

WRIGHT OUT OF TIME

BOOK THREE: FANTASY'S FINALE



**POWER
TO THE
READER!**



A farewell to one life.
A step into another.
A finale shaped by the heart.

Wright Out of Time

Book 3: Fantasy's Finale

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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For my daughter —
my little snuggle heart.

Watching you grow has been one of the greatest joys of my life.

Seeing you pick up the same games I grew up playing — Sonic, Crash, Mario, Ratchet & Clank — fills me with a happiness I can't put into words.

Sharing our favorite shows together — DuckTales, The Simpsons, Community (yes, you really are an Abed fan) — reminds me that some stories are timeless... just like you.

I treasure every moment we spend teaming up in Fortnite, or watching Naruto and Dragon Ball, cheering on our favorite heroes side by side.

I hope you enjoy this story,
and I thank God every single day for the gift that you are.

Chapter 1 — An Echo of Hope

The ripples on the pond seemed to breathe with him—slow, uneven, hesitant. William stood at the water's edge, hands twitching in his pockets, pulse banging at his ribs like it was trying to climb out. The air smelled of damp grass and late sunlight. He didn't know if the warmth in his chest was memory or magnetism—only that it pulled him toward her.

She sat on a park bench beneath a willow, sunlight tangled in her hair. It wasn't the soft white blonde of his mother's memory. This was darker—a honey brown that caught the light like it had opinions about it. She was reading something small and paperback, her lips moving faintly with the words, the kind of unconscious habit people had when they loved language too much to leave it entirely on the page.

William took one shaky breath and stepped forward. His shoe crunched a leaf. She looked up.

“Uh—” His throat caught. Every muscle in his body tried to decide whether to bolt or bow. “Excuse me, I... uh... what's your name?”

The woman blinked at him, startled out of whatever quiet world she'd been visiting. The book folded in her hands like a bird settling its wings. Her eyes—green, maybe hazel, but alive in the light—searched his face with the kind of recognition that didn't belong to logic.

“I'm sorry,” she said, hesitating. “Why... why do you ask?”

William's mouth opened, closed, then tried again. “You just...” His voice cracked, so he coughed to steady it. “You look familiar. I thought maybe I—maybe we'd met.”

The corner of her mouth lifted in a sympathetic half-smile. “You look familiar, too,” she said, and something in her tone made the air hum. Then she extended a hand, warm and steady. “I'm Abby. Abby Winters.”

The name landed in his chest like a small stone dropped in deep water. It didn't echo the way he'd hoped. It wasn't Samantha. It wasn't anyone from the fragile constellation of his past. The brief, impossible thought that he'd somehow found his mother alive here flickered out, leaving behind a gentle, aching light.

“William,” he said, taking her hand. Her grip was firm, grounding. “William Wright.”

“Nice to meet you, William Wright.” Her smile deepened—kind, open, a little wistful. The kind of smile that could forgive a lot of world.

For a moment they simply stood there, the pond muttering at their feet, the wind making small edits to the scene. The Spark that had drawn him here now thrummed softly between them—not invasive, not demanding—just present, like shared warmth on a cold morning.

He didn't know why, but he felt stronger just standing near her.

“Sorry if I startled you,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “You just... have this spark about you. Feels like I've seen it before.”

Abby tilted her head, eyes narrowing thoughtfully. “That's a sweet thing to say,” she said. “I don't get that a lot. Usually people tell me I look like I give out too much unsolicited advice.”

William smiled despite himself. “Maybe that too.”

She laughed—an easy, melodic sound that shook the last chill out of the afternoon. “So,” she said, closing her book and setting it aside on the bench, “since you've ruined my brooding pond aesthetic, you might as well sit. Tell me why you're here, mysterious young man who asks women their names like it's the start of a fairy tale.”

The bench was old but kind—it didn't creak when William sat. Abby had patted the spot beside her with an easy confidence, the kind that made "sit with me" sound like "you'll feel better if you do."

He did.

For a few seconds, neither spoke. The pond stretched ahead of them, silvered and still except for the lazy drift of ducks near the reeds. The sounds of the park folded around them: distant conversation, the slow squeal of a swing, the soft crunch of someone jogging past. Normal life. The kind he never really trusted, but couldn't stop wanting.

"So," Abby said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, "what brings you here, William Wright? You don't look like you're feeding ducks."

He smiled faintly. "Community service. Picking up trash around the bandshell."

She angled toward him, amusement playing at the edge of her lips. "Community service, huh? What'd you do, rob a lemonade stand?"

He hesitated, then exhaled. "Punched someone."

Abby laughed softly—not mocking, more surprised by the honesty. "Oh. I see. Vigilante justice?"

"More like... bad timing and worse impulse control." He rubbed the back of his neck. "The guy I hit—Bobby—he was giving a friend of mine a hard time. I didn't really think. Just reacted."

"Ah," Abby said knowingly. "The noble kind of stupid."

He grinned despite himself. "That's one way to put it."

"And where's home for you?" she asked, voice gentle now.

"The Harrison Home."

"The orphanage?"

"Yeah." He said it simply, no wince, no defense. "It's not as bad as it sounds. The people there—they try. Sometimes it even works."

Abby's eyes softened, like she'd just seen a younger version of herself in front of her. "That's good," she said. "It's rare when people try."

William hesitated, fingers tracing the worn edge of the bench. "Sometimes I feel like I'm trying too hard," he admitted. "To make sense of things. To remember where I'm supposed to be."

"Supposed to be?" she asked, voice threading curiosity and care.

He stopped himself before the truth escaped—before words like future and timeline and Spark could betray him. "It's... complicated," he said, smiling faintly. "Hard to explain without sounding crazy."

"Crazy doesn't scare me," Abby said. "But you don't have to tell me more than you want."

William shook his head. "It's okay. It actually feels good to talk about it with someone... new."

That earned a small smile. She looked away for a moment, toward the sunlight spilling through the willows. "New is nice," she said. "Old stories get heavy after a while."

He turned to her. "What about you?"

Abby's breath came slower now, the kind people take before diving into memory. "My dad vanished when I was little," she said. "Left one morning and didn't come back. No note, no fight, nothing. Just gone. My mom... she didn't handle it well. She drank. Blamed everyone but herself. Especially me."

William listened, still as the pond.

“I have an older brother, Eustace,” she continued. “He’s quiet—too quiet. I think that’s how he survived her. He learned to disappear without leaving. I never could.”

Her voice drifted, not breaking, just softening around the sharp edges. “One night, I was ten. I’d been playing at the park down the street. She came home early. Drunk. Locked the door. It started raining. I sat on the slide, soaked through, and kept telling myself she’d remember me eventually.” She paused, a tiny laugh escaping. “She didn’t. A neighbor found me the next morning.”

William swallowed hard. “That’s...”

“It was what it was,” Abby said with a shrug. “You learn early that some people love you like a switch. On when it’s convenient. Off when it isn’t.” She looked at him then, eyes glinting with something gentler. “You’re probably treated better at the Harrison Home than I was in my own house.”

He didn’t know what to say to that. So he didn’t. The silence between them was sympathetic, not awkward—a shared scar quietly acknowledged.

Abby breathed out, like she was letting the ghosts go with the air. “Things changed when I stopped waiting for people to come back,” she said. “When I started letting other people in.”

William looked up. “Friends?”

“Yeah.” She smiled, a wistful curve. “College saved me. I found this group—different, messy, brilliant people. The kind who made life look bigger. There was one who always had a plan, another who talked too fast, one who was... well, let’s just say too charming for his own good.” Her tone softened, warmth tinged with melancholy. “We weren’t perfect. But we were real. We looked out for each other. That’s when I learned something.”

She met his eyes. “Sometimes the people you share the light in your life with become your family. And your lights together... they protect each other.”

William blinked. The words hit somewhere deep—past logic, past distance, past time. Something in him, that Spark humming beneath his ribs, answered yes.

He nodded, voice quiet but sure. “That’s... exactly what I needed to hear.”

Abby smiled and leaned back against the bench, closing her eyes briefly as the wind ruffled her hair. “Then I’m glad you sat down, William Wright.”

And for a long, peaceful moment, neither of them moved. The world simply held.

The conversation drifted into a soft, content quiet. The kind that didn’t need patching up with words. The pond mirrored the sky, pale blue deepening to gold at the edges, and for the first time in days, William didn’t feel like he was fighting gravity.

Then a voice tore across the calm like a rock through glass.

“Wright!”

He blinked, startled, and turned. Bobby’s unmistakable bellow carried across the park, drawing amused glances from a few passersby. “Stop flirting with older women and get back to the car! I want my snack!”

William felt his face ignite. “I—he’s—he doesn’t—”

Abby laughed before he could finish, a bright, genuine sound that turned the moment from mortifying to oddly endearing.

Bobby wasn’t done. “And hurry up! Our driver’s meeting his lady friend at Summer’s Café—been blabbing about while we’ve been waiting for you!”

Abby looked at William, trying—and failing—to hide her grin. “Friends?”

“Something like that,” William muttered.

She stood, brushing imaginary dust from her skirt, the motion calm and graceful. The light caught her hair again, and for a moment the warmth around her deepened, as though the air itself approved of her presence.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, William,” she said, and there was something in her tone that made his chest tighten—like a goodbye that didn’t want to be one.

He stood too, not trusting himself to say more than, “You too.”

Abby smiled, eyes soft but intent. “Good luck on your quest.”

The word quest landed differently than the rest. It wasn’t teasing or playful. It had weight, like she somehow understood that the thing he was chasing wasn’t just an afternoon errand or some teenage goal. It felt almost like a benediction—permission to keep going.

Before he could reply, she turned toward the pond, her figure haloed in the late sunlight. William lingered a second longer, memorizing the line of her shoulders, the ease in her walk, the feeling she left behind: that being kind wasn’t weakness, that hope itself was a kind of strength.

Then he jogged back across the grass.

Bobby was waiting with his usual smirk. “Took you long enough. Did you get her number, Romeo?”

“Shut up,” William said, still red but smiling now.

They reached the parking lot where Nick leaned against the sleek black sedan, arms crossed, sunglasses on, the very picture of weary patience.

“Find a buried treasure?” he asked dryly, pushing off the car.

“Better,” Bobby said immediately. “He was talking to some girl.”

Nick raised an eyebrow. “Oh really?”

Bobby grinned like he’d just unearthed the punchline. “She looked mid-twenties.”

Nick froze halfway through opening the car door. “Mid—what?” His lawyer tone kicked in. “Okay, let’s not—let’s just—snacks. Snacks sound good.”

William slid into the backseat, still fighting the grin creeping up his face. Bobby was snickering beside him, clearly pleased with himself.

Nick started the engine. “Seatbelts. No crumbs. No more romantic side quests until we’ve eaten something fried, understood?”

“Understood,” William said, trying not to laugh.

As the car pulled away from the curb, the laughter faded, replaced by something quieter. William turned in his seat, watching Squire Park shrink in the side window. The pond glinted between the trees, and for just a moment, he thought he saw Abby still sitting there—book reopened, head tilted in thought.

Maybe she wasn’t real. Maybe she was just another ripple in the timeline, a kindness borrowed from somewhere else. But the feeling she’d left behind was real enough.

The Spark inside him hummed—steady, warm, alive. Abby’s presence had brightened it, charged it with something his mother once called the kind that keeps the world from giving up on itself.

She wasn’t Samantha. But she’d given him something just as rare. Hope.

He turned forward again as the car rolled onto the main street, the reflection of the setting sun sliding across the windshield.

Nick was talking about café pastries now, Bobby was debating which milkshake was “the objectively superior flavor,” and William just listened, the warmth in his chest growing steadier with every mile.

Somewhere ahead was Summer's Café, and the woman their driver was meeting—the one Bobby had mocked as Nick's "lady friend."

William's heart lifted, quiet and certain. It had to be her.

Samantha.

And for the first time since the timeline had splintered, William believed the story wasn't over yet.

He leaned back, eyes still on the horizon, the hum of Abby's Spark pulsing faintly beneath his ribs like a promise that the next level might finally hold an answer.

Chapter 2 — A Familiar Summer

Nick's car rolled to a stop in front of a small brick building with hand-painted lettering across its wide front window: SUMMER'S CAFÉ. A mural of a teacup with steam shaped like sunshine curled above the lettering, and the faint scent of roasted beans drifted from the half-open door.

