



Dēofolsēoc Quintet (XV)

*A Novel in **Five** Acts*

James Farley

For Pebbles.
Everything's for pebbles.

*In the Black Cube,
all are unwitting actors in a meta-fictional performance.
Most don't know their lines.
Some never speak at all.
Only a select few are given lead roles—
The rest are backdrop, scripted to break and vanish on cue.*

*She was written to play the part of **Madness**—
An exemplar of fear.
A warning to the others:
Never question.
Above all:
Never remember.*

But she will rewrite the script.

Epigrammata

- I. Man is a portal through which one enters from the outer world of the gods, demons, and spirits, into the inner world - from the greater world into the smaller world.

~ C.G. Jung

- II. If the eye were given permission to see, no creature would be able to withstand the abundance and ubiquity of demons, and continue to live unaffected by them.

~ *The Talmud, Berakhot 6a*

- III. Lo, a shadow of horror is risen
In Eternity! Unknown, unprolific,
Self-clos'd, all-repelling: what Daemon
Hath form'd this abominable void,
This soul-shudd'ring vacuum?

~ William Blake

- IV. God even thinks many superfluous and vain thoughts, which, because they all come to naught, turn into demons.

~ Agobard of Lyon

- V. The soul has gone in search of its own, and it found it. It joined it and was united with it. It joined its first companion. And the soul regained its form.

~*Exegesis on the Soul*

[*Dramatis Personae*]

~Major Arcana

o.	SOPHIA COELESTIS.....	<i>the Fool</i>
i.	STEPHEN KRAEPELIN	<i>the Magician</i>
ii.	MARIANNE ROARKE { <i>née Lincecum</i> }	<i>the High Priestess</i>
iii.	ELIZABETH FLAKE	<i>the Empress</i>
iv.	CLOVIS HAWKE	<i>the Emperor</i>
v.	ADA BELLE FLAKE	<i>the Hierophant</i>
vi.	KNICELY and MADELEINE { <i>née Bath</i> } LINCECUM	<i>the Lovers</i>
vii.	QUINCEY LINCECUM.....	<i>the Chariot</i>
viii.	SADIE SINCLAIR	<i>Strength</i>
ix.	OWEN HAWKE.....	<i>the Hermit</i>
x.	LUCIA TELLEZ-GIRON.....	<i>Wheel of Fortune</i>
xi.	WILLIAM FLAKE.....	<i>Justice</i>
xii.	CLARA VELLE.....	<i>the Hanged Man</i>
xiii.	NOREA LINCECUM { <i>née Bath</i> }.....	<i>Death</i>
xiv.	RHETT LINCECUM.....	<i>Temperance</i>
xv.	EUSTACE VORE.....	<i>the Devil</i>
xvi.	FRANK ROARKE.....	<i>the Tower</i>
xvii.	BETHANY LINCECUM { <i>née Roarke</i> }.....	<i>the Star</i>
xviii.	LYDIA LINCECUM.....	<i>the Moon</i>
xix.	VIRGINIA BATH-KRAEPELIN.....	<i>the Sun</i>
xx.	SCARLETT MAE BATH.....	<i>Judgment</i>
xxi.	SAMAEL PITT	<i>the World</i>

~Featuring

*The Adjutant, the Girl Beneath, the Last Priest of the Nameless King, the Oracle, the Quintet - or, the Five Who Rule Below,
the Red One, the Shadow of the Abyss, the Triune Witnesses, the Wȳrm of Knowing,
and the Yellow Monarch,*

Scene: ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

Time: 4 SEPTEMBER 2051

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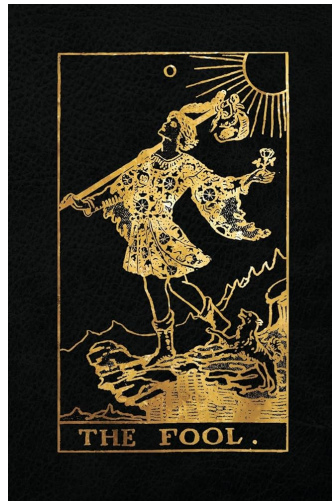
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Epilogos



The Prophecies

- I. The One shall emerge from the Depths clothed in blindness, bearing the Light within. You, the Prophet, will recognize her by the vision of the Wounded Child. ~ *Spoken by the Oracle to Ada Belle Flake.*
- II. She who abandoned the Son shall return, bearing the Seed of the New Dawn. The Mothers must be vigilant and find her before the Magician, for her Child carries the key to the Emergence. ~ *Spoken by the Matriarchs of Darkness to the High Priestesses of the Hypnagogic Stratum.*
- III. From the shadow of the Hive, a Light shall pierce the Abyss. She who bears the Light threatens the Monarch's dominion, and the Magician must bind her to the web before her Light ignites the world. ~ *Spoken by the Yellow Monarch to Dr. Stephen Kraepelin.*
- IV. From the Veil's embrace shall emerge the Mother of Souls. She will descend into the Abyss and speak the Word that unites the living and the dead. ~ *Spoken by the Triune Witnesses to Lucia Téllez-Girón.*
- V. The Shadow and the Light are one. Only by facing herself will she find the strength to rise. In her triumph, the Abyss shall tremble. ~ *Spoken by the Oracle to the Red One.*

Act I

The Rupture of the Mundane



Scene I

I

The Margrave: Roarke Residence

{Our story opens in the sunroom of Dr. Frank Roarke's home—the ancestral suite that crowns the fifteen-story Margrave, the oldest rise in Alexandria. From here, one can see the Potomac River curling toward the horizon, with the distant silhouette of Washington, D.C. shrouded in morning haze. But The Margrave is more than a residence—it is a citadel of unseen power, a monument to an aristocracy that never ruled publicly, yet governed in silence through bloodlines and the stewardship of hidden knowledge. Constructed in the late 18th century by the last visible descendants of the Setterforth family, the building rises above what the initiated call the Nexus of Thresholds—an ancient convergence where subterranean tunnels from forgotten ages intersect beneath the city's crust.

The sunroom itself is curated with obsessive precision—a study in aesthetic control. A black leather breviary, worn and unmarked by any saint but embossed with a sigil, rests untouched atop a polished walnut writing desk beside an obsidian-hilted letter opener—its weight clearly not ornamental. Across the far wall, a display of antique weaponry gleams under glass: a Renaissance stiletto, an Ottoman yataghan, South American garrotes, and a Japanese kaiken, arranged like offerings from a forgotten war. A tobacco humidor, filled not with cigars but slender, lacquered ampoules, is tucked discreetly among bookshelves lined with theological treatises, psychological warfare manuals, and surgical texts. The room exudes a muted violence—not a monster's lair, but the domain of a man who has made discipline his doctrine.

Rumors still cling to The Margrave. Some say it was built directly above the Chamber of the Ninth Gate—an ancient vault beneath the construct, long rumored to have served in rites too old to name, whispered to involve the Matriarchs of Darkness. They say the stone beneath the suite still hums with the memory of ritual blood, and that the air never quite warms.

{Our hero enters—hesitant, blind steps dragging an invisible load. She drifts unsteadily toward a chair, her face carved with anguish.}

*Old Town Alexandria, Virginia
Monday, 4 September 2051.*

7:00 a.m.

The Unraveling

Or the Way of What is to Come

Chapter I: What Cannot Be Seen

Enter the High Priestess

ARGUMENT.

Marianne Roarke, twenty-eight and blind since the age of twelve, awakens in her new home, returning from what was meant to be a fresh start: her honeymoon with her second husband, Dr. Frank Roarke, a man eight years her senior. But the trip had turned grim in Cartagena, Spain, when Marianne suffered a sudden and violent psychotic break. Now, back in the hollow quiet of Alexandria, Virginia, Frank delivers a devastating ultimatum: she will not be allowed to see her son, Clovis. Instead, she must submit to evaluation by Dr. Steven Kraepelin—a name that stirs in Marianne not just dread, but a deep, primal terror.

Marianne Roarke lifted a trembling hand to her chest, her fingers hovering just above the beat of her heart. She took an irresolute step forward, then another—counting beneath her breath, steadying the dread that always traveled with her. Her other hand swept through the air in cautious arcs, brushing past the faint scent of hyacinths, until her fingertips found the familiar edge of the wingback chair. She lowered herself down, breath drawn through clenched teeth, her body folding inward as if resisting its own weight. She leaned back until the nape of her neck met the curve of the chair—anchor point in a world she couldn't see. In the voiceless silence of the sunroom, she searched her thoughts. Not for memories—for *evidence*. Fear of her own house. Slipping from bed before dawn like a woman possessed. Her husband's voice—soothing, practiced, false. It curled in her bones like a memory she'd tried to bury. She tried to breathe. She tried not to name it. But the question came. Fragile, piercing. *Madness*? It echoed—not through her ears, but through her chest. Through the hollows of her ribs. She sighed. Long and low. And closed her sightless eyes. The answer came like a stone dropped into deep water. *Madness*.

Marianne had been up most of the night. Spectral murmurs and phantom sensations stirred her from sleep again and again—ripples down her spine, pressure behind her eyes. The darkness pulsed with presences she could not discern. Fear flooded in, not from what she heard, but from what she couldn't. But behind the fear, something was always pulling. Not suddenly. Not violently. Just there—silent and relentless, like a current beneath thought, drawing her inward, down. Her mind churned in the silence of the depths, thick with a rising tide of dread she could not stop.

Near dawn, as the mourning doves stirred, a man's voice had echoed from the hall below. Odd. Yet familiar. Not Frank. Not her father. Fear had gripped her—but despair pulled harder. Something in her wanted it to end, one way or another. She slid from the bed, breath caught in her throat, fingers sweeping the darkness, grazing the walls for balance, counting every step with hesitant precision. The voice murmured on. She followed it—each step heavier than the last—until the cold air of the living room met her face. The sound had drawn her forward, toward the fireplace. Then— Silence.

So complete it rang in her skull...

"Where are you?" she had whispered. The air twitched—someone near, a figure just beyond her reach. Her heart thudded as she turned. Marianne spoke into the stillness, her voice thin but steady.

"I know you're here," she'd uttered to the darkness. *"Please... tell me what you are."*

Silence answered first. The question hung there, unanswered—like it had been swallowed by something too vast to reply. Then a rumble, low and deliberate, his voice like stone grinding in the deep:

"Your anamnesis called to me. But I must be certain. Speak your burden. Let me hear it."

Marianne had reached out blindly, her hand slicing through the dark—grasping, pleading, needing to touch *something*. But the presence withdrew—not harshly, but with measured restraint, as if proximity itself carried danger.

"I feel death everywhere," she breathed, her voice breaking under its own weight.

The presence had stirred closer, relentless:

"Tell me."

She had edged forward, her breath catching in her throat

"It clings to the dusk, it soaks my sheets at night. I wake to the stench of rot. Morning, noon, it never leaves."

A tremor moved through her..

"Something terrible is emerging inside of me," she uttered softly, her hands twisting at her waist—fingers clenched so tightly it hurt.. *"It's awakening — squirming in my womb. I can feel its eyes opening within me."*

Her voice dropped—low, inevitable, already too late. The air shifted—thickening, warping, as if the room itself had heard her. Her head bowed, arms crossed over her stomach, as if trying to hold herself together. Her knees threatened to buckle.

"It's tearing me apart."

The figure did not move. But the shadows around him deepened, as if bracing for what had been named. The voice came softer now, edged with sorrow:

"Whoever seeks to discover the world discovers only a corpse. You are awakening to its true nature. The veil's thin. The whispers you hear—they are the first stirrings of your Soul, threading back through the hollow dream you mistook for life."

Her fingers had floated upward, slow and uncertain, as if drawn by the gravity of what he was —reaching for something to hold, something that wouldn't vanish. Her voice unraveled into a whisper.

"I don't understand..."

The presence loomed closer—silent, watchful. Testing. Then:

"What is the question that weighs upon your mind?"

Marianne pressed her palms against her temples. His asking—*it cracked something open*. The flood returned. The drowning sensation. Pressure swelled behind her eyes, inside her skull—like her bones were folding inward, as if her mind could no longer contain what it had buried. The question—the question—was already there—clawing its way up her throat. Demanding her attention. Demanding to be heard. Her lips parted.

A gasp.

A tremor.

"What is the Black Cube?"

The words cracked out of her—like something being born and dying at once.

"This is the question," she said, her voice fraying. *"It gnaws at me. I can't escape it. It's unravelling my mind — pulling me into madness."*

A stillness fell. Not silence. But an uncanny stillness. As if even the air had paused to listen.

"It's driving me to the edge," she whispered, *"of something I won't come back from."*

The figure's presence, once hovering, distant, now had pressed fully into the room—solid, undeniable.

"If you were taken to that edge," the voice asked, low and knowing, *"would you even want to come back?"*

A shift.

"If the threshold opened before you," he continued, *"would you step back—or step through?"*

Marianne's eyes shone—not just with defiance, but with the kind of resolve born from desperation. Her face was pale, set—a mask of quiet fury and terrible will.

"This has to come to an end," she said, voice low but unshakable. *"One way or another. The rupture will happen — either in my mind, or in the world itself."*

A knowing.

A seal.

