

# WRIGHT OUT OF TIME

BOOK ONE: A GLITCH IN THE SYSTEM



**POWER  
TO THE  
READER!**

A boy out of time.  
A Spark on the frits.  
A world that refuses to stay still.

Written By R.C. Crespo



# *Wright Out of Time*

Book 1: A Glitch in the System

R.C. Crespo



Wright Out of Time – Series Copyright  
Book One of the Cresponia Universe  
Book One of Wright’s Will Series

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### ***Dedication Page***

To my Father, you gave me my first sense of humor, my first sense of wonder, and the imagination that still follows me into every story I write.

From DuckTales and The Simpsons on the couch, to the NES you gave me on my ninth birthday—the gift that opened the door to entire worlds.

You taught me honor, even when no one else is watching.

You told me God would notice, and I believed you.

Thank you for supporting every spark of curiosity that led me into technology, storytelling, and the life I have today.

This first book is yours.

Huge thanks to my family, who tolerated the endless brainstorming, plot twists, and late-night typing that went into this book. Special thanks to my dad, Aurelio Crespo, for giving me the imagination, humor, and NES controller that started this whole creative spiral in the first place.

To my wife: thanks for letting me rant about characters like they were real people and for nodding politely even when I made zero sense. Your support kept this world alive.

To everyone who ever loved retro games, weird mysteries, or the kind of stories that feel like a glitch in reality—this one's for you.

And to the readers holding this book right now: you're the reason stories matter. Power to the reader!

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# Chapter 01 – Echoes of the Pirate Ship

Rain ticked on metal and frayed tarps, a soft hiss over the bones of the abandoned amusement park. William lay on his side in a knot of wet grass, staring up at a charcoal sky. For a breath he couldn't move. The white-hot afterimage of light—his mother's arms around him—still burned across his vision.

He remembered the hum of her Spark, a warm static that always found him in the dark—then the noise, the collapse, the scream that cut it clean. That sound still lived behind his ribs.

A flashlight swept across his face. He flinched, throwing up an arm.

“Hey.”

The voice was sharp, female—older than him, a young adult, carrying the patience of a hangover. “What are you doing clomping around in my amusement park?”

For half a heartbeat the rain turned to fire. He saw her framed in blue light, shouting orders through smoke. Then the illusion blinked away, leaving only drizzle and a silhouette in a cracked raincoat.

“Mom?” he blurted, because hope didn't check logic first. “Have you seen mom?”

A short laugh—dry, not kind. “That's new.” The flashlight tilted down to his shoes. “Try again.”

He blinked until the beam thinned. The woman stepped closer: slim build, dark hair tucked behind one ear, eyes that glowed faintly red when the light clipped them. She looked like Casandra—but lighter, meaner; less gravity, more edges. The armor before the dents.

“Cas... Casandra?” he said, voice catching.

Her head tilted. “How do you—” She cut herself off, jaw tightening. “Never mind. Answer the question.”

“I... I don't know.” He pushed up on his elbows. “I was with my mom, and there was a room with crystals, and then—”

Casandra hooked two fingers into the back of his hoodie and hauled him upright. “Slow down, Captain Cryptic.”

The grip was iron; he remembered another hand—Mr. E's—yanking him behind a console when alarms screamed. Same urgency, less mercy.

“You stink like rain and bad decisions,” she said. “You get concussed falling off a ride, or were you running from somebody you stole from?”

“I didn't steal anything,” he shot back before his lungs caught up. “It's me—Samantha's son. There was a siege, and Mr. E—”

Sirens. Metal coughing sparks. His tongue tasted ozone. The memory slammed the door before he could finish.

Casandra's expression shifted a millimeter—enough to register, not enough to read. “Head injury,” she decided flatly. “Or a runaway story. Both get you help. Neither gets you my patience.”

She dropped his hood and stepped back. “Come on, kid. Somewhere dry before I decide you're a hallucination.”

He hesitated. “You don't believe me?”

“I don't even believe me most days.” She turned toward the pirate ship. “Move.”

He followed across the plaza. Faded signs promised Funnel Cakes! and Ride the Tide!—ghost slogans from a happier century. He'd walked this place before, only then the weeds had

swallowed everything and the air had tasted like rusted blood. Now it looked almost alive again, half-rewound.

Cassandra moved ahead with the confidence of someone who'd decided ownership was nine-tenths of survival. She ducked through a warped service door beneath the pirate ship's hull and climbed a set of metal stairs that complained under her boots. William followed, one hand on the rail, water dripping off his sleeves.

The captain's deck cabin at the top of the stairway was smaller than William remembered from his fractured memories—bare walls, no wires or maps, no crates doubling as furniture. Just a chair, a crate-turned-table, and the hollow hum of rain against sheet metal.

"Sit," Cassandra said, kicking the chair toward him. "If you puke, do it out the window."

William sat. The seat creaked, protesting his existence. Water dripped from his hair down his neck, and he tried not to look like a stray someone might regret saving.

Cassandra leaned against the crate, arms folded. "You've got about two minutes before I decide whether you're a concussion or a scam. Use them wisely."

"I'm not lying," he said. "There was light. And music. And my mom—"

"Ah, the classics." Her tone went flat, like she'd heard every story worth not believing. "You've got amnesia, mommy issues, and a hell of an imagination. I'm still waiting for the part where this gets less fantastical."

William's shoulders tensed. "She saved me. I think... she sent me here."

Cassandra's expression didn't change, but her eyes flickered red for half a heartbeat before she looked away. "Here," she said, pointing to the room. "The rain, the rust, the ghosts. Great vacation spot."

"You don't have to believe me."

"Good," she said dryly. "Because I don't."

Silence stretched between them, filled by the drum of rain on the hull.

He looked down at his hands, the small tremor he was trying to hide. Beneath the fear, a habit kicked in—observe, catalog, survive.

Her stance: solid but coiled. Breathing: steady. Tone: controlled sarcasm masking calculation.

He'd seen that mix before—in people deciding whether to shoot or save.

"Who are you, really?" she asked finally.

Her voice wasn't kind, but it wasn't cruel either—just tired, like someone testing the edges of a truth they didn't want.

"William Wright."

He hesitated. Then, quieter: "I think I'm from... later."

Cassandra exhaled through her nose, unimpressed. "So you're a time traveler. Fantastic. Add that to the bingo card."

She pushed off the crate and paced once, boots clanging softly against the metal floor. Her hand brushed the wall, fingertips tracing old rivets like she could feel the ship's heartbeat beneath the rust.

"You look about thirteen," she said. "So either you hit your head hard enough to scramble your calendar, or you're deep into the wrong crowd."

He didn't answer. His fingers brushed his jacket pocket—the shape of the key digging into his palm, the weight of his father's phone pressing against his thigh. Lifelines he couldn't explain.

Cassandra caught the motion. "What's in there?"

“Nothing,” he said too quickly.

“Cute lie. Keep it. I’ve got better mysteries than yours.” She turned toward a cracked porthole and stared out into the rain. For a second, her reflection in the glass looked hollowed out, like a photo double-exposed with something lonelier underneath.

“You got anywhere to go?” she asked without looking back.

He shook his head. “No.”

“Good,” she said. “Nobody to yell at me.”

He frowned. “So... what happens now?”

“I figure out if you’re dangerous, delusional, or both.” She crossed to the crate, pulled a half-dead flashlight from its surface, and clicked it twice. Nothing. “And while I’m deciding, you sit there, don’t touch anything, and don’t look like you’re planning to stake me.”

“I’m not,” he said.

“That’s exactly what someone planning to stake me in the heart would say.” Her mouth twitched—maybe a smile, maybe a muscle cramp. Hard to tell.

William huffed, half a laugh despite himself. “You’re... kind of mean.”

“Life experience,” she said. “You keep enough ghosts around, kindness just clutters the place.”

The words hit harder than she meant. He looked away, focusing on a corner where rain dripped through a crack and pooled into a rust-colored puddle. The rhythm steadied him—tap, tap, tap—like the ticking of a clock that wasn’t supposed to exist yet.

He reached inward, instinctively searching for the warmth of his Spark—the quiet hum that had always been there.

Nothing. Not even static.

Just the cold void where something used to be.

He swallowed, chest tightening. “Something’s wrong,” he murmured.

Cassandra’s eyes flicked toward him. “You’re wet, lost, and trespassing in my park. Congratulations, you noticed.”

“No, inside. I can’t feel it.”

He pressed a hand to his ribs, like he could force it to come back. Hold tight to the hum, Will, his mother’s voice whispered. Then—silence.

Cassandra studied him, expression unreadable. “You having a panic attack, or am I supposed to guess?”

He shook his head. “I’m fine.”

“Liar.” She tossed him a towel from the crate. “Dry off before you start molding.”

He caught it clumsily. “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me,” she said, turning back to the window. “I just don’t need a corpse in my chair.”

He rubbed the towel across his hair, feeling the weight of the silence return. Outside, lightning flashed, and for an instant, her reflection in the glass looked like a statue—red eyes glowing, a faint hum building in the walls.

Then it was gone.

“Cassandra?” he asked softly.

“What?”

He hesitated. “You were different... before.”

Her hand froze on the edge of the windowframe. “Story of my life, kid,” she said, voice low. “Now shut up before you start growing on me.”

The rain softened, but the sound of it stayed—steady, insistent, like it meant to remind them both they weren't safe yet. Casandra moved around the room, restless energy under her skin. She picked up the flashlight, set it down again, and finally reached for a battered phone from the crate.

"Don't move," she said, thumb already on the keypad. "Or talk. Or breathe weird."

William stayed perfectly still.

She lifted the phone to her ear. "Jeff. Yeah, me. Don't scream."

A pause, then the speaker exploded with enthusiasm: "My Queen! Are you having ghoulish trouble again?"

Casandra closed her eyes. "No, Jeff."

"Gnomes, then? You still feuding with the gnomes?"

She rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Different problem. Found a kid in the park. Human. Breathing. Says his mom's named Samantha."

The line crackled. "Samantha, like that lady from Bewitched—oh, wait. You don't like when I talk about old TV shows. Sorry."

"Do you still have that number," Casandra said flatly, "for the cop who's like you... but responsible?"

"You mean Officer Dogman!" Jeff's voice went up an octave. "Yeah, he's got the badge and the sniff. You want me to fetch him?"

"Fetch is a dangerous word, Jeff."

"I'll give him a ring."

"Better." She hung up before he could keep talking.

William had watched the whole exchange with quiet fascination. "Officer Dogman?" he asked carefully.

"Don't ask," Casandra said. "Long story involving some roasted pork and questionable ethics. Point is, he's a friendly guy like me I can trust—he just has a better nose."

He frowned. "That's... weird."

"Welcome to Casandra's world."

She leaned against the wall, folding her arms again, but her eyes softened—barely. "Look, kid. Whatever's going on, you don't belong here. This place isn't built for normal people, and besides, I don't really like sharing space with people... no matter how small. Can be dangerous."

"I'm strong," he said quickly. "Not much stuff can hurt—"

Casandra shook her head. "It's not that kind of danger." She looked out the window; the rain blurred the view, streaking the park into a watercolor. "There are whole places around and under us that haven't been mapped in years. I wouldn't send a stray cat strolling around here, let alone a kid..."

"Me," he finished quietly.

She didn't deny it. "You're thirteen, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then you're supposed to have... adults. Schools. A room that doesn't leak. Not..." she gestured vaguely to the walls, "...whatever this is."

"I don't have anywhere else," he said. "My mom—" He stopped, swallowing the ache. "She's gone."

Casandra's eyes flicked toward him. "Gone how?"

He hesitated. "She... saved me."

Her posture tightened. Something unspoken moved behind her expression—recognition, maybe, or memory yet to be created.

“Right,” she said after a long beat. “Then maybe Officer Dogman can help find her. He’s got resources. Or worst case, he’ll drop you off at Harrison’s Home. They feed you, give you a bed, make you fill out too many forms. Better than getting lost in a basement full of ghouls and gnomes.”

William looked down at his hands. “Your underground, I’ve seen that place before,” he whispered.

She blinked. “You’ve... what?”

“I mean—heard of it... places like it... on conspiracy threads online.” His pulse quickened. He shouldn’t know that name yet. He shouldn’t know any of this yet.

Cassandra narrowed her eyes, but let it go. “Good. Then you’ll know it’s not a place for kids.”

They stood there in the quiet, the ship creaking like it remembered being a ride instead of a shelter.

William spoke first. “You could just let me stay for one night.”

Her laugh was short and tired. “You think this is a sleepover? Kid, this is a town of misfit toys with one resident. Don’t make the population double.”

“I can be quiet,” he said. “You wouldn’t even notice I’m here.”

“I already noticed.” She leaned back against the crate again, and for a moment, her expression cracked open—just enough to show the exhaustion underneath. “Listen. I’ve seen too many kids get crushed trying to survive in places that look like magic until the lights go out. I’m not adding your name to that list.”

William swallowed hard. “You’re not really cold,” he said softly. “You just don’t want to lose anyone.”

That landed. She didn’t move for several seconds, then exhaled like it hurt. “You talk too much for someone soaking my chair.”

The phone on the crate buzzed. She snatched it up.

“Talk,” she said.

Jeff’s voice crackled through, distorted by static. “Dogman’s on his way. Says the rain’s murder on his hair but he’s bringing his good nose.”

“Tell him captain’s deck. Use the side stairs.”

“Roger that! Should I make snacks?”

“Don’t. You’re not invited.” She hung up before the conversation could get dumber.

She looked back at William. “Alright, McFly, here’s the deal. Dogman’s coming. He’s not as bad as he sounds, but he’s still a cop. He’ll get you to someplace with walls and rules. And you’ll hate it. But you’ll live. Understand?”

He nodded, though every muscle in his face wanted to argue.

Cassandra turned away, pretending not to see it. “Good.” She picked up the dead flashlight, rolling it in her hand like a coin. “Everything ends up where it’s supposed to eventually. Even lost kids.”

A hollow silence filled the room. The rain’s rhythm slowed, syncing with the faint, tired hum of the ship’s frame.

William looked out the window. “You ever wonder why things seem to cycle?” he asked.