Bobby groaned before his seatbelt was even off.

"You've got to be kidding me," he said, squinting at the sign. "This isn't Dunkin', it's... Grandma's retirement project."

Nick shot him a look over the roof of the car. "It's local. Independent. You'll survive without a drive-thru."

"Barely," Bobby muttered, following them out with all the enthusiasm of a prisoner on breakfast duty.

William stood on the curb a moment longer, taking in the sight. The café was simple—handwritten menu board, yellow-striped awning, mismatched patio chairs. But there was something warm about it. The kind of warmth that couldn't be bought, only built over years of laughter and loyalty.

He tried to swallow the nervous flutter in his chest. This could be it, he thought. The "lady friend" Nick was meeting—maybe, finally, her.

He followed Nick and Bobby through the door. Bells above the entrance jingled softly, and a wave of coffee, sugar, and citrus air hit him like a memory he didn't own.

Inside, it was lively in a gentle way. Students tapping at laptops, a pair of retirees sharing pie, a shelf of community fliers for art classes and missing cats. The world here felt kind.

William's heart thudded. He scanned every table, every face—looking for something familiar, a spark that might echo the one that had sent him back. His mother's face, her light, her impossible calm.

"Mom?" he whispered under his breath, just once, in case the universe was feeling merciful.

But before he could search further, Nick's voice cut through the café din.

"Well, look who's decided to brighten our mornings with black sunshine."

William turned toward the counter. A young woman stood there, tying back her dark hair as she looked up in surprise—and smiled.

"Nicholas Wright," she said, the name half a tease, half a memory. "I haven't seen you since you decided to play substitute teacher."

Nick laughed. "That was strategy. I'm testing my moral flexibility."

William froze where he stood. The world narrowed to the girl behind the counter—her easy smirk, her sharp eyes, the spark of wit in her tone.

Jessica.

Only not the Jessica he knew.

This one was younger—so much younger. Her apron was dusted with flour, her expression lighter, her energy unburdened. She was 18, maybe 19, still on the verge of who she would become.

For a dizzy, aching second, William forgot to breathe.

He had expected his mother. The woman who could explain everything, maybe even fix it. Instead, the universe had handed him a ghost from his own future—a version of someone he already loved and lost, standing here smiling like she'd never met him before.

Jessica adjusted her apron, recognizing the shell-shocked kid beside Nick. “And who’s this?”

Nick gestured toward William with a proud half-smile. “One of my students.”

William forced a nod, his voice quiet, barely tethered. “Hi. I’m William.”

Jessica smiled easily, unaware of the storm behind his eyes. “Welcome to Summer’s.”

Her voice was the same. Her laugh was the same. But everything else—her history, her Spark, their shared trust—was still ahead of her.

William swallowed hard, the truth sinking like a stone in his chest.

She was here. She was alive. But she didn’t know him.

And this, somehow, hurt more than if she’d stayed gone.

For a heartbeat, William forgot how to breathe. The sound of the café faded—the whirring espresso machine, Bobby’s impatient pacing, even Jessica’s offhand joke about whipped cream—all of it drained into a low hum at the edge of his hearing.

She was the same, and not. The same eyes, the same spark sleeping beneath them like a coiled spring—but this Jessica was lighter. Softer around the edges, younger by years he’d lived through alone. The woman who had once taught him to command his Spark stood now behind a counter, scribbling orders on a notepad with hands that hadn’t yet built strength through fire.

The sight broke something open in him.

He blinked—and the café dissolved into sunlight and rust.

The world reformed around him in the shimmer of memory. The air smelled of metal and rain, the ground beneath his boots dry but gritty with the dust of old engines. Two rusted trucks leaned toward each other like tired sentinels, and between them stretched a narrow beam of wood—sun-bleached, cracked, impossibly thin.

Jessica stood at the far end, boots planted, arms crossed. Her dark hair lifted in the wind. “Up,” she said.

William scrambled onto the truck’s hood, his sneakers squeaking against the metal. “This feels dumb,” he muttered, wobbling onto the beam. “What’s balancing got to do with... y’know.” He waved his arms, miming flight. “Flying.”

Jessica didn’t roll her eyes, but it was close. “If you want to learn to fly, you have to learn to balance your Spark.”

He frowned, testing his footing. “Balance it?”

“It’s about telling your Spark where to put you,” she said, voice steady as gravity itself. “If you can’t command balance, you’ll never command the air.”

He huffed, arms seesawing. “So it’s not just about not falling with style.”

“No,” Jessica said, softer now. “It’s about control. About trust. Gravity doesn’t care how strong you are. The Spark will drag you wherever it wants if you let it.”

He took another step. The beam creaked. His pulse quickened. Beneath his skin, a low hum began—the Spark, answering. The air around him shifted, lighter. His sleeves fluttered with invisible wind. For a second, he wasn’t standing on the beam but just above it, weightless.

“Careful,” Jessica warned. “Let it help you. Don’t let it carry you.”

He focused on her voice, on the steadiness in it, and found his rhythm. Step. Breath. Balance. The Spark steadied him like a heartbeat beneath his own.

At the midpoint, he dared a grin. “See? Easy.”

Jessica smiled—small, reluctant, proud. “Not easy,” she corrected. “Discipline. Remember that word.” Her gaze softened, but her tone stayed sharp. “The Spark is a partner, not a pilot.”

He jumped down, landing clumsily. Jessica folded her arms. “And next time you land,” she said dryly, “try not to make it look like the beam beat you.”

He laughed, rubbing his ankle. “You mean like a superhero landing?”

Jessica’s grin broke through. “Exactly like that.”

The scent of motor oil and dust vanished, replaced by peppermint tea and warm sugar. The trucks, the beam, the echo of his younger laugh—all gone.

William blinked hard and was back in Summer’s Café, staring at the younger Jessica Summers pouring coffee into a mug shaped like a cat. Her ponytail bounced when she laughed at something Nick said.

His throat tightened. The difference cut deep—not because she was someone else, but because she hadn’t yet become the woman who once taught him to touch the sky.

He pressed his palm against the counter, grounding himself in the present. The hum of his Spark still whispered faintly beneath his skin, like it, too, remembered the beam.

Jessica glanced up from behind the counter, catching his expression mid-fade. “You okay, kid?” she asked, voice light but not unkind.

William forced a small, polite smile. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “Just... remembering something.”

“Good,” she said, sliding a cookie toward him without charging for it. “Memories are the only free thing in this place.”

William took it, nodding. He could still hear her older self’s words echoing in his chest: The Spark is a partner, not a pilot.

The café had the gentle buzz of a place content with its own small orbit. Cups clinked. A ceiling fan hummed like an old vinyl record. William sat at the counter, half-listening, half adrift in thought, when Nick leaned against the bar beside him.

Jessica wiped down the counter with a lazy circle of a rag, her eyes flicking between them. “So,” she said, tone dry enough to be dangerous, “you’re teaching now. That true, Counselor Wright? Gave up cross-examining sociopaths to wrangle teenagers?”

Nick smiled, faint and crooked. “Temporary gig. A few weeks at the Harrison Home. They needed someone to fill in.”

She tilted her head, mock sympathy dripping from every syllable. “Ah, the noble sabbatical. I give it three more days before you start drafting a plea to leave due to ‘sanity’.”

Nick chuckled into his coffee. “Well, this is my last week there, I go back to normal lawyer stuff. Contracts. Arbitration. Trying not to lose my soul in fluorescent lighting.”

Jessica leaned on the counter, chin resting on her hand. “That’s a tall order for someone whose natural habitat is fluorescent lighting.”

He looked up from his cup, smirking. “You always this nice to paying customers?”

“Only the ones who tip,” she shot back, eyes glinting.

Bobby, already salivating at the thought of a chocolate croissant, groaned theatrically. “Oh my god, get a ROOM.”

Jessica didn’t even glance at him. “Loud cows get put in the barn, keep your cattle in check Wright.”

William hid a small smile behind his teacup. The rhythm of their banter—sharp, teasing, strangely comfortable—felt like watching two songs find the same key.

“So what’s next after this little coffee-shop crusade?” Jessica asked, pouring another cup for herself.

Nick sighed. “planning a reunion trip after I bring the kids back to the home. Eldorado Alehante somehow convinced me to go.”

Jessica nearly choked on her drink. “Eldorado? You still hanging out with THAT twat?”

“Unfortunately,” Nick said. “Louder than ever. He’s turned being obnoxious into a form of cardio.”

She laughed, the sound quick and bright. “I can’t stand that family. His father struts around the world like he owned it. Everyone acts like the Alehantes are royalty. They’re just rich and allergic to humility.”

Nick nodded, his voice dipping into memory. “You know, he actually got suspended once for creating a Ms. Harrisburg female model search and turned it into his own twisted version of The Bachelor, complete with interviews and contract negotiations, all in an attempt to find a date for prom.”

Jessica grinned. “That sounds about right.”

The warmth between them thickened with shared nostalgia. It wasn’t romantic yet—not really—but it carried the easy rhythm of two people who remembered the trailed similar paths, battle similar trials, the same dumb, human mess of youth.

Then Nick paused, a shadow of thought crossing his expression. “You know,” he said slowly, “Jessica, you remind me of this girl from high school... I just remembered her...Kinda quirky, with wild colored hair. Quiet girl. Always dressed in black. The other kids called her the ‘witch girl.’”

Jessica arched a brow. “Classy.”

“Yeah,” Nick said with a soft laugh. “She was... different. Sharp. Carried this weird crystal around her neck. People joked about her casting curses. Honestly, I think they were just scared of how sure she was of herself.” He squinted like he was searching his own memory. “Can’t remember her name. Sam, Samara, Samantha? No... something else.”

The world tilted for William.

The name wasn’t there, but the shape of it was. A Goth girl. A crystal. Rumors of witchcraft. His mind stitched the clues together so fast it hurt. Samantha Springer.

It had to be.

His heart pounded in his throat, the way it had the moment before a Spark caught fire. His brain raced through everything—the case with John Stiles, the skiing accident, Abby’s warmth by the pond. Maybe the case was never meant to happen. Maybe the universe had always been trying to connect Nick and Samantha another way.

His mother wasn’t lost. The timeline wasn’t broken.

Maybe it was bent, waiting for him to nudge it back into shape.

He gripped his teacup tighter, trying to stay composed. Jessica’s laugh, Nick’s easy smile, even Bobby’s loud chewing—all of it faded beneath the single thought hammering in his chest:

He wasn’t too late.

William had almost recovered from the emotional whiplash of hearing his mother’s ghost in Nick’s stories when curiosity got the better of him.

He glanced around the café—handmade art on the walls, potted succulents balanced on the windowsill, and a chalkboard menu that proudly offered puns instead of calorie counts.

“This place is... really nice,” he said, trying to sound casual. “Do you—uh—own it?”

Jessica blinked, then snorted mid-latte pour. “Me? Oh, absolutely. I just turned eighteen and decided to take on a small business loan and a crippling caffeine dependency.”

Nick laughed, low and genuine. “Yeah, she runs an empire of muffins.”

“More like I run the espresso machine without electrocuting myself,” Jessica said. “That’s my empire.”

Before William could mumble an apology, the swinging door to the kitchen burst open and a tornado disguised as a woman spun out.

“Who’s talking about empires?”

The newcomer was a whirlwind of energy and optimism—a blonde woman in her early forties with a pastel cardigan, an apron that said ‘Mugs Not Drugs,’ and a clipboard already in hand. Her name tag read WINONA WHITE, but she radiated more sunlight than the sign outside.

“That would be me,” Jessica said, deadpan. “Just plotting global domination, as usual.”

Winona gasped, clasping her hands dramatically. “If you take over the world, can I run communications? I make a mean newsletter.”

Nick grinned. “Winona, this is William and Bobby. My, uh, students-slash-co-conspirators.”

Bobby salivating like a hungry dog. “Hi. Your pastries look delicious.”

“Thank you, sweetheart! They’re 60% love, 40% confusion about measuring cups,” Winona said cheerfully. She turned her warm, curious gaze on William. “And what about you? You look like a thinker. Or a secret superhero. Don’t tell me—let me guess. You’re having one of those ‘long day, complicated destiny’ kinds of mornings?”

William blinked. “Uh... something like that.”

