, shrouding it within his grasp. He wasn’t sure what he planned to do with it- whether it was merely a deterrent or truly intended to be a weapon. Either way, his nerves grasped at the only thread of hope available: the scalpel. Layton was surprised at himself for how relatively calm he was. The constant lack of options presented to him over the past few days were becoming his new norm, and he was either adapting quickly or running too low on adrenaline to panic. He didn’t dwell on it too much; always the pragmatist, he remained focused on the situation at hand

When the van stopped inside the warehouse, Layton closed his eyes and pretended to be passed out in case either of the two decided to glance back. Once he heard both of the front doors close, he looked around again. He was alone, but could hear more voices outside the van. Not willing to lay still and find out what was going to happen to him, Layton slid off of the gurney and crawled in between the front seat and driver seat where there should have been a console. Layton realized this was the first time he had moved since crashing his jeep, being beaten, and getting shot. In spite of this, the pain Layton felt was almost nonexistent. His ribs didn’t feel cracked because he could breathe just fine, even while crawling. The thigh he was shot in felt tender, but nothing near what he imagined a bullet wound should feel like. His left knee was in the most pain, but it felt akin to a bad fall rather than a shattered kneecap. While Layton wanted to examine his wounds, he knew he hadn’t the time. He furthered his evaluation the situation.

*If they still think I’m passed out, they’re probably planning to open the back door and transport me on the gurney… I can kick the gurney out when they open the back doors and knock down whoever is standing back there- No, that’s no good, I don’t know how many there might be.*

Cautiously, Layton poked his head up so he could see outside the windows. The overwhelming sight made clear the futility of Layton’s initial plan. Around the van, and scattered throughout the warehouse, were dozens of men, some working, some playing cards, and some standing guard. More importantly, the majority of them were carrying a variety of firearms on their hips or slung over their shoulders. Even if Layton managed to knock out or outrun every single person immediately behind the van, he wouldn’t be able to outrun the ensuing bulletstorm. Panicked, Layton scrambled for an idea while his concerns intensified. In the midst of his own thought, Layton noticed the low hum of the engine. Slowly, he dragged his wide eyes over to the steering wheel in disbelief; Layton didn’t react at first: the keys were still in the ignition and the ambulance had been running the whole time.

The sound of the door hatch opening at the back of the van brought Layton back to reality. He carelessly dropped the scalpel to the floor, hopped up into the driver seat, threw the gear selector into drive and floored the accelerator just as the rear doors opened. The bounding ambulance ejected loose medical equipment through the exposed back doors. There must have been a wooden crate in front of the ambulance because just as Layton began to speed away there was a crashing sound followed by wood chips and dust flying up into the air, coating the ambulance and pattering back to the warehouse floor. For a brief moment of peace, Layton was able to drive unhindered. Seconds later, hell’s fury erupted around him in the form of gunfire; the van was drenched by lead rainfall.

*Smash--* the driver side window shattered inward.

*Thunk-Thunk-Thunk--* Bullets cannonballed through the ambulance’s aluminum chassis.

*Ting--* The rear view mirror was was hit and disappeared in an instant.

*Snap--* The restraining bolt went, catapulting the gurney out the back.

*Pop--* One of Layton’s rear tires deflated in submission to a bullet.

*Skrrrrt--* The ambulance fishtailed out of control as Layton struggled to keep steady. Layton ducked down as low as possible while still being able to see in front of the ambulance; he wasted no time looking around. The back side of the warehouse was wide open, and almost directly adjacent to the ocean. As Layton reached the rear of the warehouse, he was forced to turn right to avoid driving into the ocean or running into the shipping containers on the left. As Layton turned, the popped tire made itself better known. It stole all of his effort just to maneuver the ambulance around the corner.

After clearing the corner, the deafening gunfire was replaced by the grinding sound of an exposed rim scraping against the concrete. All along his right were rows of shipping containers and piles of oil barrels, to his left was nothing but open ocean. Layton sped down the narrow path as fast as the ambulance would permit. In front of him, only a few hundred yards or so away, was a bridge that appeared to lead out into the open port where Layton would be able to escape, unrestricted by obstacles. It was blocked by another sliding chain gate, but it was thin. Layton resolved to run it down with the ambulance and simply kept the accelerator smashed into the floorboard. The engine revved violently as Layton pushed it as far as it could go.

Defiantly, a small yellow pylon arose from the ground right in front of the gate. There was no way he could make it in time; his path was blocked. Layton slammed on his brakes right as he passed a small jetty and swerved to the right. The shot-out tire had almost completely worn away at this point and the rim threw up waves of sparks as the ambulance grinded to a halt. Layton flung the front door open. It fell off of it’s hinges as he bolted out and climbed onto the hood of the ambulance, planning to use it as a boost to jump onto the shipping container he had pulled up next to. A moment before jumping, Layton could hear two distinct voices shouting at one another on the other side of the containers. “They said over here, hurry up!” was all he could make out clearly. Unsure of whether or not the voices would see him once on top of the container, he changed his plan, jumping down from the hood and doubling back towards the jetty. As he ran back, he could see that no one from the warehouse had yet caught up into sight. He shimmied down the edge of the wall connected to the jetty and climbed his way into the woodworks below. Thankfully, the waterline was exceedingly low at the moment, otherwise Layton would not have been able to hide beneath the jetty at all.

Hidden in the network of wooden pillars and support beams, Layton remained silent and listened as the men from the warehouse finally caught up. He could hear shouting from what seemed to be someone in charge. “The hood is dented; he probably jumped onto this container and took off on the other side. Split up and surround the main yard! You two, get up in the crane and see if you can spot him down here.” Layton was relieved that they assumed he ran into the maze of containers.

*I just have to wait them out,* he thought.

“You two! Check that sloop and that walkaround!” The voice ordered.

*Damn, now they’re going to check around the jetty*, Layton worried.