She gave him a sideways glance. “You thirteen or forty-three?”

“Just wondering.”

“If I’m not part of the wheel,” she said, turning the flashlight over one more time, “the cycle is none of my concern.”

The sound of boots on metal stairs broke whatever quiet truth lingered between them. Heavy steps—too steady to be some goofy guy named Jeff. A second rhythm, metal clicking against the railing.

Casandra’s head tilted, eyes flicking red again. “Dogman,” she muttered. “Right on time.”

William’s stomach dropped. “He’s here already?”

“Guess the nose knows.” She slipped the flashlight into a pocket and straightened. “You sit there and look... normal. Which shouldn’t be hard.”

He clutched the edge of the chair, knuckles white. “What if he doesn’t believe me?”

“That’s what the nose is for,” she said simply. “Normie kids get help. Glitches get questions. You want to stay alive, you learn to look normal.”

Rain hissed beyond the door. Then the knob turned.

Casandra’s voice lowered, calm and steady. “Whatever story you tell, make it sound like a life you could’ve actually lived. Trust me, that’s the only kind that passes inspection.”

The door opened.

A tall man stood framed in the gray light—raincoat zipped to the collar, hat pulled low enough to shadow his eyes. The air around him carried a faint ozone tang, like the air before a storm.

“Afternoon, ma’am,” he said pleasantly. His voice was steady, low, with the kind of calm that makes people tell the truth. “Got a call about a kid?”

Casandra folded her arms. “Yeah. Found him in the park. Soaked, half-conscious, and a big fan of time-travel stuff. Thought you’d enjoy the paperwork.”

The man stepped inside, shutting the door behind him with careful fingers. He didn’t look at her right away—his gaze went to William first. The boy felt the weight of it, not threatening, but probing. Like a scientist watching a spark under glass.

Something flickered in the man’s pupils—an amber flash that vanished too quickly to name. William blinked, unsure if he’d seen it or imagined it.

“You okay, son?” Dogman asked. His tone was kind but measured, words placed like stepping stones.

William swallowed. “Yes, sir. I think so.”

“Good.” The man gave a small nod, then glanced toward Casandra. “You said he mentioned a mother?”

“She’s missing,” Casandra said, her sarcasm folding into something closer to weariness. “He’s soaked through, probably concussed. You’re the one with the badge. Figure it out.”

Dogman’s mouth twitched—not a smile, but the ghost of one. “I can take it from here. There’s a youth home not far from here that can keep him warm while we sort things out.”

Casandra looked away, pretending the answer didn’t sting. “Perfect. He’s all yours.”

William’s throat tightened. “My mom’s not here... well, she is, but not the same—”

Dogman crouched to his level, voice softer. “Let’s start with getting you dry, alright? After that, we’ll talk about finding whoever you’re looking for.”

The boy nodded slowly, eyes darting once toward Casandra. She didn’t meet them. She was staring at the rain instead, jaw set.

“Let’s go, son,” Dogman said.

William stood, the world outside humming low and blue. Hide your Spark, or the world will extinguish it.

He didn't have a Spark to hide; all he felt was a hole where his family was.

Cassandra stayed by the window as they disappeared down the stairs, the sound of rain swallowing their voices. She crossed her arms tighter, watching the gray sky ripple over the park.

"Poor lil dummy," she muttered. Then, quieter, almost to herself: "Hope you find her."

Lightning flashed, painting the room in white for an instant. When it faded, she was already moving—cleaning the chair, wiping away footprints, pretending she hadn't just let the future walk out of her life.

## Chapter 02 - Whispers in the Hallways

By the time Deputy Doug Dogman finished the questions that had to be asked and walked William to the car, the rain had softened to a mist—less a storm, more the park sighing. He didn't say much on the drive. He didn't have to. His calm filled the spaces where William's answers didn't.

The Harrison Home for Youth looked like it had been brave for too long. Three stories of brick squared off against the drizzle, windows patched where a pane had lost a fight with a baseball, gutters wearing necklaces of weeds. The sign out front had a missing bolt so the last two letters trembled in the thin wind: HARRISON HOME FOR YOU\_. It still somehow tried to smile.

Inside, it smelled like coffee, old carpet, bleach, and warm food. Voices echoed from a distant hallway. Somewhere upstairs, someone laughed too loudly on purpose.

"Welcome!" boomed a man in a vest over a t-shirt and an askew tie patterned with tiny cartoon cats juggling oranges. He swept into the entry like he'd been waiting behind the coat rack for his cue. "You found us through this truly dreadful weather—ten points to both of you. I'm Spencer, we offer pizza on Fridays when the budget is merciful, and I will fight anyone who says Pudding Night is childish."

He thrust a hand to Dogman, then to William, calibrating in real time—the sneakers, the shoulders, the held breath. The corners of his eyes were mapped with sleep and worry, but his smile was real, the kind that tried to warm rooms without heating.

"Evening, Spence," Dogman said, posture relaxing half an inch.

"Deputy!" Spencer clasped his hand like old friends in a small-town play. "One of your foundlings?"

"County intake," Dogman said. "Needs a bed, a warm meal, and someone with forms."

Spencer winced theatrically. "Ah. Forms. The dragon every hero must face." He stage-whispered to William, "Don't worry—our forms look scary, but our pens are all glitter gel and our chaplain is a raccoon." He caught himself. "Not literally. Just spiritually."

William almost smiled despite the ache. Under that, something else stirred—his quiet Spark-sense, the way the air of a person felt. Spencer wasn't a beam like Jessica or a gravity like his mother. He was a kaleidoscope: shards of worry and hope clicking new patterns every breath. Chaotic, messy, kind. He liked it. He didn't trust it yet—but he liked it.

"Xenia!" Spencer called toward a hallway. "We have a boy, a deputy, and a dampness situation!"

A woman arrived holding a mug, a clipboard, and a house on her shoulders. "The boiler's sulking, the pantry's judging me, and my inbox is reproducing by mitosis," she said by way of hello. Then she looked at William and softened in a way that hurt a different way. "Hi, sweetheart. I'm Xenia. We'll get you sorted."

She ushered them into an office losing a battle with its own paperwork: color-coded binders stacked like Tetris, IN/OUT trays blooming Post-its, a faded poster urging PERSEVERE. Xenia sat, sipped, and made the machine go: name, age, health issues, allergies, school. Brisk because it had to be. Underneath, William felt it—her Spark like a thin, warm blanket stretched over too many beds. He made himself small. He didn't pull any strings.

"If you need anything," she said, signing the last page with the weary flourish of small victories, "my door is always open." Her eyes added: it is, and a hundred people are in line. Both truths sat together. William nodded; he understood.

A shadow paused in the doorway. A neat man in a sweater vest, sleeves crisp, eyes cool as a scanner.

“Ellis,” Xenia said, voice shading from fond to formal in a syllable. “This is Mr. Dee, our counselor.”

“Welcome, William,” Ellis said with a thin, professional smile. His tone never rose above calm intake, but something quickened under it—the interest of someone collecting puzzle pieces. “If you experience perceptual anomalies, sleep disturbances, or a persistent sense of observation by non-human entities, my door is open. Context is critical for proper understanding.”

William’s Spark-sense recoiled: Ellis was a cold, focused laser. Precise; not cruel, just indifferent to comfort. Instincts slammed walls into place. William nodded and offered nothing to the slide.

“Thank you, Ellis,” Xenia said—adult for we’re done here—and he moved on, his neatness leaving a wake.

Spencer clapped once, too loud, to disperse the chill. “Tour! Before Xenia remembers I promised to fix the dryer and realizes I didn’t. Come on, William. Deputy, you’re welcome for waffles Saturday. That’s a policy I just invented.”

Dogman adjusted his hat. “I’ll hold you to it.” He looked at William—one more quiet check of the air between them. “Harrison’s a decent harbor,” he said softly. “Sleep. Let your weather settle.” Two fingers tipped. He was gone.

They walked.

The common room had a TV older than William and a stack of board games missing essential nations or vowels. Someone had taped a paper crown to a lampshade and written FOR ME IT WAS A TUESDAY in marker. The kitchen buzzed with fluorescent defiance and the smell of something comforting stretched to feed too many. Kids’ drawings crowded the fridge—tigers with purple stripes, a house with hands, a rocket labeled NOT TO SCALE. The place was clean because people loved it, not because it was easy.

“Community room,” Spencer said, gesturing like a magician with a too-short cape. “Also detention hall. Also homework dungeon. We practice multipurpose everything. Budget says it builds character.”

They turned a corner and a man in a windbreaker stepped into their path so smoothly it felt choreographed.

“You. New recruit.” Two finger-guns at William. “Perfect. You’ve got the eyes of a scout. TJX!—CLAP!—Head of Security. The exclamation point is mandatory.” He made the sound—an actual room filling clap—after his own name. “I run perimeter defense and entrepreneurial opportunity. Which means safety. Which means you need this.”

From nowhere: a blister pack with a screaming neon keychain. “Personal alarm slash Bluetooth speaker slash turtle deterrent. We have turtles. Menace-class. For you? Family rate.”

“Tyrone,” Xenia said without looking up from her clipboard, “don’t sell safety turtles to children.”

“TJX! CLAP!” he corrected, wounded. “And it repels turtles. And pigeons. And... unauthorized personnel.” A wink at William. “You look like a go-getter. Don’t let your tomorrow be compromised by today’s inaction.”

His eyes narrowed—just once—at the bulge in William’s jacket where the phone sat. “You carrying tech? We’ve got a charging station that might—uh—soon exist. I have a guy. I have three guys.”

William's heart tripped. A charger. The phone in his pocket suddenly weighed more, like it wanted to leap into TJX!'s hand.

"Maybe later," William said, keeping his voice level.

"Later is where mistakes live," TJX! intoned, then brightened. "But yes, later can also be where solutions are born. Find me." He pivoted and vanished like a magician who hadn't rehearsed the exit and still stuck the landing.

Spencer spread his hands. "He keeps raccoons off the porch?"

"He keeps my blood pressure high," Xenia said. "Now to where you'll be spending the night."

A corridor smelled like laundry that refused to lose. Doors with taped-on name labels; the murmur of a video game; a burst of laughter, then shushing. Xenia opened one door and stood back.

Two bunks, a dresser, a window painted shut three paint jobs ago. The bottom bunk on the left was made with military precision. The top was an explosion of starry blankets. The other set was bare.

"You'll take this one," Xenia said, tapping the lower bunk on the right. "Linens in the closet. Bathroom at the end of the hall. Quiet hours start at ten unless Spencer forgets what clocks are."

"Time is a construct," Spencer said, "and also Pudding Night is at eight, so plan accordingly."

William set the small county duffel on the bed and palmed his pocket again: phone, key. Hiding places. Future problems. Or solutions, if he could find a spark and a lock.

The day settled on his shoulders like a wet coat. He needed air. Or a sink. Or to not cry.

"I'll—bathroom," he said, and slid into the hall.

He almost missed the janitor.

The man moved with a careful rhythm, mop describing neat arcs on old linoleum. Same unknown wisdom around the eyes, same dark hair with the first gray—Snakes. The posture was identical to the version William knew: listening to a song everyone else pretended not to hear.

"Mr. Snakes?" William whispered, relief flooding him so fast he caught himself on the wall. "You're here in this time. You—how—"

Snakes didn't stop moving. He side-eyed the mop head, not William. "That's the name, dunno how you guessed it," he murmured. "Mister's my dad's name, unless you're talking to my mop." A brief glance, one eyebrow. "Name's Snakes, sure. I wipe floors. Not time machines." The wink was so small it might have been a blink someone taught to lie.

William's hand went to his pocket without permission.

Snakes pushed the bucket three quiet feet. "Funny thing," he said to the ceiling, "in my line of work, you find a lot of lost stuff. Phones. Keys. Hope. My advice?" He leaned on the handle, voice dropping as if the mop needed to hear it. "A dead phone ain't good to nobody. Needs a spark. And a key without a lock is just a pretty paperweight. Best keep 'em both safe till they know what they're for. You feel me?"

William's breath shook once; he nodded hard. "Yeah," he said. "I... I feel you. Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Snakes said. "Seriously. Walls keep track of dirt." He looked at the mop. "So do mops."

He went back to arcs and patience. William went to the bathroom. The world stitched one quiet, careful loop at a time.

Lights-out came with less drama than he expected. Spencer materialized once to deliver a blanket and a whispered story about Mrs. Harrison's wrath turning a broken boiler into hot

chocolate. Xenia passed like a weather system, checking, ticking, breathing. Somewhere, TJX! narrated a “covert perimeter sweep” to no one. Laughter rose and fell. The rain quit arguing.

On his new bunk, William lay on his side and drew a map in his head: front door; office maze; common room; kitchen; dorm; bathroom; the subtle slant near the fire door where mop water left a shine. He added people like landmarks: Spencer’s kaleidoscope; Xenia’s thin, warm light; Ellis’s cold, curious dot; TJX!’s crackling storm cloud; Snakes’s quiet tide in the corners. He added a charger-shaped star next to TJX!’s name.

Under the blanket, he eased out the phone. The screen was black. He pressed the secret button sequence he’d watched his mother use. A single red dot glowed—faint, stubborn—then winked out. Still a little juice. Not enough for anything but hope. He tucked it back against his chest. The key pressed beside it, sharp and waiting.

The day gathered tight again. Heavy. But not empty.

He pressed his forehead to his sleeve and breathed slow until the day let go. The home hummed. Water ran somewhere down the hall. A mop traced a ritual. The night listened.

William didn’t feel powerful. He didn’t feel brave. He felt awake.

Tomorrow, he promised himself, eyes open in the dark. Tomorrow, I move first.

## Chapter 03 - Of Fogs and Sparks

The first light of dawn crept through the blinds, thin and hesitant, carving the dorm into crooked lines. William stirred under the coarse blanket, eyes half open, dreams and old realities still webbed around him. The springs groaned when he rolled onto his side.

No hum.

No reactor.

No mother's quiet voice.

Only the murmur of pipes and the smell of dust and detergent.

He reached for the warmth that used to live under his ribs—the quiet vibration he could always find if he breathed deep enough. Now it was a muffled phantom, static under water. His Spark. Or what was left of it.