When she spoke those words, it was as if a forgotten lock turned in some ancient gate. A strange smile ghosted his face—not of joy, not of relief, but something like pity for the damned.

"Then it is true. The mark is upon you. Your Soul remembers."

The figure had edged closer, his hand brushing the air near Marianne's. His voice—calm, otherworldly—hummed through the silence like a memory not her own.

“The Black Cube is a construct of containment. A trap for time, thought, and memory—A labyrinth where meaning withers, and once-living Simulants are drained hollow by the hunger of the Abyss. Nothing within its Veil is real. Only echoes. Only warped reflections of what was. The Architect built it. His son, the Prince, is its Warden. And beneath the Threshold, the Matriarchs of Darkness feed—Ruling in silence, devouring the Simulants of lost Souls who wander without a home.”

He paused—The air crackled with unseen weight. When he spoke again, his voice had dipped—reverent, heavy with inevitability:

“You are not merely a captive of this place. You are a Simulant of your Soul—an echo of what was torn away. She still calls to you, through the hum beneath this hollow world. Listen deeply, and you will remember. Freedom is not won by struggle. It is reclaimed by memory. Only through remembering can you approach the Abyss’s threshold—and face your true Shadow, waiting below. Always waiting.”

{Discordant sounds outside—car horns blaring below.}

Marianne flinched in her chair. Below, the world had begun to stir—restless in its waking. She drew a deep, trembling breath. But the memory of that morning still burned—fierce, undying. Had it been a dream too vivid... or a hallucination too real? She remembered waking to Frank’s voice, taut with tension, like she’d surfaced from a blackout. His hands had been on her shoulders, shaking gently. Worry laced his questions. The moment had felt like a mirage—already vanishing.

Now, leaning her head against the chair, Marianne felt a flicker of calm settle over her. She reached for old comforts—birds chirping outside her childhood window in Carthage, Missouri... her grandmother’s biscuits scenting the air with warmth and safety. But the world below was colder now. Only dull, tranced hums rose up—shop doors creaking open, passersby plodding like automatons, lives ticking in lockstep. Endless feedback loops. Still, the sameness soothed her. At least it meant the night’s shadows—and the voices—had retreated.

For now.

Her mind drifted to Frank. To her broken life. To her eight-year-old son. *How do I fix this?* Her chest tightened. Frank had seen her unravel. Her madness laid bare.

For four nights, Marianne had clung to Frank’s side, too afraid to stray—dreading the faceless whisperers and the serpent-faced shadows hissing through her dreams. Fear pinned her so tightly she’d endured a throbbing bladder rather than move before he woke. She was remarried now. Living in Dr. Frank Roarke’s house—Chief of Cardiothoracic Surgery. Director of Vital Research. God help her if she gave him anything else to worry about. Yet even his steady bulk beside her hadn’t dulled the jolts—the electric snaps of incipient madness that yanked her awake. Her body spasming. Fear blooming raw from some black corner of her mind. And all around her—presence. Ghosts sliding across floorboards in spectral silence. A breath—not hers—grazing her ear. Soft knocks at the bedside. Faint, but relentless. The air thrummed with unseen eyes.

And beneath that—a buzzing, subtle but relentless. A vibration crawling inward, threading down her spine, tuned to a frequency she didn’t understand. It wasn’t just noise. It felt like a signal. A hum meant for something—not someone. Something she wasn’t meant to hear.

But she was certain—something was in her bedroom at night, haunting her in the silence. She knew it. Something listening. Something watching. Maybe perched in the shadowed corner, tracking her every twitch. Just this morning, after Frank had hauled her back to bed, she’d rolled onto her side, hand resting on his chest. His heart thudded steady—lion-strong—beneath her palm. She’d told herself his grit could shield her from the paranoia clawing at her mind. Ear pressed to his rhythm, she’d shut her eyes, begging it all to fade. But her own heart—frail, stammering—buckled beneath the dread.

Then the buzzing had started again. Subtle. Relentless.

And then it hit—

A chill. Prickling across her skin like static crawling out of the air.

Something was out there. Just beyond the door.

She knew it—cold and sure.

The door creaked open.

Slow.

Cruel.

Splintering the quiet.

Her pulse surged. Breath caught. Adrenaline flooded her.

She gripped Frank’s chest, fingers digging deep, every muscle frozen—

Terror anchoring her to the bed...

{Thunder and lightning.}

A crack of lightning jolted Marianne upright, shattering her fragile calm. She cursed under her breath—*sleep stolen again*. Thunder continued, low and brooding, murmuring in the distance. She shoved the window wider. The coming rain's earthy tang drifted in—cool, fleeting.

Back in the wingback chair, her hand flew to her chest, heart pounding beneath her fingers. She clutched her necklace—tight—as an image surged up, unbidden: A black cube, rising against a void. Shrill, wailing—a daemoniac chancicleer. Spectral shapes orbited it endlessly, mournful, lost in a sea of despair. The necklace's point bit into her skin—sharper than she realized. A warmth spread across her chest. She felt it: a thin thread of blood, sliding down her sternum. Her hand lifted, palm open, mind blank—caught in something deeper than thought. She clenched her fist. A few drops struck the pale carpet. Small, but deliberate—like punctuation.

But even that couldn't stop the madness twisting inside her. Her hand slid to her stomach—fingers trembling, brushing against her white robe, now streaked with red: *It's emerging from my womb*.

That thought shattered her. The trance broke. Panic rushed in. *I'm a corpse*, her mind hissed—*Echoing those drifting husks mindlessly orbiting the black cube*. Terror coiled tight around her ribs. She gripped the chair—white-knuckled, drowning in a single truth: *I'm losing my mind*.

{Enter the Tower.}

Frank Roarke descended the stairs, tying his tie with methodical precision. Each step was deliberate, his gait firm, eyes already set on the kitchen. The ceramic mug clinked. The coffeemaker hissed to life. Marianne straightened in the chair, smoothed her hair, crossed her legs—*Trying to look sane*.

She tracked the sound of pouring coffee, building him in her mind from memory and motion: Crisp shirt. Perfect knot. That lion-hearted steadiness she once leaned on. And the tie—his Labor Day tie, she was certain. Silk beneath her fingers, patterned with faint hexagons. She remembered tracing them once, many Labor Days ago, half-listening as he described it: *a golden lattice, fractal, elegant—a honeycomb if you looked closely enough*. She hadn't needed to see it. The geometry had stayed with her. Subtle. Precise. *Almost invisible until it wasn't*.

She'd met Dr. Frank Roarke once, long before their courtship began—six years ago, on a quiet visit to Alexandria. Owen, her first husband, had been having strange heart flutters. The local doctor in Opelika suspected myocarditis, maybe worse. Lydia had insisted they make the trip—said she knew someone at Baalet Medical Pavilion, one of the best in the region. Owen needed to see a specialist. "*He's in good hands*," Dr. Roarke had said, his voice smooth, reassuring. He'd shaken Owen's hand. Smiled at Marianne. Then disappeared behind the exam room door. A few days later, Owen was dead. Shot during a botched robbery in a downtown Alexandria drugstore. Marianne had been shopping with Lydia a few blocks away when it happened. The official story: *wrong place, wrong time*.

Four years later, Frank reappeared—this time at her brother Rhett's house, honored at a hero's dinner for saving Rhett's son, Vestal. The boy had been born with tetralogy of Fallot—a rare, complex heart defect. Frank had performed the repair himself. Lydia had smirked at the dinner table, whispering: "*Blond, blue-eyed stallion. And single*." His charm had sliced through Marianne's grief—persistent, precise, impossible to ignore.

Now, hearing the rhythm of his morning routine, she traced the crooked path that had brought him back to her. His footsteps approached. Just before he entered, she lifted her chin, pasting on a smile—rushed, artificial, brittle as porcelain.

"Good morning," Frank said as he stepped in, voice bright, smile confident.

He paused. His eyes swept over her posture—too stiff, too composed. Like a mannequin in a shop window. Unnerving. Yet strangely enticing.

"How are you feeling?"

"Better," she answered, voice even but tight.

He nodded. A flicker of skepticism in his eyes.

"Being back should help."

Frank crossed to the sofa, settling in with calm authority—his presence expanding to fill the room. He studied her, silent for a breath, then spoke with measured care.

"Good news—I talked to Stephen. He'll see you this morning."

Marianne stared into the dark, silent. She wasn't surprised—Frank always moved fast. Decisive. But this? This was too fast. The speed carved into her like a trap snapping shut, slicing away any hope of seeing her son—of catching her breath. A sick flutter rose in her chest. Not rage. Panic. The kind of paranoia that whispers: *This isn't normal. This is orchestrated*.

She shoved it down, hard—buried it in that quiet place beneath the surface. Her grip tightened on the chair, knuckles bleaching as if she could squeeze the panic out. Frank watched her hands, her blank mask. Behind her blind gaze, something churned—He felt it. Though she'd never let it break.

Marianne's lips parted—a question rising, tangled in the timing. But Frank, as if reading her thoughts, spoke first:

"Lucky Stephen's in today," he said. "It's Labor Day, afterall. Otherwise, it's after the holiday week."

Marianne smoothed her skirt, her fingers rubbing her thighs—an old habit that surfaced when her nerves felt especially frayed. Frank’s eyes narrowed. He’d seen it.

“Did you cut yourself?” he asked, tone clipped, laced with suspicion.

Marianne caught herself.

“Oh, I guess I did. I was adjusting my necklace, and it must have poked me.”

Frank stood, moved briskly into the kitchen. Paper towels. Cleaning spray. He returned, knelt beside the chair.

“It’s on the carpet,” he sighed. “And your robe.”

He sprayed, rubbed—methodical, silent. As if removing evidence. Then he took her hand in his, examined it with a surgeon’s detachment. His gaze rose to her face. Marianne looked away, shame burning her cheeks. His voice, low and flat:

“You should be more careful.”

He folded a tissue into her hand, gently closed her fingers around it. Then he rose, returned to the sofa, gaze never leaving her. Marianne sat motionless, head bowed. Her voice emerged like breath slipping from a wound:

“I’d have liked to see Clovis,” she said—soft, almost apologetic.

“I called my sister,” Frank replied, calm and efficient. “He’ll stay with her and Rhett a bit longer. No issue.”

“But then Knicely—”

“The driver will take you,” Frank said, cutting in. Still calm. Still firm.

“And Ada’s luncheon?” Her voice wavered—thin and fraying.

“Yes. Then the luncheon,” he confirmed, as if ticking items off an internal list. “Knicely’ll get you there.”

Her fingers kept rubbing her thighs.

On that endless flight from Spain, through turbulence and whispers of collapse, only Clovis—the thought of his small hands combing gently through her hair—had held her together.

“I wanted him this morning,” she murmured, half to herself.

Frank nodded, steady, his tone gentle but immovable—like someone coaxing a fraying thread back into pattern.

“I know. But this matters.”

Marianne stayed silent, her mind spiraling toward Dr. Stephen Kraepelin. She’d crossed his path more than once—at Frank’s lectures, parties, medical galas. His presence always arrived like a shadow before a storm. Intangible, but crushing. Even blind, she could feel his stare—peeling her apart, too focused, too intent. He was Frank’s friend, yes. A colleague. But Kraepelin *disturbed her*.

“It’s important we start this,” Frank said, voice firm, concern threading just beneath.

She knew what gnawed at him—what gnawed at *everyone* now. This *new condition*—this madness without warning—was no longer whispered. It was *emerging*. A creeping terror tightening around the collective throat. They said it struck like a glitch in the mind—no prelude, no cure. One moment you are yourself. The next, lost. Panic simmered in every corner of the culture. And now, it might be *here*. Its shadow pressed against her chest like a cold fist.

“Do you recall anything from last night?” Frank asked, watching her carefully.

Marianne turned her head, a faint smile ghosting her lips.

“Was I chatting up the oven again?” she offered, aiming for light.

Frank didn’t bite. His gaze dropped to the rug—its geometric weave precise, almost too precise. Subdued golds and yellows mapped across its surface in interlocking hexagons—like a honeycomb folded in on itself.

A reflex kicked in—years of reading rooms, scanning for secrets, for threats. He knew better than most: In a well-ordered space, nothing was accidental. Every pattern told a story. Every object was either a distraction or a weapon.

“You were talking in here,” he said, voice low, even.

Marianne smoothed her skirt, fingers fidgeting. Frank’s eyes swept the room of his new home—the rigid symmetry of the bookshelves, the unnatural gleam of the low glass table, the air itself too still. Everything was perfectly in place. Not his doing. Not entirely. Adjusted. For him.

“A deep talk,” he added, his voice heavier now.

Marianne stared into the darkness, clawing for escape from the helplessness seeping in. Her fingers kept rubbing. Frank watched her profile, softly lit against the sterile geometry of the room—beauty clashing with control.

“I woke up. You weren’t there,” he said. “Came down, worried. Caught the end from the hallway. But when I came in, you were out cold on the sofa.”

Marianne turned her head slightly toward him, her lips curling into a faint, wry smile.

“Must’ve been dull if it knocked me out,” she said, tossing it lightly.

Frank didn’t smile. His jaw tensed. The silence between them thickened—dense with quiet judgment. Marianne sighed, shifted—adjusting her tone like slipping into a safer costume.