It was impossible to see through the support beams, but by the sound of creaking planks, Layton could tell that the men had stepped onto the jetty. “Chill here and watch my back, I’ll check out that one first,” one of the men said. “Yeah,” the second replied casually. The first man walked briskly, moving straight to the boat and stepping on. Layton could tell by the bouncing of the vessel that he moved onto the walkaround first. Thankfully, the bow of the hull of this particular walkaround was rather high, and faced Layton, hiding him from the man’s search. The sloop was on the other side of the jetty and had a much larger hull, so it was unlikely that the man inspecting the vessels would spot Layton at all. The second man stayed on the pier, dawdling in his patrol. He came to a stop directly above Layton. Through a thin slit between two wood planks above him, Layton could see the man’s face and witnessed him lighting up a cigarette. He was wearing a black beanie, had thick black stubble on his face, and was a relatively large man who appeared to be in his mid-thirties. More importantly, he had a sub-machine gun slung around his shoulder reminding Layton to stay as quiet as humanly possible. The man was so close that Layton placed his fist over his mouth to help muffle his breathing and dissipate any visible mist that the warmth of his breath would generate. Remaining so still was causing Layton’s heart beat to slow down, reminding him just how cold it was. He began to shiver in the ocean breeze as the mist from the gentle, crashing waves lightly peppered him from below.

”Whatya up to?”

Startled, Layton gasped and nearly fell off of the support beam. Regaining his footing, he flicked his head over to the source. It was the strange man again, staring back at Layton with his blood-red snake eyes. Peach in hand, he sat on the support beam behind Layton, relaxed, in the nonchalant way a child would sit on a swing set. Now in the light, the finer details of his appearance were visible. Aside from his eyes and strong jawline, his facial features were subtle, his solid black hair was no longer than two inches at the top, and his skin tone was somewhere between olive and tan. On his lapel was a gleaming silver pin: a side profile of a skull biting into a peach. This time, Layton wasted little time in snatching the peach out of the man’s hand. He didn’t dare to look away for fear of the man vanishing again.

”What is going on? Who are you?” Layton demanded in a whisper so as not to alert the sentry above.

The man shrugged, “Maybe tomorrow when we have more time. For now, you know what to do- uh oh.” He interrupted himself after glancing up at the lookout’s location. Layton’s eyes widened and he instinctively looked up.

The sentry was still smoking his cigarette, oblivious to Layton’s existence. Layton squinted his eyes, annoyed, and accepted that he had just fallen for the oldest trick in the book. The strange man was gone, and Layton was left alone again, with a peach in hand and more questions in mind.

Several minutes passed by; the man searching the boats had finished and was walking back up the jetty when a third man came along. He called out, “Anything unusual?” Layton recognized the voice as the man who was shouting orders earlier.

“Nothing,” both men answered back in coincidental unison.

“Alright, well, you two hang out here and keep watch on this side. We have a perimeter we know he couldn’t have breached, especially not with his leg the way it is, so he’ll turn up sooner or later.”

“Got it,” answered the watchman, nodding his head in agreement.

With each passing minute, the violent intensity of Layton’s shivering reached new heights. The waves continued their misty assault and the air taunted Layton with its relentless consistency. His shivering had moved from just his hands to his his legs, his entire upper-body, and even his teeth.

*Damn, there’s no way I can out-wait them in the freezing cold like this, not to mention the fact that one of them could look down on a whim at any second. I need to move.*

Layton saw a possible path through the woodworks that lead to the rear side of the walkaround, where he could potentially hide out more safely.

Looking at his feet, Layton carefully stepped from the support beam he was on over to the next.

-*Crack!*

The instant Layton weighted the beam, it gave way, snapping in half like a toothpick. Layton fell through, the splintered support beams scraped and stabbed at him on the fall down. His singular thought mid-fall was holding onto the peach for dear life. He landed flat on his side as he hit the waterline. The sting of the impact was intensified by the blistering cold temperature of the water. Layton swam fervently back to the surface. Just as he broke the waterline, crashing waves forced him against the wall of the dock. He used his free hand to reach for the rope ladder adjacent the jetty and to begin climbing out.

”Gahhh!” Layton cried out loudly.

The moment he began to pull up the ladder, Layton’s arm gave out; he had been impaled by a sliver of wood in his shoulder and hadn’t noticed until now. Layton knew better than to remove an object after being impaled, but the situation mandated the use of his shoulder. Layton switched the hand he was holding his peach in, wrapped his arm around one of the pier’s support beams, gritted his teeth, and quickly ripped the piece of wood from his shoulder. The removal pain was less than he had expected since the wood was only an inch or so deep. The ocean salt, however, bit at his exposed wound, insistently driving him back to the ladder.

Now using his other hand to support his weight as much as possible, Layton began struggling his way up the ladder. Finally, Layton reached the top and threw his good arm over the ledge. Once he lifted his head above the peak, he was greeted by a double barrel shotgun only a few inches from his face. It was Evelynn. She spoke at a normal volume, but her voice was laden with rage as her words passed through gritted teeth, completely lacking any warmth or the charmful qualities from before. “Who are you?” She demanded as she pressed the barrel of her shotgun to Layton’s lips.

Layton was completely surrounded. At the top of the wall stood Evelynn, the two men who inspected the jetty, and nearly a dozen others.

“Three seconds!” She shouted, continuing without pause.

“One!”

”Tw-”

-”I’m Layton!” He screamed defiantly, backing his mouth off of the shotgun. “I’ve already told you about me! My name’s Layton, and I’m an engineer who just happened to be at the same gas station as you! I’ve been in a car crash; I’ve been beaten, impaled, shot, and unconscious more times than all of the rest of my life put together in the last few days. So, please, if you-”

”No... you’re not just ‘Layton the engineer,’” Evelynn rejected. “Not if you’re able to run around when you’re supposed to be in a coma after being wrecked, beaten, and shot. Not if you woke up after a few hours when I gave you enough sedative to knock out a normal person for two days.” Evelynn paused, shaking her head. ”No.” Her piercing glare trailed off.  
 “Grab him,” she ordered.