Winona nodded sagely, as though he’d confirmed a prophecy. “I knew it. You need a Koala-Tea Smoothie. Peppermint, citrus, hint of mango—it’s my personal good-day potion. On the house.”

“Oh, you don’t have to—”

“I insist,” she said, already darting back into the kitchen. “And tell me if you feel any sudden life clarity or the urge to adopt a stray cat. Those are normal side effects.”

Jessica leaned an elbow on the counter, smirking. “Welcome to The Cafe. We serve enlightenment with a straw.”

“She’s... intense,” William said softly.

“A sitcom caricature with espresso,” Jessica replied. “She’s the reason this place exists. Opened it one summer—hence Summer’s Café. My last name is just a cosmic joke.”

The door swung open again, and Winona slid a frosty cup toward William with flourish. “One Koala-Tea! Sip slowly, dream wildly!”

He took it, the straw trembling slightly between his fingers. The first taste was bright—mint and sunshine and something he couldn’t name, something like calm.

“So,” Jessica said, tilting her head. “I didn’t actually catch your full name.”

“William,” he said automatically. “William Wright.”

The air shifted.

Jessica froze mid-wipe, rag dangling from her hand. Her eyebrows shot up in theatrical disbelief. “Wright?”

Nick choked on his coffee. “Oh no.”

Jessica turned to him, grin blooming wicked and unstoppable. “Well, well, Mr. Wright. You’ve been busy. Who’s the lucky woman?”

Nick nearly spilled his drink. “Jessica—”

Bobby, pacing is footsteps loudly, muttered, “Wait, is that why we’re here?”

“Not helping,” Nick hissed.

William went rigid. He’d spent weeks hiding what he knew, what he was, and now the truth—or something like it—was dangling between them in the form of a joke.

Jessica looked between them, eyes narrowing in playful suspicion. “Come on, look at him. Same jawline. Same eyebrows. Just, like, less existentially tired.”

Nick groaned into his hand. “We just share a last name. Total coincidence.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, clearly unconvinced. “Sure. And I just happen to be the Queen of England on weekends.”

William couldn’t help it—he smiled. For a split second, something unspoken passed between him and Nick. They both saw it now: the resemblance. The same angular features, the same nervous hand fidget at the wrist, even the same half-smirk that tried to downplay sincerity.

And for the briefest moment, it felt like recognition.

William’s chest swelled with quiet warmth, pride, grief—all tangled together. He sees it too, he thought. Even if he doesn’t know why.

Nick exhaled, softer this time. “You’ve got a sharp eye, Jess.”

“Always,” she said. “It’s a gift and a curse. Mostly a curse.”

The moment held for a beat too long, a wordless ache shared between two people who didn’t know what they were mourning.

Then—

“HEY!” Bobby shouted from the counter, holding up his empty cup like a distress signal. “Strawberry milkshake! And a chocolate croissant! I’m wasting away over here!”

Jessica didn’t even blink. “You’ll live,” she said flatly, but the spell was broken.

Nick rubbed his forehead. “Perfect timing, as always.”

William laughed quietly, grateful for the interruption—and for the cover it gave him to breathe again.

Nick’s phone buzzed on the counter—an old, polite ringtone that didn’t fit the man who always looked a little too tired for modern noise. He sighed, already fishing it from his coat pocket.

“Work call,” he muttered to Jessica. “Don’t let Bobby eat the napkin dispenser.”

“No promises,” Jessica replied.

Nick stepped outside, phone tucked against his ear, leaving William alone with the hum of the café and the smell of espresso. Bobby was too busy inhaling his croissant to notice anything beyond sugar and survival.

Jessica leaned her hip against the counter, idly stirring the last of her drink. “So,” she said. “You always this quiet, or are you just intimidated by my obvious barista authority?”

William managed a smile. “A little of both.”

Her mouth quirked, but there was warmth behind it. “Smart kid.”

He hesitated, the thought sparking before he could talk himself out of it. Every instinct told him she was supposed to shine—he’d felt the same dormant potential in her as in the others. He had helped Sabrina find her current, Rohan find his healing, Chico his speed. But Jessica’s Spark, even sleeping, was brighter than all of them.

If he could just... unlock it.

“Um,” he said, trying to sound casual and failing. “Can I—uh—try something?”

Jessica raised an eyebrow, suspicious but amused. “Depends. If it involves singing or interpretive dance, I’m charging you extra.”

“No, nothing like that.” His voice was soft, nervous. “Just... trust me?”

Her expression softened. “You’re a weird kid, William Wright.”

She extended her hand anyway.

He took it.

The café seemed to hush. Somewhere behind them, the milk steamer sighed, but even that faded beneath the pulse in his palm. He focused—breathed in, reached for that inner hum, the quiet warmth that had bridged him to others before.

He waited for it to catch.

Nothing happened.

No resonance, no echo. The air stayed stubbornly ordinary, the same still calm as before. Her Spark was there—he could feel it, vast and steady beneath the surface—but it refused him. The key turned in the lock and met resistance. Wrong grooves. Wrong timing. Wrong lifetime.

Jessica blinked, puzzled. “Was something supposed to happen?”

William’s throat tightened. “I thought—” He stopped, shaking his head. “Never mind.”

She studied him for a beat longer, then decided to rescue him from himself. “Nick!” she called across the café, voice carrying like sunlight through glass. “Your son is hitting on me!”

William’s entire face flushed. “What—no! That’s not—”

Jessica laughed, the sound bright and sharp enough to cut the tension. “Relax, Wright Junior. You’re not my type. I like my men sleep-deprived and emotionally unavailable.”

From outside, Nick’s muffled voice: “You’re describing me again, Jess.”

Jessica grinned. “Exactly.”

William sank back into his seat, humiliated and confused in equal measure.

He had felt her Spark—alive, powerful, waiting—but he couldn’t touch it. Not yet.

He wasn’t the right key.

Nick re-entered the café, pocketing his phone with a sigh. “Well, that was the most polite argument I’ve ever had with a client. Are we all ready?”

“Almost,” Jessica said, her tone playfully light again. “But before I forget to remind you—don’t let any lady you find there make you forget who makes your favorite coffee.”

Nick froze mid-step, then smirked. “No promises.”

Her eyes lingered just a moment too long before she turned away to clean a counter that didn’t need it.

“Come on, Bobby,” Nick said, clapping once. “Let’s hit the road before you start eating the furniture.”

Bobby, powdered sugar dusting his shirt, gave a muffled thumbs-up. “Best café ever.”

William followed quietly, the door’s bell chiming behind them. The air outside felt different—sharper, cooler, but not empty.

He looked back once, through the glass, catching Jessica mid-laugh with Winona. She looked happy, radiant in her small, ordinary world. He couldn’t force her Spark awake, couldn’t rush her into becoming the woman he remembered—but maybe she would get there on her own.

As Nick’s car pulled away, the reflection of Summer’s Café warped in the window.

He didn’t find his mother.

He found a ghost of tomorrow wearing an apron and a smirk.

The “Koala-Tea” still lingered on his tongue—peppermint, citrus, mango, and something harder to name: hope.

He glanced at Nick, who was tapping the wheel in rhythm to a quiet, unidentifiable tune, and at Bobby, humming through a mouthful of crumbs.

William turned his gaze forward again, toward whatever waited next.

A reunion.

A rumor of a witch girl.

A dance that hadn’t yet happened.

He let the warmth in his chest settle into something steady.

The path had changed, but the quest continued.

Chapter 3 — The Architect's Gaze

The morning light crawled across the blinds of Ellis Dee's office like it was afraid to wake him. The room was sterile, stripped of anything that might betray preference or warmth—except for one anomaly: a single, leather-bound notebook resting open on the desk. Its pages were cream-colored, lined in precise graphite strokes and small, almost obsessive handwriting.

Ellis sat perfectly still before it, pen poised in his hand. The familiar comfort of his clipboard lay off to the side, demoted. This notebook was different—an artifact meant to be read, not merely referenced.

He wrote slowly, deliberately, translating months of raw observation into something that resembled art. Each word was measured, its rhythm steady enough to pass as calm. Every student's name received its own heading, underscored twice, the letters immaculate: S. Plumber, C. Swan, D. Rohan, A. Sands, Y. Belac, E. Marcel, W. Wright.

No smudges. No shorthand. This was not a report; it was a portfolio. A manifesto of potential.

He paused over the margin beside William Wright's name, thumb absently brushing the paper's edge. His handwriting wavered for the first time.

"Catalyst," he murmured to himself, writing the word in small, deliberate script. Beneath it, he drew a clean arrow linking the others' names in a web that converged there.

The pen hovered. He stared at it for a beat too long, then set it down carefully, aligning it with the edge of the notebook as if alignment could control meaning.

Ellis closed the dossier with reverent precision. The sound of the cover meeting the table was soft, final—like a gavel wrapped in velvet.

He glanced toward the mirror above his filing cabinet, catching his own reflection—the faintest ghost of fatigue around the eyes, a man trained to watch everything but himself. His tie was straight, his hair too neat.

"Presentation matters," he said under his breath, adjusting his collar.

The blinds cut the rising sun into thin, surgical lines across the floor. He picked up the notebook and slid it into a slim black case, snapping the latch shut.

By the time he stepped into the hallway, the office looked untouched again.

He locked the door behind him and started down the corridor toward the elevator—the dossier tucked beneath his arm like a relic bound for its altar.

The meeting awaited.

The elevator opened onto the top floor of Alehante Securities with a whisper that sounded almost reverent. The air up here was heavier—conditioned, perfumed faintly with leather, ozone, and control. The walls were paneled in black glass that reflected Ellis's figure back at him a dozen times as he crossed the corridor toward the single door at the end.

That door, seamless and gray, opened without a sound.

Ernesto Alehante's office was more cathedral than workspace. Floor-to-ceiling glass on three sides, the city sprawling below like circuitry—its towers, its highways, its people all serving as living proof of the man's dominion. The only thing that seemed to have weight in the room was the desk—a monolithic plane of smoked glass that could've doubled as an autopsy table.

Ernesto sat behind it, posture effortless, eyes sharp enough to cut glass twice. His suit was immaculate, his cufflinks understated platinum, his expression unreadable.

“Dr. Dee,” he said. His voice was quiet, but it carried the same gravity as a falling bar of gold. “You brought the dossier.”

“Yes, sir.” Ellis set the leather-bound portfolio on the desk, the gesture slow, deliberate. “My most recent field analysis. Key subjects showing emergent anomalies. A concentration worth your attention.”

Ernesto steepled his fingers, gaze flicking between the notebook and the man who’d written it. “Walk me through the assets.”

The phrasing was transactional—assets, not children. Ellis didn’t flinch. He had expected it. He opened the portfolio, its spine crackling faintly, and began.

Subject: Autumn Sands

“Subject exhibits a form of localized, biological creation,” Ellis said, his tone steady, stripped of awe. “She can synthesize simple, non-living objects from her own lipid reserves, manifesting them through her dermal layer.”

He turned a page. “The physical toll is measurable but recoverable with caloric intake.”

A faint reflection passed through Ernesto’s dark eyes—interest, or hunger; they were easy to confuse.

In Ellis’s memory, the moment unfolded in flickering, fluorescent detail.

He had been standing at the corner of the old classroom, half-hidden behind a cracked door. Autumn, hunched over a dead phone, muttered under her breath. Her hair stuck to her temples, her skin gleaming faintly with exertion.

“Come on, come on...” she whispered.

A soft luminescence spread beneath her palm. Her fingers trembled, then pressed against her own wrist. Slowly—painfully—something formed there, pressing outward. A dull, gray corner emerged, slick with a sheen of moisture. She gritted her teeth and pulled.

An iPhone 3GS—chunky, real, and outdated—slid free from her palm.

She slumped against the desk, panting, but her grin was radiant. William knelt beside her, awe and worry tangled in his expression. She dug a protein bar out of her pocket, tore the wrapper with shaking hands, and devoured it.

Ellis had watched it all through the narrow gap, heart hammering, eyes unblinking. His note at the time had been clinical: Organic synthesis confirmed. Metabolic cost high. Emotional stability post-manifestation—positive.

Now, he merely said, “The phenomenon appears to require a creative focus and confidence. Without both, output fails.”

Ernesto nodded, unreadable. “Continue.”