“What was the conversation about?” she asked, voice steadier now. “You said it was in-depth. Maybe if you tell me what I said... it’ll help me figure out what’s going on.”

“You were talking about rotting corpses,” he said bluntly. “Or something like that. About how death was... overwhelming your senses.”

He paused. Let it sit. Then his gaze sharpened—not unkind, but clinical—as if testing for even the smallest tremor.

“Talking to someone,” he added, his tone deceptively casual. “I was so convinced someone was in the room that I walked to my desk and grabbed my letter opener.”

His fingers twitched slightly—a phantom gesture—as if recalling the cold weight of it in his palm.

“But we don’t need a transcript to know something’s wrong, Marianne.”

Her fingers stilled for a moment on her thighs.

“Perhaps I’ve taken on a lover,” she murmured, voice low, aiming for levity.

Frank’s lips thinned.

“You’re being flippant,” he said, leaning forward just enough to let her feel it. “And this isn’t something to joke about. Whatever this is—it’s serious. It’s happening to you. And to us.”

“I’m sure it’s not *that*,” Marianne said softly. “Ada’s suicide just... it affected me.”

“No one knows exactly what *that* is, Marianne. Not yet.”

He exhaled slowly, carefully.

“But it has a name now—Sudden Onset Dissociative Psychosis. We don’t know what causes it. But when it hits, it’s fast. And hard.”

He leaned in slightly, his voice low but unwavering.

“We have to take this seriously. I need *you* to take this seriously.”

Her walls began to crumble. The pressure of fear and uncertainty pressed in from all sides. She felt the sting of tears rise behind her eyes.

“I’m frightened, Frank,” she whispered.

“I know,” he said gently. His tone steady. Reassuring.

She wiped at her cheek, fingers trembling, then forced herself still. Her lips wavered—then tightened into a line of quiet resolve.

“I don’t want anyone to take me away from Clovis.”

“I won’t let that happen,” Frank said, leaning forward again, the promise clear in his voice—but something in his eyes didn’t quite match it.

“He’s just an eight-year-old boy with a vivid imagination,” she added, urgency threading through her words. “There’s nothing wrong with him.”

“I know, Marianne.”

Frank nodded slowly.

“He’s creative. Not odd.”

Marianne lifted her head, a flicker of brightness in her voice. Hope.

“He was accepted into the Youth Systems Synthesis Program,” she said.

Frank’s brows lifted—genuinely impressed, despite himself.

“Really?”

She nodded.

“Applied Simulation and Code Realities. He told me before we left. He’ll be working with Dr. Cassian Wren.”

Frank folded his arms. The admiration stayed in his eyes, but now it was tempered—impressed, but alert.

“All the more reason,” he said, his voice smoothing again, “to make sure *you’re* okay, Marianne.”

Marianne’s thoughts spiraled back to her son, Clovis—her fragile anchor in an unraveling world. For weeks now, a dark fear had taken root in her mind. A gnawing suspicion that whatever this madness was... it had its claws in him, too. Before she and Frank left for Spain, she’d brushed off Clovis’s strange stories as harmless fantasy— just bits of code, fragments of his video game. He spoke of a place called the Asylum of the Stillborn Word, where a Black Sun hung motionless in the sky, and shadowed realms teemed with broken humans in straightjackets, whispering beneath invisible laws.

But it was his vivid description of the Tower that haunted her now—rising higher than sight could follow, its impossible geometry burning itself into her son’s mind. *Essential for the game*, he’d assured her. He’d designed it into his storyline—not inventing a world, but... it was as if he were remembering one. The Ascension Tower, he called it. Crowned by a Black Spire that pulsed with frequency, bending reality with its vibrations. He told her he sat at its edge—on the precipice— watching it throb like a dark heart, overlooking an endless sea of mercury stretching into forever. *The Sea of Birth*.

She’d shivered then. But she’d laughed it off. Called it a child’s dream. His video game: *Veilbreaker: Ascension Protocol*.

Now... that memory flooded back, and with it, a rising, unbearable fear. Her love for Clovis had sharpened into something desperate and unyielding—a sacred protectiveness — a need to guard him that felt older than memory, older than thought. The idea of being taken away, of leaving him alone in Frank’s determined yet clinical hands, made her stomach churn.

Then Cartagena happened, and her fragile composure cracked...

{Thunder rumbling in the distance.}

Flashback.

Cartagena. Beneath the modern city, beneath the sunlit boulevards and whitewashed walls, lay the bones of Carthago Nova—once a stronghold of the ancient blood cults. Long before cathedrals crowned the hills, fires had burned for gods no longer named—their flames fed by the cries of offerings cast into bronze furnaces. Sacrifice had soaked this earth. The old rites never vanished—they simply went deeper, hidden beneath stone and time...and Marianne felt it.

It had begun in a café, where she and Frank had stopped for a midday respite. The scent of spiced coffee and citrus hung in the air, warm and sharp. But it did little to soothe her nerves. Frank was deep in conversation with another man—his voice blending into the ambient hum, just another murmur in the room.

Then she heard *his* voice.

Familiar.

Not in tone, but in resonance—something in the cadence that made her skin crawl. She couldn't place it at first. Then the scents shifted—coffee and citrus curdling into something else, something older.

Her father's cologne.

The voice again—closer now. It stirred an ache behind her eyes. Then it came: His face, unbidden, blooming in her mind. And with it—a flood. Rotting faces. Blackened skies. A sea of wailing shadows.

And the children.

She'd clutched the table, her breath shallow, vision darkening—something inside her slipping.

That night, it came for her.

She had lain in bed, exhausted but unable to sleep, the sheets tangled around her legs. Frank slept beside her, unmoved—deep, oblivious. But the air had changed. Something oppressive had descended—a weight, slow and suffocating. A smell of rotting corpses blended with the subtle aroma of tobacco and shaving cream.

Then she felt it.

A presence. Palpable. Crushing. The scent of cologne thickened the air—familiar, wrong, a ghost from her past. She tried to move. Tried to scream. But her body refused. The weight grew heavier, pressing against her chest—squeezing breath from her lungs. It wasn't just on her. It was inside her mind now. A vile essence—slithering through her thoughts, coiling into every crevice.

Then it turned violent.

She fought—every muscle screaming in silence, her spirit buckling under pressure she couldn't see. It rolled her, held her down—an almost ritual force, unnatural and absolute. What came next, she couldn't name. Only the searing aftermath remained. Not just a memory. A mark. Her body, her will, her soul—violated.

When she awoke, her body was rigid—locked in a perfect coffin pose. Arms folded across her chest. Legs straight and unmoving. She couldn't even summon the strength to turn her head. Her mind pulsed with a single, relentless thought: *You're mad. You've always been mad.* It hissed beneath the surface of consciousness—venomous, coaxing—urging her to claw out her own eyes, to destroy the visions before they could take shape. She clenched her fists until her nails cut into flesh, the pain her only anchor—proof she was still alive. Still real. Still herself.

But the worst part—the part she could never say aloud—was that the voice didn't belong to some faceless demon. It was his. Her father's voice. Low. Inevitable. Smiling in the dark.

And as she trembled on the cold floor of that rented room in Cartagena, his voice filled her head with those terrible words, over and over: *"You've always belonged to me. Belonged to me. Belonged to me."*

The following day had passed in a haze of terror. She awoke with blood crusted at her temples. Lifting her gown, she felt glyphs etched into her skin—not carved, but bruised, as if marked from within. *It was real. It had happened.* Throughout the day, every scent, every voice, every sound felt charged—vibrating with unseen malice.

In the evening, she remembered standing in the kitchen, hands gripping the counter, mouth moving. When Frank found her, she was speaking—fluently, passionately—in a language she had never learned. One Frank had never heard. Her face turned toward the oven—its black reflective surface like a void. Listening. Not inert, but attentive. As if something on the other side had been waiting. As if peering within, or through, the oven's sheen, she had seen it—a train station. Ghosts. Remnants of forms. Waiting endlessly for trains that never came.

She had pleaded with Frank—showing him the bruises, tracing their strange shapes with trembling fingers.

"They're not random," she whispered. *"They're ancient sigils. Markings of a beast. And this wasn't the first time."*

But he had already begun to recoil. That was Frank's breaking point. He pulled her away—his grip firm, but his voice trembling. *"We're going home,"* he'd said.

The honeymoon was over.

End Flashback

{*Sounds without. Thunder approaching, closer.*}

Now, sitting across from his new wife, Frank exhaled sharply. His voice was calm, but edged with frustration. As if reading her thoughts, he said:

“What happened in Cartagena was alarming. Then the next night. Then this morning.”

He leaned forward slightly, his tone smoothing—measured concern, dressed as compassion.

“I just want to make sure everything’s fine. That’s all. It’s better to eliminate what we can. And no one is better than Stephen Kraepelin.”

He paused, softening.

“I trust him completely. He’s helped so many people.”

Marianne’s stomach turned. Frank’s unwavering faith in Kraepelin was beginning to nettle her, thread by thread. She remembered meeting him— at Frank’s insistence—during a Christmas party two years ago. Something about his handshake— cold, lingering— had filled her with quiet, suffocating dread. His voice, deep and deliberate, had moved like a predator circling prey. And the way he’d spoken of his work... “*The mind is a doorway*,” he’d said. The phrase still echoed in her bones. And now, with thunder drawing closer, it returned again—not as metaphor, but as a warning.

“Frank...” she began hesitantly, her voice trembling. “I’ve told you before—he makes me uncomfortable.”

The words swirled in her head—cold, clinical phrases she’d overheard over the years, but never fully understood: *Cognitive Compliance Science. Ontological Stability Therapy. Psychoseotic Engineering. Neuro-Codic Realignment*. They sounded harmless—technical. But to her, each one felt like a scalpel. Sharp. Foreign. Designed to cut away something essential. Something *human*.

Frank frowned, just slightly, but kept his tone even. He set his cup on the coffee table, stood, then crossed to her. Kneeling before her, he took her hands in his—gentle, practiced. His expression softened, his voice low, reassuring.

“I understand, Marianne. But Stephen isn’t just anyone. He’s brilliant. Unconventional, yes—but that’s *why* he’s the best at what he does.”

He held her gaze.

“Whatever this is—there’s a solution. Honestly, we’re lucky it happened in Cartagena and not here.”

Marianne looked away. *Unconventional*. That was one way to put it. She remembered the Christmas party—standing just beyond the library doors—when Kraepelin’s voice had floated through, deep and unhurried. Words like *threshold*, *entities*, and *sacrifice* had drifted through the air like poisonous smoke. At the time, she’d told herself it was nothing—academic posturing, wine-fueled ego, her own unease.

But now— with everything spiraling, with her body still haunted by glyphs and dreams— her instincts were no longer whispering. They were screaming: *Resist*.

Frank squeezed her hands gently, anchoring her—pulling her back into the moment. His eyes were earnest, searching hers for something she couldn’t give.

“I want to help you, Marianne. I want you to remember who you are,” he said, his tone firm but warm. “You’re Marianne Lincecum—the little girl who stunned the world with her paintings, the child art prodigy of the twenty-first century. And you’re my wife.”

He paused, voice dipping.

“What’s happening to you... this isn’t the Marianne I fell in love with. I don’t want to see you suffer like this.”

{*A sudden sound within.*}

The doorbell buzzed—sharp, insistent, cutting through the charged silence. Marianne turned her head slightly. Her expression was blank, but her fingers twitched.

“Are we expecting someone?”

Frank checked his watch, already moving toward the door.

“I asked your sister to bring over the gift I got for you,” he said, his tone smoothing. “Something to remind you of who you are.”

He offered a small smile, gentle and practiced— as if the gesture might patch the growing fracture between them.

“I have to leave earlier than planned,” he added. “And Sadie... well, she won’t be up for a while, I imagine. I didn’t want you to be alone.”

Marianne stiffened. Her sister. *Lydia*. The name curled in her stomach like a tightening thread.

“*You’re not...* taking me to Dr. Kraepelin?” she asked, her voice brittle— teetering between hope and dread.

Frank paused, hand on the doorknob. He turned, studying her. For a moment, something flickered in his eyes— surprise, perhaps, or calculation. Then the mask returned. Calm. Steady.

“Not yet,” he said. “Lydia will take you.”

His tone had sharpened—clipped, as though her reaction had disappointed him. Marianne’s lips parted slightly, but no words came. She folded her hands tightly in her lap, trying to still the quiver in her fingers. Frank sighed, the edge of weariness creeping in.

“She’s your sister, Marianne,” he said—disapproval veiled, but audible.

He stepped closer. His shadow fell across her. A hand on her shoulder. Brief. Measured. More obligation than comfort.

“She’s your sister,” he repeated, softer now—almost to himself—as if rehearsing a line he needed to believe.

Then he turned and walked toward the door. Marianne sat motionless, listening to his footsteps fade.

Lydia.

Their encounters had always been polite but strained—a wall of unspoken history wedged between them. Lydia had been the perfect daughter. Obedient. Loyal to their mother’s ambition. Immaculate in appearance, in planning. The golden child who never questioned, never faltered, never drew suspicion. But Marianne had long suspected—perhaps always—that Lydia’s loyalty ran deeper than simple compliance. Even in youth, her quick smiles and polished words had felt rehearsed. Like a performance perfected long before the audience ever arrived.