Two men swooped down from behind Evelynn, grabbing Layton under his shoulders and pulling him onto the dock. The shocking pain from his shoulder wound caused him to drop the peach as he breached the ledge. Layton’s eyes widened and he lunged out to reach for it but was effortlessly overpowered and denied.

*Damn! That’s my only safety net here.*

One of the nearby man laughed. ”Really? This is your pressing concern at the moment?” It was the voice of the man barking orders earlier. He reached down and picked up the peach.

“Actually, it doesn’t look half bad.”

Though it seemed to be quite the strange comment, the man was right: despite being dunked in the ocean and relentlessly squeezed by Layton, the peach still rivaled the *Mona Lisa* in terms of quality. The man used the cuff of his sleeve to wipe some water off of it, took a bite, chewed it while laughing at Layton, and mockingly threw the remainder of the peach into the ocean. Layton’s heart sank into the shallows of the port right alongside the peach.

*Now what’ll happen? What can I do without that? What about this guy? Will he kill somebody on accident?*

”Throw him into the back, I’ll drive.” The man said while chewing and gesturing to a nearby truck. “We’re following the boss.” Evelynn had already dived into a black sedan with a few others and shot off back towards the warehouse.

The men finished shuffling Layton into the back seat of the truck cab. One of them got in the front seat after Layton was in, the other stayed behind at the pier. The drive back to the warehouse seemed much farther this time since Layton had floored it on the way out to the jetty. When they arrived, the warehouse doors were closing and Evelynn was out of her sedan, talking to a couple others standing outside the warehouse.

As the truck pulled next to Evelynn, she called out to the driver. “We just got wind that county dispatched a couple units our way because of the shots. Let’s play it safe; take him over to ‘C,’ and I’ll meet up with you there. I’m going to make sure we wrap up closing here, so I should only be a minute or two behind. Radio back if there’s any trouble.”

”Gotya.” Without another word, the man turned the truck around and drove back towards the jetty. As they arrived at the jetty, the remaining men were busy trying to get the ambulance moved. The driver rolled down the passenger window and yelled at them. “Hey! Why the hell is the emergency pylon still up?” Without so much as tendering a response, the closest man swiftly plucked a walkie talkie off his waist and proceeded to bark orders into it to get the pylon lowered. A few seconds later, it retreated back into its burrow. As it was lowering, one of the men moved from the ambulance and pulled open the chain link gate to let the truck pass.

The three fled the port and drove onto the highway. Layton almost felt calm as the trio drove in silence. A couple of miles into their drive, the truck passed *The Statue Bad*, a colossal glass figure of a naked man sitting atop a mound of cash. The muscular man smirked while leaning back into his pile of money and spreading his legs out, as if to assert how comfortable he was. Layton recognized the offputting scene from Kingfisher, that meant he was over five hours North-East of Griffin. After driving for a couple more minutes, Layton had calmed down enough to collect his thoughts.

*Well, at least I’m not unconscious this time... Who are these people? This man is clearly some sort of lieutenant for Evelynn, but what type of organization are they running? I didn’t see any drugs in the warehouse, and it looked benign aside from all the guns.*

Layton’s train of thought was interrupted by a loud fit of coughing from the driver.

”You good?” The man in the passenger seat asked.

”Yeah... just something in my chest.” He responded.

The man’s coughing deepened for several minutes until suddenly-

“Ugh!”He coughed again, spitting blood all over the steering wheel and his own hands.

”What the hell, man? Pull off at the next exit, and I’ll switch with you; you need a doctor,” the passenger offered.

”Yeah... you’re probably ri-” The driver’s coughing interrupted his reply. He was now driving with one hand, using the other to cover his mouth, causing blood to run down his arm and drip onto the console. His breathing seemed to battle the atmosphere around him in an epic struggle against the pressure of regular, sea-level air.

”Gahhh!” The driver suddenly grabbed at his head with both hands, screaming incessantly as blood leaked from his eyes and mouth. The truck veered off the highway, crashing through the side rail and running through a road sign. The crash was a flash-bang: deafening, blinding, and quick. The truck was halted in an embankment to the side of the highway.

The engine was still revving, and the truck was still in drive, spinning its wheels in the dirt. Acting fast, Layton jumped up and leaned over the console. He used his left hand to push on the brake and used his right to shift the truck into park. Leaning over the driver caused blood to smear along Layton’s chest and face. As he recoiled into the back seat, he could clearly see that the driver was not unconscious, but dead. His chest was motionless, his mouth wide open, and his eyes frozen. Nothing had impaled or crushed him, but his mouth, eyes, and ears were faucets of blood. Layton looked over at the passenger. He was still breathing, though it was clearly laborious. He had been impaled in between his right shoulder and chest by part of the road sign they had run through. The metal went completely through his chest and stuck out of his back, pinning him to the seat.

Layton moved towards the man. “Where is your phone? I’ll call 9-1-1.” The man looked back at Layton, expressionless, and shook his head; he had already accepted his death. After a moment, his expression appeared confused. He looked up at the roof of the interior and thought out loud: “Who...are...you?” Each passing breath was more shallow than the last. His eyes slowly closing and his breath fading into nothingness, the man resembled someone falling asleep more than someone dying.

Finally, the man was still. Layton had never so much as seen a dead body a few short days ago; now, he had seen five people die right in front of him. Before collecting his thoughts, Layton remembered that Evelynn had said she would only be a minute or two behind.

*No, I’m not getting anymore involved in this. I’m done with the insanity of these past few days. I’m getting out of here.* Layton was determined to take control of his situation.

Layton kicked open the door and bolted away from the highway as fast as his aching leg would let him. As he gained some distance, Layton could see cars gathering near the scene of the accident and heard the wail of sirens in the distance. Eventually, the sounds faded, the scene was out of sight and, similarly, out of mind. Layton maintained his pace as he made his way through fields of knee high-grass. He felt as though each breath was more insufficient than the last as he failed to catch his wind, sweat poured over his face, but he did not slow; he had the goal of retaining his newly regained ownership over his decisions and was intent not to falter. The relieving feeling of putting the situation behind him made the ice cold air feel like summer sunshine, made the sharp wind feel like a spring breeze, and made the wet grass feel like crisp, autumn leaves at his feet.