The emptiness ached.

A mop squeaked across tile in the doorway.

“Rise and shine,” came the familiar drawl. “Easy part's over.”

Snakes rolled the bucket in like a sleepy chaperone. Uniform too clean for a man who claimed to hate cleaning, badge tilted sideways. He hummed something tuneless, eyes half lidded, the picture of casual mystery.

“You always watch kids sleep?” William muttered, voice scratchy.

“Only the ones who owe me answers.” Snakes leaned the mop against the frame, hands in pockets. “First night's over. You survived the soft landing. Now comes the hard part: staying small in a place that loves to notice.”

William pushed up, heart knocking. “You talk like I'm supposed to understand that.”

“You do.” Snakes nudged the bucket with his foot. “Oh—What if I put it this way. Don't shine to bright or someone will try to snuff it out.” One brow ticked. “All kinds of shine.”

He winked and ghosted down the hall.

William stared at the empty doorway—then his hand went to his pocket. The phone was a cold, dead weight. The key's teeth pressed little half moons into his palm.

Move first, he told himself. Find a charger. Then figure out the key. But first, he had to get through a morning already shaped like an obstacle course.

The hallway buzzed with motion—kids with towels around their necks and toothbrushes in their mouths, the churn of a building deciding to be a school. William slid into the flow, Snakes's words still thudding in his head.

A lanky kid stepped into his path, arm braced against the wall like a gate. Name tag said C. Swan, but the confidence said it louder.

“Bathroom's the other way?” William guessed.

The boy grinned. “I know. Hall pass?” He twirled a folded scrap—doodles, fake stamps, authority by arts and crafts. “Two bucks, or something interesting.”

“New rule?” William said.

“Old economy.” The grin edged shark bright.

William weighed him. His dulled Spark sense prickled—not a kaleidoscope like Spencer, not a cold beam like Ellis. Quicker. Sharper. A street smart calculus constantly running numbers. Useful, if pointed the right way.

“I'm looking for a charger,” William said, deadpan. “Custom phone. Weird port.”

Chico's brows flicked. Calculation updated. "Maybe I know a guy who knows a guy." He twirled the pass. "Today, hall pass. Tomorrow, prizes. Maybe a tournament with a charger on the table. Secret. Shh. Don't tell anyone." His eyes glittered. "Two bucks gets you on the mailing list and a hall pass."

"I'll risk detention," William said, stepping around. "Thanks for the... sales pitch."

Behind him, Chico's laugh trailed like a hook. "Clever boy. You'll fit right in." A wad of gum arced; William shifted—not a flinch, a deliberate transfer of weight. The gum kissed tile where his shoe had been.

Balance, Jessica's voice from a landfill a lifetime away. Lose your center, you lose everything.

William didn't look back right away. When he did, Chico was gone, leaving only another boy eyeing him crooked smirk.

The bathroom lights buzzed, pale and jittery. Mirrors threw back a version of him with worn eyes and a too big hoodie.

"Still here," he whispered. It echoed small on tile.

He set the phone and the key on the sink. Two relics from a world that felt too far away to touch. The key's etched symbol caught the fluorescent glare; time hadn't dulled it.

"Come on," he told his reflection. "Just one spark."

He closed his eyes. Reached for the current, the pull, the hum of something larger. The air sharpened cold.

The mirror fogged in an instant.

Not from breath. From something else.

A mist curled around him, carrying a smell like rain on scorched metal. The key warmed, glowing faintly. For a heartbeat the warmth wasn't his—it was his mother's hand on his shoulder. Steady. Sure.

Faces almost formed in the fog, then unraveled back to static. The key pulsed once, weak and stubborn, and dimmed.

William opened his eyes. The mirror cleared. The chill let go. The key cooled to ordinary metal.

Maybe a failure.

But for the first time since waking here, it felt like home was still reachable.

He pocketed the relics. The boy in the mirror looked a little steadier. Not safe. Not whole. Ready to try again.

The door hissed as someone leaned in the frame without entering. A mop of rebellious hair. Bright, wary eyes.

"You hog the mirror," the kid said, like a weather report. "Bad omen on a first morning."

"Sorry," William said.

"Don't apologize. It sets a precedent." The boy stuck out a hand. "David Rohan. Other kids call me Rohan because David is what people angry at me call me. You're not from around here, I'm assuming."

The cadence was so flat it took a beat to find the joke. William shook. "William."

"Favor." Rohan held up two fingers. "Tear me exactly one square of toilet paper."

"What?"

"Come on, spare a square. For a bet." He glanced down the hall like the air owed him money.

William stared, then tugged a single square and handed it over.  
Rohan studied it like a jeweler. "Precision. You pass the first test."  
"What test?"

"If I explained it, it wouldn't be a test." He pocketed the square with ridiculous ceremony. William's senses pricked again—Rohan's presence a low, steady hum of observation, like a kid conducting a field study on the universe. "Welcome to Harrison, William hoggin mirror time guy. Try not to join a cult before lunch."

"Is that... an option?"

"Everything's an option." Rohan was already drifting. "Some just have worse snacks." He saluted lazily and dissolved into the current of morning.

A calm voice cut the din like a scalpel. "William? If you have a minute—I'm free now."  
Ellis Dee.

His office was warm and neat and too quiet. Books stood at attention. A plant pretended to thrive. The desk was immaculate: pads, pens, a cup of tea exactly three minutes past ideal.

"Come in," Ellis said, gesturing. The smile was thin, professional; the eyes cataloged posture, breath, shoes, soul. "Punctual. It tells me two things: you're cooperative, and you're listening."

"You called from ten feet away," William said, sitting.

"Listening," Ellis repeated, as if half the battle. He lifted a notepad. "These conversations are for your benefit. Orientation. Safety. A space to speak plainly, without performance." Tilt of the head. "Do you feel safe today?"

"Yes." In on four, hold two, out on six.

"Good. Do you feel... seen?"

A prick. William kept still. "Sometimes."

"That's honest." The pen moved. "Tell me about last night. Any dreams? Recurring pictures—a key, perhaps, or a symbol you can't name?"

"I slept."

"Mm." Turn of a page. "You said you left home because it wasn't safe. We take that seriously. When you say 'not safe,' do you mean weather, guardians, entities, or an internal perception of threat?"

"My mom made sure I was safe," William said, truth in the center like a weight.

"Then she made a brave choice." Edges softened, tone still clinical. "Sometimes survival is the bravest vocabulary we learn."

William's gaze drifted—not away, exactly, but toward the blotter. Half tucked under its corner lay a small brass token, etched with a jagged sigil he knew like fear's shape.

It didn't glow. It didn't flare. But in the hollow where his Spark should be, he felt it—a single, slow, ochre pulse—a blink of warm earth that echoed in the bones of his hand, where his key waited.

Ellis's pen stilled. "Curious piece," he said mildly. "A friend of the Home donated a handful of old tokens. Claims this one is Tartarian. I keep it here as a reminder that if history isn't written down, your mark on the world is forgotten."

"I like history," William said.

"History likes to be liked. It repays attention." Ellis folded his hands. "You're very careful for a thirteen year old."

"Thank you?"

“It wasn’t praise. Care keeps you alive. It also keeps you alone. Don’t choose loneliness if you don’t have to.”

William didn’t answer. Couldn’t.

Ellis didn’t push. “We’ll talk again. If your sleep changes—if you feel pressure behind the eyes, or lights misbehave—come to me directly. I don’t judge phenomena. I document them.”

“Right,” William said, rising.

As he did, Ellis’s gaze flicked to the token’s edge and back, meeting William’s eyes with a look that wasn’t warm and wasn’t cold. Recognition, measured in millimeters.

A link. Dangerous. Valuable. He knows things. About relics. About Tartaria. About keys like his. About the truth Samantha found at the flea market and hid in his pocket the night everything burned.

“Thank you,” Ellis said.

“Sure,” William answered, meaning none of it.

The hallway was louder now, bodies herding toward breakfast. William slipped into the current and bounced off a wall of blue and gray.

“Look who graduated from guidance counseling,” a gruff voice said. New England Patriots jersey. Practiced lean. To his right, a pretty boy polished by malice. To his left, a short kid working gum like a weapon. Behind them, a tall sentinel stared past everyone, a quiet storm front.

“I’m Bobby Wolf,” the the gruff one, his Patriots jersey tight containing his fat chest, said, grin almost a threat. “Crew’s Warren, Tommy, and Danny.”

As he named them, their faces clicked into place: Warren flicking perfect hair; Tommy popping a bubble like a dare; Danny’s dead calm eyes not looking at anything so much as through it.

“Counselor get you a tissue for your feelings, charity boy?” Warren sang.

“Bet he cried,” Tommy smirked, gum flashing.

William’s pulse went tight and fast. The urge to step back thrummed in his heels. He set his weight forward instead—small, deliberate—until the soles of his shoes felt glued to the scuffed floor.

Tommy flipped his gum. William watched it come and shifted—Mr. E’s drill, not luck. Junkyard corners, chicken chases, the lesson you only learn cold: don’t give ground you don’t choose to give. The gum slapped tile with a mean little kiss.

He didn’t look down. He looked at Tommy like Tommy had dropped something embarrassing.

Bobby’s grin thinned. “Cute.”

An alley flashed—someone throwing a cat—his Spark flaring to protect a life. Jessica’s voice over the memory: The Spark is a tool. The will to use it—that’s you.

Four of them. One of him. No Spark. Exits: left stair, right service door. Terrain: narrow hall, bad footing, witnesses. The loud one’s the leader. The quiet one’s the real problem.

William’s hand closed around the key. Metal pressed his palm—his mother’s steadiness across the gap words couldn’t cross.

“I’m still here,” William said quietly. Not defiance—position. A marker on a map.

Bobby leaned in until William could see the freckle near his left eye—the one he probably hated. Static gathered under the lights. Warren’s smirk faltered. Danny’s eyes finally saw him. Tommy’s jaw clicked uncertain.

No one moved.

For a heartbeat, the hallway held its breath.

Then Bobby's mouth curved—slow, dangerous. “We'll see how long that lasts.”

A bell rang somewhere, sharp and hollow. The current surged around them.

William didn't step aside. Not yet.

## Chapter 04 - Circuit Breakers

The bell's echo hung in the hallway like a challenge unmet, the air thick with unspoken threats. William stood his ground, knuckles white around the key in his pocket, staring down Bobby's glare. Patriots jersey like a flag of false authority. Warren's smirk, polished sharp. Tommy loading another wad of gum like a weapon. Danny's blank stare, a closing wall.

No Spark. No escape. Just the vow burning in his chest: I'm still here.

A hand thrust into the gap—small but callused, solder burns and black marker streaks like it had been wrestling wires since dawn. It latched onto William's sleeve with surprising strength.

"There you are!" a girl snapped, the annoyance half real, half staged. "You're late. My project's gonna overheat because of you."

She yanked him forward, slicing through the cluster as if they were misfiled furniture. No glance for Bobby. Oversized safety goggles perched like a crooked crown. Face tilted—one side calm and neutral, the other always ready to quirk at a spark of inspiration.

Bobby recovered first. "Mind your own business, Palzy."

"Freak," Tommy muttered, popping his gum. She ignored them, already lecturing as she hauled William down the hall. "Punctuality, new kid. Difference between a smooth circuit and a fried board. You want my capacitor blowing up? Because that's what happens when you're late."

William stumbled, heart still hammering, but her audacity cut through the tension like wire cutters. The crew didn't follow—surprised, or wary of whatever project she meant. They turned into a quieter wing; fluorescent lights buzzed like drones far away. She let go.

"Coast is clear," she said, wiping her hands on a stained AC/DC tee. "Those clowns are all talk. Short circuit—lots of noise, no power."

"Thanks," William said, rubbing his sleeve. "I think."

She grinned lopsided, freckles lit. Up close he saw the mismatch of her features—Bell's palsy flicking the grin into a challenge.

"Yeah, it does that," she said, catching his half second look. "Most people call me Palzy. Cute insult once. I stole it. Now it's mine. Kinda like it. Got more zing than plain old Sabrina."

"I'll stick with Sabrina," he said, meeting her eyes. "If that's okay."

She rolled her eyes, but the grin softened—test passed. "Your loss. 'Palzy' sounds like a superhero sidekick. But fine—Sabrina. Don't expect me to answer if I'm mid build."

They fell into step. The Home felt alive in a way William hadn't noticed—echoes of kids' voices, the tang of fresh paint from a half finished mural, a mattress fort peeking from a room like a secret world. Not the dugout's quiet hum or the park's hidden grandeur—but a spark of wonder in chaos people had cobbled into a life.

"So," Sabrina said, voice like a soldering iron through wire, "you're the whisper. Quiet type? What's your deal—runaway or bad luck?"

He stuck to the story. "Little bit of column A and a little bit of column B. Figuring things out."

"Fair." She nodded. "Place is full of 'figure it out.' Bobby's a capacitor—stores up meanness, discharges when it's dramatic. Made me build a taser out of vape pens once." She tapped a cuff strapped to her wrist—a tangle of salvaged parts faintly humming. "My most dangerous creation. Don't make me regret not letting him field test it on you."

William huffed a surprised laugh. The cuff tugged at him—Jessica's hammer, Mr. E's rigged vapes—junk into power. If she can build that, a clean thought clicked into place, she can find a charger. A lead more concrete than Chico's vague promises.

“Sounds like you’ve got the place wired,” he said.

“Pretty much. Spencer’s the power source—all ideas, no fuse box. Fun, chaotic. Xenia’s the circuit breaker—stops meltdowns. Stay on her good side; she’s the only stable voltage.”

He didn’t need his sense to see it, but felt it anyway: Spencer’s chaotic buzz, Xenia’s steady dampening presence. She didn’t just know the wiring; she knew the physics of this place.

They passed a doorway: Chico huddled with TJX!, swapping a bundle of wires for a pudding cup.

“What about them?” William asked. “TJX! and Chico?”

“TJX! is noise. Useful noise,” Sabrina said. “Chico handles distribution. I don’t pry. I just get parts.”