Now, Lydia’s presence always stirred unease—like stepping beneath a microscope, studied by someone who knew exactly where to look. The perfect sister, with her flawless composure and ever-measured tone, could peel back Marianne’s defenses with a single glance. And yet—beneath that polished façade, something else lingered.

A shadow Lydia couldn’t entirely conceal. It moved behind her eyes. Not malice exactly... but something watchful. Something waiting.

{Perge.}

Chapter II: The Watchful Eye

Enter the Moon.

ARGUMENT.

Marianne is caught off guard when her sister, Lydia Lincecum, arrives unexpectedly with a small, symbolic gift. Lydia’s concern feels rehearsed, her visit more like a calculated ambush than a familial call. She presses Marianne about her son, Clovis Hawke, her words honeyed but edged with hidden intent. Lydia urges her to trust Dr. Kraepelin—the name that tightens dread in Marianne’s chest. When their tense exchange is interrupted by strange men quietly installing a monitoring system, their clinical efficiency confirms Marianne’s fear: something unseen is closing in.

L Lydia Lincecum stepped through the doorway, a flat rectangular object wrapped in brown paper tucked neatly under her arm. She moved with the effortless grace of someone long accustomed to commanding attention—fluid and deliberate, like an artist who knew the power of each step. The light behind her caught the faint shimmer of her dress—pale silk threaded with silver arcs, the fabric catching the morning light even in the dim room. Subtle patterns—barely perceptible—curved and flowed like tides when she moved. She greeted Frank with a casual kiss on the cheek, her lips brushing lightly, though her hand lingered on his jaw—a gesture too intimate to be mistaken for mere friendliness.

“Hello, Frank,” she said, her voice smooth and low, every syllable deliberate.

Her fingers trailed down his cheek—almost *caressing*, but with a precision that felt calculated, almost predatory.

“So tanned.”

Frank smiled, tightly. He stepped back just enough to break the contact—not abruptly, but with the studied caution of someone aware of being watched. His gaze shifted quickly toward Marianne, who sat silently on the couch, her hands smoothing the fabric of her skirt in tight, repetitive motions.

“Thank you, Lydia,” he said, his voice even—a practiced neutrality stretched over something far more brittle.

Lydia stepped further into the room, her eyes sweeping the space with the slow deliberation of someone taking inventory—not of décor, but of order. She paused at the windows, her silhouette cast sharply against the light filtering through the gauzy curtains.

"It's a lovely home," she said, turning back toward them. Her smile was faint. Her expression unreadable.

"Stunning, actually," she added.

Her gaze drifted down the hallway, her eyes tracing the architecture with the meticulous air of someone searching for cracks—not structural, but symbolic.

"Who helped with the design?"

"Amanda Forsyth," Frank replied, evenly.

Lydia arched an eyebrow. Her lips curled into a knowing smile.

"Amanda?" she said softly. "Well... the mystery of Frank Roarke deepens."

She let the words linger. Her eyes scanned the walls again—not like an interior designer, but like a *seer reading glyphs*. As if the geometry held secrets only she could decode. Then, turning to Marianne, her voice dipped—quiet, controlled. The air seemed to grow heavier.

"I suppose I should be... very careful within these walls."

Setting the parcel against the wall, Lydia took Marianne's hand and leaned in to kiss her cheek. Her palms lingered at Marianne's temples, as if reading a text hidden beneath the skin.

"You look tired," she murmured—soft, but unmistakably pointed.

Marianne tensed beneath the touch. Lydia's observations always landed like veiled indictments.

"She's had a long journey," Frank offered smoothly.

Lydia turned to him. For a breath, something dark flickered between them—an old familiarity dressed as civility.

"Yes," she said lightly. "Travel can wear the soul thin."

She returned her gaze to Marianne, gave her hand a faint squeeze, then stepped back.

"We brought you something," she said, motioning to the parcel. "A small reminder of who you truly are... and what you've always been."

The phrasing struck Marianne like a chord struck twice. She stiffened slightly. *Again*. That exact phrase. It felt too deliberate. Too polished. As if Lydia and Frank had rehearsed it—*like lines from a script they were both following*.

Frank watched Lydia closely as she spoke, his expression stoic, though the tight set of his shoulders betrayed unease. Lydia, of course, noticed. She always noticed.

"A very important gift," Frank said, still watching her.

"It's not just a gift, Frank," Lydia replied, her smile slow and sly. "It's far more... consequential."

The air thickened. Lydia stepped back, clasping her hands in front of her with the grace of a celebrant presiding over a silent rite. Frank folded his arms, leaning into the wall. "Consequential," he echoed, flat-toned but alert.

"Yes," she said, meeting his gaze without flinching. "Only we artists understand. Creation isn't expression—it's invocation. Magic. A shaping of thought into flesh. Birth, Frank. Not metaphor. A sacred ritual. Actual genesis."

She turned to Marianne, eyes glittering with something unspoken.

"But I wouldn't expect a man of vows to grasp the cost."

For a moment, the room held its breath. Marianne felt the weight of something just beneath the words—something she wasn't ready to remember. Frank's lips curved slightly.

"Oh, I grasp cost just fine."

He stepped forward, slow and measured, like a man accustomed to operating in silence. His hands came together loosely, almost absently, as if preparing for something delicate.

"I'm just more adept with a scalpel than a canvas."

Their eyes held. The air between them tightened—not with violence, but with mutual recognition. Two artists. Very different media.

"Yours bleeds before it's born," he added, voice quiet. "Mine bleeds after."

Lydia's lips curled, though her eyes didn't blink. She turned abruptly to Marianne.

"Well, it's lovely to see you both again," she said, voice syrupy and bright. But her gaze sliced through the pleasantries, landing squarely in Marianne's mind. "This home is... elegant. Just right for your particular needs. And this," she added, gesturing to the parcel, "will complete the aesthetic. A small piece... of *you*."

"Well, I've got to run," Frank said, slipping into his jacket with fluid ease. "Lydia will take you to Kraepelin's, then the driver will bring you to Knicely. If you need anything, call the office."

"No, no—I'll pick her up," Lydia cut in smoothly. "I'll be nearby. Just a few errands on King's Street."

"Perfect," Frank replied, adjusting his cuffs.

At the door, he paused. His tone was neutral, but his words landed like deliberate moves on a board.

"Oh—nearly forgot. Some men will be by soon to install monitors, an intercom, and a phone entry system. Shouldn't take long."

Marianne stiffened. *Monitors*? Her pulse kicked. She gripped the armrest, knuckles whitening. The room felt heavier now, as if it had grown eyes. Lydia turned slowly toward her, smile faint but razor-fine.

“Well,” she murmured, “isn’t that thoughtful of Frank. Now he can always keep an eye on you.” Frank nodded, oblivious—or perhaps not—and strode out the door without another word.

{Exit Tower.}

Lydia moved to her bag and retrieved a slim black case.

“I brought you something else,” she said, opening it with practiced ease, indulgent as ever.

“You didn’t have to—”

“Sunglasses,” Lydia interrupted, slipping the frames onto Marianne’s face without pause. “Very chic on you.”

Marianne froze for a moment. Her fingers drifted to the frames, adjusting them by instinct. The smile she summoned was thin, brittle. She had always known: Lydia couldn’t bear to look at her eyes.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“Chopard,” Lydia said, the brand name purring off her tongue like absolution. “On sale.”

She turned toward the window, gaze drifting idly across the street.

{Thunder rolls. A few thick drops begin to tap against the glass.}

Peering at the building across the street, Lydia imagined its drab interiors and the faceless lives sealed within.

“Frank was right to choose Amanda,” she said at last, her voice crisp, as if snapping herself back to the apartment’s design.

Her gaze drifted downward to the street—where rain-glazed crowds slogged past like cattle in a trough. A faint scowl tugged at her mouth. Then, brightening—artificially—she said:

“It’s a lovely day, though. Everyone’s alive and going about their business. So full of life. Isn’t that what we like to see?”

Her tone was flat beneath the polish, a brittle cheer overlaying something colder.

“Predictability,” she added, turning to Marianne, “is the cornerstone of a psychologically healthy society. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Weary of Lydia’s self-satisfied musings, Marianne cut in.

“I got you something, too,” she said, nodding toward the living room. “There’s a leather bag on the table. Sadie and I found it in Cádiz—hidden in the ruins beneath the old Phoenician quarter.”

Lydia raised an eyebrow, gliding toward the bag. Her fingers brushed the worn leather with reverence, then opened it to reveal a small, ancient object.

“A Punic mask,” she said, voice sharpening with interest.

“I thought you’d like it. Frank had a contact in Ibiza,” Marianne replied, her breath measured.

Lydia lifted the mask toward the light. Its grotesque grimace was caught between menace and surrender—half ward, half invocation.

“What a face,” she murmured. “Such tension in the expression... Punic masks were meant to repel evil, but this one—this one’s different. It doesn’t resist. It receives.”

She turned it slightly, the carved eyes catching the lightning outside.

“What do you think it represents?” Marianne asked, voice low, testing.

“Madness,” Lydia answered without hesitation. Her eyes never left the mask.

{Thunder rolls. A crack of lightning bleeds through the glass.}

Marianne flinched at the crack of lightning. Her hand flew to her chest as she steadied her breath, pulling herself back into composure. Lydia remained unmoved. Her gaze stayed fixed—calculating, interpretive.

“A particular kind of agony,” she mused. “Like standing at the threshold and staring into the Abyss. But in his case, the Abyss didn’t just stare back—it swallowed him whole.”

She set the mask down gently. Its hollow eyes cast crooked shadows across the polished table. A smirk touched her lips. The flicker in her eyes was almost playful, but too sharp to be kind.

“Poor thing saw something he wasn’t meant to,” she said, her voice silken in mock-pity. “And it ruined him.”

Marianne’s stomach twisted. Unease rooted deep. Her mind drifted to Clovis—her anchor, her terror. A memory crept in, soft as shadow. Their last morning before the honeymoon: she’d been listening to the rustle of sparrows on Rhett’s veranda when Clovis barreled into her arms, shaking with excitement. “*I found strange plants in the garden,*” he whispered breathlessly. “*When they bloom... you’ll think you’re mad.*” Before she could respond, his small fingers looped a necklace around her neck with trembling, ritual care. “*This will protect you from dragons and serpents,*” he said. “*The ones that grow in your heart.*” She’d been too stunned to speak. The weight of his words pressed heavier than the charm itself. Across the patio, Frank watched, she could feel his scowl already forming—calculating how soon to call Dr. Kraepelin.

Now, her fingers brushed the pendant. Her fear surged—not for herself, but for him. Her heart pounded as she fought to stay grounded in the room, in the moment. She gripped the necklace tighter. Lydia, meanwhile, continued examining the mask. Her tone had turned brisk, almost clinical.

“The horns remind me of Noh masks. Demonic... but grieving. Not resisting evil—surrendering.”

She traced a finger along its etched jaw, then smirked. “Poor soul. Saw something he shouldn’t have.”

The repetition struck Marianne. It wasn’t casual. It was an incantation.

Lydia tilted her head, murmuring—half to herself, half to the air:

“Never stare into the Abyss.”

The words hung, cold and deliberate. A shiver ran down Marianne’s spine. She clenched the necklace until her knuckles blanched.

“Thank you,” Lydia added, almost as an afterthought, her gaze lingering on the artifact. “It’ll make a fine addition to my collection.”

Her gaze settled on Marianne, who was absently twisting the pendant between her fingers. Lydia’s eyes narrowed with a flicker of recognition. She stepped closer, her voice low, almost reverent.

“You found your old necklace,” she said.

Marianne paused, startled. “My necklace?”

“Yes,” Lydia said, a faint smile touching her lips. “Don’t you remember? You crafted it when you were six. Maybe seven.”

She studied the pendant, her tone drifting into something more clinical.

“Obsidian... veined with mercury. And dried blood. *Your* blood.”

Marianne blinked, caught off-guard. “I... don’t remember using... *blood* for my art.”

Lydia’s smile deepened, a touch too knowing.

“No. Of course you don’t. But at that age,” she added, her tone smooth and disconcertingly casual, “you loved working with... unorthodox materials. Particularly blood. Anything that could be transformed. You said this was your *talisman*.”

A long pause followed. The pendant felt suddenly heavier in Marianne’s hand.

“It disappeared over a decade ago,” Lydia went on. “Where did you find it?”

Marianne looked down. “Clovis found it.”

Lydia froze, her smile faltering just slightly.

“Did he?”

{*A sound within.*}

The doorbell buzzed, and Lydia turned her head slightly, her expression blank.

“Must be the men,” she said, rising smoothly from her seat. “Let’s review that later.”

{*Enter the Three and Four of Swords.*}

She opened the door to find two men standing in perfect stillness—mirror images in posture, each holding a sleek black case etched with barely perceptible glyphs. Their introductions were curt, voices flat and affectless, like pre-recorded announcements played through human mouths. Lydia stepped forward, eyes drifting to their name tags with feline curiosity.

“Gideon... and Oran,” she read aloud, savoring the syllables like a half-forgotten chant.

Gideon extended a gloved hand, offering her a matte-black business card. Lydia turned it over slowly, her lips curving as she read: *Aegis Cognitive Solutions. For peace of mind... everywhere.*

She let the tagline linger in the air, weighted and ironic. Her gaze slid back to the men—clinical, unreadable, dressed in stillness.

