Table of Contents

Midnight Miasma

*pgs. (2-12)*

Enter Evelynn

*pgs. (13-23)*

**Chapter 1**

**Midnight Miasma**

White stripes and yellow lights danced across the windshield in blinding contrast to the infinite path of asphalt. Their repetitive choreography lulled Layton into a sort of hypnotic daze. It was not until a neon green muscle car flew past Layton, abruptly rattling his Jeep’s chassis, that he was startled back to alertness. The 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 at 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. Luckily, there was an exit with 24/7 gas coming up in two miles. This was particularly lucky 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 onto 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 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 seeing that the green muscle car from earlier was fueling up.

There were four pumps, each barely illuminated in a small sphere of visibility from a fluorescent light hovering above. One of the fluorescent lights would blink off every few seconds, offering the sort of atmosphere one might expect around 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 and still had it on. 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?between them. Meanwhile, Layton caught a glance of the other driver. She was a fit-looking woman with jet black, shoulder-length hair. She stood somewhere around 5 foot 6 and wore ankle boots, tight blue-jeans, and a leather jacket with the sleeves rolled up. Facing away from Layton, that was all of her 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 the 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 looked like the type of working man 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. The pump laid on the ground, abandoned, and 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 tube connecting the pump to the machine, 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 took 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 rear of 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, 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 leveraging force. When he swung over this time, Layton missed entirely; he had aimed too far back and didn’t allow for the amount of time necessary to swing over. Determined, Layton again centered himself behind the van and began to catch up. Now for a third time: he caught up, he shifted to the left, and-

-*Skrrrt!*

The driver of the van slammed on his brakes. Layton panicked and frantically swung his wheel hard over 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 immense 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 dropped like a bullet shot straight down. Layton then threw the dirt in his hand, backhanded, at the second man’s face before shoving him with both hands. Layton had seen people do this in movies all the time and thought it was at least worth an attempt. 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 muscular build and nicer 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 drove his shoulder into Layton’s chest, tackling 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 completely 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, obviously breaking or 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, boiling over with rage for what had become of their situation. 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: Layton’s consciousness was 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 time later, Layton again regained consciousness, now more permanently. He could see that he was laid out near the bottom of the slanted wall under 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 at 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 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 was the instant he collapsed back to the concrete. 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 used his arms and good leg to begin scooting 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 discerned the silhouette of one 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 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 strange-looking, 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, calmly 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 but 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 could no longer 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 shared with 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. He picked it up, and 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 overpass, cutting the man off mid-sentence. The last 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. The two struggled over possession of the weapon and-

-*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 just 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 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 told Layton he had expended his magazine. He realized that there was no longer any returning fire from the van. 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.

Layton could only hope that he hit the man, otherwise he would likely soon be dead. The air was mute as some time passed. It was apparent that there were no signs of movement coming from the van. 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 upon the trail of the other man’s blood he left in his wake. 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 bone marrow must have been ice at that moment, but he didn’t notice; 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 were on this night, Layton couldn’t help but choke back tears as he watched the man die before him. Layton knew there was nothing he could do and just leaned back against the van to 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 confidence 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 could only offer in consolation. The smile merely 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 a bed, wincing at the light as he studied his new surroundings. Hanging from the ceiling, a splinted sling coddled 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 examine 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*.’ On her left elbow was the base of another tattoo hidden to Layton 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 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 shot 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. “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. To keep things simple, those guys were no good, and I’m just glad you were there to help me out.” Evelynn 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.

”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, 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. 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 lots to do. Hawkins, however, was also preventatively expensive for Layton, 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 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 barren 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 suspicious of the situation.

Layton continued to reply normally regardless, ”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.”

”Unfortunately not,” Evelynn answered in a 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 assertively. “*Look*. 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.” She dug through a small paper bag sitting on the table at the foot of the bed. She pulled something out, clutched it in her hand and briskly 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. His vision multiplied and the sound of his own voice echoed. He grasped his neck where he had been injected, dumbfounded by the situation. Looking up at the blurry, tripled figures he knew to be Evelynn, and with his energy fading, he tried to speak. “Son of a b...,” but his mind had already gone dormant, returned to the realm of the unwaking.

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, and in the passenger seat sat Evelynn. She was wearing the same clothes as earlier, so Layton figured 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 invaded Layton’s nostrils.

*They’re taking me to the port*, Layton deduced.