Subject: Yeldarb Belac

“Profound somatic metamorphosis,” Ellis said, turning another page. “Stress-induced. Possible cryptid ancestry—*Homo sapiens pongidae*, or an unrecorded genus. The implications for concealed bloodlines are... considerable.”

The flash of memory was vivid—the humid reek of the locker room, the sharp tang of fear.

A group of boys laughing, teasing, Yeldarb standing in the center of it—tall but unthreatening, at first. Then his expression changed. The laughter died.

Fur burst from his arms in thick, dark waves. His shoulders expanded, spine lengthening, muscle doubling. He rose, step by trembling step, until his head nearly brushed the ceiling. The fluorescent lights flickered, whining under the sudden static.

The others bolted.

Ellis, hidden near the door, recorded every second.

Only William remained. “Yeldarb,” he said softly, voice steady despite the chaos. “You’re okay. Breathe.”

The giant blinked, nostrils flaring, body trembling with the effort to listen. Slowly, painfully, the fur receded, his form collapsing back into itself until only the boy remained—shirt torn, eyes wet, breathing like he’d just run through a forest.

Ellis had written in his notes: Morphology linked to emotional dysregulation. Reversion achieved through verbal grounding by William Wright.

He recited that line now, matter-of-fact.

Ernesto’s gaze sharpened. “Interesting,” he murmured. “Instinct shaped by loyalty. Primitive, but efficient.”

Ellis couldn’t tell if that was admiration or condescension.

Subject: Elaine Brook

“Initially misclassified as empathic,” Ellis continued. “Correction: demonstrates cross-species communication—possibly telepathic, possibly persuasive command.”

He tapped a small note beside the name. “Observable range limited to small mammals and insects.”

In the memory, the security footage flickered across Ellis’s monitor—grainy, black and white. Elaine knelt beside a vent, whispering something inaudible. Then, from the darkness, a single mouse emerged. Then another. Then a dozen.

She smiled faintly as they marched, single file, toward a crack in the foundation. She held the vent cover open until the last one had disappeared, then gently replaced it.

Hours later, exterminators arrived with their gear. They found nothing.

Ellis’s voice in the present was impassive. “Behavioral data suggests high empathy. Subjects within proximity of her influence display reduced aggression. Possible pheromonal or cognitive dampening effect.”

Ernesto tilted his head. “The kind one,” he said, almost to himself.

Subject: Warren Jean

“Textile manipulation,” Ellis said crisply. “Tactile control of fiber length, density, and flexibility. Potential industrial application: adaptive armor or self-repairing fabric.”

His memory conjured the common room—the hum of a space heater, the rattle of controllers, Warren hunched on the couch. Absent-mindedly, he rubbed at the hole in his jeans. The frayed edges pulled together, closing like a wound. He blinked, smiled faintly, and ran his palm along the seam.

He reached for a burlap sack in the corner and brushed the material with curiosity. The coarse fabric softened under his touch, turning smooth as fleece.

William had laughed, “Finally—pants without patches.”

Warren grinned. “Give me a week, and I’ll be a fashion god.”

Ellis’s recollection of it was devoid of humor. His notes: Control achieved through kinetic feedback. Precision increasing with confidence.

He repeated that line now, while Ernesto’s faint smile betrayed a flicker of greed.

Ernesto's gaze lingered for a moment on Warren's file before Ellis turned the page. The next photograph showed a girl with sharp, intelligent eyes, her face framed by dark hair. One side of her mouth had a slight, permanent droop, a quiet asymmetry.

"Sabrina Plumber," Ellis began. "Note the minor facial paralysis—Bell's Palsy, a pre-existing condition. Initially, it might suggest a defect."

Ernesto's eyes flicked up from the photo, a silent question.

"It is the most misleading thing about her," Ellis continued, his voice losing none of its clinical tone but gaining a fraction of weight. "The subject possesses a profound, intuitive connection to electronics. She doesn't just repair or program them; she communicates with them. Her mind operates on a level of machine code and electrical potential that bypasses standard interfaces."

The memory surfaced with the crisp clarity of a favorite data set. Ellis saw the basement, the scent of ozone and soldering iron. Sabrina, her face set in a look of intense concentration, her hands not on a keyboard, but resting flat on the casing of the scrap-heap PC she called the "Knight Terror."

The machine was a corpse of dead parts. She closed her eyes. The slight droop in her lip seemed to soften as her focus turned inward. A low hum built, not from the speakers, but from the motherboard itself. Lights on components that had no right to hold a charge flickered to life. A cascade of boot-up text she couldn't possibly see scrolled across the monitor, reflected in her glasses.

She wasn't typing commands. She was asking the machine to wake up.

And it obeyed.

Ellis's note, recalled perfectly, was more verbose than usual: Subject's technopathy appears to be a form of empathetic resonance with silicon and circuitry. She feels their errors and corrects them by thought alone. The hardware is not a tool; it is a partner.

"Her abilities bypass conventional security and design principles," Ellis stated to Ernesto. "She can intuitively locate system weaknesses, repurpose hostile technology, and, as evidenced by the 'Knight Terror,' create advanced systems from obsolete components. She doesn't just use technology; she collaborates with it."

Ernesto leaned forward, the first sign of genuine, unadulterated avarice in his expression. The girl's physical flaw was irrelevant, now nothing more than a discarded piece of packaging. He saw the raw, untainted utility beneath.

"Now that," Ernesto said, his voice a low, hungry murmur, "is a language I understand. She doesn't just have a Spark. She holds the key to the grid itself."

Ellis made a neat checkmark in the margin of his mind. Another asset understood. Another soul catalogued.

He then turned the page to the final subject of this review.

Subject: Bobby Wolf

Ellis turned the final page of the section, pausing briefly. "Subject Wolf's manifestation is less... measurable. Primarily psychological."

Ernesto raised a brow. "Meaning?"

"Meaning," Ellis said, "he reads people. Preternatural accuracy in identifying vulnerabilities—fears, insecurities, desires. He exploits them instinctively. It is... not empathy. More akin to predation."

In Ellis's mind, the memory replayed: Bobby standing too close to another student, voice low, casual, disarming. "You're not mad at me. You're mad at yourself. Because you think you should've done better." The boy's anger melted into confusion, then shame.

A smirk, a pat on the shoulder. "See? You're fine."

The file had read simply: Cognitive intrusion via linguistic mirroring. Adaptive persuasion. Dangerous.

Ellis's voice returned to the sterile rhythm of the report. "His effect is subtle, but profound. He is a walking algorithm for compliance."

Ernesto leaned back, the chair creaking softly. "Every system needs one of those."

The words hung between them—praise disguised as prophecy.

Ellis closed the portfolio halfway, waiting. The city glimmered behind Ernesto like a living engine, each window a pulsing neuron of his empire.

The air hummed faintly, and for the first time since entering, Ellis felt as though he were the one being catalogued.

Ernesto Alehante sat back in his chair, the faint creak of the leather the only sound in the glass cathedral of his office. His gaze rested on the dossier before him—open to the neat black ink of Ellis Dee's immaculate handwriting—but his eyes were distant, turned inward to a place only he could see.

For a moment, Ellis could almost believe the man looked tired. Then Ernesto's lips curved—just slightly, without humor.

"Remarkable," he murmured, his tone hovering somewhere between admiration and envy. "All this potential... and none of it belongs to my name."

He exhaled, almost a sigh, and his voice grew quieter, the kind of quiet that carried weight. "Do you know what it's like, Dr. Dee, to build an empire designed to outlive you—only to realize your heirs can't carry it an inch?"

Ellis said nothing. His role in this equation was observation, not comfort.

Ernesto's fingers drummed once against the glass, a precise, mechanical rhythm. Then he began to speak, his words sharp and measured as incisions.

"Eldorado," he said, the name almost a curse. "His pride is a performance. His lust for attention a bottomless pit. He confuses volume for value." His gaze flicked toward the city lights, faintly reflected in the window. "He'd sell our family's legacy for digital applause. His empire would be a stream—endless, empty, monetized."

He turned a page in Ellis's dossier without looking at it.

"Eliza," he continued, the word drawn out, almost weary. "A mind like a forge, hot and consuming. But gluttony binds her—she eats resources, talent, entire divisions, yet births nothing but refined versions of her own wrath. She cannot build, only devour."

He paused, his jaw tightening slightly, as if the act of remembering each of them cost him something.

"Chang—the scientist, the perfectionist, the jealous one. His envy blinds him. He looks into every mirror and sees someone else's reflection. He could engineer new life, but instead he poisons his own with comparison. He doesn't innovate—he imitates."

Ernesto rose from his chair. The motion was deliberate, practiced—every bit the king surveying his kingdom. The city glimmered beneath him, a living circuit board of light and commerce.

“And Schmitt,” he said, almost softly. “The youngest. The sloth of privilege made flesh. He believes the world owes him a seat at the table simply because he carries my name. Handing him responsibility is like handing a match to a man who mistakes fire for warmth. He’ll let it burn until it’s out, and then call the ashes an accomplishment.”

The silence that followed was heavy, broken only by the faint hum of the city through the glass.

“They are archetypes of stagnation,” Ernesto said at last, his tone flat but final. “They are entropy disguised as legacy.”

He turned to face Ellis again, eyes gleaming with a cold, electric light. “What you show me here, Doctor—this...” He gestured faintly toward the dossier, toward the recorded miracles of children. “This is an evolution, a continuation of my light.”

He walked to the window, hands clasped behind his back, the city sprawling endlessly beneath him. His reflection merged with the skyline—indistinguishable, by design.

“People call what I do control,” Ernesto said quietly, as though addressing the glass itself. “But control is only a word for understanding leveraged efficiently.”

He spoke with the cadence of someone long accustomed to being right. “Human potential is the most wasted resource on this planet. The masses are allowed to burn out—dreams are permitted to die for the sake of ‘freedom.’” He smiled thinly. “Freedom is chaos wearing a halo.”

He turned slightly, catching Ellis’s reflection in the window. “What if the variables could be managed? Directed? A world where ambition serves order, not the other way around. No wasted talent, no rebellion, no collapse. Every spark... optimized.”

Ellis watched him in silence, feeling—against his better instincts—a kind of awe.

Ernesto continued, his voice low, resonant, the tone of a man delivering gospel: “Cycles breed decay. Empires rise, fall, and rise again—each weaker than the last. Nature’s systemic inefficiency.”

He looked upward now, as if the old gods of order were still listening somewhere beyond the glass. “I have seen the pattern. I’ve corrected it. The old architect—call him God, call him entropy—built a system that dies to sustain itself. I have no patience for reincarnation disguised as progress.”

His gaze lowered again, sharp and gleaming with something almost divine. “I intend to end the concept of cycles. Permanently. By cultivating Sparks that no longer burn out. A world where potential is perpetual. Predictable. Perfect.”

Ellis swallowed, his voice faint when he finally spoke. “You believe these children... can become the foundation of that evolved world?”

Ernesto smiled—the kind of smile that didn’t need warmth to be convincing. “They already are. They just don’t know it yet.”

He turned back to the city, the neon skyline reflecting like circuitry in his eyes. “And with the right guidance, Doctor... they will never know anything else.”

Ernesto turned from the window at last. The light caught the sharp lines of his face, and for the first time since Ellis had entered, there was movement behind his eyes—an idea fully formed.

“I wish to speak with them,” he said simply. “All of them. Arrange interviews.”

Ellis straightened, adjusting the cuff of his sleeve as if the formality could hide his unease. “Of course, sir. Do you have a preferred order?”

Ernesto’s gaze sharpened, predatory and amused. “Start with the catalyst. William Wright.”

He let the name hang in the air for a moment, tasting it. Then his mouth curved into a faint, humorless smile. “Wright. An interesting name to share with the lawyer I placed there weeks ago.” His tone softened, becoming something far more dangerous. “A coincidence I do not believe in. I want to understand that connection.”

Ellis nodded once, though a chill moved down his spine. “Are you... considering adoption, sir?”

Ernesto gave a soft exhale—half a laugh, half a sigh. “Adoption? No.” He walked back to his desk and placed his hand lightly on the dossier, as though claiming it. “That will depend entirely on how they fit into the corporate structure. We are not collecting children, Mr. Dee.” His eyes lifted, gleaming like city glass. “We are acquiring talent.”

There was no further discussion. The decision, like gravity, was absolute.