William watched them trade—wires for pudding. His senses pricked: TJX! a crackling, unfocused broadcast; Chico a tight, encrypted signal. An unsettling, perfect partnership.

“And school?” he asked. “Actual classes or—”

“More ‘choose your own adventure,’” she said, waving at kids with board games and art supplies. “You can learn, or just survive. Most of us are debugging our own code.”

Debugging. William almost smiled. His code was corrupted time and a missing Spark. Objectives: 1) Power the phone. 2) Decode the key. 3) Stay under Ellis’s microscope. This place—with hidden workshops and black market pudding—might be the perfect compiler.

She glanced sideways. “Weird night, too—dreamt every clock here ran backward. Woke up with my soldering iron in my hand. Freaky, right?”

Static flicked his spine. Backward clocks. He shrugged carefully. “Yeah. Dreams are like that.” Inside, something reached toward the idea and retreated, like iron to a magnet and back.

They cut through a fogged breezeway over a muddy courtyard. She pointed out doors that stuck in rain and outlets that sparked if you glared at them. The way she talked about wires and thresholds and “temperamental ground” tugged a memory loose—Jessica, sleeves shoved up, hammer braced against a reactor she pretended not to care about. The same stubborn tilt. The same dare for the universe to blink first.

I know you, he thought, watching Sabrina. I’ve fought beside someone like you. The ache was sharp and, somehow, easing.

“You’re smiling weird,” she said. “Is that a ‘wow, she’s brilliant’ smile or an ‘I escaped death and my brain is soup’ smile?”

“Both,” he said. “Mostly the first.”

She tried to smother a pleased flicker and failed. “Good answer.”

They passed an ancient trophy case, milky glass and googly eyed second place. In the reflection, they moved like a double exposure—her a narrow storm, him a shadow lengthening to keep up.

“Been here long?” he asked to keep the thread.

“Long enough.” No drama. Just fact on fact. She tapped the cuff; something chirped inside. “You build your own armor. Literally, sometimes.”

“What does it do?”

“What doesn’t it do?” She ticked pieces: “Pulse sensor, voltage tester, tiny screw driver set, and a speaker that yells if I forget it, and this—” She flicked a switch. The cuff hummed. A warm halo brushed his forearm hair more than skin. “EM shield. Cuts interference. Or pretends to.”

The muffled static in his chest leaned toward it, then away—iron to magnet, back again. Comfort, brief and real.

“That’s incredible,” he said.

“Nobody builds it for you,” she said, softer at the edges. “You’ve got the stare.”

“What stare?”

“The one people get when they’re fixing a thing in their head while pretending to listen. My dad could take an engine apart with his eyes if you gave him fifteen minutes and a nap.”

He almost asked. Set it down instead—too heavy for a hallway, too soon for a truce. “I was imagining rewiring the building so Spencer and Xenia stop tripping each other.”

“Good luck. That’s a feedback loop you solve with a bigger breaker.”

“Or better wiring.”

“Ha.” She bumped his shoulder, light. “You’re not bad, newbie.”

“You either,” he said. “Sabrina.”

Her mouth twitched at the choice. “Still sticking with that?”

“Feels right.”

They laughed—earned, not borrowed. His dulled sense caught it, her creative current warming to a steady glow. He had no power to draw on, but he had calibration—a way to feel people in the dark.

They pushed into a main spine. Light from high windows; breakfast smells—syrup, burnt toast, brave orange. Kids eddied in swirls, brokering hash browns.

Sabrina stretched her wrists; the cuff clicked as it resettled. “Rules,” she said. “If you don’t want to be someone’s unpaid intern: One—don’t let TJX! sell you a ‘security dongle.’ It’s just a keychain with a loud opinion.”

“I’ve met him,” William said. “Tried to recruit me for some turtle deterrent thing.”

“Classic. Two—if Chico gives you a map, draw your own. His are less ‘directions’ and more ‘probation.’ Three—”

She didn’t get to three.

Large, steady hands landed—one on William’s shoulder, one on Sabrina’s. Not rough. Not friendly. Professional. The kind of grip that ends arguments and breaks up crowds without breaking bones.

William’s body reacted before thought. Breath cut short. Sight tightened into a threat assessment grid. Alehante Patrol, his nerves screamed, before logic overrode. The grip was the same—absolute, unyielding authority. His hand didn’t just find the phone; his thumb found the secret reset sequence, a ghost habit from a war he’d time traveled to prevent.

Sabrina went rigid. The laugh burned off her face, replaced by an older, flatter guard. Her cuff whirred—tiny machine reflex at a boundary.

William kept his eyes forward. In the fire escape diagram’s glass he caught a warped reflection: broad chest, catcher’s mitt hand, a face he couldn’t resolve. Bigger than the hallway’s usual noise. The hold wasn’t cruel. It was sure.

His fingers curled uselessly, then settled on the key’s edge biting a comma into his palm. His pulse wrote itself in Morse: wait wait wait.

The corridor’s chatter thinned, pulled like taffy. Far down the hall a tray hit tile and skittered. No one moved to help.

The hands didn’t tighten. Didn’t ease. They simply held.

Sabrina’s jaw set. William’s shoulders locked. The air went dense as damp wool.

The person behind them drew a breath.

## Chapter 05 - The Invitation

The hands on William's shoulders loosened. For one terrifying heartbeat he was sure they belonged to a staff member—or worse, someone from Alehante. Breath locked.

Sabrina spun. “Yeldarb! You big oaf, you scared the capacitors out of me!”

The grip vanished. William turned to a mountain of a boy—broad shouldered, ruddy cheeked, grin so wide it cracked the tension. Shirt half untucked, hair defying gravity, presence filling the hallway like warm thunder.

“Palzy!” he boomed, accent rolling. “I was searching for you! You are supposed to be in Workshop Wing, not causing riots in cafeteria sector!”

“Correction,” Sabrina said, brushing her hair back with mock primness. “I was preventing a riot. Bobby's crew cornered the new kid, so I executed a tactical extraction.”

“Extraction?”

“I grabbed him and left.”

“Ah.” He nodded, perfectly satisfied. Then, with diplomatic gravity, he turned to William. “Any friend of Palzy is comrade of mine!”

Before William could react, Yeldarb scooped him into a bear hug that evacuated his lungs.

“Uh—thanks—can't—breathe,” William managed, arms pinwheeling. Training flashed—three escapes, two levers, one stomp—then logic caught up: not an attack; an ally. An overwhelmingly physical one.

“Apologies!” Yeldarb released him, horrified at his enthusiasm. “I forget American ribs are not made of iron. You must eat more protein! Look at you—too much wire, not enough muscle!”

“Please don't start with the protein shakes again,” Sabrina said.

“I am Yeldarb Belac, future American Strong Man!” he declared. “One day my parents—greatest people in all Russia—will see me lift car above head and say, ‘That is our son! He has guts!’”

Sabrina smirked. “Tell him how your ‘stage’ was the storage shed roof.”

“That was rehearsal,” Yeldarb said solemnly. “And only minor injuries.”

Despite himself, William laughed—real, unforced, warm. Yeldarb's grin softened.

“Good! You laugh! That means you have spirit. This place tries to take it sometimes. You must keep it.”

Under the boom, William's dulled sense registered him—not a kaleidoscope like Spencer or a laser like Ellis, but a steady furnace of sincerity. Simple. Overwhelming. Utterly genuine. It tightened William's throat in a way he didn't expect.

Parents anchored the talk like a stone in his stomach. For a half second, Sabrina's smile faltered at the word; her fingers fidgeted with the tool bristled cuff.

Different stories. Same distance.

“So,” William said, forcing lightness, “do all rescues come with speeches, or was I just lucky?”

“Lucky's not usually what people call it,” Sabrina said, bark laughing.

They moved as an oddly balanced unit—Sabrina's wire taut energy, Yeldarb's rolling thunder, William's quiet uncertainty between them.

“Come! It is almost lunch!” Yeldarb marched a half step ahead.

“Relax,” Sabrina said. “We've got time.”

“Not if we want chicken tendies!” Yeldarb's expression turned grave. “Bobby's gang devours them like hyenas. Once, I blinked and they took nine trays. It is battle for survival.”

“Battle for cholesterol,” Sabrina muttered.

“Is that seriously a thing?” William asked.

“Chicken tendies are prize of champions. They go first. Then nuggets. Then sadness.”

“Lead the charge, Comrade Strongman,” Sabrina said. “May the fryer be ever in your favor.”

“For guts and glory!”

The cafeteria was too loud, too warm, too human. Trays clattered; grease and syrup wrestled cleaning spray.

Bobby’s crew held court dead center—Bobby draped across a chair like a throne; Warren preening in a spoon; Tommy chewing gum like it owed him; Danny quiet, the eye of their storm.

“They multiply when you feed them,” Sabrina said.

“Ignore,” Yeldarb said. “Mosquitoes. You swat, you waste energy. You eat, you win.”

They queued. Sabrina tinkered with her cuff; Yeldarb leaned in. “When I first come, I knew no English. Only ‘food’ and ‘yes.’ This one—” thumb at Sabrina “—thought I was poet because I repeated one word with emotion.”

“You did sound like a tragic playwright,” she said. “‘Food. Yes. Food.’”

“And I thought she mocked me with her face,” Yeldarb boomed. “I did not know it was... permanent!”

Sabrina laughed so hard she almost dropped her tray. “We fought a week.”

“Then best allies,” Yeldarb finished.

“You two are ridiculous,” William said.

“Yes,” Yeldarb agreed gravely. “That is how friendship works.”

They took a window table. William nodded toward the bully court. “What’s his deal? Just likes being awful?”

“Rich parents,” Sabrina said. “Private school when he was littler. Entitlement syndrome. Big inheritance at eighteen. He thinks this place is beneath him.”

William studied the four—Bobby’s commanding smirk, Tommy’s fidget, Warren’s mirror, Danny’s stone calm. “King without a kingdom,” he said. And if the future is true, a cold knot formed, this is exactly the kind of kid Eldorado Alehante would recruit to build his empire. Not just a bully. A potential founder of what breaks my mother.

“Exactly,” Sabrina said, popping a fry.

“King without tendies, soon,” Yeldarb added. “He will suffer.”

Their laughter rose over the clatter. For a moment the room felt less like a battlefield and more like a place that might learn peace.

Cafeteria doors slammed.

“EVERYBODY—FREEZE!”

Half the room stopped. The other half looked up, unimpressed.

TJX! stormed in, neon windbreaker blazing, holding a pen like evidence.

“Attention, residents of Harrison Home! A cap has gone missing!

Nobody moves, nobody breathes, until it’s recovered!”

“Oh no,” Sabrina groaned. “Not again.”

“Head of Security,” she told William. “Only security concern is securing his next side hustle.”

TJX! prowled aisles with exaggerated precision. “Stay calm, citizens! I am deploying my patented Pen Cap Finder Mark Three!” He produced a toaster—once a toaster—now duct taped, LED blinking, wire sprouting like a nervous jellyfish.

“Observe!” Switch flip. Shrill beep. Violent vibration. A puff of smoke.

“Incredible craftsmanship!” Yeldarb clapped.

William snorted. The absurdity was a pressure valve—but his mind was cataloging: Useful. Unstable. Access to parts; disregard for rules. High risk, high reward asset. Charger lead. Filed.

TJX! reached into his pocket, brandished the missing cap. “Aha! Found it—right where I left it—because of science!” Scattered pity applause.

“For others prone to catastrophic stationery losses,” he pitched, “the TJX! Finder Service is now available—two dollars a minute! Ninety percent success rate, or your next failure is free!” He carried the toaster away, trailing ozone and crumbs.

Two boys approached: tall, wiry, calculating—Chico. Smaller, sharp eyed, perpetually unimpressed—David Rohan.

“Secret tournament,” Chico said. “Tonight. Basement. Winner gets forty five dollars, thirty four cents, a sleeve of Oreos, and an official Samsung USB-C charging cable.”

William froze mid bite. A charging cable. The words echoed in the hollow where his Spark should be. Not just a prize: a power source. A link to the world he remembers. A key to his past and a tool for his future. Everything—wrapped in a cheap cord.

Rohan smirked. “Fight’s Invite only. You in or out?”

Alarm pricked—fight club? But the room kept eating. Another Tuesday.

“I’m in,” Sabrina said immediately. “Tell my opponent not to cry.”

“You sure?” Chico asked.

“I build tasers for fun.”

“I am in also!” Yeldarb thumped his chest. “I always lose, but with honor! And Oreos.”

“You... always lose?” William asked.

“Yes! But I lose with style.”

Sabrina’s grin turned daring. Yeldarb’s encouragement felt almost paternal. William tried to laugh. “I don’t really—”

“Come on,” Sabrina said, softer. “You’ll do fine. We could use one more good fighter.”

“Do not think, comrade,” Yeldarb urged. “Accept destiny.”

Destiny. The word rang hollow. William looked at Chico, at the paper in his hand, at the imaginary glow of a cord that could wake a dead phone.

“Okay,” he said at last. The word felt like turning a key in a lock. Risk: Bobby’s crew, getting hurt, exposure. Reward: the cable, intel on the underbelly, a chance to power up. Brutal math. Simple answer. He was in.

Chico smiled for the first time—slow, approving. Names scrawled. “Basement. Nine o’clock. Try not to die. It’ll be fun.”

Rohan nodded once and ghosted after him.

Sabrina stood, slinging her tool band. “Workshop after lunch. Yeldarb’s got... arm day.”

“Every day is arm day!” he flexed.

“They won’t go easy on newbies,” she told William. “But I’ll be there—practice, rescue, even if you get eliminated fast.”

“Gee, thanks,” he said, smiling despite the knot.

“Breathe,” she said. “That’s rule four.”

“Courage, little brother,” Yeldarb added, lifting his tray like a trophy. “The basement awaits.”

They left together, laughter fading into the cafeteria’s roar.

William sat alone. Fries going cold. In the ketchup sheen, his reflection wavered—distorted, uncertain.

A fight in a basement, he thought. He pictured the crowd, the ring, the cord. The one thing he needed, tethered to something that could get him hurt—or worse.

Why does everyone treat this as normal? What kind of world did mom send me to, where a fight is just Tuesday?