Layton shed his blood-soaked shirt and threw it into a gutter as he worked his way into residential kingfisher. He had tread ground for hours and, by the time he had come upon his first house, it was dusk; there was a hose sitting in the backyard begging for Layton’s use. Turning the spicket on, Layton scrubbed the blood and sweat from his face, hydrated, and refreshed himself. Now, walking shirtless and wet through an unfamiliar Kingfisher neighborhood on an icy November evening, Layton felt safe. This was familiar terrain: after the death of Layton’s parents, he had spent multiple years living on the streets while avoiding foster homes. Although all signs of life were absent from the street of this neighborhood on the fringe of Kingfisher, Layton felt like he was surrounded by the comforts of society. For the first time in days, he wasn’t in the company of someone with an unfamiliar agenda. The houses themselves were his company; their familial architecture: his comforting embrace. Layton smiled and let out a small laugh, overwhelmed by his own relief.

Just then, an older gentleman out for an evening run came jogging around a street corner.

“Excuse me sir!” Layton immediately called out, raising out his hand.

The man stopped and pulled his earbuds out, cautiously eyeing Layton up and down.

“I can recognize that I probably look like a crazy person right now, but I’ve had a hell of a day and could really use a hand; may I by chance use your phone for just a brief moment?” Layton spoke, relaxed and energetic; a smile coated his every word and he exuded his normal aura of charisma that had been absent his side for these past few days.

Disarmed, the older man chuckled. “Yeah.. I remember weekends back in my twenties. Here.” He pulled the phone out of a carrier wrapped around his upper arm and handed it to Layton. Layton wasted no time in dialing.

“Hello?” sang the familiar melody of the sweetest voice that had ever graced Layton’s ears.

“Hey babe... I’m in Kingfisher... could you come get me?”

**Chapter 3**

**Lauren at Last**

“Are you a good guy or a bad guy?”

Layton snapped back to reality at the sound of the little girl’s voice. Caught off guard, he replied. “Uhm.. I’m a good guy. What about you?” He playfully returned.

“Not me, no way! I want to be a bad guy,” the girl of six or seven years replied, defiantly. Layton laughed.

“Chris! Table of four!”

“Come on honey.”

The little girl ran back and rejoined her family as they entered the restaurant. Layton had agreed to meet Lauren at *Frank’s Diner*. The two had once attended a formal get together in Kingfisher where they were served the miniscule meal portions typical of the ‘upper echelons’ of society. After the event dispersed, the pair immediately ran off in search of some food that might actually serve its purpose and found themselves at *Frank’s*, a family owned restaurant that called itself a ‘diner’ but felt more like a nice sit down place for an evening meal.

The older gentleman had offered to let Layton shower, to eat, to have some fresh clothes, and to give him a ride to *Frank’s*. Layton graciously accepted it all. After being dropped off, Layton waited out front for a few hours and had began to daydream a bit as his mind steered away from the painful contemplations of recent events.

From the corner of his eye, Layton’s chariot rode in to return him to normality. His worries nulled as he thought of her again.

Lauren had arrived.

Finally, Lauren pulled up to the curb in her two-door Mazda Miata. “Hurry up, babe! There’s traffic behind me,” she called out while reaching over to push the passenger door open, a warm smile drawn across her face. Layton hustled into the car, and the pair took off. Layton waited for Lauren to merge back into normal traffic, then leaned over the console and wrapped his arms around her, practically strangling her in his embrace. Lauren’s warmth melted the misery of the weekend from his shoulders, and her surprised smile freed him from the cage of this relentless reality. Layton sighed a breath of relief at last.

“Hey Babe.. I missed you too, but if you could manage to refrain from killing us both by running me off the road, that would be pretty cool.” Layton released his hold on her, laughing, and recoiled back into the passenger seat. “So, we’re going to have switch pretty soon. I need to pass out; There were basically zero opportunities to sleep at the convention.”

*...the convention*, Layton whispered to himself, his mouth made agape and his expression blank. He had entirely forgotten about the convention. *She’s been gone all weekend; she has no idea that I’ve been missing…* Layton suddenly realized why her tone on the phone call was not worried as he had anticipated it would be.

“By the way, where’s the jeep? I didn’t see it at the complex when I swung by earlier. Did it break down here in Kingfisher?”

Layton’s mind swam: *‘I’ve been getting shot at all weekend’...’I was kidnapped’....’I almost died’...’I met a guy with some kind of magical, murderous peach’...*

*…’I killed people’*

“Layton? Are you okay, babe? What’s on your mind?”

“Sorry, I just zoned out,” Layton explained, shaking his head. “Yeah, I’m fine. Uhm, I totaled the Jeep,” he continued, nonchalantly, without filtering. Destroying the Jeep seemed like such a minute detail in comparison to everything else that Layton didn’t think to withhold it.

“What?! What happened? Oh my God; are you really okay?” Lauren looked back and forth between Layton and the road as she worried.

“Really, I’m fine.” *What else can I say? I can’t tell her… can I? -No, I have to tell her; It’s Lauren. She has to know.* Layton sighed. “There’s more.”

Layton spent the drive home detailing his account of the weekend to Lauren. Even after expunging every last detail he thought he could remember, Lauren was keen to interrogate him further, rendering more information. She listened to every acute detail, soaking in the entirety of Layton’s experience from the description of the gas station to the man with the peach. Having worked as an on-scene forensic toxicologist for nearly two years, Lauren had an acuity for capitalizing on the importance of seemingly trivial details.