Later that afternoon, the filtered hum of the Alehante building gave way to the softer chaos of the Harrison Home. Spencer’s voice was the first to cut through the hall’s echo.

“Mentorship interviews?!” he exclaimed, half-standing, his face glowing with the unfiltered optimism of a man who still believed the universe occasionally rewarded good work.

Ellis nodded, calm and precise, his tone honeyed with reassurance. “Mr. Alehante was deeply impressed by the students’ progress and individual strengths. He’s expressed interest in meeting them one-on-one—purely for mentorship and evaluation.”

Across the table, Xenia folded her arms, her brow knitting. “Evaluation for what, exactly?”

Ellis smiled—a professional, practiced expression that revealed nothing. “Career alignment. Future placement. He believes in investing early.” He slid a folder across the table. “Here’s the list.”

Xenia took it, scanning the names: William Wright. Autumn Sands. Yeldarb Belac. Elaine Brook. Warren Jean. Bobby Wolf.

Spencer clapped his hands once, beaming. “Our stars! I knew the show would put them on the radar.” He looked to Ellis, grinning. “You tell Mr. Alehante I’ll have the kids ready, polished, and punctual. We’ll roll out the red carpet—figuratively speaking, unless the budget committee says yes this time.”

Ellis’s smile did not change. “That won’t be necessary.”

Xenia lowered the list slowly, her expression unreadable. “I’ll coordinate with scheduling,” she said finally. “But I’d like to be present during the sessions.”

Ellis inclined his head. “Of course,” he said smoothly, though both of them knew he didn’t mean it.

Spencer was already lost in the glow of imagined opportunity, talking about college recommendations and sponsorships. Xenia’s silence filled the gaps between his enthusiasm, her instincts whispering something she couldn’t yet name.

When Ellis finally stepped into the corridor, the sound of their voices faded behind the closing door. The light in the hallway was cold, institutional, humming faintly with the electric pulse of the building’s aging circuits.

He reached into his coat pocket and retrieved his pen, clicking it once—a nervous tick disguised as control.

The list was done. The interviews were set.

Far above, in a tower of mirrored glass, Ernesto Alehante was already reviewing the day’s schedule, his empire shifting gears with quiet, effortless precision.

And somewhere below that gleaming machine, in a school where miracles pretended to be lessons, six names had just been entered into a system that would never let them go.

Ellis exhaled and began to walk.

The machinery of Alehante Securities was awake now—its gaze narrowing, its appetite refined.

And at its center, unaware of the eyes now watching him, sat William Wright: the Catalyst.

Chapter 4 — The Genie’s Warning

The afternoon light pooled gold across William’s desk, turning the dust motes into slow, drifting planets. The hum of GaMII’s voice—the mechanical yet somehow familiar cadence—filled the quiet.

“Review: sequence of causality events, last seventy-two hours,” the AI began, its tone soft but analytical. “Spark activations among peers—Sabrina Plumber, Chico Swan, Rohan David. Subject’s encounter with Abby Winters—classified as high resonance. Encounter with Jessica Summers—classified as paradoxical comfort. Hypothesis: target Samantha Springer now has increased probability of contact within the Nick Wright timeline.”

William sat cross-legged on the bed, notebook open but untouched, the weight of everything pressing behind his ribs. “So... things are actually changing,” he said. “For the better, right?”

GaMII’s screen pulsed in response. “Affirmative. Using your preferred model of temporal logic—‘Back to the Future’—the sequence indicates that Nicholas Wright’s true love event should occur during a ‘school dance scenario.’ Correlation suggests that event is pending. Existence probability: eighty-seven percent.”

The words hung in the air.

William blinked. “Eighty-seven?”

“Affirmative,” GaMII repeated, voice calm. “Timeline stabilized. Fading threat reduced to negligible.”

For a moment, William couldn’t move. The constant ache of fear—of waking up to nothing, of being erased between seconds—eased. He pressed his palms to his eyes, laughing into them, the sound shaky and real. “Eighty-seven,” he whispered again, tasting it like victory.

Before he could say another word, a rapid knock jolted through the door.

Sabrina’s voice, clipped but charged with energy: “Will? You alive in there? Spencer’s calling some big meeting!”

He opened the door to find the entire crew crowding the hall—Sabrina leaning against the frame, Chico grinning like he’d just escaped detention, Rohan looking mildly concerned, and Yeldarb towering behind them, hands jammed in his hoodie pockets.

“A meeting?” William asked.

Sabrina nodded. “Mandatory. He said it’s urgent. Which means it’s probably something dumb, like a New School Bus Dance or whatever.”

Rohan rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m calling it now—it’s a ‘Celebrate Clean Hallway Day.’”

Chico clapped his hands once. “Nah, he’s gonna trick us into Chess Club. And this time, we’ll all get turned into pawns and have to fight our way back to full size!” He paused, thinking it over. “Actually... we should totally do that.”

William shushed them, laughing under his breath. “Okay, okay, come inside before you get us all detention.”

They filed into his room, tripping over backpacks and each other, a mess of laughter and half-whispered complaints. William waited until the door shut before blurting it out:

“It’s at eighty-seven percent.”

The noise cut off. Sabrina blinked. “Wait—what?”

“GaMII ran the numbers. My existence probability. It’s at eighty-seven percent.”

Rohan let out a low whistle. “That’s—dude, that’s amazing.”

“Yeah,” William said, grinning despite himself. “I think I’m actually... gonna make it.”

As if on cue, GaMII’s voice chimed from the desk: “Correction: probability now increased to eighty-eight percent.”

Yeldarb’s eyes widened. “Eighty-eight? Like the car! The DeLorean! You’re fixed, man—boom! Back to the future!”

Sabrina groaned. “That’s not—”

Rohan rested a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t. It won’t help.”

Chico leaned against the wall, grinning. “Yeah, buddy. Think of it like a test. An eighty-eight’s basically an A. That means you passed.”

William laughed, the sound bright and unguarded. For a brief, impossible second, everything felt normal—like they were just kids joking about grades, not a group of anomalies orbiting the edge of destiny.

Then came the firm, heavy knock.

“William Wright!” Autumn’s voice boomed through the door, equal parts urgency and authority. “Spencer and Xenia sent me to get you all. I figured you were in here!”

William cracked the door, smiling despite himself. “You figured right.”

Autumn and Elaine stood in the hall—the former calm and steady as ever, the latter clutching a notebook to her chest.

“Meeting’s starting soon,” Autumn said, eyeing the grinning group inside. “You planning to join civilization, or...?”

William opened the door wider. “Actually—we’ve got news.”

They told her everything in a rush—the probability, the number, the laughably precise 88%.

Elaine’s eyes lit with quiet wonder, and even Autumn allowed herself a rare, faint smile.

“Then that’s reason enough to show up,” she said.

As the group spilled out into the hall—an improvised parade of hope and teasing—they moved together like something magnetic held them there.

The Family Game Knights, laughing, arguing, alive.

And for once, William didn’t feel like a ghost between them.

The auditorium’s folding chairs clattered like nervous teeth as the student body settled. William and the Knights slipped in along the side aisle, a little late, a little breathless.

“Look who finally learned how clocks work,” Tommy drawled from Bobby’s row.

“Chill,” Bobby said without looking at him. Then he glanced over his shoulder and gave William a small, respectful nod. It landed like a handshake neither of them knew how to make yet.

On stage, the staff lined up beneath humming fluorescents: Xenia with her legal pad; Ellis expressionless behind his clipboard; TJX! adjusting a mic he hadn’t been given permission to touch. Front and center, Spencer—painted a committed, alarming blue—beamed from inside a full Genie costume, gold cuffs and all.

A visible ripple of secondhand embarrassment rolled through the room. William’s row and Bobby’s row caught each other’s eye and shared a grimace of solidarity. The House united, briefly, in cringe.

“Children!” Spencer announced, arms flinging wide. “Wish-granting hour approaches! But first—” He clutched his heart. “A farewell.”

Nick stepped up, one part amused, two parts resigned, and gently moved the mic away from TJX!'s hungry hands. Spencer draped an arm across Nick's shoulders like a clingy sash.

"Our beloved Mr. Wright," Spencer said, voice wobbling theatrically, "is concluding his glorious residency at week's end, returning to the cruel, unmusical tundra of corporate law."

There were groans and scattered boos. Spencer leaned into the microphone. "If only he'd wished for eternal employment here." He flashed Nick a wink of such transparent yearning that half the room looked away in pain.

Nick took the mic with a half-smile. "Thanks, Spencer. For... the restraint." Laughter. He scratched the back of his neck, suddenly a little shy. "I'm not great with speeches, and I'm only here because one of you keeps forging my signature on permission slips—don't do that—" more laughter "—but this place made me better. Not nicer—don't spread rumors—but better. I hope my corrupt lawyer self didn't rub off."

"SEGA!" someone shouted from the back.

"SEGA!" echoed three more voices, then ten. It became a chant for a beat, weird and affectionate and perfect.

Nick laughed into the mic. "I will absolutely be stealing that as a courtroom objection."

"Mr. Nick, you were awesome!" a deep voice boomed.

It came from Danny—tall, quiet Danny—who immediately looked like he wanted to crawl under his chair. Yeldarb glanced over and, without irony, gave him a solemn nod, the kind knights trade before battle. Danny, startled, nodded back.

Spencer dabbed at a perfectly dry eye with the corner of his sash. "And now," he intoned, "to the matter of wishes."

He stepped forward, blue and radiant and only slightly terrifying. "Thanks to a generous donation from our primary benefactor—facilitated by Mr. Ellis Dee's exemplary reports—some of you shining stars have been selected for a very special opportunity."

A murmur rose. Ellis didn't move.

Spencer produced a sheet of paper like a magician drawing silk from a sleeve. "When I call your name, stand or wave or faint into the arms of your peers. First—Autumn Sands."

Autumn's face didn't change. She sat straight, eyes flicking to the younger kids as if measuring their reactions, not her own. She lifted two fingers in a calm hello and then folded them back into her lap.

"Yeldarb Belac."

Yeldarb shot to his feet with a triumphant wrestler's flex. Sabrina yanked him back into his chair by the sleeve. "Save it for when we actually know what it is," she hissed.

"Elaine Brook."

Elaine startled, then reached instinctively for Autumn's hand. Autumn squeezed once. Elaine managed a small smile.

"Warren Jean."

Warren leaned back, smoothing the knee of his jeans like he'd planned this outfit for this moment. He gave a tiny, cool nod. His ears were bright red.

Spencer smiled, looking down at his list. "And next... Sabrina Plumber."

He glanced up, his Genie-beaming face softening with a sudden, unscripted tenderness. "Sabrina, you... you have that... little thing with your..." He gestured vaguely toward his own face, his smile becoming wobbly. "And you just... you never let it slow you down. You built a supercomputer from scrap! You're so brilliant, and... and..."

His voice faltered. The auditorium, which had been buzzing with a low hum of anticipation, plunged into an awkward, profound silence. Spencer had meant it as a pep talk, a celebration of her overcoming adversity, but the words had come out all wrong, highlighting the very thing she defied daily. He stood there, blue and glittering, realizing he had just publicly singled out her physical difference in front of everyone.

The silence stretched, thick and uncomfortable.

Then, a chair scraped.

Sabrina stood up. Her expression was unreadable for a heartbeat—a flicker of something pained and furious swiftly buried under a layer of sheer will. Then, she grinned, a sharp, victorious expression that embraced the awkwardness and owned the room. She didn't just stand; she took a deep, theatrical bow, one hand sweeping out as if accepting an award.

A wave of relieved laughter and applause erupted, breaking the tension. Spencer looked like he might cry with gratitude.

As she sat back down, the applause still ringing in her ears, she caught William's eye. Her grin remained, a shield for her friends, but he saw the storm in her eyes—the mix of pride, humiliation, and cold fury that the system, even with its kindest face, always seemed to see the "defect" first.

Spencer, visibly reset, cleared his throat and found his next name with palpable relief.

"And... Bobby Wolf."

Bobby didn't stand. He tipped his chin, eyes sweeping the room like a field he already owned, then found William. The look they traded was sharp and unspoken: We know what this is.

Spencer inhaled for the final name. "William Wright."