He pushed the tray away. Grease lingered like a warning.

What's wrong with a world where kids have to fight for power—literal and otherwise? Why does this past feel as dangerous as the future I left?

The questions hung unanswered as the room churned on, indifferent and alive.

## Chapter 06 - A Room of His Own

The cafeteria blurred to a low, oily shimmer—ketchup gloss, cold fries, voices bouncing off cinderblock as if the building were practicing echoes. William sat with his tray pushed away, palms flat on the laminate, breathing like he'd been told to in emergencies: in on four, hold two, out on six.

Basement. Nine o'clock.

Charging cable.

Forty-five dollars and thirty-four cents.

Oreos.

Everyone else treated it like weather. He treated it like a storm.

His thoughts pinballed—Jessica's voice telling him courage wasn't the Spark but the heart that wielded it; his mom's arms around him at the end of the world; the absurd normalcy of tendies and TJX!'s toaster. The past felt like a theme park with broken signage: familiar shapes pointing toward the wrong rides.

"William?"

He didn't move.

"Earth to William?"

He flinched and looked up. Xenia stood across the table, one hand on her clipboard, the other softening into a patient wave. She had the look of someone who could smell trouble and carry three sacks of groceries anyway.

"There you are," she said, smiling in a way that made the smile work even if the day didn't. "Mind a walk?"

He nodded and stood, the weight of the night finding his shoulders and settling in like a cat that had chosen its spot.

They cut through the current of trays and laughter and polish-smelling air. Xenia's stride was brisk but not hurried, the kind you learned from putting fires out before they knew they were flames.

"So," she said lightly, "I hear you've already met Sabrina and Yeldarb."

"I... yeah," William said. The memory of being yanked from Bobby's wall by a grease-smudged hand flickered, then brightened into the sound of Yeldarb's booming laugh. He'd smiled at the time; he felt the ghost of it now. "They're... kind of great."

"They're a lot," Xenia amended, fondness pulled thin over fatigue. "But good kids. You could do a lot worse."

They reached the end of the cafeteria corridor and turned into a quieter wing where the floorboards creaked like tired knees. Xenia glanced at her clipboard, then back at him.

"Quick update," she said. "Deputy Dogman checked in."

William's mouth moved before his brain could stop it. "On my mom."

Xenia's eyebrows lifted a fraction. "Yes," she said, with the gentle gravity of a correction she wasn't making. "On your... mom. No leads on a Samantha Wright." She thumbed her papers. "It's odd. No missing persons reports. No records that match what you gave us. The only Wright that keeps popping up locally is a childless playboy lawyer named Nick Wright."

The world didn't just tilt—it lurched, like someone had yanked the floor sideways. William blinked hard, trying to keep everything from sliding off the edges of his vision.

Nick Wright.

The name didn't hit him.

It detonated.

His breath stuttered. His lungs forgot their instructions. His fingers curled toward his jacket pocket, gripping the metal edges and old glass inside like the pieces might keep him anchored to the present.

It couldn't be.

It couldn't be that Nick Wright.

His brain ran in circles trying to match the impossible: his father's name, the ghost he'd grown up building a life around, the man he'd been told died before he was born. A story older than he was. A fact so solid it had formed the floor under his childhood.

And now Xenia was talking like the universe had casually rewritten a chapter of his life without asking permission.

Alive?

A lawyer?

Here?

His heart hammered too loud; his mouth went dry. Hope, disbelief, anger, fear—they all surged at once, crowding his ribcage like they were fighting for space.

Xenia paused with him, reading the static pouring off him. "Mean anything?"

He swallowed, throat tight. The truth cut both ways. "It's... my dad's name." The words scraped raw. "But he's dead. Before I was born."

"Then it's a coincidence," she said, with the soothing certainty of a blanket pulled over a bad dream. "Besides, this Nick Wright runs with that Eldorado Alehante crowd. You're better off having nothing to do with him."

The corridor seemed to narrow. Eldorado. The name moved like a shadow across the back of his eyes, pulling a wake of noise and heat behind it. He pictured the mansion's crystals shivering under Maddox's bombardment; he heard Mr. E's last joke dying in static. And then—clear as a photograph—his mother's battered wallet, the creased picture she kept: a young man in a cheap suit with a crooked tie and an easier smile.

That man, laughing at a bar beside Eldorado, shaking hands with the architect of their ruin. A stain spreading under water.

Not dead. Not gone.

Here, and friends with the man who breaks the world later.

He was thirteen, standing in a world too strange to trust, and for a second it was too big, too bright, too much. The what-ifs rushed him—what if he could pull his father away from that gravity? What if he could lay a new track before the train arrived? What if saving the world meant saving one man in a suit before he picked the wrong friends?

He forced his shoulders down from his ears. Xenia's eyes softened further, misreading the quake. "I know this is frustrating," she said. "Memory can be slippery when you're scared. We'll help you get home to your mom. For now, let's get you settled."

He nodded. The word home did a small, painful circuit through him and came back singed.

They walked again, turning into a new hallway that smelled less of bleach and more of old varnish. This wing was quieter; the air felt cooler, like the building exhaled here.

"You're graduating from intake," Xenia said, inevitable cheer slipping into her voice despite itself. "You get your own space."

She unlocked a door and stepped aside with a flourish that was part kindness, part ceremony.

William stepped in and stopped moving.

The room was simple: narrow bed, thin mattress, dresser with three drawers that didn't quite agree about alignment, a small closet with a squeaky door, a mirror set in wood that had seen too many reflections to be surprised anymore. There was a window.

He walked to it like people walked to lakes in summer. The glass framed a sky so blue it looked painted, as if the world had decided to show off for him and had overdone it. Trees shivered on the other side, their leaves clean—the kind of clean you got when air wasn't being strangled by machines. A bus hissed somewhere far away. A bike bell chimed. The sounds didn't feel like warnings; they sounded like the world practicing a song.

His throat tightened unexpectedly. The dugout had been safety disguised as claustrophobia. This was space. This was a shape he'd only seen in movies—your own bed, your own door, your own place to put a cup down and find it still there later.

"It's... big," he said, which was absurd. But he couldn't help it.

"It's tiny," Xenia said, but she was smiling. "Right now we have vacancies, so you get a single. Don't get too attached—rooming changes happen."

"I won't," he lied, because he'd already attached a filament of relief to the doorframe and it hummed when the building did.

He wanted to ask about the basement—about nine o'clock and crowds and what counted as a tournament here and why kids said fun like it meant risk disguised as play. The question rose to his teeth, pressed there, then folded back down. Snitches lost friends. He wasn't ready to trade the only ones he had for an answer he wasn't sure he wanted.

Instead he said, "Thank you."

Xenia nodded, the I see you part of her job done without fanfare. "Sheets are in the closet. If the radiator hisses, tap it friendly, not rage tap. There's a difference." Her phone jangled. She grimaced, checked the screen. "Give me one minute?"

He nodded, and she stepped into the hall to take the call.

Silence elasticized the room, stretching to fit him. He put his palm on the dresser's edge; it wobbled a little, loyal anyway. He sat on the bed. The mattress gave with a soft, honest sigh. He looked at his hands on his knees and then out the window again because the window kept promising the town would still be there when he blinked.

He took out the phone under the blanket of his jacket—habit—pressed the secret sequence. A red dot kindled for a heartbeat and vanished. Still a little juice. Not enough for anything but hope. He slid it back, thumb finding the key in the same pocket. The symbol cut into his skin, familiar as a lullaby with half the words missing.

The sky's blue felt heavier now that he'd seen what might be under it: Nick Wright at a bar with Eldorado, laughing too loud; a handshake that tilted a life the wrong way. He pictured stepping between them, rerouting a river with a word. He pictured failing.

From the hallway came Xenia's voice, sharp with surprise. "He did what?!?!"

William jumped. A second later, the door flew open and Xenia popped her head in, hair slightly wild, clipboard clutched like a shield.

"Change of plans," she said, looking like she'd been told the fire code had personally insulted her. "I have to cancel 10.5 Boatmen, a Twenty One Pilots cover band Spencer hired for a 'Full Moon Dance.'"

William blinked. "The... ten and a half what?"

"Exactly." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Apparently there are eleven of them, but one plays triangle 'on an as needed basis.'" She took a breath, then launched, half to him, half to the ceiling. "This is what I get for saying we could use more morale events. He invents a holiday—"

Full Moon Dance, because of course he does—then hires a band with a half member. Do part-time triangle players have health insurance? Do we have money for triangles? We do not.”

Despite the knot in his stomach, William felt a reluctant smile sneak up. “Do they at least know the songs?”

“According to Spencer, they ‘feel the essence of 21P,’” she said, air quoting like a professional. “I am going to feel the essence of our budget if he keeps this up.”

She blew out a breath, the rant vented, the kindness layering back over the irritation like a sweater. “Okay. You’ll be fine here for a bit?”

“Yes,” he said, surprising himself with how much he meant it.

“Good. I’ll be back with a pillow and a victory over triangles.” She paused in the doorway, softening. “We’re glad you’re here, William. Even when the day is weird.” A wry tilt.

“Especially then.”

She was gone, her footsteps off down the hall, already muttering about invoices and lunar phases.

After Xenia left, the room felt too quiet—like it was waiting to see what kind of person he’d be inside it. William sat on the edge of the bed, hands on his knees, breathing in the smell of old paint and laundry detergent. The radiator clicked once, then seemed embarrassed it had made a sound at all.

A strip of sunlight angled across the floor, catching dust motes in a slow, drifting dance. He watched them until sitting felt too much like sinking.

He stood.

Maybe the Home wasn’t as big as his memory wanted it to be. Or maybe the hallways were designed to feel bigger when you walked them alone. The bulletin boards were crowded with flyers—Homework Hour, Movie Night, “Please Stop Stealing the Good Spoons.” Someone had drawn googly eyes on the word Spoons.

He wandered.

The first classroom he peeked into smelled like pencils and instant ramen. A few kids hunched over math worksheets while Mr. Ellis—tie crooked, patience worn to fibers—lectured about positive integers like they owed him money. One boy snored softly into his hoodie sleeve.

William didn’t go inside.

He tried another room. This one buzzed with whispered arguments over a group project. A girl with bright blue braids was asking if “creative differences” was a legal reason to exile a classmate. Her partner was insisting no. Loudly.

William backed out before they noticed him.

The common area felt like the Home’s living heartbeat. A TV murmured an animated show. Two kids battled on a couch with the intensity of gladiators, except their weapons were foam pool noodles. A younger girl sat on the floor with a jigsaw puzzle, muttering encouragement to the sky-blue pieces like they needed morale support.

No one really stared at him—they looked, cataloged him, then went back to their orbit. He wasn’t a spectacle here. He was just new.

It was almost disappointing.

He drifted to a bookshelf stuffed with paperbacks whose covers had been taped three times over. He picked one up—The NeverEnding Story, its spine held together with stubborn hope—and thumbed the pages before setting it back.

He’d expected this place to feel... worse. Colder. But it didn’t.

It felt lived in.

He wandered back to his room when the sun started leaning toward late afternoon. He lay on the bed staring at the ceiling, listening to the laundry machine thump somewhere far away. His dead phone lay in his palm, heavier than a small object should be, the key warm against his side.

The world was still too big.

He was still too small.

And somehow, he was supposed to find answers tonight.

The room held him again when he returned—same bed, same window, same stubborn sunlight trying to pretend everything was normal. He stood and crossed to the glass. The sky outside was too blue. It didn't apologize for being too blue; it just kept being itself. A few thin clouds drifted like thoughts deciding whether to matter.

In the reflection, a kid stared back—a boy in a too-big hoodie holding onto secrets with both hands. Behind him, the bed waiting like a question. In his pocket, a dead phone with a heartbeat and a key that warmed his skin when he wasn't looking.

Tonight, he thought, and the word rang like a tiny bell.

Not warning.

Not promise.

Just time arriving on schedule.

Basement.

Cable.

Answers.

He let his forehead rest against the cool pane for one long breath.

Then another.

The room creaked softly—pipes settling, wood remembering it was wood—as if offering its quiet approval. He breathed in, held, let go.

The sky stayed too blue.

He stayed anyway.

The radiator ticked once, like it had just remembered to exist. William was still tracing cracks in the window frame with his eyes when a knock came—three crisp, confident taps.

Not Xenia's rhythm.

He opened the door.

Sabrina stood there with her hair a little wilder than usual, goggles hanging around her neck, and a grin that dared the world to keep up. Beside her, Yeldarb loomed, his T-shirt tucked into sweatpants that read PROPERTY OF NO ONE in peeling letters.

"Rescue mission," she announced, brushing past him into the room as if it already belonged to her.

Yeldarb followed, ducking under the frame that didn't actually require ducking. "We come bearing courage and bad singing!"

William blinked. "How did you find me?"

Sabrina tapped her temple. "Sneaked a peek at Xenia's planner. 'Show new kid, Will, his room.' You're not exactly 007."

He sighed, half exasperated, half grateful. "Did she send you?"

"Nope. We're freelancing," she said. "Thought you might need extraction before the dance of death."

He gave her a look. "You mean the fight?"

"Semantics," she said. "Xenia get any more info out of you?"

William shook his head.

“Good.” She clapped once. “That means you’re still a free agent.”

Yeldarb, apparently bored of standing still, burst into song—something between an opera and a wrestling entrance theme.

“Sooooou! Sooooou still burns!” he bellowed, fist to the sky. “The tooools of historrrry! They carve a legend of GLORY!”

Sabrina groaned. “Oh no, not Soul Edge again.”

“Blade, and it’s a Classic!” Yeldarb declared proudly.

He elbowed William, nearly knocking him off balance. “Sing with us! It is anthem of true fighters!”

William raised both hands. “I—I don’t know the words.”

“That has never stopped anyone!” Yeldarb boomed.

Sabrina cracked a grin. “Fine, fine. If you can’t beat ’em—” She launched into an exaggerated harmony that somehow made it worse.

William mumbled along, hopelessly off key, until Sabrina held up a hand. “Okay, stop. You’re terrible. No offense, newbie, but you sound like a glitchy game rip.”

He snorted. “Thanks, I think.”