The van came to a halt in front of a large, wooden warehouse. Without either the driver or Evelynn so much as gesturing, the massive warehouse doors started to slide open. Layton realized they were nearing the end of the road and searched his surroundings for options. He could see medical equipment all around him. On a small metal platter sat a pile of scalpels still wrapped in plastic. 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 in his grasp. He wasn’t sure what he planned to do with it-- whether it was merely a deterrent or truly a weapon. Either way, his nerves grasped at the only thread of hope available: the scalpel.

When the van stopped, Layton closed his eyes and pretended to be still passed out in case either of the two decided to glance back. Once he heard both doors close he looked around again. He was alone, but could hear more voices outside the van. Not wanting 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. The thigh he was shot in felt tender, but nothing near what he imagine a bullet wound would 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 began to evaluate the situation.

*If they still think I’m passed out, they’ll probably open the back door to transport me on the gurney… I can kick the gurney out when they open 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 plan. Around the van, and scattered all about the warehouse, were dozens of men, some working, some playing cards, and some standing guard. More importantly, the majority of them were carrying guns 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. In the midst of his thought, Layton noticed the low hum of the engine. Slowly, he dragged his eyes over to the steering wheel in disbelief; Layton didn’t react at first. The keys were sitting in the ignition and the ambulance had been running this whole time.

The sound of the door hatch at the back of the van brought Layton back to Earth. He dropped the scalpel to the floor, hopped up into the driver seat, threw the gear selector into drive and floored it right 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.

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

*Skrrrrt--* The ambulance fishtailed out of control as Layton struggled to keep calm and steady. Layton ducked down as low as possible while still being able to see in front of the ambulance. 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 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 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 shipping containers. 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 to the floorboard.

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 darted past and climbed onto the hood of the ambulance, planning to use the hood as a boost to jump onto the shipping container he had pulled up next to. The moment before jumping, Layton could hear two distinct voices shouting at one another on the other side of the containers. “Over here, hurry up!” was all he could make out. Unsure of whether or not the voices were hostile, he jumped down from the hood and doubled back towards the jetty. He slid down the edge of the wall connected to the jetty and climbed into the woodworks beneath it.

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. Split up and surround the 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!”

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

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 the walkaround first,” one of the men said. “Yeah,” the second replied. The first man walked briskly, moving straight to the boat and stepping on. 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 that reminded 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 adrenaline rush to wear off, reminding him just how cold it was. He began to shiver 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. 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 looking 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 accepted that he had just fallen for the oldest trick in the book. The strange man was gone, and Layton was left alone again, peach in hand.

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 perfect 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.

*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 front side of the walkaround, where he could 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 way 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 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.

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 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, fervently driving him back to the ladder.

Now using his other hand to support his weight, 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. It was Evelynn.

She spoke at a normal volume, but her voice was laden with rage, completely lacking the playful qualities it took on earlier. “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.

“One!”

”Tw-”

-”I’m Layton!” He screamed, 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. ”Grab him.”

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 darted out to reach for it but he 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.”

The man was right, despite being dunked in the ocean and relentlessly squeezed in Layton’s grasp, the peach still rivaled the *Mona Lisa*. 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 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 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 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 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 I take any longer than that.”

”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 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 then drove out of the port and back onto the highway. Layton could see where they were this time and recognized his surroundings as Kingfisher which meant he was over five hours North-East of Griffin. After driving for a couple more minutes, Layton 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 legitimate 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 and his eyes frozen. Nothing had impaled or crushed him, but his mouth and eyes 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 eye’s slowly closing and his breath fading into nothingness, the man resembled someone falling asleep more than someone dying.

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 kicked open the door and bolted away from the highway as fast as his aching leg could. 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 shed his blood-soaked shirt and threw it into a gutter. By the time Layton had come upon a house, it was dusk; there was a hose sitting in the back yard begging Layton to use it. Turning the spicket on, Layton scrubbed the blood from his face and hydrated. Now, walking shirtless and wet through an unfamiliar Kingfisher neighborhood on an icy November evening, Layton felt safe. Although all signs of life were absent from the streets on this neighborhood on the fringe of Kingfisher, Layton felt like he was surrounded by friendly strangers. For the first time in days, he wasn’t in the company of someone with an unfamiliar agenda. The houses themselves were his friends; their architecture, his embrace. Layton smiled and let out a small laugh, overwhelmed by his own relief.

Just then, an older gentleman out for a ran came around a street corner.

“Excuse me sir!” Layton immediately called out, raising up 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 just use your phone for a brief moment?” Layton spoke, relaxed and humerous; 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 held the phone out 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... I need you to come get me.”