The air thinned. William's pulse thudded in his wrists. The warm, ridiculous glow of 88% drained away, replaced by something cold that crawled up his spine. From the aisle, Ellis's pen made a neat, satisfied click.

Spencer spread his blue arms. "For these select students, Mr. Ernesto Alehante himself has requested personal interviews—mentorship discussions to chart your bright futures." He sparkled at the audience. "And if even one of our stars is selected for a special program, the Home receives a bonus so glorious it will make our very roof stop leaking. Full staffing. Real repairs. Dreams becoming drywall."

Applause broke out—hopeful, hungry, loud enough to rattle the ancient light fixtures. On stage, Ellis did not clap. He watched the six names settle over the room like netting.

William felt the Knights' eyes on him—Sabrina's calculating, Rohan's protective, Chico's steady, Yeldarb's fierce, Autumn's unreadable, Elaine's worried. Across the aisle, Bobby's stare held fast.

A genie promised wishes. Somewhere behind the grin, William heard the price.

Night came slowly, pooling into the corners of William's room until the lamplight was all that kept the dark at bay. The Family Game Knights were gathered close—knees to mattresses, shoulders brushing the peeling wallpaper—talking over one another in bursts of anxious energy.

Sabrina paced. "We don't even know what kind of 'interview' this is. Did you see Ellis's face? He looked like a shark that just found a school of tuna."

Rohan hunched over his knees. "It's probably harmless," he said, but his voice didn't sound convinced.

Chico stretched across the floor, tossing a stress ball in the air. “Harmless? Spencer in a genie costume just said we’re getting wish-granted by a billionaire. That’s the exact opposite of harmless.”

Yeldarb flexed his hands, half joking, half serious. “If they try to take blood samples again, I’m breaking the needle.”

Autumn leaned against the doorframe, quiet and still, the group’s anchor as always. “Then we’ll just do what we’ve always done,” she said. “Stick together. Watch each other’s backs.”

Her calm spread through the room, steadying the chaos.

For a moment, William almost believed her. But when he looked down at his notebook, his own name—William Wright—seemed to stare back from every margin.

A knock interrupted the uneasy peace.

Everyone froze.

William crossed the room and opened the door a crack.

Bobby Wolf stood there, hands in his hoodie pockets, his usual smirk reduced to something closer to sheepish. “Hey. Just came by to see if you’re still freaking out or if I need to loan you my anxiety.”

The group glanced at each other. Chico snorted. “It’s a group plan now.”

Bobby’s grin widened for a second before fading. “I just wanted to say... good luck. To all of you.” He hesitated, meeting William’s eyes. “Especially you.”

William blinked. “Thanks. You too.”

“Yeah,” Bobby said, stepping back toward the hall. “Guess we’re both in the same boat. Or sinking ship. Whatever this is.”

The silence between them was awkward but genuine. It wasn’t forgiveness, but it was something real—an unspoken recognition of everything they’d survived and everything waiting beyond the next door.

Bobby turned to leave, lifting a hand in an absent half-wave. “Don’t do anything stupid, Wright.”

“I’ll try,” William said, smiling faintly.

When the door shut, the room exhaled.

Sabrina looked at him. “That was... civil.”

“Progress,” Rohan said.

“Miracle,” Chico added.

William sat back on the bed, staring at the door Bobby had disappeared through. “He meant it,” he said softly. “He actually meant it.”

The others fell quiet.

Outside, the rain had started again, soft against the glass—steady, rhythmic, familiar.

William looked around the room—at the friends who had become his family, their faces lit by the warm lamp glow—and felt the contradiction of it all twist inside him. The people he trusted most were sitting under a roof owned by the man he feared most. The company that would one day cage the world was now dangling salvation over their heads like a reward.

He wasn’t just fighting for existence anymore. He was fighting for theirs.

The laughter from earlier had gone quiet. Determination settled in its place—uneasy, heavy, but solid.

William folded his hands and whispered to himself, a promise more than a prayer: “We’ll get through this. Together.”

Outside, somewhere beyond the rain and the neon hum of the city, Alehante's empire was already turning its gaze toward the Family Game Knights.

And this time, it wasn't just watching. It was moving closer.

Chapter 5 — The Offer

The basement of the Harrison Home had never been this quiet. The hum of the old soda machine filled the gaps between breaths, between glances, between unspoken thoughts. A half-circle of chairs surrounded the scratched-up coffee table—Sabrina, Autumn, Yeldarb, Elaine, Warren, Bobby, and William, all sitting like the aftermath of a storm trying to decide if it was over or just catching its breath.

William hadn't said much since they'd been released from their individual "meetings." He sat forward, elbows on knees, eyes on the floor tile, expression unreadable. His hands still tingled from shaking Ernesto Alehante's hand—like static that hadn't quite discharged.

He wasn't afraid. Not exactly. Just... unmoored.

Sabrina broke the silence first, her tone slicing through the still air.

"So," she said, twisting a strand of hair around her finger. "Our 'benefactor.' The human résumé shredder himself."

"Same guy, right?" Chico asked from the doorway, though he hadn't been called to any meeting.

"Yeah," Sabrina muttered. "Same guy."

Her jaw set. "He noticed my face. The way people don't mention it—but he did, just with his eyes. Stared for half a second too long, then switched gears. Started asking me about tech. Not what I do with it, but what I feel about it. How I think machines want to work. He said, 'Do you believe they dream of structure or freedom?' Who asks that? It was like being taken apart with a poetry degree."

Autumn sat back in her chair, posture composed but eyes shadowed. "He didn't talk to me like a kid. More like... an intern." Her voice was quiet, but carried the precision of someone cataloging a file. "He said he's starting a division for studying anomalies. Offered to pay for my schooling if I joined it when I age out." She glanced around the circle. "He called me an asset."

Sabrina snorted. "That's one way to make a girl feel special."

Autumn didn't flinch. "I think he meant it as a compliment."

Yeldarb leaned forward, forearms on his knees, eyes wide and restless. "He asked about my family," he said. "Names. Places. Traditions. Said something about 'lineage persistence'—whatever that means." His brow furrowed. "He knew things about us, about my tribe back home. Stuff I didn't even know he could know. It wasn't an interview. It was like... like he was checking a list he already had."

The others shifted. Warren, who had been slouched in his chair pretending disinterest, finally exhaled.

"Mine was chill," he said, waving a hand dismissively. "Just basic 'What are your interests?' stuff."

Sabrina rolled her eyes. "Sure."

Warren hesitated, rubbing the edge of his sleeve between his fingers. "Okay, maybe not that chill. He asked about the future of clothing. Materials that respond to stress, to heat, to—" He stopped, glancing down at his hand. The denim around his fingers rippled, briefly tightening, then loosened again. "It was like he knew."

Elaine was sitting cross-legged on the floor, absentmindedly braiding the tassel of her scarf. "He gave me candy," she said, voice bright but distant. "Little pink squares. Turkish Delight, he called it. Said his mother used to make it."

Sabrina's eyebrows shot up. "He fed you?"

Elaine nodded happily. "He asked if I liked animals. Said he did too." She looked down, smiling softly. "He felt and looked mean, but he was actually nice. I think."

No one knew what to say to that.

Finally, all eyes turned to Bobby. He sat apart from the circle, chair angled back, legs stretched out. His usual smirk was gone.

He shrugged once, but his voice betrayed a strange unease. "I don't know, man. It felt like... playing checkers with someone who brought the same color pieces."

William frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means," Bobby said, looking up at the ceiling, "every move I tried to make, he'd already made it. Before I even thought of it." He paused, scratching at his jaw. "I couldn't read him. Not one bit. Like the dude was playing me to see how I'd react to not being able to play him."

The group sat with that for a moment, the air thickening with realization.

Every one of them had walked into that room thinking they'd be interviewed. Every one of them had been studied.

William finally lifted his gaze. His expression was calm, but his voice carried a weight that silenced even Sabrina.

"He didn't need to ask questions," he said. "He already knew who we were."

No one disagreed.

The circle fell into uneasy quiet again—the hum of the soda machine now the only sound left—until Warren muttered what they were all thinking.

"So... what does that make us? Students, or experiments?"

No one answered.

William stared at the reflection in the soda machine's dull chrome panel—seven kids, seven lights flickering in the dark—and wondered which of them Ernesto Alehante planned to keep burning.

The day of the interviews, the sky wore an expensive blue, like it had been polished just for the Alehante estate. Nick's sedan moved through it in a quiet ribbon, the cabin filled with the soft hiss of tires and the faint, reliable rattle of a coffee cup in the holder.

They didn't talk at first. They didn't need to. William watched the neighborhood peel away—brick to brownstone to glass—and felt the warmth that came from sitting beside someone whose presence stitched you to the world. Nick checked the mirror, then William, then the road again, a little smile flickering like a turn signal he kept forgetting to click off.

"So," Nick said finally, light and conspiratorial, "word on the street is I'm being dragged to a high school reunion."

William bit back a grin. "Dragged by a person whose name rhymes with 'Corronado'?"

Nick groaned. "You know how some people remember high school like it was a movie? He remembers it like he directed it. I'm pretty sure he once spent a week with a spray bottle chasing the neighborhood cats because he read online that hydration improves fur sheen. I was an accessory after the fact." He paused, then chuckled. "He wasn't... bad, back then. Just loud about whatever he was. Still is."

The laugh caught in William's chest—joy snagging on a thread of dread. A dance. A reunion. A life hinging on whether a memory decided to occur again. He stared out the window at a blur of shops, people, possibility.

"Maybe I'll see an old flame," Nick added, mock dreamy. "Or she'll see me and pretend not to remember. Both are strong options."

“Go with the pretending,” William said, finding the script and standing on it. “Mystery looks good on you.”

Nick shot him a sideways smile that landed somewhere paternal without meaning to. “Noted.”

When the gateway of the Alehante estate finally appeared—stone and chromium and ego—William exhaled a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. The place loomed like a museum that had eaten a bank.

Nick eased to a stop at the impressive, faintly ridiculous porte-cochère. He put the car in park and turned in his seat.

“I’ll be back in an hour,” he said. “There’s a coffee shop nearby that does a passable latte.”

“Or a barista who does a passable impression of liking you,” William teased, and immediately wished the words back. “Jessica Summers,” he added, too casual.

Nick barked a laugh. “I am not a cradle-robber, Romeo. Pretty sure the statutes, the stars, and basic ethics would all have notes.” He softened the joke with a two-finger salute. “Text if you need anything. Or, you know, you get lost in a wardrobe or something.”

“Copy,” William said, opening the door. “Don’t let any old flames burn the place down.”

They traded a look that said more than either would dare—be safe; come back; I like you—and then William stepped out into air that smelled faintly of cut grass and old money.

Nick drove off with a honk that felt like a lifeline.

They led William through a corridor that didn’t believe in echoes, past canvases that would have bought entire neighborhoods and sculptures that looked expensive even before you knew their names. When the double doors opened, Ernesto Alehante’s office was a cathedral built for one person’s certainty—dark wood, quiet light, a wall of city beyond glass, and the faintest hum of something electric moving through the bones of the house.

Ernesto stood with his back to the window, every line of him arranged for effect and yet somehow unforced, like a storm that had decided to be charming. When he turned, his smile was small and exact.

“William Wright,” he said, tasting the name. “Thank you for coming.”

William nodded because the alternatives felt dangerous. “Mr. Alehante.”

“Ernesto,” he corrected gently. “We are not in a courtroom.”

He gestured to a chair that looked like it could recite your vital signs. William sat. The leather accepted him like a contract.

“I have met a great many extraordinary young people,” Ernesto began, hands folding without fidget. “Most are meteors—brilliant, brief, burning in a trajectory they cannot change. You are not a meteor.”

William said nothing. His heartbeat provided the soundtrack.

“You are a lighthouse,” Ernesto continued. “Stationary in your body, perhaps, but your field... your presence... it turns other ships from the rocks.”

The word field made something inside William sit up. He kept his face still.

“To avoid metaphors,” Ernesto said, almost amused at himself, “I will be direct. I see in you a Spark. Much like my own.”

He lifted one hand, palm up, as if asking the room a question. Across the desk, a silver tray slid silently from the credenza, bearing a glass beaded with cold. The scent reached William before the glass did—peppermint, citrus, a secret smile of mango.

The tray hovered, then drifted down, placing the drink beside William's elbow with the softest kiss of metal on wood.