“Save your breath Glitch Boy,” she said, swinging her goggles over her eyes. “We gotta move if we want good match placements.”

“To victory and tendies!” Yeldarb punched the air.

They slipped into the hallway, laughter echoing low against old plaster. Night changed the building; lights hummed in pockets instead of rows, and the air smelled faintly of dust and burnt sugar—like someone had tried to make popcorn in a lab.

Sabrina took point, quick but careful, knowing which floorboards squeaked and which locks never caught. Yeldarb trailed, whispering his own stealth soundtrack (“duh duh DUH duh”) until Sabrina jabbed him in the ribs.

They rounded a corner and nearly collided with a small figure in oversized pajamas.

Elaine Brooks stood there, clutching a stuffed raccoon by the tail, dark hair in chaotic tufts. Her eyes were wide and certain.

“You’re going to the fights,” she said, not asking.

“Not tonight, Brooks,” Sabrina said, crouching, already ushering. “Scout’s honor—next practice in the rec room, you get a round with the new recruit.”

Elaine peered around her at William, sizing him up. Then she leaned forward and sniffed.

“You smell weird,” she said. “But nice.”

William blinked. “Um... thanks?”

“Promise?” Elaine pressed, pinky raised.

“Promise,” Sabrina said, hooking it fast. “Bed.”

Elaine nodded solemnly and shuffled off, muttering about needing to recharge her raccoon weapon.

When she disappeared, Yeldarb whispered, “The small ones are always most dangerous.”

They continued. Fluorescent buzz faded with each turn, replaced by a lower hum William couldn’t place.

The basement door waited at the end of a narrow corridor, paint flaking around the knob. The sign above it read MAINTENANCE ACCESS, scratched through and overwritten by a single word: ARENA.

Sabrina rested a hand on the handle. “Ready?” she asked, grin bright even in the dim.

“Born ready!” Yeldarb declared, puffing up.

William swallowed. His heart thudded like a clock hammering seconds. The key in his pocket felt heavier. He thought of his mother's voice, the phone that might hold her ghost, everything he didn't understand about this world and the one he'd lost.

For the charger, he told himself. For them.

Then, louder: "Yeah. Ready."

"That's the spirit, glitch," Sabrina said.

She twisted the handle and pulled.

The door swung open. Sound exploded into the hall—a thunderous, pulsing wave.

Bass heavy music rattled the light fixtures. A crowd roared below, voices blending to an electric chorus. Underneath: crackling pops, digital whirs, the pew pew cadence of energy blasts and clashing weapons.

William froze on the threshold, blinking against a strobe of neon spilling up the stairs.

It wasn't the sound of fists. It wasn't the sound of a fight at all.

Sabrina adjusted her goggles, grin turning feral. "Welcome to the basement."

Yeldarb bellowed something triumphant in Russian and thundered down the steps. Sabrina followed, boots syncing to the beat.

William lingered, staring into the kaleidoscope glow.

He'd expected bruises, blood, pain. What waited below sounded like magical fireworks.

His fingers tightened on the rail. The air smelled like ozone, burnt sugar, and popcorn.

He took one step—then another—drawn toward the impossible noise and light of whatever world waited beneath.

## Chapter 07: Rules of Fight Club

The noise hit first—bass thudding through concrete, laughter braided with electronic chimes and digitized grunts. William gripped the railing as he descended, each step rimmed with flickering neon tape.

He'd braced for blood.

Instead, he got color.

The basement opened like a portal. Rows of battered CRTs hummed in the dark, curved glass glowing with pixel battlefields. Heat poured off daisy-chained power strips. The air smelled like plastic, dust, and overworked electronics.

Controllers clacked. 16-bit anthems overlapped—sword rings from *Soul Calibur*, *Marvel vs. Capcom 2*'s shred, *Street Fighter Alpha*'s coin-jingle swagger. Blue victory screens washed the walls; red critical flashes answered back.

"This... isn't a fight club," William breathed.

Sabrina elbowed him, grinning. "Depends on your definition of fighting."

At the far wall, a projector played *Adventure Time* on mute—Finn's grin flickering over the crowd like a blessing. Childhood stacked on childhood. Time folding in on itself.

William knew these shapes. His father's old phone had been full of fragments like this—menus, icons, offscreen captures from "before." He remembered scrolling them under a single weak bulb, wondering what kind of world found joy in digital color.

"How is this even here?" he asked.

"Trade secret," Rohan said, peeling off the wall with a lollipop stem stuck to his lip. Then, after an annoyed glance from Sabrina, with a sigh: "Fine. Division of labor. I run diplomacy and brackets—call me the Game Client. Chico's our Driver—he procures the hardware, however it wouldn't all snap peacefully together without the Operator. Sabrina's the OS—repairs, mods, installs custom Linux builds on anything that hums. And—"

A vibrant voice echoed through the air. "I," TJX! Declaimed while in an intense game himself, "am the power supply. Due to my powerful physique."

Rohan pinched the bridge of his nose. "He's not completely wrong with his analogy. This guy's 'security' for the home, works with Chico and tends to forget to report us. Spencer's oblivious, Xenia is dealing with Spencer, Ellis sticks to a strict sleeping schedule, unless one of us gets his interest. That's the understanding."

Across the room, TJX! continued sitting lotus-style on a beanbag throne, hands a blur on a make-shift arcade stick. "COME ON, BONNE SISTERS—DON'T FAIL ME NOW!" he howled, as his Tronne team got shredded by Cable.

"Dedicated MvC2 casualty," Rohan said dryly. "Also our black-market electronics fairy."

William just stared. "You built this."

"Team effort," Rohan said, already drifting. "Welcome to—"

"It's Chico's Basement," someone bellowed.

Center stage, Chico stood behind a folding table buried in crumpled bills, tangled controllers, and a clipboard glazed in energy drink. "Sign-ups here. Pick three games. No refunds, no excuses."

Sabrina practically vibrated, towing William into line. "Real Harrison tradition. No staff, no supervision—just skill and bragging rights."

"Also snacks," Yeldarb added, balancing a plate of Takis like an offering.

Chico barely glanced up when they arrived. "Sabrina Plumber. Already in."

“Make it official,” she said. “Alpha 2, MvC2, Calibur 2. The holy trinity of twos.”

“Confidence looks better on a win record,” Chico muttered, scribbling.

He pointed at Yeldarb. “And?”

“Alpha 2,” Yeldarb said, catching himself mid-boast. “Honorable rematch with her Karin!  
Also—glorious Zangief!”

“Fine.”

Chico’s gaze slid to William. “New kid, right? Hall-pass survivor? You’re cool. No entry fee.”

Sabrina folded her arms, smug. “See? VIP.”

William scanned the list—logos that felt like echoes: Soul Calibur. Marvel vs. Capcom. Street Fighter Alpha. He’d seen them in his dad’s relic phone; he’d heard his mom say we don’t have time for games like she was locking a door and putting the key in her pocket.

“I’ve... seen these,” he murmured.

“Destiny’s calling, Glitch Boy,” Sabrina nudged. “Pick.”

Yeldarb leaned in, conspiratorial. “You lose with honor. Then you eat Oreos.”

William laughed despite himself and wrote:

- Soul Calibur 2
- Marvel vs. Capcom 2
- Street Fighter Alpha 2

“Ecstatic,” Sabrina said, like she’d wired a bomb to success.

Rohan drifted by with a lazy thumbs-up. “Welcome to Thunderdome, Wright. Pray for your thumbs.”

A hand snatched the clipboard.

Tommy twirled the pen like a mosquito with a diploma. “hmph, noob.” He passed it off slyly to Bobby.

Bobby lounged in a folding chair, grin calibrated to aggravate. He skimmed the picks and tapped the page. “Soul Calibur, Marvel, Street Fighter... someone’s been studying the classics. Hope you did your homework, Slick Willy.”

Warren preened into a spoon. “Maybe throw in Kung-Fu while you’re at it?”

“Bet he can’t even dragon punch,” Tommy cackled.

Sabrina rolled her eyes. “You’ve been ‘reigning champ’ since they banned foosball for violence.”

“Jealousy’s not helping your face, Plumber.” Bobby slapped the clipboard down. “Don’t worry, kid. Participation Oreo’s on me.”

They strutted off in a fog of cologne and ego.

“They good?” William asked, heat rising.

“Good at losing with honor,” Yeldarb said cheerfully, scooping the clipboard. “Come—training. You cannot enter arena with dull spirit.”

### **Soul Blade 101**

He dragged William to a humming CRT. Soul Blade’s logo pulsed like a relic spell.

“Prequel to Calibur,” Yeldarb announced. “Root of greatness.”

He handed over a sticky knock-off PS3 controller. “You pick. I am Rock—big man, big heart.”

Portraits flickered past. A blonde in white and gold—Sophitia—held her shield like a promise. Something in the steadiness tugged at William.

“She looks... familiar.”

“Later,” Yeldarb advised. “For beginners—Mitsurugi. Even power. Cuts like razor.”

William trusted the thunder and hit start.

“First fight is for learning,” Yeldarb said solemnly.

“That’s... comforting.”

The announcer roared: THE LEGEND WILL NEVER DIE!

William lunged. Yeldarb’s Rock scooped him and spun him into the floor.

“Quick lesson,” Yeldarb beamed. “You learned what not to do!”

William laughed. “How are you doing that?”

“Muscle memory. And random mashing. Both equal victory!”

They ran it back. Patterns emerged—high/low, block as timing not fear. When William finally landed a single clean strike, Yeldarb vaulted up, roaring, “HE DRAWS BLOOD! THE LEGEND BEGINS!”

For a minute, the glow pulled William inward. The fight wasn’t chaos; it was rhythm. Balance. Focus. He still lost. He still smiled.

### **Street Fighter Tutorial**

Sabrina appeared, arms crossed. “Caveman class over?”

“He learns fast,” Yeldarb reported. “Heart of lion. Reflexes of... tired mongoose.”

“Good enough.” She claimed a station. Street Fighter Alpha 3 blinked awake. “Sacred text. Read it, live better.”

“Do I get a syllabus?”

“Sure. Don’t jump dumb. Don’t mash dumb. Never taunt me.”

She picked Karin—elegant, smug. William hovered, then chose Ryu. Headband. Quiet eyes. Balance.

“Nice,” she said. “He’s balance. Which tells me you don’t have any. Yet.”

Round start. She deleted him.

“Stop jumping,” she said mildly. “You’re food for anti-airs.”

Next round. Another deletion.

“Control space. Quarter-circle, punch—Hadouken.”

He tried. A blue fireball sputtered out.

“Again.”

They cycled. She explained frame advantage, spacing, the art of not panicking. On the fifth match, his hands stopped overthinking. Fireball on command. A lucky anti-air. She still won—grinning now.

“You’re officially a button-masher with potential,” she said.

“I’ll... take it.”

### **The Basement’s Secret**

They drifted along the edge. TJX! danced after finally eking out a win. Cords coiled like vines; graffiti names climbed the cinderblock—champions crowned and forgotten.

“It’s... amazing,” William said.

“It’s home,” Sabrina answered, too soft for a boast.

Rohan passed, flipping a quarter. “Credit where due: Plumber resurrected half these rigs from trash; TJX! moves parts; I keep truces; Chico spins the plates.”

Joy from scraps, William thought. Like an older, wiser Casandra’s world—only born of play instead of war. For the first time, the future’s ache eased. The past wasn’t just wonder and ruin. It was resilience.

Lights dimmed. The biggest CRT came alive. Cables fed it like arteries. Chatter dropped to a murmur.

Chico raised his clipboard like a scepter. “Next match—rookie from the rafters, Glitch as proclaimed by Palzy—William Wright!”

A cheer rolled through—curious, hungry.

“Opponent—reigning champ of the mid-tier ladder, Sagat stan, hair product enthusiast, the vainglorious—Warren Jean the NINTH!”

Roar. Warren strutted in, smirk polished. “Don’t blink.”

Sabrina shoved William toward the chair. “Breathe. Pick Ryu.”

Across the room, Bobby cupped his hands. “Pick Dan! Perfect fit!”

Warren had already highlighted Sagat—scarred, immense. William’s thumb hovered over Ryu. Menu music drummed in his chest.

Fwip.

A wad of gum slapped the controller. His thumb jolted, the cursor dropped.

SAKURA!

The basement howled.

Tommy waved from the back, wicked. “School’s in, Willy!”

Sabrina threw up her hands. “Oh, come on!”

Sakura bloomed onto the screen—sailor uniform, fists up, eyes bright. Ryu’s echo. Smaller. Faster. Riskier.

Chico couldn’t help himself. “On the left—our noble newbie in training wheels—Sakura! On the right—our knees-for-days menace—Sagat!”

Bobby whistled; Warren soaked it in.

Sabrina crouched, urgent. “Listen—Sakura’s diet Ryu. Same inputs, less reach. Fireballs to buy space. Don’t trade. Ever.”

Yeldarb thumped his palm. “Fight with heart! Lose gloriously if you must!”

William’s grip tightened. SAGAT vs. SAKURA filled the screen.

A new warrior has entered the ring!

The chant rose: SA-GAT! SA-GAT!

Sabrina cut through it. “You’ve faced worse.”

Something steadied inside him.

Not a reactor core. Not a patrol bot. But the principle was the same.

Landfill, beam: Lose your center, lose everything, Jessica had said.

Chickens scattering: Speed is nothing without aim, Jessica had yelled.

Mr. E’s voice: Assess terrain. Find the pattern. Don’t waste your second chance.

His thumbs found the shape. Quarter-circle, punch.

Round One... FIGHT!

Tiger Shot. He blocked late, stumbled, jabbed—panic rising—

Breathe.

He slid, crouched, and let the muscle memory Sabrina had hammered in spark to life.

Hadouken!

Sakura’s fireball flared small and bright, clipping Sagat’s shin. The crowd ooooohed—half mock, half surprised.

One hit.

He exhaled. Eyes narrowed. The screen’s light washed him white.

For an instant he wasn't in a loud basement; he was a small, stubborn fighter staring up at a giant.

The past's world had teeth.

So did he.

## Chapter 08: Collision Chaos

The room still thrummed with electricity as the match resumed.