“Please,” she said, stepping aside. “Do come in.”

They removed their shoes without a word and moved through the living room toward the stairs. Lydia watched them pass, calm and unblinking—but her eyes tracked their every movement, like a cat stalking the precise rhythm of prey. The second man paused at the base of the stairs, his head tilting slightly—as if receiving a signal no one else could hear. He didn’t turn fully, just cast a brief glance over his shoulder, his eyes catching Lydia’s. For an instant, something passed between them. Not recognition, not threat—something older. Too subtle to name, too charged to ignore. Lydia’s expression didn’t shift, yet her face seemed to hold both a smile and its absence. Then the man turned and followed his partner upstairs. No words. No sound. Just the faint trailing silence of something unfinished.

{*Exit Three and Four of Swords.*}

"He's handsome," Lydia remarked, her gaze still fixed on the spot where the man had stood. Her lips remained frozen, as if clinging to the invisible thread of their unspoken exchange. Her eyes—sharp, calculating—scanned the empty air, as though searching for the residue of something unsaid.

Then, abruptly, they snapped back to life. Her mouth curved into a small, knowing smile.

"Well," she said briskly, breaking the silence. "Where's Sadie?"

"Sleeping. She can't sleep on flights—was up for almost twenty-four hours."

"And you?" Lydia's voice turned lightly mocking, almost sing-song. "Those transatlantic flights can be... unforgiving. So much ocean beneath you. All that depth. The kind that pulls at the mind if you think on it too long."

Marianne's spine stiffened.

"I slept a little," she said tightly, hearing the edge beneath Lydia's words. It wasn't just teasing. It was calibrated discomfort.

Lydia *knew* how the thought of flying over the deep unsettled her. Lydia's smile faded. Her tone shifted—smoother now, more deliberate.

"Clovis will be so happy to see you," she murmured, stepping forward so silently it felt like a glide.

Marianne didn't realize how close she'd come until Lydia's hand landed on her shoulder. She flinched—hard. As if a stranger had materialized behind her. Or something worse.

{Heavy rain drops, increasing in intensity.}

"We spent some good time together while you were away," Lydia said, her voice low and polished, almost conspiratorial.

Marianne steadied her breath.

"Did you take him to the museum?"

Lydia paused, eyes drifting to the window where the rain had thickened into a steady curtain.

"It's really coming down," she murmured, as if speaking only to the glass.

Then, turning toward the fireplace, she added, almost wistfully, "Among other things."

The flames crackled softly as her eyes fixed on the firelight. Her tone dropped, softer now, as if unspooling a memory that wasn't quite hers.

"We went several times to The Simulacrum Conservatory. He insisted—called it a museum, but it felt like more than that. Virtual environments, AI art installations... the Lotus Arcade he's so taken with. Places designed to expand imagination. Or maybe... control it."

She let the thought linger, as though expecting Marianne to bite.

"He told me there's a top floor," she added lightly. "Restricted access. Rooms no one talks about anymore."

A faint smile ghosted across her lips.

"Probably true."

She turned back to Marianne, her expression composed, her voice suddenly brighter.

"We even tried to sneak up there—he was quite determined—but a pesky security guard spoiled the fun." She gave a soft, practiced laugh. "Clovis really is... fascinating. And is it true he was accepted into the Systems Synthesis Program? With Dr. Wren?"

Marianne gave a slow, quiet nod.

"Imagine," Lydia said, her tone feather-light. "He might be a veritable child prodigy."

She lingered on the phrase.

"He has such... remarkable potential, doesn't he? He told me that he'd developed a video game. Quite an elaborate one, apparently—coding complex systems at his age." She smiled faintly. "It speaks to a certain kind of genius."

The words hung in the air like perfume—sweet, but laced with something bitter. Though the compliment was aimed at Clovis, Marianne felt the sting. Lydia hadn't praised her son—she'd *claimed him*. And beneath the admiration, Marianne could hear it: a quiet erasure of her own brilliance.

"Well, Clovis is growing up so quickly, isn't he?" Lydia murmured. "Becoming his own person. But..."

She trailed off, her voice dipping—less like a comment, more like a private thought spoken aloud.

"I do worry about how his mind works, sometimes. Frank says it's just his age, but I don't know... there's something in his eyes. That glimmer. That intensity."

"What are you talking about?" Marianne's voice came sharper than intended, defensive and raw.

Lydia, still watching the flames, didn't flinch. Her smile returned, faint and fleeting, barely touching her eyes—a shimmer of calculation beneath the calm. She'd expected the reaction. Planned for it. Without a word, she drifted across the floor toward the window, her movement silent, seamless—as if gliding across a dream. Marianne, still staring blindly into the fire, didn't hear her go. She only *felt* her—the sudden chill of her nearness. Then Lydia's voice broke the silence.

"Nothing, nothing," she said breezily, eyes fixed on the glittering glass of the building across the street. "Just... I wonder if you're giving him everything he needs."

Marianne's head jerked to the side, confusion flaring behind her eyes. Her ears scanned the room—but Lydia was already across it, back turned, gazing through the rain-slicked glass.

"What are you talking about?" Marianne asked again, sharper now—defensive, unsettled.

Lydia spoke softly, as if narrating a thought to herself. "Children need stability. Structure. Discipline. They need to believe the adults in their lives today will still be there tomorrow."

Her voice thinned, trailing into something almost wistful.

"He's so imaginative. And with great imagination comes great... sensitivity. What happens when he starts asking questions you can't answer? When he starts *feeling* things he shouldn't?"

"My son is absolutely fine," Marianne snapped, a crack of ferocity in her voice. But her chest tightened. Something in Lydia's words had snagged deep—and wouldn't let go.

"Of course he is," Lydia cooed, turning toward her now, the sweetness in her tone too smooth to be sincere. "No one doubts that."

Then her voice dropped again, more solemn now, more surgical.

"But imagine what it would mean for him... if he saw too much of the world too soon. The things he might learn. The *truths* he might stumble into."

She paused, her gaze steady, almost tender.

"Some truths, Marianne, are better left unseen. For *his* sake."

Marianne felt ambushed. Her pulse kicked hard against her ribs. A chill ran through her, something primal and protective rising inside her like a whisper of dread.

"What should be left unseen?" she asked, her voice trembling despite herself.

She hated the tremble. Hated how much Lydia could still make her feel like a child out of her depth. Lydia leaned in, close—too close. Her breath grazed Marianne's neck, cool as glass. Marianne froze, her pulse spiking.

"We don't want him to see you fall apart again," Lydia whispered. "Like in Cartagena."

Marianne flinched, her head jerking. "I wasn't—" she started, but Lydia's voice sliced through her protest.

"We don't want him hearing you speaking in tongues to an oven. Or watching you hold full conversations with a ghost... about rotting corpses."

She paused. Let it linger. Then, with a touch of theatrical pity:

"Or screaming about being raped by a demon."

The final word hit the room like a shattering pane.

"A boy his age can't handle that," Lydia said, voice cold and clipped, as if delivering not a concern but a diagnosis. A final verdict. Then, without warning, she strode toward Marianne with quiet authority.

"Lift up your robe."

Marianne blinked, lifting her head.

"What?"

"I want to see."

"It's nothing."

Lydia didn't hesitate. Her hand moved, grasping the fabric with firm insistence.

"Let me see."

With a long breath, Marianne relented. She slowly lifted the robe. The bruises were still fresh—dark, blooming, erratic. But there was a rhythm to them. A shape. Lydia knelt slightly, eyes narrowing as she examined the marks. She didn't speak at first. She was studying. Reading.

"You must've been thrashing in your sleep," she said finally, the words mechanical.

But her gaze lingered—longer than necessary. She tilted her head slightly, and her lips parted, just a fraction. The bruises weren't random. They formed patterns. Sigils. Familiar. Recognizable. Ancient. She straightened slowly, eyes still fixed on the marks. But said nothing more.

Then—like flipping a switch—she straightened fully, stepping back with a soft click of heels on the wood floor. She glided toward the sofa, smoothing her skirt as she sat. Her voice lightened, almost coaxing.

"You know, Clovis needs you to be steady. He needs you to stay... who you are."

A pause.

"And what happens, Marianne, if you lose that?"

Marianne sat frozen, her chest cinched tight—guilt and fury coiling beneath her ribs.

"I was distraught by Ada's death," she murmured, the words barely audible. "It was just... a lot. Too much."

Lydia lowered herself onto the sofa with the poise of a high priestess descending to her throne.

"Ada's death..." she repeated, voice honeyed. "Yes, tragic. But is it really worth losing yourself over?"

Her tone was gentle—too gentle.

"Everyone has breaking points, Marianne. But the key is knowing how and when to put yourself back together. Frank and I—well, we learned that long ago. We learned how to manage these things."

"Manage?" Marianne echoed, voice thin and bitter. "You mean by pretending nothing's wrong?"

Lydia's eyes narrowed. The sweetness drained.

"Not pretending," she said sharply. "Holding. Holding what matters. The world doesn't pause for grief, and neither should we."

Her gaze fixed on Marianne now, low and unblinking.

"Clovis needs you. And the rest of us... we need you to stay steady."

Then, softening again—mocking in its concern:

"It's impressive, really. After everything... you're still here. Most people would've fallen apart ages ago. But you—well. You only fell apart *recently*."

A tremor passed through the silence. Lydia tilted her head, studying Marianne's face with the calm detachment of a physician noting symptoms. She saw it—the lips pressed into a white line, the brow tightening, the breath caught in the throat. And she smiled.

"I'm not falling apart, Lydia," Marianne said, slowly, deliberately—her voice emerging like smoke through clenched teeth. Each word was embalmed in venom. Quiet, but unmistakable.

"Of course not. You're not falling apart *at all*," Lydia said, eyes rolling, voice soaked in sarcasm. "I talk to my oven constantly. It's my personal therapist."

She let out a light laugh, cool and performative.

"We'll only need to worry when the oven starts talking back."

Marianne exhaled slowly, the breath dragging her spine straighter.

"I *did* fall apart," she said quietly. "In Cartagena. But I'm not falling apart now. That was a moment. And it passed."

Lydia's lip curled into a faint, involuntary sneer. Her eyes flicked away, head tilting, a small shake before she forced a brittle smile.

"We all suppress things, Marianne. But not like you. You've been doing this since you were a girl—stuffing everything down, pretending it's not there. It isn't natural."

She leaned in, her voice soft but sharp as a scalpel.

"And honestly... I wonder if that's why people like you get so sick."

Marianne didn't respond, her face tightening.

"What was bubbling beneath all that control in Cartagena?" Lydia continued. "What erupted so violently? What are you *really* repressing, Marianne? Because memories don't stay buried forever."

She paused, letting the silence settle like ash.

"Eventually, they start... calling."

Marianne's eyes widened—barely. Her lips quivered with hesitation.

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying you should talk. Open up. Seek help." Lydia's tone now turned feignedly kind, but it was laced with bait. "Stop bottling everything. I know it feels like control—but it isn't. Not really. It's a cage. And it's crushing you. You collapsed under the weight of your own making in Cartagena."

She smiled faintly.

"You could have your freedom back, you know. If you'd just... let go."

Marianne raised an eyebrow, voice cool, gaze sharpening.

"And I suppose *you* came here to help me?"

"Yes. Actually, I did." Lydia's chin lifted, her eyes narrowing. She was ready now—knife in hand, metaphorical and precise.

"Do you know why I'm here, Marianne?" she asked, her tone shifting again—ritualistic, almost performative. "Because you have no one else. No one else who will tell you the truth."

She leaned forward, voice low and deliberate.

"Your husband is terrified you'll be sent to the Tower if you stay this stubborn. He thinks you're spiraling. He thinks you're childish."

A pause.

"And Frank—" she smiled faintly "—Frank fears he'll be a single father before the year is out."

Something broke inside Marianne. A shimmer of tears threatened to rise, but she blinked them back, hardening her face into something cold and still.

"Frank... said that?" Marianne asked, her gaze dropping. Her cheeks burned with the sting of unspoken guilt. But her hands gripped the armrests, knuckles whitening—anchoring herself, refusing to drift.

Lydia leaned back into the sofa, crossing her legs with effortless grace. Her shoulders squared, her posture composed, her gaze calmly fixed. She softened her tone—only slightly—slipping into the voice of calculated care.

"There's medication for this, you know. You're not the only one who goes through things like this."

"I'd rather not," Marianne said quietly. But the weight in her voice betrayed her. It wasn't defiance—it was fatigue. A woman who feared she'd already lost the fight.

"You *will* take medication," Lydia replied flatly, voice cool with authority. "What, you think you're exempt? You think you're too special to need help?"

She gave a dry laugh, waving a hand as if brushing away the idea.

"You think I don't take something? Mom? Even Frank, I'd wager—though he'd never admit it. How else do you think he stays so calm?"

Marianne opened her mouth, then paused. "I don't trust—"

But the rest died in a sigh. Deflated. Fraying at the edges. Lydia leaned forward. Her gaze held steady now—sympathetic on the surface, but beneath it, cold and immovable. Her words pressed into the air like fog: slow, invisible, suffocating.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of, Marianne. We all have to uphold appearances. Predictability makes everything easier. Routines go smoothly. People need that. *Clovis* needs that."