Lauren invested herself into a deep analysis. Her thoughts were palpable, practically lingering in the air, thickening the atmosphere of the Miata. The two sat silently, marinating in thought. “I’m not sure what to make of it, Layton. Why would the men ditch you under the overpass, only to come back and shoot you later? Why didn’t this Evelynn lady just leave you at the scene? She definitely seems like the type that would.. and how are you able to walk right now, let alone run away from the scene of a *second* car accident you were involved in?” Lauren did not so much as second guess a single detail of Layton’s account; she had complete fidelity in Layton’s wild story. That was the essence of Lauren and Layton; it was *them* against the world, and they would never divide from one another. Lauren had been with Layton since long before he worked at Lothbrok, long before he graduated college, long before he climbed his way from the depths of society’s deepest holes. This was merely another obstacle, and by no means, did Lauren fear it.

Eventually, Lauren surrendered to her exhaustion. Layton took the wheel and drove the car home while she slept. “We’ll figure this out, babe,” she had reassured, looking Layton in the eye, nodding her head, and wagging her finger, just before falling asleep. She slept with a determined look on her face, as if she was solving the puzzle of Layton’s weekend in her dreams.

Parking in the carport outside of their apartment complex, Layton allowed Lauren to continue her slumber. He was careful to open and close the driver-side door quietly, then locked the car. Sedated by her own fatigue, she slept like a rock. Layton let Lauren sleep for fear of a lookout waiting for him to enter the apartment. He had not recovered his own wallet or phone from the accident, so somebody else had possession of his license, his address, and whatever other personal information he may have left behind at the scene.

Cautiously, Layton trod the two flights of stairs leading up to the apartment. A familiar sensation nestled into his intestines: fear. Layton wasn’t worried about himself anymore, but for Lauren. Nevertheless, Layton needed a credit card at the very least. Even if he were to leave the apartment in the interim between now and figuring out a solution to the situation, they would need some money. The key rotated slowly in the door, turning Layton’s gut as much as the lock.

-*Click!*

It was done. Layton darted in, throwing the door open with anxious ferocity. Silence billowed out of the couple’s dimly lit apartment. The only light inside was a tinted blue produced from the light inside the couple’s fish tank at the far edge of the living room. The navy hue tenderly illuminated the larger objects in the living room: the edges of the tv, the table in front of the couch, the pictures of Lauren and Layton on the walls, and Layton’s own face. Layton walked through, afraid, yet refusing to tremble, and briefly inspected the area. He walked into the bedroom and, without flipping on the light, grabbed one of his credit cards, his passport, and a jacket, then walked back to the front door. He felt relief as he locked the door and made his way back down. As he re-entered the car, he considered letting Lauren sleep but thought that it wouldn’t be fair to rob her of the opportunity to grab some things from the apartment now that things seemed safe. He gently shook her shoulder.

“Hey babe, we’re going to stay at a hotel for now.”

Fighting to keep her eyes open, she responded, “Yeah.. probably smart.”

“Do you need anything from the apartment while we’re here?”

“Uhm… I have my suitcase from the convention still so n- Oh, wait. Yeah, my bike keys. They’re next to the stove.”

*I should have thought of that on the first go,* Layton lamented. “Okay. I’ll be right back.”

“Love you, babe,” she called out, her half-asleep state still obvious from her hazy voice.

“I love you, too,” he replied, turning back to kiss her on the forehead before darting back up the stairs. Once back in the apartment, there were the keys, sitting on the counter adjacent to the stove just as Lauren had said. He grabbed them and started jogging back. As he reached the bottom of the first flight of stairs leading down to the carport, a man stepped out from behind the corner, blocking his path. Layton took a step back. The man quickly started up the stairs, and Layton mentally prepared himself for a fight. As he reached the top, the man looked Layton directly in the eye and said, “hey, how’s it going,” politely nodding his head as he casually passed by.

Layton let out an audible breath as the adrenaline leapt from his body. *Of course that wasn’t someone looking for me. If they were camping out the studio, they would have approached me on my first trip up.* Layton felt as though he had let his paranoia get the best of him. He shook off his nerves and calmly walked back down the steps to the car. He handed the key ring to a still-semi-cognizant Lauren who then placed it in the glove box before returning to her slumber.

Layton drove to a nearby gas station to fuel up and consider his next move. After paying for his gas, Layton held his credit card in his hands, tapping it with his thumbs. *If Evelynn has the ability to get her hands on an ambulance and has control over a warehouse full of hired guns, it would probably be safest to assume that she has the power to track my card and get Lauren’s information and plate numbers.* Layton walked over to the gas station’s ATM and pulled out the maximum amount it would allow. *There, that should hold us over for a week or so.*

Driving around downtown Griffin, Layton searched for a hotel that would satisfy his needs. After about an hour of searching, Layton found a small, two-story hotel tucked neatly away on a residential street just behind a corner shopping center. He pulled in to the parking lot, which was conveniently behind the hotel’s complex, and backed into a spot beneath a low-hanging tree. He gently shook Lauren’s shoulder to nudge her awake and began to explain.

“Okay, honey, here’s the plan for tonight: I’m going to check us into this hotel we’re at here in downtown. I figure it’s dense enough here for it to make it difficult for anyone trying to locate a specific car, so we should be able to blend in for a bit. Also, I pulled out enough cash for about a week, so we don’t need to pay for anything with a card. Everything else, we’ll figure out in the morning. Let’s go.” Lauren simply made an ‘okay’ gesture with her hand and said, “Sounds good.”

Layton checked in and returned to the car to retrieve Lauren, “Alright, we’re set: let’s go.”

“Carry me?” Lauren requested with a particularly sleepy pair of puppy-dog eyes. Layton pursed his lips, squinted his eyes, and stared back at Lauren, silently feigning reluctance. She giggled, knowing that this was a game the two always played: and a game that she always won.