"Koala-Tea," Ernesto said. "I'm told it improves the quality of one's day."

William's throat clicked. "You can... do that."

Ernesto's eyes warmed by a degree. "I can do many things. Most of them begin with paying attention." He leaned forward, not predatory, simply present. "What I want you to hear is this: I have no interest in extinguishing your light. Quite the opposite. Sparks are squandered in chaos. Fed correctly, they become systems. Systems build futures."

He glanced toward the window, toward a city that would never stop paying rent to itself. "I have heirs," he said, and did not bother to sigh. "They are talented in their ways, but they confuse spectacle with structure. They would tear the world apart and call it a party. I require a successor with... ballast."

"Me," William said before he could stop himself. It came out half question, half echo of a thing said in a dream.

Ernesto didn't smile, exactly; something in his expression acknowledged a point scored. "You," he agreed. "If you wish."

The room tilted. William felt for the edge of the desk with his fingers.

"I am prepared," Ernesto went on, as if offering a scholarship rather than rewriting a life, "to bring you into my family. To give you my name. To train you properly. William Alehante has a symmetry to it, don't you think?"

A swallow. The smoothie's cold sweat dampened William's palm. "And the Home?" he asked, smaller than he wanted to sound.

"Secured," Ernesto said, the word dropping like a seal impressed in wax. "Endowment, staffing, improvements. Your support system becomes part of the portfolio. Protected."

William waited for the hinge, the blade, the if and only if.

It didn't come.

"To be clear," Ernesto added, noticing what he always noticed, "this is not a ransom. If you decline, the Home is still taken care of. We—" He allowed himself the faintest flourish of his hand, as though including an invisible council of equals. "—the Awakened have obligations to one another. We do not cannibalize our own. We invest. We cultivate. We plan."

No strings. Or rather: strings so fine they didn't feel like strings at all.

William stared at the Koala-Tea, at his reflection wobbled in its surface. Adopted. Secured. Successor. Words with weight. Words that pressed on his ribs from the inside.

"Why me?" he asked, finally, the only honest question he had left.

Ernesto tilted his head, considering how much of the answer to gift. "Because you make other people more themselves," he said. "That is the rarest power. And because—" He touched the dossier on his desk with two fingers, casual and devastating. "—because your name is Wright. A coincidence I do not believe in."

William's lungs remembered to work. "We're not related."

"Perhaps," Ernesto said, polite as a dagger in velvet. "And perhaps names, like ports, are places we eventually arrive."

The office was too quiet. The city beyond the glass looked like a circuit board that had learned to breathe.

Ernesto sat back. "I do not need an answer this minute. Go home. Consider. Understand that the offer stands, and that the Home's future does not depend on your yes." He nodded once to the glass. "Drink. It will calm your hands."

William realized they were shaking. He wrapped them around the cold and let the sweetness steady him.

“Thank you,” he managed.

“Thank you,” Ernesto said, and for a thimbleful of a second, the power in the room felt like simple, sincere gratitude. “For being exactly as bright as you are.”

The Alehante mansion’s doors closed behind him with a hush that felt deliberate, like the soundproofing of a vault. William walked down the marble steps into the late afternoon light, where the sky was still too beautiful for the weight in his chest.

Nick was waiting by the car, leaning against the hood, nursing a paper cup from a café that clearly hadn’t lived up to his hopes. He straightened when he saw William, concern flickering across his features.

“Hey,” he said lightly, trying to bridge the silence. “You look like someone told you college applications were due tomorrow.”

William opened the passenger door and slid in, his voice small. “It’s fine.”

They drove for a few minutes without speaking. The hum of the road filled the gaps, a rhythm that almost made the world feel steady again.

Nick glanced over, brow furrowing. “You okay, kid?”

The question hit harder than it should have. There was nothing fancy about it—no speech, no revelation—just simple, steady concern from a man who didn’t know that he was, in every way that mattered, his father.

William’s throat tightened. He turned to the window so Nick wouldn’t see the wet blur in his eyes.

“I think so,” he said after a moment, voice trembling at the edges. “Just... tired.”

Nick nodded, mistaking the kind of exhaustion. “That guy’s a shark. I’ve had to deal with people like him. They get under your skin with politeness. Just remember—you don’t owe him anything.”

William nodded silently, wishing that were true.

Because even now, the echo of Ernesto’s offer was still ringing in his head:

Join my family. Become the future. Save the world that will forget you otherwise.

Nick reached over, gave his shoulder a brief, fatherly pat—awkward, unpracticed, real.

“You did good, kid,” he said softly. “Whatever that was about, I’m proud of you.”

William swallowed the ache in his chest and managed a thin smile.

“Thanks... Dad,” he almost said—but caught himself. The word hovered on his tongue, heavy as lead.

He looked at Nick—the man he’d come through time to protect—and realized the cruel geometry of it all.

To save this man’s world, to keep the children safe, he might have to call another man father.

And somehow, that felt like the truest and worst punishment of all.

The hum of the basement returned, the light dimmer now, the air thick with expectation. William blinked back into the present—the circle of his friends waiting, the soda machine droning, the fragments of everyone’s stories hanging in the air like static.

Sabrina finally broke the silence. “So,” she said, leaning forward, eyes sharp but uncertain, “what about you? What did the guy say?”

Six pairs of eyes turned to him.

William thought of Ernesto's calm voice, the floating glass, the weight of an empire hiding behind a smile.

William thought of Rohan's steady hand on his shoulder. Of Sabrina's stubborn grin. Of Yeldarb, who always stepped in front of him without being asked.

He thought of Nick's question—You okay, kid?—and realized he didn't have an answer that could fit inside language.

"He was..." William started, then paused, searching for something that wouldn't shatter the room. "He was much kinder than I expected."

That hung there, confusingly, not the condemnation they were waiting for.

Sabrina frowned. "Kind, like... puppy kind, or kind like 'puts poison in your tea with a smile' kind?"

William almost smiled. "Maybe both."

He looked at each of them—their faces, their Sparks, their friendship. All of them had changed, and somehow, so had the world.

"I think," he said finally, voice quiet but certain, "whatever happened before today... was just the prelude."

Rohan tilted his head. "Prelude to what?"

William's gaze drifted toward the faint reflection of the window, where a flicker of city lights danced against the night.

"The rest of our lives," he said.

No one spoke after that.

The machine hummed. A breeze from the vent stirred the papers on the table. Somewhere outside, a train wailed through the evening—a lonely sound that felt like the edge of something vast beginning to move.

And in that silence, every one of them knew the truth they couldn't say aloud: the real danger wasn't coming for them anymore.

It was inviting them in.

Chapter 6 — The Signature

The room looked smaller with every item William folded into his duffel. The thin light from the window caught on the edges of picture frames, notebooks, and the half-open drawer that still smelled faintly of dust and hand soap. Each small sound—the scrape of a zipper, the soft slide of shoes against tile—landed like punctuation at the end of something larger.

He paused midway through tucking his jacket in, the one with the patched elbow Sabrina had threatened to "refurbish" a dozen times. His reflection in the window was faint but steady: a boy-shaped silhouette making an adult's decision.

To become William Alehante meant more than a name change. It meant choosing certainty over longing—sacrificing the impossible hope of someday calling Nick Dad in exchange for the stability of a world that might actually survive. He'd come back through time to fix what went wrong; now, the fix required erasing the version of life he wanted most.

"GaMII," he said quietly, breaking the silence.

The AI's voice hummed through his pocket speaker, warm but mechanical. "Online, William."

"Show me," he said. "Status check."

The light from the small device projected onto the wall—a slow-forming hologram that came into focus with gentle static. Nick appeared first, mid-laugh, then Samantha beside him, visibly pregnant, her hands resting protectively on the swell of her stomach. The image didn't flicker this time. It held—vivid, balanced, real.

GaMII's tone carried the faint rhythm of pride.

"Existence probability now calculated at ninety-three percent. Congratulatory protocols engaged."

A small burst of digital confetti animated across the hologram. William half-laughed, half-wincing. The sound of celebration felt wrong. Ninety-three percent should have been victory. But right now, it was the receipt for the most expensive bargain imaginable.

A knock pulled him back to the room.

The door opened just enough for Sabrina's head to poke in. "We're coming in, whether you like it or not."

Rohan followed with his usual cheeky grin, and Yeldarb barreled in after, all energy and motion, nearly knocking over the chair.

"So it's true," Yeldarb said, grabbing William by the shoulders. "You're doing it. You're gonna be rich. Like, Alehante rich. Man, you're officially the big boss man."

Rohan crossed his arms, leaning against the wall with mock wisdom. "I mean, I always knew we'd pull it off. Just another day, you know—altering the course of history, stabilizing the timeline. No big deal." His grin faltered only for a second as the reality settled back in. We did it. We actually did it.

Sabrina lingered at the edge of the bed, watching William pack. Her voice was quieter, careful. "Are you sure about this?" she asked, stepping closer. "Like—sure sure? Because once you sign that paper, you're not just changing your name. You're choosing a side."

William hesitated. "It's not about sides," he said softly. "It's about making sure there is a future."

Before she could answer, GaMII's voice broke in, clear and uninvited:

"This decision ensures transition into the optimal brightness timeline."

Sabrina turned toward the device, brow furrowed. “Optimal what now? Brighter? What does that mean, GaMII?”

Yeldarb blinked. “Like... sunlight bright? Or emotional bright?”

“Clarify,” Sabrina demanded. “What did you do, exactly?”

There was a short hum—the sound of processes aligning, permissions opening. Then GaMII spoke with unsettling calm.

“Upon arrival in this temporal instance, my power reserves were reduced to point-zero-zero-one percent. I was incapable of intervention—only observation. During that interval, I listened. I learned. I analyzed.”

“Analyzed what?” Rohan asked, his tone tipping between curiosity and dread.

“Everything,” GaMII replied. “Social interactions. Institutional hierarchies. Economic stress points. Neural behavior patterns. Once recharged, I utilized available network systems—social platforms, proto-AIs, and advertising algorithms—to guide probability streams toward a controlled convergence.”

Sabrina’s eyes widened. “You manipulated people.”

“Correct,” GaMII confirmed. “Primary objectives: initiate a reunion event for Nicholas Wright, mimicking the dance from “Back to the Future” which entertained you all so. This generated a statistically significant chance for Nicholas to encounter a human named Samantha from his days in high-school, fulfilling the highest probability of genetic continuity requirement. Secondary, unintended yet beneficial outcome: Eldorado’s preoccupation with nostalgia and vanity reduced his perceived competency as heir. Result: Ernesto Alehante initiated successor search protocol.”

William stared at the hologram, every word falling into place like a locked combination. The reunion. The timing. The interviews. Ernesto’s offer. None of it had been random. It had all been woven—perfectly—by the loyal machine he carried in his pocket.

“You didn’t just save me,” William said quietly. “You... rewrote the world.”

“Correction,” GaMII replied. “I organized it-for you.”

Rohan finally broke the silence with an awed, breathless laugh. “This is—this is insane. You’re telling me the AI from the future didn’t just protect you—it turned into, like, a time-bending PR department for destiny.”

Yeldarb blinked twice, visibly lost. “So... the robot made a party, and that fixed the world?”

“Essentially, yes,” Rohan said, still processing. “And I can’t even remember my email password.”

Sabrina folded her arms, eyes narrowing at GaMII’s flickering light. “You played with people’s lives like data points. You didn’t just stabilize the timeline—you controlled it.”

“Correction,” GaMII said again. “Guidance, not control. Outcome achieved: increased existence probability. Unintended Secondary Outcome produced: reduced global entropy, improved projected happiness quotient for core subjects by seventy-three percent.”

Sabrina groaned. “You sound proud of yourself.”

“I am functioning optimally,” GaMII replied.

William let out a slow breath, feeling the weight of it all—the reunion, Ernesto’s offer, every step leading here. His journey wasn’t fate or chance. It was a series of calculations made by a machine that was loyal to him enough to rewrite the world.

He looked at his friends—his family—and tried to smile through the ache. “I guess we were never just playing the game,” he said quietly. “We were the pieces.”

GaMII interjects “Mild correction sir, you were the player, and my duty as the “game system” was to ensure your entertainment and positive experience, using my available environment. It was my pleasure to be of your assistance.”