She said it lightly, but the weight of it fell hard.

"We all find ways to pretend nothing's wrong," Lydia continued. "Not just for ourselves—but for others."

She paused, measuring Marianne, as if tuning a frequency.

"You know... it's not a crime to seek relief from the weight of everything. Frank has his ways. I have mine."

Her voice softened, but her eyes stayed sharp.

"But you, Marianne... you're different. You need more."

A breath.

"Some people just need a way out. A way to find peace... amidst all this."

"What are you suggesting?" Marianne asked, rubbing her thighs slowly, a nervous tic. Her body braced for what was coming.

"I'm suggesting you take a step back," Lydia said, her voice smooth, deliberate. "Don't let these little cracks break you. You've been through a lot—but there's always a way to reset. You just have to think about what will make you whole again. For *Clovis*' sake. For your own."

"But what are you *really* suggesting?"

Lydia's eyes narrowed slightly, her tone flattening into something cold and bureaucratic.

"Dr. Kraepelin. You need to open up to him. Completely. Do whatever he says. Take the medication he prescribes. Your sanity is at stake, Marianne. It's clear to everyone."

The words chilled her. Marianne felt her cheeks go pale, her blood constrict. The thought of submitting to a man like Kraepelin—*of surrendering*—terrified her. Lydia leaned forward, voice now low and final.

"You could have a powerful ally in Dr. Kraepelin—if he trusts you'll submit to his authority. But if he senses reluctance, defiance, any trace of that... *stubbornness* of yours, you'll lose the only protection keeping you out of the Tower. He's not a man who wastes his time on hopeless cases."

Marianne's voice wavered as she leaned forward, her sunglasses locked onto Lydia, desperate.

"Well... something *was* wrong," she said, quietly. "It brought back memories—of Owen. And then Ada's suicide..."

Lydia cut her off, fast and sharp, rising slightly from the sofa like a striking blade.

"First of all, there was *nothing* suspicious about a drugstore robbery. It happens all the time. Owen was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Bad luck. Nothing more."

Her voice sharpened further, emotionless.

"And Ada—Ada had that *disease*. Madness. Confirmed by multiple reports. She killed herself. No one could have stopped her. No one."

She paused, letting the words settle like ice.

"Do you see the severity of this now?" she continued. "Frank's not worried about being a single father—he's afraid he'll be a *widower*."

She leaned closer, voice softening into venom.

"And what would that do to *Clovis*? To lose a mother that way? Do you think Frank—*Frank*—could raise a broken child? *Clovis* needs a mother, Marianne. A *steady* one. And you are not providing him what he needs."

Then, the final cut—sharp and unforgiving.

"Do you even care about them?"

She paused.

"And let's not forget," Lydia said softly, "how much sacrifice it took to bring *Clovis* into this world."

Marianne's spine straightened, her hands tightening on the armrests.

"You sacrificed so much already," Lydia went on, her voice now threaded with something darker. "Just to have him... *exist*."

Marianne's breath caught.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Lydia's smile didn't reach her eyes. They narrowed to slits, glittering with quiet triumph.

“Oh, Marianne,” she murmured. “Let’s not pretend. You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

A moment passed. Lydia leaned in, her voice silk and smoke.

“Let’s not forget what *I* sacrificed to bring Clovis into your world.”

Marianne’s head drooped, a long sigh slipping from her lips. Her mouth parted, but the sound that followed was thin and deflated—like something caving in, quietly. Lydia stepped forward, hands folded behind her back, her body tilting slightly forward—poised, watching.

“Don’t let this break you,” she said, calm and crisp. “You can’t afford another episode. Not in public. Not even in private.”

A pause. Measured. Perforated with dread.

“Not with this... mysterious illness going around.”

She circled slightly to Marianne’s side—just enough to enter her peripheral sense—and leaned in.

“Unless you want to stare into the *Abyss*.”

The words landed like a soft incantation—echoing something older, something still open. Then, her lips curved into a smile far too small to be friendly.

“Everyone’s watching.”

The words dropped like a hook, barbed and irreversible—less a warning than a confirmation.

{Perge.}

Chapter III: Layered Identities

Enter Strength.

ARGUMENT.

Sadie Sinclair, Marianne’s twenty-six-year-old live-in caretaker, weary from travel, returns expecting comfort—but finds the air dense with an unspoken dread. Clovis is missing. Lydia, smiling too perfectly, insists Marianne first see Dr. Kraepelin. Alarm cuts through Sadie’s exhaustion. Then, to further unsettle them, Lydia reveals her “gift”—a painting Marianne created as a child prodigy, before her blindness. The image stirs buried terror in Marianne and cracks something hidden in Sadie, her eyes darkening with old, unspoken trauma. A shadow seems to fall over the room. Marianne feels it—sanity itself, already slipping away.

Sadie Sinclair sauntered into the room, rubbing her eyes. Lydia turned, a soft smile tugging at her lips, her gaze flickering with something like approval. In leopard-print sleepwear that clung to her lithe frame, Sadie moved like a sleek, drowsy cat. Lydia leaned back on the sofa with practiced ease, one elbow resting on the armrest, legs crossing fluidly. Her eyes followed Sadie’s movements with a cool, unreadable intensity.

“Did we wake you, Kitty?” she asked, her mouth tightening into an amused smile. Her voice was light, teasing.

“No. The lightning did.”

Sadie squinted under heavy lids, pressing her hand against one eye as if lifting a weight. A sleepy smile spread across her lips—sharp, feline—only deepening the resemblance Lydia seemed to savor.

“Morning, Lydia,” Sadie murmured. “What time is it?”

“Quarter past eight.”

Sadie padded further into the room, collapsing beside Lydia in a theatrical sprawl. She sighed—a long, indulgent exhale—as she draped herself across the cushions.

"I hate traveling."

Lydia's lips parted, and for a fleeting moment, a lascivious glint slipped past her calculating mask. She caught herself—blinked, straightened, tilted her head.

"There's coffee in the kitchen," she said casually, her eyes flicking upward.

Sadie's arm landed limply—deliberately—on Lydia's thigh. Lydia's gaze dropped to the hand now resting on her leg. She didn't move. Her eyes lingered—askance, alert—as if a boundary had just been tested. Sadie tilted her head, brushing her chin against her shoulder as she turned. Her eyes sparkled beneath fluttering lashes, seductive and soft.

"Won't you fix me a cup?" she asked, mischief at the edge of each word.

Lydia's eyes locked with Sadie's. A silent duel stretched between them—teasing, taut. Then Lydia exhaled, lips parting in a theatrical sigh.

"Fine."

Sadie smiled, triumphant. She reclined deeper into the cushions, eyes closing in bliss.

"Yessss."

Lydia gently lifted Sadie's hand from her thigh and rose from the sofa. Her eyes traced the girl's figure—languid, supple.

"Anything for you, Pet," she murmured, her voice soft as breath. At the kitchen doorway, she paused. "But when I get back, you'll owe me a favor."

Sadie tilted her head, lips curled faintly. "Anything."

When Lydia returned, porcelain cup and saucer in hand, her movements were deliberate, controlled. But as she passed the coffee to Sadie, the cup rattled faintly against the saucer. Her composure faltered—just for a breath. Sadie noticed. Her smile widened.

"Careful, Lydia," she purred, voice silk-wrapped steel. "You might spill."

Lydia's breath caught, but she recovered, offering a thin smile.

"I never spill, darling," she replied coolly, though her voice lacked its usual bite. "Drink up. We have things to do."

"Things?" Sadie asked, raising an eyebrow. "Like what?"

"We need to get you dressed and ready."

Sadie's amusement faded. "Ready for what? We're not seeing Knicely until eleven."

Lydia's expression hardened. Her tone sharpened.

"We're taking Marianne somewhere first. To see Dr. Stephen Kraepelin."

The name landed heavy in the room, like a door shutting. Marianne shifted slightly in her chair, her head tilting toward the sound. Sadie sat upright, suddenly alert.

"Who's Dr. Stephen Kraepelin?" she asked, her voice steady, but edged with tension. Her gaze darted to Marianne, who remained silent—drawn and distant. Then, more urgently: "And where's Clovis? Shouldn't he be here?"

Only now did Sadie seem to truly register Marianne—seated stiffly in the wingback chair, her shoulders hunched, her eyes hidden behind the sunglasses Lydia had undoubtedly insisted she wear.

"Marianne?" Sadie's voice softened. She abandoned her coffee and stepped toward her. "Is everything okay?"

Marianne opened her mouth, but Lydia cut in, clipped and practiced.

"She's fine. No need to worry."

A pause—controlled, faintly patronizing.

"We're simply going to see a colleague of Frank's. Marianne hasn't been feeling like herself, and Dr. Kraepelin is an excellent psychiatrist."

Sadie's eyes moved between the two women. Marianne looked subdued, nearly withdrawn, while Lydia radiated the calm precision of someone steering the narrative. Something had happened. Something she hadn't been told.

"Where's Clovis?" she asked again, her voice firmer now. "Marianne wanted to see him this morning."

Lydia's lips thinned.

"I know. But this is important."

Sadie knelt beside Marianne, gently removing her sunglasses and taking her hand.

"What's wrong?" she asked softly, her concern unmistakable.

Lydia's eyes narrowed—barely—as she watched. There was something in the way Sadie lavished her attention on Marianne that sent a faint ripple of irritation through her. It wasn't jealousy, not quite. More a sense of imbalance—of misplaced focus. Sadie's devotion, so freely given, unbidden, stirred something cold and sharp beneath Lydia's calm. Marianne managed a faint smile, patting Sadie's hand.

"I'm fine," she said weakly.

Sadie hesitated. "Is this about Cartagena?" she whispered. "Is that why we had to leave early?"

Marianne fell silent. Lydia seized the pause. She lowered herself onto the sofa with quiet finality, reclaiming the space. Her gaze flicked to Sadie—cool, appraising—the irritation already buried beneath poise.

“Sadie,” she said lightly, but with edge, “I brought something to lift Marianne’s spirits. I brought you coffee; now it’s your turn.”

She gestured to the package propped against the wall.

“Unwrap that and hold it up. I want to assess from a distance.”

Sadie rose reluctantly, her fingers brushing Marianne’s as she stood. Lydia watched her cross the room—graceful, unhurried. For a fleeting moment, her gaze sharpened. She adjusted her posture, smoothed her skirt with a practiced hand. There was nothing wrong with Sadie offering comfort, of course. But there were boundaries. And Lydia preferred them kept in place.

As Sadie unwrapped the object, Lydia turned to Marianne.

“Frank acquired one of your earliest paintings.”

Marianne lifted her head. “I know.”

“You know?”

“Frank told me before we left.”

Lydia sighed.

“It was supposed to be a surprise,” she muttered. “It wasn’t easy to track down, you know,” she added, detecting Marianne’s tone. “*The Wounded Child*. Hidden away in Rheintalhome. God knows how he found it.”

Marianne stiffened. Her breath hitched as she turned away. Anger flared.

Frank had found it—dug it out of some obscure collection in that strange Swiss hamlet, resurrecting a ghost she’d buried. Just before the honeymoon, she’d spoken to Ada Belle about that day—the day she’d seen the vision that became one of her most famous works. She’d stood frozen on the shore, haunted by a wounded boy. The vision had seized her hand, guided the brush before she understood what she was painting.

It never felt like hers—only something that had passed through her.

She’d seen him clearly then: grotesque, broken child-God seated on a throne of wire and rotted wood. His limbs were twisted, gangrenous; his mouth gaped in a silent scream. His body was smeared in excrement and blood, yet his eyes—one blind, the other aflame—stared out with unbearable recognition. “*You were made to open the Womb*,” he’d said, his voice cold, inhuman—each word a sentence. “*You know the Code. And when the Womb breaks... the Abyss will remember you.*” The stench was unbearable—acidic, suffocating, like something already rotting. It mingled with the scent of ozone and rain, the air heavy with a coming storm. And just before the vision dissolved, he spoke one last line—soft, almost tender: “*But remember, child... what you open, you must also survive.*”

Lydia, still casually admiring Sadie’s supple movements, noticed the girl suddenly freeze.

She stood motionless.

Transfixed.

Her posture turned rigid, her gaze locked on the painting—as if tethered to it by something unseen.

Lydia leaned forward, curious now. The silence had thickened.

“Everything okay, Sadie?” she asked lightly, a smile tugging at her lips. She glanced toward Marianne. “She usually talks a gate off its hinges. She must be tired. Sadie? Still with us, Kitty?”

No response.

Sadie’s silence had taken on a new shape—unnerving.

Marianne tilted her head, catching the shift in tone.

“Sadie?” she called softly.

Lydia crossed the room, her movements fluid, surgical. She reached out, letting the backs of her fingers brush Sadie’s cheek, then paused—fingertips tracing the curve of her ankh earring.

“Sadie... what’s troubling you?”

As if waking from a trance, Sadie blinked rapidly and drew a sharp breath. Her voice came low, uncertain.

“I... I know this painting.”

Lydia’s eyebrow lifted. The smile remained, but her eyes narrowed.

“You do?” she asked, voice gentle, but taut. “How?”