“Well… at least it’s only on the second floor,” Layton let out sarcastically. Layton hit the lock button on the door so that he wouldn’t have to fumble with the keys while holding Lauren. He reached one hand under her legs and the other beneath her shoulders, hoisting her out of the car. Layton was surprised: he had always been able to lift Lauren, who was about forty pounds lighter than him, but his leg felt almost entirely normal again. He kicked the car door closed behind him and began his trek up the stairs to their room. Once he arrived at the door, he awkwardly lifted his right leg up to his hand in order to finagle the key from his pocket while still holding Lauren. He carefully maintained his balance on his left leg, which should have been crippled at this point. Lauren, sensing Layton’s struggle, decided to nuzzle her head against his chest and shoulder, as if to exaggerate how comfortable she was. Layton could tell she was fighting the urge to smirk while pretending to be asleep. Finally, he got the door open and tossed Lauren on the bed. Once landed, she exploded with laughter, obviously wide-awake.

“*Real* funny,” Layton spoke as he tapped the tv-stand to his left.

“Hey, consider that pay-back for the time Nick was passed out at ‘*Vesper,’* and I had to drag his giant ass into a taxi because you were too busy showing the bouncer and owner how to make a taser out of a disposable camera,” Lauren rebuked, tilting her head and staring accusingly back at Layton.

“I would have got him in like two minutes if you waited!” Layton plead playfully.

Lauren pursed her lips and let out a long, disbelieving “mmhmm.”

Laughing, Layton threw the locks on the door closed and jumped onto the bed with Lauren, no more than thirty seconds later, the pair was fast asleep. Finally, Layton fell asleep on his own terms: in bed with Lauren, not by injection or exhaustion.

Lauren sat on the toilet, rubbing her eyes, and glanced at her watch.

‘5:14 AM’

She always woke up early; she usually had to be at work at some ungodly hour in the morning. Thankfully, her section had the day off due to a weekend convention they were expected to attend. After washing her face in the bathroom sink, Lauren noticed Layton in the mirror. She chuckled as she gazed at his position. Layton had a habit of sleep-walking and must have moved himself from the bed to the sofa chair in the middle of the night. His position looked atrociously uncomfortable. His left leg shot up over the head of the chair while his right leg slumped over one of the armrests. His head rested on the other arm rest, with his left arm extending behind it, and his right arm hung down to the floor where his feet would have been if he had sat normally. His mouth was wide open, *but at least he isn’t drooling*, Lauren thought. Lauren grabbed the keys, quietly snuck out of the apartment, and speed walked over to the car.

*He’s had an awful weekend; I’ll let him sleep and take care of some things myself,* she determined*.* Lauren thought about Layton as she drove out of the parking lot on the pitch black November morning. She thought about his sleepwalking, and how he said that he had never known himself to do it when he was younger. Lauren had dated Layton for 7 years by now, and he had sleep walked, sleep talked, and constantly startled himself awake for her entire tenure. Then again, she hadn’t known him before the passing of his parents and sister. She reminisced about how well Layton handled tragedy. Even when she first met him, he was always outwardly joyful and focused on the present.

Lauren and Miranda had gone into Layton’s place of work: a deli attached to a small health-food chain store. Miranda had been raving to Lauren about how delicious their blackened Turkey was as they stood in front of the counter. Layton came to the counter to serve the pair, and Miranda asked for a half pound of Blackened Turkey, thin-sliced. Without hesitating or even bothering to glance in the case, Layton said “No turkey today,” with an unapologetic enthusiasm in his voice. “Ahh, man,” Miranda whined as she bent down, searching the deli case for an alternative. While she looked, Layton shot Lauren a glance and smirked. Lauren was confused as to what was funny. When Miranda made her second order for “a quarter pound of Jerk Chicken,” Lauren could see Layton unwrapping a turkey clearly labeled ‘*blackened’* behind the counter and slicing it. She couldn’t help but chuckle.

“What’s so funny,” Miranda inquired as she noticed.

“Ohh, nothing.” Lauren replied. She found Layton’s version of ‘customer service’ to be refreshingly entertaining.

“Here’s that half pound of Blackened Turkey for you,” Layton said, as he offered out the now packaged Turkey breast. “What? I thought you didn’t have turkey?” Miranda asked, confused. “Huh? This is a deli, of course we have turkey, ma’am,” Layton continued to play, pretending as if he hadn’t just contradicted himself. As she caught wind, Miranda narrowed her eyes, “*ha...ha…”* she let out, pretending not to be amused. Lauren and Layton both began to laugh simultaneously. Layton spoke to the girls for another five minutes or so before they left. By that time, they were both doubling over with laughter from Layton’s unique brand of flirting. Less than a week later, Lauren and Layton had begun dating. It was no surprise that the pair enjoyed teasing one another so much: it was how they met. She never would have guessed at that time that the playful deli clerk had lost his final family member just three weeks earlier.

Lauren arrived at her first destination for the morning: her storage unit. She stepped out of the still-running Miata, punched in the key-code to her unit, and lifted up the car-wide garage door to reveal her prized motorcycle. The bike was a project Layton and his college roommates had worked on together. It was completely electric, but suffered no performance issues. It was built on a low-profile street bike; the chassis was a textured matte white while the windshield, rims, and handlebar grips were a highly-reflective metallic purple. Lauren couldn’t help but grin as she saw her baby. She seldom had the opportunity to ride it, since, as an unregistered custom bike, it was completely illegal to drive on the road. Layton had put some old plates on it to help it blend in if Lauren ever had to drive it in case of an emergency, and this was just the case. She walked over to the passenger door of the miata and opened the glove department to fish out the key. There was some tension on the latch, causing it to spring open when she pulled the handle. A single piece of paper fell to the floor. It was a card that Layton had made for their recent November 8th anniversary. One side was a picture of the two huddled close together on a ski-lift that had been taken while on vacation last christmas; the other was

The man spoke cordially, “Hello, Mr. Layton. How about you come join us?” As he spoke, Layton heard another set of footsteps behind him. Glancing back, his path at the top of the stairs was blocked by a hulking excuse of a person. The man towered well over 6 feet tall and must have been two-and-a-half times Layton’s weight. His massive physique strangled his dapper three-piece suit. His presence, though foreboding, was needless; the man blocked the direction opposite Lauren, and Layton had no intention of leaving her behind.