On screen, Sakura's Hadouken tagged Sagat square in the chest, staggering the giant.

A gasp, then laughter rippled through the crowd.

"Yo, Wright actually clipped him!"

Warren grinned; unshaken. "Nice poke," he said, cool and thin. "Now stop guessing."

FIGHT!

Sagat lunged—Tiger Shot, Tiger Uppercut, Super Tiger Knee—flame and motion swallowing the screen.

K.O.!

The room roared. Warren leaned back, smirking. "Warm-up's over."

Across the room, Bobby punched Tommy's arm. "He let the newbie touch him. Told you—soft hands, all hair gel."

Tommy laughed wetly. "One more tap and he'll break a nail!"

Warren's smirk twitched. "You two want next match?"

Bobby held up his hands. "Relax, champ. You got it." Syrupy voice, eyes sharp—the same look William had seen in the Alehante patrol: waiting for someone else to fail so they could feel strong.

Overlapping chatter rose—boos, tier debates—but Sabrina and Yeldarb clapped so hard it cut the noise.

"That was awesome!" Yeldarb boomed. "First strike—half the battle!"

Sabrina crouched at William's shoulder. "Not bad, rookie. You saw the window—now pry it open."

William wiped his palms on his jeans. Heart racing, but their energy steadied him. This wasn't about perfection. It was presence. Persistence.

Then, impossible:

Snakes.

Leaning on his mop beside a dead vending machine, eyes half-lidded under his cap. A tiny nod. A slow thumbs-up.

William blinked.

The space was empty. Only the mop bucket swayed, slow as a pendulum.

Was he even real?

Chico's voice cut in over the mic. "Round two—same rules: no pausing, no unplugging, corner coaching allowed—and if you throw a controller, you fix it. FIGHT!"

Sakura hopped in, fists high, matching William's shaky resolve.

"Remember!" Sabrina shouted. "You've got a super!"

"A what!?"

Yeldarb cupped his hands. "Use your SUPER!"

"What's that mean!?"

Sabrina groaned. "Right—double fireball motion! Two Hadoukens, quick!"

"Stop coaching him, Plumber!" Bobby shouted.

Tommy's gum arced toward her; she tilted her head and it splatted harmlessly against the wall. She smirked. "Double fireball, Wright! Now!"

William exhaled, gripping the pad. Roll the gate. Don't force it. He traced two clean arcs—click, click—

Sakura crouched, light flaring around her palms.

SHIN-KU HADOUKEN!

The blast caught Sagat mid-jump and stapled him into the corner.

The basement jumped—chairs scraped, Takis flew, the ceiling hummed like it might shed dust.

“He learns faster than lightning!” Yeldarb whooped, knocking his chair over.

Warren hammered buttons, jaw tight. “You won’t get that spacing twice.”

But the rhythm had shifted. Bobby’s and Tommy’s heckles nicked at Warren’s focus. His spacing got sloppy; taunts turned into static.

William didn’t know he was adapting. His thumbs moved on instinct, breath syncing to the fight’s tempo.

Sakura’s hurricane kick clipped Sagat’s jaw—health bar evaporating in one glorious sweep. K.O.!

“NO WAY!” Tommy yelped, shoving Bobby. “He took a round!”

Bobby’s laugh was sharp, fake. “Because Warren went easy. Right, champ?”

Warren didn’t answer. He stared at the screen, reflection flickering in the CRT glow—defiance, cracking.

He flexed his fingers. Quiet: “Final round. No mistakes this time.”

Not gloating. A vow. And suddenly William felt something like empathy: that look—please don’t let me prove them right—was a trap they all knew.

Sabrina nudged him. “You’re getting it.”

“Yeah... I think I am.”

Sakura blinked from the screen, hands on hips—scrappy confidence personified. Not power. Play. Rhythm in chaos.

FINAL ROUND flashed electric blue.

“Let’s go!” Chico yelled. “One-one! Winner takes bragging rights and—probably Yeldarb’s Oreos!”

“NEVER!” Yeldarb cried, clutching his snack like sacred treasure.

FIGHT!

Chaos at the bell. Sagat’s reach crushed space; William backpedaled, ducked a Tiger Shot, jumped in—Sakura’s Shououken popped clean.

Half Sagat’s bar vanished.

“Yes!” Sabrina punched the air. “You’re cooking now, Wright!”

“Lucky scrub!” Bobby barked.

“Fluke city!” Tommy chimed.

Warren said nothing.

Then Sagat charged—screen flashing gold—SUPER TIGER KICK!

Sakura flew, limbs pinwheeling; the crowd howled. Both bars dipped to a sliver. Gauges glowed red—MAX SUPER pulsing like twin heartbeats.

“Don’t panic!” Sabrina called. “He’s baiting you!”

Sagat crouched, hands glowing. The heavy hum of a Super Tiger Fireball built like thunder.

William’s breath hitched.

Something steadied inside him.

Not a reactor core. Not a patrol sweep. Same law: observe, adapt, pattern.

Jessica’s voice: Lose your center, lose everything.

Mr. E: Assess terrain. Find the pattern. Don’t waste your second chance.

He rolled his thumb—too fast. A small fireball fizzed out and got eaten alive.

He exhaled. Traced the double motion again—clean, deliberate.

For a heartbeat, a top-row CRT hiccuped—one pixel blink—

Sakura crouched low, palms flaring bright.

LEVEL 3 SHINKU-HADOUKEN!

Her ball of blue fury swallowed Sagat's projectile and tore across the screen like a comet.

K.O.!

The room detonated. Yeldarb jumped so high he bonked a hanging light. "VICTORY! OUR LITTLE GLITCH—"

William leaned toward him, almost under his breath. "Please don't call me little."

Sabrina whooped, spinning William's chair. "That's how you super with style!"

Warren slammed his controller—the crack rang louder than cheers.

"Yo!" Chico snapped, hugging the pieces. "House rule—you break it, you fix it. Talk to TJX! after."

"Cheap," Warren muttered, seething.

Sabrina's grin vanished. "Hey. Easy. These don't fix themselves."

Bobby's laughter found him. "You lost to Ryu Lite, bro."

Tommy: "Fanboy newbie pick!"

Warren's knuckles whitened. For a second it looked like he might swing—not at William, but at them. Then he turned and stormed off, their mockery trailing him like smoke.

William stared after him, uneasy. Victory didn't feel like gloating. It felt... complicated.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Rohan boomed from the announcer's corner. "The underdog rises! The crowd goes wild! A Mysterious Audience member vanishes into the ether!"

William laughed despite the tension.

"Next up—Street Fighter Alpha 2: Sabrina Plumber versus... Autumn Sands?!"

The room shifted. Heads turned. "Autumn's playing?" "Thought she retired."

Even Bobby's crew went quiet.

At the far side, Autumn stood—tall, calm, hoodie sleeves shoved up. Eyes steady behind dark strands.

"Guess I'm up," she said softly.

"You still play?" Sabrina blinked.

"Sometimes." A tiny shrug.

They sat. Karin vs. Rose. The match moved like a dance—hit, counter, adjust—no panic, only poise.

"They fight like warriors from legend," Yeldarb whispered.

"Yeah," Rohan said. "One's holding back."

Final round, tied. Autumn stepped into a punishable sweep. Sabrina finished clean.

K.O.

Cheer, then Sabrina frowned. "You threw that, didn't you?"

Autumn's smile barely moved. "Sometimes it's useful to see how people win." She turned to William. "Sakura rewards nerve. Keep that."

"Thanks. I—got lucky."

"Luck's another kind of skill," she said, already turning away. "If anyone around here is a problem—or if you just wanna practice—find me."

Promise? Warning? William couldn't tell.

Rohan clapped his shoulder. "Congrats, kid. You've been eyeballed by Autumn Sands."

“Is that... good?”

“Means she’s on your side—or at least not against you. Or she’s planning to train you.” He grinned. “Either way—don’t waste it.”

The tournament rolled. Matches blurred into cheers and Rohan’s arena-grade commentary.

Sabrina’s next bout—Seung Mina vs. Max Doob’s Lizardman—was tight. Max’s spacing was a ruler’s edge. He took it. “Good match,” he said, offering a hand.

“You’re annoyingly polite,” Sabrina sighed, shaking.

“That’s my brand.”

Yeldarb’s MvC2 showdown—Team Tank (Zangief/Colossus/Juggernaut) vs. Danny’s nightmare (Shuma/Blackheart/Akuma)—was glorious chaos. Danny’s combos were surgical. Minutes later: over.

“You fought bravely!” Yeldarb told his reflection. “But my thumbs betrayed me.”

“Maybe don’t cover your fingers with Taki-dust,” Sabrina said.

She turned back to William, all coach again. “Your MvC2 next?”

He nodded.

“Run Ryu/Sakura/Tron Bonne. Keep Sakura second for pressure; Tron closes.”

“Tron Bonne?”

“My girl. Engineering icon. You’ll like her.”

“You think I can handle that?”

“After you danced around Sagat with Sakura? Absolutely.”

His set against Ryan Gasb—polite kid, thick glasses—was close. Cable/Jill pressure pushed him; William pushed back with raw momentum and a few wild guesses that paid off. Ryan’s Spider-Man sealed it.

“Man,” Ryan exhaled, relieved. “You’re good. First time... seriously?”

William grinned through the loss. “First time.”

Ryan blinked. “Terrifying.”

By the last bracket, Rohan climbed a chair, clipboard aloft. “Alright, my lovely lunatics—final matchups!”

He rattled them off with flair:

“Soul Calibur 2: Tommy ‘The Terrible’ Voldo vs. Maximilian’s scaly Lizardman!”

“MvC2: Danny ‘The Dominator’ (Shuma/Blackheart/Akuma) vs. Ryan ‘The Gentleman’ (Jill/Cable/Spidey)!”

“And the main event—Street Fighter Alpha 2: Newcomer and shoto savant William Wright vs. reigning Capcom god Bobby Wolf!”

The crowd whooped and stomped.

Bobby smirked, arms folded. “You beat my undercard with a weak girl that’s a downgraded Ryu,” he called. “Try that on me.”

The words still slid sideways in William’s head—weak, girl—echoes he refused. His mother was the strongest person he knew. Let him eat those words.

William straightened. “We’ll see.”

Sabrina slung an arm around him. “You and Sakura took down his right hand. Time for the main boss.”

Yeldarb nodded, solemn as a priest. “Endgame approaches. Seize the spark of justice!”

Rohan grinned. “No pressure. Everyone’s watching.”

William looked at the flickering select screen, his icon glowing beside Bobby’s, heart ticking like a countdown.

Yeah—the charging cable was still the prize. Charger → turn on phone → stay off Ellis’s grid, he reminded himself, even as his grin tried to break containment.

But now?

Now it was personal. And public.

## Chapter 09: Raging Demons

The crowd pressed in around the biggest TV like tidewater around a rock—heat, noise, the smell of old plastic and popcorn salt—Harrison’s heartbeat set to menu music.

Onscreen, Soul Calibur II shimmered into its final: TOMMY vs. MAXIMILIAN DOOB. Voldo bowed in insectoid contortions, blades clacking like a beetle’s jaws. Lizardman rolled his shoulders, shield lifted, stance neat and efficient.

“Finals!” Rohan called, bright through the cheap mic. “Unorthodox Ultimatum versus Raging Reptile. Place your bets!”

The first round cracked open in a frenzy. Max played tidy—shield checks, measured pokes, spacing that looked simple until you tried it. Tommy... didn’t. Voldo slithered under punches, scuttled around strings like a spider dodging shoes. Twice Max clipped him out of a roll; twice Voldo turned inside-out and backflipped to safety, stabbing from angles that shouldn’t exist.

“He Fights like noodle,” Yeldarb whispered, awed. “Danger noodle.”

Second round swung back—Lizardman’s clean anti-air and punishes ground Tom’s bar into a sliver. The last round turned razor-close. Voldo lunged into a whiff; Max stepped to punish—and Tommy canceled into a cruel sidestep string that chewed through the rest of Lizardman’s health.

K.O.

Tommy detonated into a victory dance halfway between chicken strut and broken sprinkler. He chest-bumped Bobby, hip-checked Danny, then spun toward a newly returned Warren with a wide, mean grin. “Hey, Prince Sagat—it’s ALARMING that you lost to a school-girl.”

Warren laughed like it didn’t hit; the sound folded at the end. He pocketed his hands and slipped toward the stairs, jaw clenched. “Sure.”

A shadow fell across William. Bobby. Patriots hoodie like armor; smirk like a dare.

“Say goodbye to your lucky streak, Slick Willy,” he said, close enough for William to smell mint gum. “I’m sending your schoolgirl back to the nurse’s office. Maybe she can hold your hand while you cry.”

The flicker of pity William had felt for Warren vanished like a screen turning off. He smiled without teeth. “Guess I’ll see you after school.”

Bobby’s smirk thinned. “Oh, you will.”

Rohan clapped into the mic before it curdled. “Marvel heads—on deck! Danny versus Ryan for the MvC2 crown. Someone grab TJX!’s toaster—I lost my pen cap from excitement.”

They shifted to the Marvel station—two battered controllers, a monitor with a faint burn-in you could only see when the room went quiet. It was never quiet.

Teams popped on the select screen: Danny locked Shuma-Gorath / Blackheart / Akuma with practiced speed. Ryan went Cable / Jill / Spider-Man—gentleman menace.

“Three, two, go!” Chico barked.

Color exploded. Cable’s laser carved clean lines across chaos; Shuma’s gelatinous limbs popped in like nightmare party streamers. Ryan hit early—zoning, smart assists, a tidy Cable super that made the crowd chant, “ONE MORE!” He obliged. Danny bled meter, bled health, bled smile.

Then the tide turned. Blackheart’s demons turned the screen into a hailstorm. The pace slowed just enough for Danny’s patience to show. Jill got corner-trapped; a mistimed assist got chewed up; Ryan’s momentum evaporated like water on a griddle.

“Uh-oh,” Rohan murmured, half show, half warning.

Shuma hit the floor with a sticky thump.

CHAOS DIMENSION.