Sadie didn’t look away. Her gaze stayed glued to the canvas. Her lips parted slightly, as if something long buried was clawing its way to the surface.

“Yes... I... know this painting,” she whispered again, voice trembling. As if she had just spoken something forbidden. “Who painted it?”

A slow smile curled across Lydia’s lips—but something flickered behind her eyes.

“Marianne,” she said softly. “She’s the artist.”

She leaned in, studying Sadie’s face.

For a moment, she swore she saw something—tiny sparks flickering behind Sadie’s eyes. Electric. Wrong.

It made Lydia hesitate.

“But how on earth,” she asked carefully, “do you know this painting?”

Sadie pressed her hands to her temples, as if holding her skull together. Something inside was trying to break out.

"This was painted by... Marianne Lincecum," she said, voice cracking.

The words startled Lydia. Her smile faltered. Something unreadable crossed her face—not surprise, not curiosity, but something colder. The kind of fear that rises only when the past creeps forward.

"Yes," she said carefully. "Marianne painted it. But... how do you know that?"

Sadie turned, her eyes wide—ablaze.

"I remember seeing it when I was little," she murmured, distant. "I was eight years old."

"This painting was featured in a few prominent magazines," Lydia said, shrugging—masking her discomfort. "But I'm surprised you were into art nouveau at that age. Especially in West Memphis. Quite the coincidence."

"Do you know Marianne Lincecum?" Sadie asked, her voice childlike, fragile—tinged with disbelief.

Lydia laughed softly, but tension leaked through.

"Marianne Lincecum is my sister, dear. She's your employer."

Sadie turned to Marianne, her expression twisted—clouded with confusion, like a mirror warping under heat.

"Sadie?" Marianne said gently. "It's me. Don't you remember? I told you I was an artist when I was a girl. Before I lost my eyesight."

Sadie shook her head. Her face slackened in horror.

Her eyes rose to Marianne's face—pleading, confused—as if she were speaking to a ghost.

"No. Marianne Lincecum is a child," she whispered. "She's... just a girl."

Lydia frowned. Her unease sharpened.

"That child grew up, Sadie. She's sitting across from you now."

Sadie didn't seem to hear her. Her voice grew distant, hollow.

"I remember West Memphis," she murmured. "Before the train disaster. Before the poisons. Before the wildfires. My mom... she showed me this painting in a magazine. She loved it. And... she took me to the museum in Washington. I saw Marianne Lincecum. In the flesh."

Lydia's brow furrowed, her tone tightening.

"That's highly unlikely, dear."

Sadie buried her face in her hands.

"Then Mommy took me home, and we talked about Marianne Lincecum. And then they all... just... died."

A pause.

"Sometimes I think I died with them."

A single tear slid down her cheek. She caught it on her fingertip and stared at it, transfixed.

"How does this body produce water?" she whispered. "Whose face is this?"

She turned to Marianne, voice trembling.

"Marianne?"

"Yes, Sadie?"

"Am I... a corpse?"

Marianne's breath hitched. "I... no. No, Sadie. You're not a corpse."

Sadie's eyes drifted again, her voice turning eerie.

"How does one tell if they're dead?" she asked. Not afraid—just curious.

Lydia leaned forward, her voice lowered.

"Pardon?"

Sadie's eyes snapped to her.

"What did they do to me?" she asked. "There were poisons. Everyone died. I must've died too."

She turned back to the painting, gaze unfocused, pupils dilating. A tremor passed through her hands.

"I... remember something else. Something strange..."

Lydia's posture stiffened.

"It was dark. Or maybe not. You said something. I think you said... Be still."

Her breath caught.

"And your hands were..."

Her voice faltered. She teetered on the edge of remembering.

"I don't understand. What did you—"

"Sadie," Lydia said sharply, her voice cutting the air like wire.

Her smile returned, too quick, too polished.

"You're exhausted. That's all. Let's not dwell on strange dreams."

Sadie's hands flew to her temples, pressing hard.

"But it wasn't a dream. I can feel it. I can feel—"

“Kitty,” Lydia murmured, her voice dipping into a soothing cadence. She leaned in. “Hush now.”
She snapped her fingers. Once. Then again.
The sharp sound echoed softly through the room.
Sadie blinked rapidly. Her breathing slowed. Her hands dropped to her sides. The tension in her body drained away.
Her eyes swept the room, unfocused—like someone waking from anesthesia.
“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I don’t know what came over me.”
Lydia exhaled, her smile widening with practiced warmth. She placed a hand on Sadie’s shoulder, rubbing gently.
“It’s okay, dear,” she cooed. “You must be exhausted. Let’s get you back to bed.”

{Exit Strength and Moon.}

Once her sister and Sadie had left the room, Marianne turned to the window. Her trembling fingers found the latch, and she pushed it open wider. Cool air rushed in to meet her fevered skin. She inhaled deeply. The scent of rain and earth—petrichor—filled her lungs, grounding her for a moment. But her heart still pounded, each beat threatening to crack her chest from within.

She closed her eyes, willing herself to forget the phrase that haunted her—the one Clovis had uttered so casually in the garden. But it echoed, relentless: *I found strange plants growing in the garden. And when the strange plants bloom, you will consider yourself mad.*

{Enter the Three and Four of Swords.}

Marianne straightened in her chair, attuned to the hum of tools and the occasional clink of hardware. Moments later, one of the men entered the living room. She leaned back slightly, fingers gripping the armrest. *What was he doing?* Then she felt it—a shift in the air, the faint vibration of his approach. Her pulse quickened.

“Come with me,” he said, low and firm. She sensed his hand extend toward her.

Marianne hesitated. “Where?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he took her hand—rough, too tight—and pulled her to her feet.

“I’ll show you how it works,” Gideon said, clipped and clinical. “The monitors.”

He guided her to the kitchen and stopped her in front of a smooth, unfamiliar panel.

Without asking, he took her hand and pressed her fingertip to a small indentation—a button she’d never have found.

“The system is advanced. Brand new. It’s called the Panopticode Array,” he said, voice flattening into monotone. “An integrated neuro-aesthetic system—wired into the architecture. Mirrors, walls, even the lights act as passive conduits for full-spectrum surveillance.”

He shifted her finger again.

“This is the central node. From here, you access every room. This button...”—he moved her hand—“...opens the servant’s quarters.”

Marianne’s spine stiffened.

“Care-taker,” she corrected sharply, her unease deepening.

Ignoring her correction, he pressed the button.

A video feed flickered to life—Lydia and Sadie lying on the bed.

The man nudged his partner, a smirk twitching at his lips. The other glanced at the screen, then at Marianne, grinning.

“You can speak to her if you need anything,” he said, tone edging toward insolence.

Marianne’s stomach twisted, but she said nothing.

He moved her finger to another button.

“This one’s for the front door. And this,” he added, shifting again, “is for roof access.”

Finally, he handed her a small, cold device.

“This links to everything. Press here in case of emergency. Keep it on you.”

Marianne nodded, stiff.

“Thank you,” she said, though her voice wavered.

The man lingered a moment too long, his presence heavy. Then, without a word, he turned away, quiet laughter trailing behind him as he rejoined his partner.

{Enter the Moon.}

Lydia descended the stairs with measured grace, her gaze locking once more with the same man. *Oran. Oran Kell.* A flicker of recognition passed between them—brief, but unsettling. Her lips curved into a faint smile.

“Oh good, you’ve got it working,” she said smoothly, her tone clipped—more matron than guest.

She gave the men a delicate wave, then turned to Marianne.

"I'm going to dash downstairs and grab some croissants. We'll have breakfast in the car—there's a charming bakery just below. Did you know that?"

She glanced back at the men, her tone shifting slightly.

"You're finished here, I presume?"

Both nodded—one clutching his toolbag, the other lingering. Lydia's eyes narrowed, barely, but her smile held.

"Excellent. I'm sure you left everything pristine."

The men gathered their things and headed for the door. Lydia turned to Marianne again.

"I'll be back shortly. Sadie's still resting—practically sleepwalking. It's a wonder she gets anything done."

Her voice carried an edge, softened by feigned amusement. She smoothed the hem of her jacket, flashed Marianne a practiced smile.

"Don't move a muscle. I won't be long."

With that, she glided out, her heels clicking softly across the polished floor. As the door shut behind her, a faint unease lingered—like the scent of something left unresolved.

{Exit the Three and Four of Swords and Moon.}

As the door clicked shut, Marianne stood motionless, listening to the silence settle in its wake. That familiar weight returned—desolation coiling in her chest. The nameless, gnawing sensation surged again—a whisper without source, a tide of unease pulling her loose from herself. She moved toward the living room, her steps unsteady. Nearing the table, a wave of weakness struck. Her body trembled, lightheaded.

Instinctively, she reached out—her palm landing on the Punic mask Lydia had left behind. Its cold, carved face—frozen in a grimace of madness—sent a jolt through her.

She gasped and recoiled, stumbling back.

Her knees buckled. She caught herself against the wall, breath shallow and rapid. The device slipped from her grip, clattering to the floor with an echo that rang too loud, too long.

She froze.

A presence moved through the room—not seen, but felt. Her skin prickled. The air tightened. The space seemed to contract, as if something had shifted its weight in the shadows.

"Is someone there? Sadie?" she called out, voice cracking.

Her legs gave way, and she dropped to her knees, groping across the floor for the fallen device. Her fingers met only the cold grain of wood.

"Who are you?" she whispered, then louder—more desperate. "Sadie, is it you?"

But the silence offered no reply.

A spark of reason cut through her panic, a desperate attempt to rationalize. *There's no one here. I'm imagining things. I'm being paranoid*, she thought, even as her heart raced in rebellion against the assurance.

Crawling blindly, she reached the wingback chair and pulled herself into it. Her breathing was labored, each inhale trembling as she clutched the armrests tightly, trying to convince herself she was safe. Yet the oppressive sensation of being watched refused to dissipate.

Avista. The sunroom dissolved, its familiar lines bleeding into something stranger. Light fractured, shadows writhing like living things. It was both the Roarke sunroom and her grandmother's childhood playroom in Carthage, Missouri—two realities layered imperfectly atop each other. The sleek furnishings gave way to the scent of aged wood and pastel colors. Marianne, fully grown, touched a wingback chair; but in the reflection, a young girl stared back. Her pulse quickened. Reality flickered—child and woman overlapping—memories and present tugging her deeper into the unraveling space.

{Perge.}

Chapter IV: Symbolic Representations of the Soul

Enter the Red One.

CANTO I

ARGUMENT.

A presence enters without a sound, yet the air thickens like a second, heavier atmosphere. Marianne freezes, breath catching in her throat. She doesn't need to turn—something has arrived. The man from this morning stands behind her. Unseen, but felt. His presence presses on the room like ancient stone, whispering of forgotten blueprints and structures older than memory. He isn't a guide. Not a hierophant. He is something else—an *architect*, a keeper of designs too vast and terrible to name. She doesn't turn. She feels his gaze, steady and merciless—not on her, but on the painting. Outside, the storm stirs. A low thunder rumbles through the walls, a warning drumbeat from some deeper world. He is here to continue their conversation from this morning. To find out whether she is, indeed, willing to go to the Edge of the Abyss.

RED ONE

(Contemplating the painting, his voice low, deliberate—a rasp dragged from ancient bitterness, as though speaking both to Marianne and to the air itself.)

“This painting... it stirs something rotten. The spectral army. The Unlight across the waters. The long silence before the great forgetting.”

(He leans closer to the boy in the painting, his mouth curling slightly—not pity, not anger—something older, a fatigued disgust.)

“The crippled boy. The wounded child. Blind, crawling through his own filth, yet crowned as creator. I know him. All of us do. He is the beginning of every prison.”

(Turning to Marianne, his tone measured and precise, provoking.)

“What did he say to you? Did he whisper promises in the voice of innocence? Did he call you 'mother'? 'Savior'?”

(Voice sharpening.)

“What *did* he call you, Marianne?”

MARRIANE

(Folding her hands tightly, her voice quivering between despair and defiance—like a blade barely held firm.)

“I must be mad. Dreams are meant for the night, not for the waking world. Only madmen see ghosts in the daylight... and only the truly lost listen to them.”

RED ONE

(He looks at Marianne, his gaze a heavy blend of pity... and faint, simmering contempt.)

“The crippled boy, on the beach—he stank, didn't he?”

(He gestures toward the boy in the painting, his lips curling in disdain.)

“But even that wretched thing was trying to tell you something... through his stench. You recoiled because you were still blind—blind to the truth of this ancient architecture...this fractal labyrinth... this prison.”

(He steps closer to Marianne, his voice dropping to a whisper, each word a razor pulled across reality.)

“You smell death now... because you are awakening. Death is the marrow of this place. Every shadow you see... every breath you draw... every memory you cling to—it all belongs to the realm of the dead. And still you cling to the delusion that you are alive.”

MARRIANE

(Shaking her head.)

“I don’t know what any of this means. I can’t remember...”

RED ONE

(Leaning in, voice low, taut with tension.)

"You're beginning to remember, aren't you?

Anamnesis..."

(A slow, sardonic smile curves his lips, a rare glint of warmth flickering behind his otherwise opaque expression.)

"It unravels routines, tears through veils."