“Honestly, our employer just wants to speak to you. If he wanted you hurt, your girlfriend would’ve turned the key on a car-bomb when she came by here earlier.”

Layton’s eyes widened in response.

“Yeah, so, if you don’t mind. Let’s move with some purpose here.” The man nodded towards the car. “...and get her,” he ordered, looking at the brickhouse standing atop the staircase. Layton followed the man; Lauren and the behemoth followed a few strides behind. Every short while Layton would glance back to be sure that Lauren was still nearby; he was not intent on trusting either of these men.

After walking about a mile or so, the group arrived at a small Italian cafe called *The Heart of Sicily*. It was clearly closed, but the man pushed the door open and walked right in. In a corner booth opposite the storefront sat a party of archetypical mafia types. Amongst them, sitting in the center, one man’s presence loomed over them all. His build was similar to Layton’s: average size, but fit. The group moved over to the table.

“Go ahead and sit,” the man sitting center-table said to Layton; he spoke with a distinctive New York accent. Layton pulled out a chair in front of him and sat opposite the man. The remainder of the party took Layton’s arrival as a cue to disperse around the restaraunt. Lauren was led off to another table by the giant.

The man spoke, his words emotionless. “I’m marcus,” he paused, “you killed my younger brother a few days ago.”

Layton’s heart ignited and rocketed into high gear instantly. *Were they lying when they said they didn’t want to hurt me? How naive could I have been? Of course he wants to kill me. Maybe I can still get Lauren out of this at least…*

“...but,” he continued, “I am not an unreasonable person. My brother was supposed to bring Evelynn to me. In that respect *he* failed. I don’t blame you because I know you can’t be one of Evelynn’s people. Whether you killed him and my two other associates, I don’t know, I don’t care; you were unlucky on that night, and I’ll be understanding.” He waited for a response.

Ever so slightly shaking his head, “I’m sorry,” was all Layton could muster.

“Like I said, there is no need to be sorry; this wasn’t your fault… That being said, however, I do hope you appreciate the great service I am doing you with my forgiveness and by not feeding you any of your own friends and family for dinner here tonight.”

Layton could only nod his head, outwardly appearing to agree but inwardly shocked by the man’s ability to sound so calm saying something so outlandish.

“Being a businessman, I do hope that you will be able to repay this debt, and I think I have just the opportunity for you. Let’s talk it over some food.”

Layton’s heart sank into his stomach. *A few days ago I was filling up my gas… now I’m getting extorted into working for the mob.* Nonetheless, Layton was nearly starved. As of late, he had only eaten at the old man’s house, and it did nothing to satiate his appetite.

“...sure… let me run to the bathroom if it’s going to be a minute then.” Layton struggled to buy himself some time to think.

“Why? Did you hide a revolver in the toilet?” A couple of the men standing nearby laughed.

“Heh, I’ll be right back.” Layton stood up, looked over to check on Lauren, nodded at her, then walked towards the far back of the restaurant where the bathroom appeared to be. Layton locked the door behind him as he walked in. He relinquished a deep sigh and hung his head in defeat.

“Thanks for locking the door, I put a high value on privacy.” The familiar voice startled Layton as it always did. He rotated around to face the strange man.

“Wh-”

He held his finger up to shush Layton. “Let me just go ahead and fast-forward you real quick: Who am I? Luther. What am I? Long story. Where am I from? Longer story. Did that peach really enable me to kill that guy? Yupp. That’s my FAQ, if you will. Now, what other questions do you have?”

Layton was thunderstruck. “I… uhm…What... Oh! What happened to the other guy that bit the peach?”

“It’s insulting to take something that isn’t yours, isn’t it? That’s what happens.” Luther chuckled. “No, but seriously: if you consume of any of the fruits of- err... if you take a bite of the peach and don’t use it’s power to take another life, then it will take yours instead, quite ruthlessly, I might add. The more you eat the peaches, the longer you can hold out. Usually first-timers can only last about seven minutes or so; that guy lasted like thirteen!” Luther threw his hands up. “Hey, gotta give credit where it’s due.” He continued mockingly, “Oh also ‘hey Luther, why am I not in a wheelchair from my obliterated leg?’ Yeah, thanks for asking. Eating a fr-... Eating a peach causes your body to change. You’ll heal quicker, you’ll run faster, you’ll jump farther, and each time you eat from it, you will retain its powers for a longer period of time.”

“What exactly are those *powers*?” Layton asked, now fully involved in Luther’s conversation.

“Ah, good question. The power of the peach is the power to force your will onto other physical objects. You’ll find out what that means as time goes on-”

Layton cut him off, “I don’t think I will. If eating a peach means I have to kill someone each time, then I had my last peach at the same time as my first last Friday.”

Luther laughed egregiously loud. He leaned in uncomfortably close Layton’s face and grinned. “I told you the peach changes your body, didn’t I? ...normal food won’t feed you anymore.”

“WHAT?! So I’ll die if I don’t eat your cursed peaches? I know what you are, it’s not complicated, you’re a demon!” Layton argued back incredulously, staring Luther right into his demonic eyes.

Luther laughed more, “I like you, you’re a fun one. Also, please, enlighten me, what better options did you have when that gun was honed in on your skull?”

Layton cooled his tone.

“Anyways,” Luther continued, “here’s another peach, for now.”

Layton slapped the peach out his hand, knocking it to the filthy bathroom floor, and eyed him defiantly. “If you and your peaches of death want me to murder people to go on living, then I’ll just die.”

Luther asked in a tone that suggested he was merely playing devil’s advocate, “Well, having only eaten one peach, you’ll only live seven days, tops. Then you’ll go out pretty violently.”

“Then so be it,” Layton replied, his tone taking on a righteous character as he climbed the moral high ground.

Luther chuckled again. “Well, I’m not sure if you’ve noticed a pattern about when I come to you, but…”

Layton’s brows raised.