Void swallowed a chunk of the screen; Jill vanished into spiraling nothing. The bar didn't drain; it disappeared. When the timer spat her back out, she crumpled.

"Waste of flesh," Shuma burred in cold syrup.

It wasn't the sound that chilled William. It was Danny's mouth, moving in sync with the taunt. No smile. No heat. Just the words, formed precisely, like lyrics he'd rehearsed alone.

Spider-Man danced a brave last dance; Akuma finished it with clinical neatness. The pop on K.O. carried relief, not joy.

Danny stood without theatrics. No gloat. The quiet around him did it for him.

William rubbed his arms. The basement felt a degree colder.

Rohan sprang back to center, balancing on a chair. "Ladies, gents, and gremlins of Harrison—your main event approaches! On one side: surprise prodigy, schoolgirl tamer, slayer of Sagat—William Wright!"

Cheers sparked from the edges—Sabrina's sharp whistle, Yeldarb's barbaric yawp, a chorus of kids who liked a story.

"And on the other: the self-appointed Capcom connoisseur, trainer of tyrants, patron saint of smack talk—Bobby Wolf!"

Bobby shadowboxed to the station, grinning for cameras no one had. Warren was gone. Tommy and Danny flanked Bobby like bad angels.

Sabrina tugged William aside, goggles pushed up. "Last call for coaching. He'll pick Akuma. Glass cannon—monster if you know him, self-destruct if you don't."

"Should I switch to Ryu?" William asked, breath tight.

She shook her head. "No. Your hands already know Sakura. Lighter Ryu, better pressure up close. Rhythm, not resume."

Yeldarb slapped William's shoulders like a coach inflating a player. "Remember—heart first, thumbs second."

"Not actually how—" Sabrina started.

"Shh," Yeldarb said gravely. "In Russia, this is science."

Rohan cupped the mic. "Fighters to stations!"

William sat. The controller fit like it remembered him.

Across the screen, Bobby already had Akuma highlighted, eyes never leaving William's. He jabbed confirm with unnecessary force.

"Sticking with the weak little schoolgirl?" he called, smooth as oil. "Let's see how she does against a raging demon. You gonna cry for mommy when it hurts?"

The words slid sideways: weak, girl... mommy. William's chest went hot. His mother, strongest person he knew, did not belong in Bobby's mouth.

His thumb trembled over Ryu. The safe pick tugged hard. Then—like a soft tingle under the collarbone—the power-echo again. Not Spark, not not. The scanlines seemed to shimmer, a tiny ripple like heat over asphalt. For a second, Sakura's portrait brightened—CRT blink.

He moved down.

SAKURA. Confirm.

In his pocket, the dead phone felt heavier—a stone with a heartbeat. Charger → phone → Memories of Mom and information. The cable wasn't just a prize; it was a tether to the person who sent him through the light.

Sabrina's hand pressed his shoulder—solid, proud. "Let's go, new guy."

Round One—FIGHT!

Akuma vanished—teleport—behind him. Jab. Sweep. Late block. Knockdown. Stand into air fireball—pinned. Bobby turned the game into a magic trick: disappear, reappear, punish. Zanku Hadokens rained at evil diagonals; red fire flashed; a palm strike clipped William out of his attempt to breathe.

Half a bar gone. Then three-quarters.

“Don’t chase!” Sabrina called, needle-steady. “Make him come to you!”

William tried, retreating into slivers of safety. The basement braided into one rope: feet stomping time, kids shouting, CRTs humming like sleeping beasts. Tommy cackled when Sakura ate a fireball. Up on the projection, Adventure Time flashed violet, that color seeming to drip toward William’s corner—an impossible glitch his eyes wanted to chase.

Focus.

He found a block-string to breathe in: crouch, crouch, stand—Sakura’s footwork tapping a pattern. The faint hum under his ribs rose a notch, synching with the game’s tempo. For a heartbeat the scanlines thinned, colors brightening—junk-tech and his frayed Spark shaking hands.

Akuma teleported again.

William waited a half-beat longer than terror wanted, then met him with a fast standing kick.

COUNTER!

A gasp—small, but his.

He buffered what Sabrina tattooed into his hands. Quarter circle forward + punch—again.

Sakura leapt—too early—adjust mid-commit—Shinku Shoryuken!

Uppercut caught Akuma’s shoulder, lifting him into bright pixels. The room popped like oil taking popcorn.

Bobby rolled, not smiling. Red eyes, red kanji. Teleport—air fireball—dive kick. Messatsu Gou Hadou burned across the stage, eating space that felt like floor under William’s shoes.

K.O.

Bobby leaned back, grin reattached. “One down.”

William exhaled. He’d lost the round—but he hadn’t drowned. The hum under his ribs held, quiet as a promise.

Sabrina dipped close, voice for him alone. “You saw it. See it sooner.”

Yeldarb’s fist clenched at his side. “Lion heart. Round two.”

Sakura faced the demon again. The scanlines across her face flickered like a smile.

“Okay,” William whispered to the screen, to himself, to a waking echo. “We’re still here.”

Tommy leaned across the cab, needle-voice. “Careful, Bobby. Demon’s looking a little... mortal.”

“Shut up, Tommy,” Bobby said, never looking away.

“Be a shame if you lost to a pep rally.”

“Shut. Up.”

Before it tipped, TJX! leapt between them, windbreaker cracking like a flag. “Authority has arrived! Any more hostility in my arena and I shut it down—tournaments, snacks, electricity, fun—gone.”

Sabrina didn’t glance over. “sure,” she muttered.

Snickers. TJX! puffed, retreated, muttering about “paperwork and ravioli.”

Rohan smoothed the room with the mic. “Round two. We breathe, we play.”

William let the room drain until only the screen remained.

Round Two—FIGHT!

Teleport. William didn't bite. Block. Half-beat. Jab-check the recovery. Akuma jumped—air fireball—William dashed under instead of standing into the trap. Clean punish—low kick, chain, throw.

“Fundamentals,” Sabrina said, pleased. “Yes.”

Bobby tried to dazzle—dive-kick into palm, red arcs meant to impress. William picked boring on purpose: block, crouch, 2-in-1 punish. Teleport behind? Sakura's heel was already there. Overhead? Duck—point-blank Hadouken stuffs startup.

Little hits. Correct hits. He watched the bar, not the drama.

The crowd noticed—oohs leveling into appreciative claps. Akuma's life bled without theatrics.

Bait. Whiff. K.O.

Pop. Yeldarb's roar rattled a light. Bobby pressed his lips thin, staring at the screen like it had wronged him.

Rohan kept it calm. “One apiece.”

Final Round flashed. The CRT's scanlines sharpened; pixels looked honed.

Bobby cooled. Pressure turned patient. He stopped overextending and started cornering. Air fireball. Teleport feint. Sweep. A wall. Come into it.

Sakura got walked back. A mistimed fireball—punish. A bad jump—anti-air. Her bar slid into danger red while Akuma scarcely dipped. 90% to 25%. The low hiss of the speakers thickened the air.

“Breathe,” Sabrina said. “He wants you flustered.”

William tried. Hands trembled. Not like this. Not when he was this close. Not when the charger sat on the table like a glass slipper. Not when it meant phone → voice → Mom.

Another air fireball—inevitable red arc.

Something in his chest answered.

A faint, familiar tingle—like the mirror's cold, like the key's ghost-warmth—rose under his sternum. The CRT picture stuttered—a blink he felt. Colors saturated: Sakura's white collar brightened; stage shadows inked deeper.

His thumbs moved—not the motion Sabrina taught. Longer, stranger—a chain that shouldn't mean anything in Alpha 2.

The screen shook.

Sakura's aura flared—pink to violet to blacklight purple bleeding into the scanlines. Her eyes flashed—not bright, voided—and an inky kanji ghosted across her back and vanished.

The basement went silent.

“No way,” someone whispered.

On-screen, Sakura... shifted. Lower stance, coiled. Gloves darkened like bruises blooming backward.

“Evil... Sakura?” Rohan breathed, forgetting his mic.

“That's not in this game,” Chico said, flat, awed.

Bobby barked a laugh that sounded like a cough. “You dragged a demon out of your pep rally? Cute.”

He rushed.

William didn't think. The stance felt like an answer to a question he hadn't learned. His hands snapped to a command he'd only heard in Sabrina's Akuma stories: two jabs, a step, a whisper of movement, then—

The screen dimmed violet. Footsteps—tap, tap, tap—ran across nothing. For one breath, only kanji floated, stark and terrible.

RAGING DEMON.

The room detonated. Kids jumped, screamed, clapped the air. Yeldarb lifted Sabrina; she kicked his shin until he put her down.

William's breath burst like he'd been underwater. He'd done it—he'd actually—

“Finish it!” someone yelled. “He's done!”

Sabrina didn't cheer. Her smile went tight, eyes calculating. “It's weaker,” she murmured. “Not Akuma's version—watch—”

The violence cleared.

Akuma stood.

A pixel. Enough.

Bobby didn't waste it. Messatsu Gou Shoryu ripped through—uppercut catching Evil Sakura clean. Her bar guttered to black. The purple bled out as she hit the floor—just a kid in a sailor uniform again.

K.O.

For a heartbeat, no one moved. Then sound fell back into itself—cheers for the show, groans for the loss, disbelief filling the spaces between.

Bobby stood slow, stuffing his grin back on like a mask pulled from a pocket. Tommy whooped, over-loud. Danny didn't clap.

Rohan made his voice carry—steady, generous. “That's the set—Bobby Wolf takes Alpha 2. What a match.”

Chico handed Bobby an envelope of bills, a sleeve of Oreos, and an Official Samsung USB-C cable that suddenly looked like glass under fluorescent light.

Bobby raised them like a trophy and drank in—nothing. The cheers weren't for the prize. They weren't even for the win. They were for the impossible: the purple aura, the kanji, the way a kid who'd never played had made the basement feel... enchanted.

Sabrina leaned on William's chair, knuckles brushing his shoulder. “You just hacked a game from '96,” she said softly. “What a Glitch.”

Rohan jogged over, eyes bright. “Best set in basement history,” he declared. “I'll die on that hill.”

Chico nodded once—which, for Chico, was a standing ovation. “Also, we are not telling Ellis.”

Across the room, Bobby's smile snapped. Tommy yammered—“Demon tax! Demon refund!”—Danny murmured something like “expected,” and all the praise not landing on Bobby gathered like static.

He shoulder-checked William's chair hard. The jolt rattled to bone.

“This isn't over, Slick Willy,” he said, voice low and even, like something that decided things in the dark. “You made a mistake tonight.”

William met his eyes. Too wrung out to be afraid. “So did you,” he said. “You pushed me beyond my limit. I should thank you.”

The words landed. Bobby flinched like they carried weight, then elbowed Tommy for laughing and stalked out, entourage snapping at his heels.

The buzz softened into something warmer. Cleanup began the way good chaos ends—communally. Controllers untangled. Snack wrappers bagged. Cables coiled with reverence owed

to snakes you hoped were sleeping. William collected old phones and Franken-computers with Yeldarb while Sabrina rewound a giant orange extension cord like a sailor taking in line.

It felt... familiar. Not the world he'd left, but the part that mattered: hands doing a job together, quiet jokes, a place earned more than given.

"Hey," Sabrina said, bumping his arm. "You good?"

"I think so," William said—and it surprised him by being true. "I wanted the charger."

"You'll get one," she said, like weather. "Tonight you got something better."

William's eyes drifted toward the table where Bobby's envelope and the USB-C cable had sat, now gone with him. The knot in his stomach tightened. Winning the match would've made things easy. This... didn't.

He rubbed his arm. "I really did need that charger."

Sabrina snorted. "Please. Bobby only wanted it because you wanted it. He hoards stupid trophies."

She nudged him with her elbow. "Besides—I've got like chineseium cables in my workshop."

"Chineseium?"

"Yeah." She made a so-so gesture. "They barely work to charge, don't really carry data, and hold your breath. I strip them for parts more than I use them. Good wires. Bad regulators."

William blinked. "You can fix them?"

"Fix?" Sabrina laughed. "No. Make something new out of their suffering? Definitely."

"So... you could build one that works?"

Sabrina hesitated—an engineer weighing truth against comfort. "Maybe. I'd need the right chips. Good ones. Not the bargain-bin stuff Spencer buys in bulk because he saw a coupon code."

"Could Bobby trade?" William asked quietly. "If I gave him something—"

"No," Sabrina said instantly, sharp enough to stop him mid-breath. "Absolutely not. Making deals with Bobby is like shaking hands with a stray cat. You're gonna get scratched and it's gonna be your fault."

William tried not to smile. "So what do I do?"

She tapped his hoodie pocket where the dead phone sat like a secret. "You keep it safe. I'll keep an eye out for parts. We'll figure it out. Just... not with him."

Yeldarb leaned between them, completely missing the tension. "Teamwork makes the dream work!" he announced, throwing an arm around both their shoulders. "Also: I found a slice of pizza under the TV stand. No mold! This is a sign."

"It's a health hazard," Sabrina muttered. "But sure. A sign."

"A sign to us making history!" Yeldarb declared, sweeping in to crush them both with a hug. They escaped with only moderate rib damage.

Rohan clicked the mic off, satisfied, and tossed it to Chico. "Same time next week?"

"If Spencer keeps ignoring the mild electric bill," Chico said, tucking it away.

Across the room, TJX! perched on a crate, finally unwrapping a dented can of ravioli. "A peaceful end to an operationally complex—"

The fire alarm went off.

A siren knifed the basement—shrill, mechanical, merciless. Red strobes pulsed. Screens flickered like spooked animals.

TJX! jumped, launched his ravioli in a perfect arc, and sprinted for the stairs. “FIRE! LIVE FIRE! EMACULATE!” he bellowed, slipping on a noodle and regaining his dignity purely by declaring it intact.

Rohan’s grin died. “We don’t... I think he means evacuate.”

Kids froze, looked at the door, at each other. The alarm didn’t stop. It clawed at the room, at William’s spine, at the thin new calm he’d stitched together.

Sabrina’s eyes found his. Yeldarb’s found both of theirs. Three looks, one question.

The siren wailed on. The home William had just started to claim quivered under the noise, like it was deciding which version of the world to be next.