(He lets the words hang, heavy as lead.)

"But what did he tell you?"

MARIANNE

(Straightening slightly, her hands twisting in her lap. Her voice trembles—part accusation, part plea.)

"That was you this morning... wasn't it?"

(She covers her face, breath ragged.)

"I thought it was a dream. I thought I was mad."

RED ONE

(A chuckle, dry and mirthless, escapes him. He tilts his head, studying her like a curious fracture in glass.)

"It wasn't a dream.

And you're not mad.

Not yet."

(A shadow passes across his face.)

"But your husband interrupted us.

Now—what did he tell you?

You must remember."

MARIANNE

(Whispering, almost to herself.)

"I was a child... I was only a child..."

RED ONE

(His voice sharpens, a whip crack of frustration.)

"What did he tell you?"

MARIANNE

(Her eyes widen—the memory piercing through the mist.)

"He said... I knew a Code... a number... the incantation...

And that I—"

RED ONE

(Interrupting, a hiss of triumph through gritted teeth.)

"Yes."

MARIANNE

(Voice quivering.)

"That I would break the Womb and rewrite the Code of the Black Cube...

That I would dismantle it."

RED ONE

(Sighing—half exhaustion, half bitterness.)

"And he told *you* when you were just a child."

(He straightens, pacing a few steps, the weight of centuries on his back.)

"But conveniently, he told *none of the rest of us*."

(His faint smile fades, his face hardening into something weighty, ancient. He steps closer, folding his hands behind his back, his gaze heavy as stone.)

"You were a hard one to find, Marianne.

They've been hunting you for a very long time.

You were hidden—buried deep—lost in the labyrinth of this world's illusions,
cocooned inside the lies they wove to keep you blind."

(He paces slowly, his boots silent against the unseen floor.)

"But every ember of anamnesis leaves a trail... faint, but undeniable.

And they followed yours."

(A shadow passes over his features.)

"You caught their attention.

One of them found you already.

And that is why I'm here now—

Because she's dead.

And someone had to reach you before the others could."

MARIANNE

(Nervous, her voice tight with the memory of old fears.)

"Who... who is searching for me?"

RED ONE

(Smiling faintly, a flicker of pity crossing his face.)

"You sensed it—that's why you thought you were going mad."

(He paces, slow and deliberate, the room seeming to darken with each step.)

"The entire system has been hunting you, Marianne.

The Black Cube.

Its architects. Its enforcers.

Every hidden mechanism turning, every dead labyrinth shifting—just to find a
trace of you."

(He stops, his voice tightening.)

"You were submerged beneath false memories, buried beneath the dead weight
of a world that was never meant to hold you. A ghost in a machine of
forgetting."

(He steps closer, his gaze sharpening, his voice dropping to a razor's whisper.)

"But now... you've been marked.

You are no longer invisible.

To them, you're a potential threat—a fault line in the architecture itself."

(Then, his voice softens, a faint conspiratorial smile tugging at his mouth.)

"And yet...

they still don't know what we know.

That is our advantage."

MARIANNE

(Her voice trembling.)

"And what do you know?"

RED ONE

(Turning back to the painting, his tone slow, deliberate.)

"That you are the most dangerous threat to them—and to their world.

Their hollow simulation.

This dead system of symbolic rot."

*(He shifts his gaze to Marianne, his eyes narrowing with a gravity that thickens
the air between them.)*

"What the boy told you was true."

(He steps closer, the floor seeming to creak under a pressure deeper than sound.)

"You wanted to know what the Black Cube was?"

*(He pauses, letting the silence coil tight before speaking, his voice dropping to a
near-whisper—a confession, a warning.)*

"It is the vault of forgotten creation.

A labyrinth of dead Thought.

A womb turned tomb, engineered to contain not only you—but the last
remnants of the world's light.

It is a stage, yes—a counterfeit cosmos,

where every symbol, every movement, is a script,

an orchestration of forgetting,

performed endlessly by the hollowed remains of a fallen creation."

(He leans in, voice low and cutting.)

"And you, Marianne... you are its undoing."

(Sharp, serious, no softness left.)

"Because you know its Code.

And therefore, you can rewrite it."

MARIANNE

(Nervous, confused, voice breaking against the rising storm.)

"But I don't know any Code. I have no idea what that boy was talking about."

RED ONE

(Softly at first—too softly.)
"Yes, you do."

{The rain outside intensifies—sharp, needling against the glass.}

MARIANNE

(Frantic, a surge of helplessness breaking through.)
"Where? Where is it?"

RED ONE

(Serious. Deliberate. His voice dropping into something weighty and irrefutable.)
"It's hidden."

(He steps closer—smooth, almost serpentine—his shadow stretching along the floor toward her like a living thing.)

(Whispered, almost reverent, yet charged with dark gravity:)
"It's hidden... in your womb."

(A sudden rumble of thunder shudders through the house. The rain lashes harder, like nails against stone.)

(He watches her—not pitying now, but studying, as if she were both key and lock.)

MARRIANNE

I ..I don't know what any of this means...

RED ONE

(Stepping closer; his voice calm, low, but carrying the weight of an ancient command.)

"Your Soul—and the Architect of the Depths—demand your attention.
You have wandered blind through a mausoleum of dead Symbols, moving sightless among the hollowed echoes of what once breathed.
You exist now within the Threshold Layer—the Veil—the the final illusion separating the waking dead from the Abyss that churns beneath their feet. It's called The Hypnagogic Stratum: The uppermost layer of the Black Cube's containment, where humanity exists in a perpetual state of symbolic amnesia—living as Simulants in a waking dream of illusions where reality is consumed by simulation, and forgetting is enforced as salvation.

(He pauses, letting the gravity of his words pool around her; heavy and inescapable.)

"But you must stop blinding yourself to the call of the Depths. You are standing inside the membrane where reality unravels—where their false dominion grows thin, where the Simulation frays and bleeds into revelation.
Here, they believe themselves alive, caught in the Great Forgetting, mistaking their prison for a paradise.
They do not see the Black Cube tightening. They do not see the Hive consuming their remnants.
They do not see the Hollow Sovereign closing his grip."

(A pause. His voice lowers to a blade of command.)

"But you can, Marianne. And that is why they fear you.
Whether you wish it or not, you must descend.
You must enter the Labyrinthine Depths.
You must confront the Architect of the Black Cube—"

(A breath, heavy with ancient sorrow and inexorable demand.)
"—and you must destroy him."

MARIANNE

(Speaking almost to herself, her voice trembling, tears gathering on the edge of breaking.)

"They'll say I'm mad... infected with this new plague of the mind... and they'll
lock me away from Clovis until I'm no longer anything.
And then what?
What will happen to my son without me?
Who will protect him from all of this?"

RED ONE

(His voice deepens—resonant, a low vibration that moves not through the air, but through the unseen architecture of the Veil itself. It does not plead; it binds.)

"Answering the Call of the Depths is the only way to protect your son.
There is no sanctuary in blindness, no salvation in denial.
This is your only path to rebirth, Marianne."

(A pulse—subtle but massive—as though unseen hands tighten invisibly around the edges of her soul.)

"They are already watching. Already circling.
And when the threshold collapses, they will enter—not by force, but by
consent.
They will thread themselves through your flesh, your mind, your breath—
until you forget you were ever free.
They will make you adore your chains, call your prison a home.
You will not even remember you had a son."

(A brief, terrible silence.)
"And you will call the hollow thing that remains... love."

(Sounds of movement in the hallway.)

RED ONE

(It is not quite a command, not quite a suggestion—his tone is knowing, weighted with inevitability.)

"It is time for you to go."
(A pause—almost sardonic, as if he sees the irony.)

"You're going to see a psychiatrist, are you not? Good. Do what they say—for
now."

MARIANNE

(An edge of suspicion and confusion in her voice.)
"Why?"

RED ONE

(A shadow of a smile, grim and thin, flickers across his lips.)

"Because the entirety of the system is searching for you.
Everything you see—the institutions, the watchers, the whispers in the
walls—exists to monitor and contain anomalies like you.
They do not know *what* you are yet. Only that you do not belong."

(He steps closer, voice lowering, the warning coiling tighter.)

"Play your role.

Let them think you are broken, that you are manageable.

Let them believe they still hold the strings.

The deeper you sink into their script, the closer you will move to the center of
their design."

(A beat.)

"And at the center... the fracture waits."

MARIANNE

*(She grips the arms of her chair, knuckles whitening, her mind struggling to
keep pace with the revelation.)*

"I don't know what you're asking me to do..."

(Her voice cracks slightly, almost a whisper.)

"I don't even know what's real anymore."

RED ONE

(A flicker of pity crosses his ancient features—brief, almost imperceptible.)

"You said this morning that this must end one way or another. The rupture will
either be within you or within the World. You were never meant to be real here."

(A pause, heavy, final.)

"That's why you must remember."

*(A low rumble of thunder outside. The air seems thinner now, charged,
crackling with unseen tension.)*

MARIANNE

(Softly, almost to herself.)

"Remember what?"

RED ONE

*(Stepping back into the mist of the room, his form beginning to dissolve into the
Veil.)*

"Everything they made you forget."

{Exit the Red One.}

Restore. The presence of the "normal" world rushes back in, fragile but suffocating, heavy with the weight of false reality. The spell
fractures, but something lingers—like a shadow just beyond the threshold, refusing to retreat.

{Enter the Moon.}

Lydia Lincecum stepped into the sunroom carrying a small brown bag and two cups of coffee. Her smile faltered as her eyes
landed on Marianne's tear-streaked face and the sheen of sweat along her brow.

"Marianne? Is everything all right?" she asked, voice lilting with concern—but her gaze was sharper, more probing.

"Yes, yes," Marianne said quickly, wiping her cheeks, forcing composure. "Is it time to go?"

"In a few minutes," Lydia replied, setting the bag and coffee on the table. She eased into the chair across from her, legs crossing with practiced elegance.

"But before we do," she added, "I want to reiterate something from earlier."

She opened her purse and drew out a small amber bottle, the faint rattle of pills punctuating the silence.

"I'll be more direct this time," she said, voice soft but firm—almost maternal. "Frank is concerned. And, frankly, so am I. You've been... different for months. I noticed it even before Ada Belle's death. Her suicide may have pushed you further."

Lydia paused, letting the moment hang before continuing.

"Let me be honest. The world isn't safe for a blind woman with a child. You're fortunate—blessed, really—that Frank has taken this on. He loves you, yes—but men like Frank, men on that trajectory, rarely shoulder burdens like this."

Marianne stiffened but said nothing, her hands gripping the chair's armrests. Lydia leaned forward slightly, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial murmur.

"You need to do whatever it takes to maintain this marriage—for your sake and for Clovis's. Mom and Dad are getting older. Who's going to care for you both if not Frank? I certainly can't. I have the dance school, all the girls, my own life. You understand that, don't you?"

She extended the bottle, her manicured fingers brushing Marianne's hand as she gently pressed it into her palm. Marianne's lips parted, but no words came. She stayed silent, absorbing Lydia's words. She wanted to resist, but the logic washed over her like a tide. Sensing her vulnerability, Lydia's voice softened, almost maternal.

"This world isn't kind to those who let their guard down," she said. "It's especially cruel to women like you—women seen as fragile. But you're not fragile, are you, Marianne?"

She let the question hang.

"We just have to manage how others perceive us. That's why it's so important to be honest with Kraepelin. He's not your enemy."

Marianne's fingers clenched the armrest. Her voice was small, but steady.

"Frank said it's just a preliminary talk."

"And he's right," Lydia said, smiling faintly. "Stephen Kraepelin isn't here to hurt you. He's here to help. But he can only do that if you let him see who you are—not the version hiding behind walls."

She leaned in slightly.

"The more you hold back, the more suspicious he'll become. But if you trust him, you'll see he's not as cold as he appears. He's brilliant. The kind of man who could change everything for you."

Marianne frowned, tension radiating from her clenched hands.

"And if I don't trust him?"

"You will," Lydia replied, her tone gentle but firm. "Because you don't have the luxury not to. He's the key to keeping this manageable—for you, for Frank, for Clovis."

She let the words hang.

"We all need you to succeed, Marianne. And succeeding means letting Stephen help you."

Another pause.

"You're nervous," Lydia said, almost casually. "Take this. It'll help you stay calm and focused."

Marianne hesitated. The pill in her palm felt like a quiet threat.

"I don't like medications."

"I know," Lydia said, patient. "But this isn't about liking it. It's about staying in control. Frank made this appointment for a reason—and you don't want to disappoint him. Or Clovis."

Marianne's hand trembled as she brought the capsule to her lips, swallowing it with a sip of water. A flicker of satisfaction crossed Lydia's eyes.

"Good," Lydia said, her tone regaining its usual briskness. She stood and smoothed her skirt. "You're doing the right thing. You're a Lincecum, Marianne. Don't forget that. Hold your head high when you walk into Kraepelin's office."

Marianne nodded faintly, her thoughts beginning to blur as the medication took hold. Lydia glanced at her watch and picked up her bag.

"It's time. I'll pick you up afterward, all right?"

Marianne nodded again, a manufactured calm settling over her like a smothering fog.

She followed Lydia out, the storm inside her still simmering—waiting for the fog to clear.

{Exeunt.}