“...but you might have noticed that it tends to be in situations of grave danger. I mean, if I were in a situation like that, I would want to get a head start.”

“I’m not afraid of y-” Layton stopped himself short, his eyes grew wide. *Lauren!* He reached down and snatched the peach off of the floor. By the time he stood back up, Luther was gone. Layton didn’t care this time, he sprinted out of the bathroom and out to the dining area. The food had arrived to the table and everyone was sitting calmly, eating. *Damn him! He tricked me again…* Layton clenched the peach angrily in his hand. He stopped short of smashing it so he wouldn’t draw attention to himself. He walked back to the table and set the peach down next to his plate

“Took you long enough,” Marcus quipped. “So, let’s get down to business. I need you to get information from Evelyn for me. I know you can get close to her because I know that she wants- What the hell is this?” Four sets of headlights flooded the restaurant with blinding light.

-*BANG!*

An explosion went off from beneath one of the booths, ruthlessly projecting two men into the air and violently littering shrapnel around the dining area. Some were impaled by debris and some knocked unconscious from the force of the blast.

*-smash!-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat*

*-pop-pop-pop-pop-smash!*

Automatic gunfire filled the restaurant with a firestorm of lead and smoke.

“LAUREN!” cried out. He saw her in the distance, taking cover behind a knocked over table with the large man. She was clutching her shoulder, bleeding. Layton sprinted over to her. He couldn’t hear the gunfire, the falling debris, or the second explosion, all he could hear were Lauren’s panicked shallow breaths. He paid no mind to the waves of bullets he was swimming through, he couldn’t see them, only Lauren.

-clack!

He heard a single bullet shot just as Lauren was hit in the chest.

“LAUREN!” Layton screamed to her with the voice of Hades himself. She turned to see him.

-clack!

He heard one more gunshot just as his sides were ripped open. He was shot between his ribs and his intestines. He fell to the floor in plain. He crawled, desperate to reach Lauren. She looked back at him, a constant stream of blood running from her wound.

The gunfire stopped. Layton continued crawling to Lauren.

Marcus yelled out. “Those were government sedans boys! We know who we need to pay a visit to!” He looked down at Layton crawling to Lauren. “Our business is done, Mr. Layton; we are even. I wish you luck.”

Layton paid him not an ounce of regard. His goal was Lauren.

She laid there, her back leaning against the booth. She still looked like an angel. Her face became wet with sorrow. ‘I love you’ she mouthed.

Her eyes grew void of life. Layton stared.

*The gravity of a thousand black holes tore at Layton’s heart*

*like wolves into a sheep.*

*His soul became the center of the universe,*

*crushed by the weight of all existence.*

*The light in his eyes,*

*consumed by her last breath,*

*faded to a hue darker than black,*

*and hope was invisible,*

*shrouded by the emptiness of reality.*

*Feeling froze,*

*and numbness raged.*

The peach had rolled just next to Layton. His eyes were no longer his own; they were Luther’s, or hate itself, and behind their red tint, only the peach could be seen. Layton picked it up and stood, wincing only slightly as blood bucketed from his side. “MARCUS! We are far from even.” His voice invoked a fury unfamiliar to those never robbed a life.

Marcus looked at the large man and said, “Better take care of it then, I guess.” He continued walking to the door with the other man. Layton stole one third of the peach in his first bite alone.

-*Crunch!*

His eyes trained on the man leading Marcus to the door. He raised his hands as if holding a massive log overhead, then slammed them to the ground. With it, the man was picked up and thrown to the floor, the sound of his ribs snapping was audible across the room.

Layton took another bite.

-*Crunch!*

He lifted his arm up, picking up the large man’s right arm. The man’s eyes filled with terror.

Another bite.

-*Crunch!*

Layton rotated his hand, and the large man’s shoulder twisted three hundred and sixty degrees, ripping its tendons and breaking the bone completely through.

-*Crunch!*

Layton slapped his hand in the air. The large man’s head whipped to the side, his neck cracked, he dropped to his knees, coughed a spot of blood, and fell to the floor dead.

“Layton wait! I’m sorry Layton! I can… I can-”

“Like you said, there’s no reason to be sorry; this isn’t your fault.”

Layton devoured the remainder of the peach.

-*Crunch*!

He dropped the peach to the floor, formed the shape of a ball between his hands, then focused until he felt Marcus’ very heart beating between his fingers.

“Gahhh!”

He crushed it just as Marcus had crushed his. Marcus’ eyes rolled back as he dropped. His life missed the floor and fell straight through to oblivion.

He walked back over to Lauren’s motionless body. Her eyes were still open; he closed them and kissed her forehead.

“I love you too.”

Layton left.

-Why did you choose me?

-Why didn’t you intervene?

-Where are you from?

-What are you?

-create the feeling of the scene better in ch2 and ch3

-have Luther flash his power?

-attach the reader to Lauren more

-Luther’s eyes filter

-aces on sleeves (ace jack?)

-careful when shooting at van

-relative morality: each fruit bearer is justified in wanting to kill the other

-showdown between fruit eaters that illustrates the pros and cons of particular fruits

Title?

Characters:

?? of Eden:

??

Keepers of Eden:

Leera

Leo

Livia

Lord (Apple-Lightning)

Luther (Peach-Force)(Nihilism)

Lulu

Zen (Banana-Knowledge)

Guardians of Eden:

Lex

Lisandra

Vallter

Valkyries of Eden:

Joenna

Hilda

Zina

Humans:

Layton

Lauren

Eve

Amanda

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Layton:

Parents dead, hard-working college student, only has his girlfriend, intelligent, put-together, morally good till he loses Lauren, then morally ambiguous (self-righteous)

He interns at a tech company (like SpaceX?) for the summer

Luther:

Keeper of the peach trees of Eden, ancient, morally nihilistic, (symbolism-satan)

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This isn’t what Lauren would want!

Don’t you dare speak her name! ← ?

-Layton force chokes dat bitch eve

Lauren is...all love lost…now only an old legend from some lie-layden la la land literature

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