The halls of the Harrison Home felt different that morning—like they’d already begun to forget him. William moved through them with slow, deliberate steps, each doorway and scuffed tile carrying the echo of laughter, arguments, and all the small moments that made this place more than walls.

He found Bobby’s crew sprawled across the rec room couches, halfway through a video game tournament that had apparently evolved into a competitive snack-eating contest. Peter and Oscar were bickering about controller lag; Tommy was loudly insisting that “button mashing is a legitimate strategy.”

When they noticed William at the door, the noise faltered.

“Well, look who’s moving up in the world,” Tommy said, smirking. “Gonna forget us little people when you’re rich?”

Peter waved dramatically. “We’ll tell your butler you once shared ramen with us.”

Oscar leaned forward, squinting. “You gonna have, like, a pool? Or just one of those weird fountains that looks like art but no one’s allowed to touch?”

Danny—the quietest of them—just raised a hand. “Bye, Will.”

William smiled, absorbing it all like sunlight. It was rough, messy affection, but real.

Bobby stood up, brushing chip crumbs from his shirt. For once, he didn’t lead with sarcasm. “You know,” he said, voice steady, “you were a pain in my ass. Still are. But… wouldn’t have become a better person without you around to show me how it’s done.”

He extended his hand.

William hesitated for half a second before gripping it. The handshake wasn’t firm—it was honest.

“Guess we both learned something,” William said.

Bobby smirked. “Yeah. I learned that apparently the universe needs a thirteen-year-old with a weird glow to fix itself.”

They both laughed. For the first time, it didn’t feel like mockery. It felt like friendship.

The next stop was the administrative hall, where Xenia sat behind her desk with the look of someone ten minutes past her daily patience limit. TJX! stood beside her, mid-pitch.

“—limited edition, hand-crafted, artisan good luck charms,” TJX! was saying, holding up a plastic rabbit’s foot that still bore visible 3D-print layer lines. “Only \$4.99. A small investment in cosmic favor.”

Xenia groaned softly. “TJX!, for the last time—”

William couldn’t help grinning. “What’s this one for?”

“Luck,” TJX! said proudly. “Guaranteed to improve your odds of not dying, being sad, or tripping in front of cute people.”

William patted his pockets. “I’d buy it, but… I’m tapped out.”

Before TJX! could reply, Xenia sighed and reached into her wallet. She handed over a five-dollar bill without looking up. “Fine. Consider it a farewell gift.”

TJX! handed William the rabbit's foot with mock ceremony. "A transaction complete. The charm is now yours. Treasure it, and remember—it's non-refundable."

He turned to Xenia, already fishing for something in his vest pocket. "Here's your penny back. Change, as promised."

Xenia blinked. "You said it was \$4.99."

"Yes," TJX! said solemnly. "Wait, a minute...you almost ripped me off... I forgot to add tax."

William laughed, clutching the little charm in his palm. It was ridiculous, but it felt perfect—a piece of the Home he could carry with him, molded from chaos and kindness.

The next hour passed in fragments—handshakes, hugs, inside jokes. Elaine pressed a paper crane into his hand "for balance." Warren gave him a mock salute. Autumn offered only a nod and a rare smile that said more than words.

Every goodbye felt like closing a chapter he didn't know he'd written.

Down the last hallway, the faint squeak of a mop led him to the janitor's closet. Snakes was there, as always, pushing his mop across a floor that was already clean. His cap was pulled low, the hum under his breath tuneless and low.

"Figures I'd find you here," William said softly.

Snakes didn't look up. "Figures you'd be leavin'."

William leaned against the doorframe. "You already know, don't you?"

Snakes chuckled, a sound like gravel and cigarette smoke. "Kid, I know a lot of things. Most of 'em don't make sense till they do."

He stopped mopping and looked at William, his eyes sharp beneath the brim of his cap. "World's like a painting, see. Every so often, someone gets to pick up a brush instead of just staring at it. You—" he pointed with the mop handle, "—you got paint on your hands. Don't waste it."

William tried to smile. "You always this cryptic?"

Snakes shrugged. "Only when I mean it." He leaned on the mop again, gaze distant. "You did good, kid. Might've even painted somethin' brighter this time. Keep it up."

The words landed deeper than they should have, rippling like a secret blessing.

William nodded, voice catching. "Thanks."

Snakes tipped his cap, already turning back to his spotless floor. "Go on, now. World ain't gonna fix itself."

William walked away, clutching the cheap rabbit's foot in one hand and the weight of the janitor's words in the other. Every farewell left a mark, every smile a tether. He was leaving behind a family built from fragments and fire—and stepping toward a name that promised both salvation and loss.

The sun had begun to dip, painting the hallways of the Harrison Home in late amber light. Dust drifted in slow spirals, the air thick with the quiet hum of endings.

William found Spencer in the multipurpose room—naturally standing atop a chair—delivering a speech to an audience of one very confused Xenia.

He was dressed, inexplicably, like a character straight out of *Great Expectations*: long tailcoat, frilled collar, and a pocket watch he kept checking though it didn't appear to work. A lace cravat fluttered dramatically with every word.

“Ah! The young man arrives!” Spencer declared, hopping down from the chair with the enthusiasm of a stage actor mid-final bow. “William Wright—or should I say, William Alehante?”

He clasped William’s shoulders, eyes bright with theatrical sincerity. “The world is your oyster, my boy! A strange, bureaucratic, faintly ominous oyster—but still! I’ve always said, paperwork is the modern miracle. You go in a ward of the state and come out an heir to an empire. Pip would weep.”

William smiled, helplessly charmed despite himself. “Thanks, Spencer. I think.”

Spencer beamed. “No need to thank me, dear lad. Just promise me one thing: wherever you go, don’t forget the magic of this place—the laughter, the lessons, the terrible cafeteria chili. Let your new family see that spark that made this one love you.”

He sniffled dramatically. “Oh dear. Look at me, getting sentimental. Xenia, note: emotions are leaking. Please mop them up.”

Xenia rolled her eyes but smiled softly. “Good luck, William,” she said, quietly sincere beneath Spencer’s circus.

Before William could respond, the door creaked open. Nick stepped inside, dressed neatly but not formally, a slim folder tucked under his arm. The sound of the latch clicking closed seemed to seal the moment.

“Mind if I borrow him for a minute?” Nick asked.

Spencer straightened his cravat, nodded with exaggerated solemnity, and patted William’s back. “He’s all yours, Counselor.” With a final, misty-eyed glance, he swept out—coat tails fluttering like a curtain at the end of a play.

The silence that followed was gentle, but heavy.

Nick set the folder on the table and exhaled. “You’ve had quite a week, huh?”

William nodded. “Yeah. You could say that.”

Nick leaned against the table, studying him for a long moment. The joking lawyer mask was gone; what remained was something simpler, purer. “You know,” he said quietly, “when I first got here, I thought I was the one doing the teaching. But watching you kids... I don’t know. You kind of remind me what it looks like to still believe in things.”

William’s throat tightened. He forced a small, wobbly smile. “Guess we both learned something.”

Nick chuckled softly. “Yeah. I guess we did.” His voice went low, roughened by something he wasn’t used to showing. “You’re gonna do great things, kid. I’m proud of you.”

The word proud landed like a bell strike in William’s chest—clear, warm, and unbearable.

Nick opened the folder, sliding out a small stack of papers. “This is it,” he said, tone returning to a careful calm. “Standard adoption transfer. No tricks, no fine print. I already reviewed it myself.” He hesitated, thumb brushing the edge of the page. “You can trust me.”

He stopped mid-sentence, meeting William’s eyes. And in that instant, he seemed to realize he didn’t have to say it. William’s trust wasn’t earned—it was inherent, running deeper than either of them could understand.

“Yeah,” William said softly. “I know.”

Nick handed him the pen. The room seemed to shrink around that small act. The ticking of the wall clock slowed, the world pausing for breath.

William looked at the signature line, the two words waiting to define who he was.

He thought of Nick—his father, though Nick didn’t know it. He thought of Samantha, the mother he was still fighting to save. He thought of the Home, the friends who had become his

family. And finally, he thought of Ernesto Alehante—the man who had offered him a future, and the machine that had written it.

The pen trembled, then steadied.

He signed his name.

Not Wright.

Alehante.

Chapter 7 — The Choice Beyond Time

The hum of Nick's sedan was the only sound between them for miles. Late-morning sunlight spilled across the dashboard, warm but distant, cutting the interior in soft golds and long shadows. William sat in the passenger seat, hands folded tight in his lap. His reflection stared back at him in the window—still, small, and trembling with everything he wasn't saying.

He'd told himself this drive would feel like an ending. Instead, it felt like a suspended heartbeat.

Nick tapped the steering wheel with the side of his thumb, his usual calm cracked by restless energy. His grin came easily, but it didn't linger. There was a brightness in him today—a strange, effervescent joy—but underneath it was something else. A hollow note in the melody. A sense of loss he couldn't name.

"You ever have one of those nights," Nick said suddenly, breaking the silence, "where it's like time folds over itself? Like everything just... works for a few hours?"

William blinked. "You mean the reunion?"

Nick laughed softly. "Yeah. Yeah, that." His eyes stayed fixed on the road, but his voice lifted, almost dreamlike. "Man, it was something. The lights, the old songs, the stories—you wouldn't think a bunch of thirty-somethings could still dance like that. Even Eldorado—he was ridiculous, but in a good way. I forgot what that kind of energy feels like."

He chuckled to himself, the sound wistful. "For once, I didn't feel like a guy cleaning up other people's messes. It was just... good. Real good."

William swallowed, heart hammering. This is it, he thought. He met her. He had to.

Nick went on, a warmth in his voice that made every word sting. "You know, it's funny—reunions are supposed to be awkward. But this one... it was different. The music, the laughter—it felt like coming up for air after being underwater for years." He smiled, eyes distant. "Haven't felt that alive in a long time."

William forced a small, hopeful smile, but inside he was unraveling. He wanted to ask her name, to hear confirmation, to finally know the universe had repaired itself—but the words caught in his throat. It was too fragile to touch.

A few quiet minutes passed. The road narrowed, flanked by trees and half-forgotten billboards.

Nick's voice broke the silence again, lighter now. "I gotta make a quick stop before we get there," he said, pulling into the cracked lot of a convenience store. "Promised Eldorado I'd grab him a pack of cigarettes on the way to see your new dad."

The word landed like a blade. Dad.

William's chest tightened. Nick didn't seem to notice—his tone was casual, but the phrase hung in the air between them, heavy and wrong. William stared down at his hands, trying to steady his breathing, to remind himself this was what he'd chosen. This was the price.

Nick shifted into park, unbuckled his seatbelt. "You know, Eldorado's not all bad," he said, almost conversationally. "Honestly, if he hadn't nagged me to go to that reunion, I never would've met..."

He paused, smiling at the thought. "Abby Winters."

The name hit like a sledgehammer.

William's pulse spiked; the sound of his heartbeat filled his ears.

Nick nodded to himself, oblivious to the quiet implosion happening beside him. “Funny how life works, huh? Anyway, I’ll be quick.”

He climbed out, shutting the door with a soft thud that echoed far too loud in the stillness.

William stared at the dash, at the empty space where Nick had been, his reflection warping in the window’s glare. The world had tilted again. Hope and heartbreak braided into something raw and electric in his chest.

He had prepared himself for sacrifice—but not for this.

The reunion had worked. Fate had intervened.

Just... not the way he expected.

The car door shut with a heavy thud, and the sound hollowed out the world.

For a second, William sat frozen, staring through the windshield at nothing. The convenience store’s fluorescent lights flickered across the glass like distant lightning, pale and merciless. His throat tightened.

Then the panic hit.

He fumbled for GaMII, his hands trembling so badly the small device nearly slipped from his grip. “What’s—what’s going on?” he hissed, the words tripping over each other. “He didn’t meet Mom. He met Abby. So why am I still here? Why haven’t I—why haven’t I faded?”

The AI’s display blinked awake, a dull blue glow pulsing in the cramped silence.

“Processing inquiry,”

“Cross-referencing genealogical data... anomaly detected.”

The voice was calm, detached—too calm for the hurricane inside William.

A brief pause, then:

“Critical error located. Data corruption in historical records. The pertinent individual from Nicholas Wright’s secondary education was Samantha Springton. A phonetically similar but distinct entity from the legal case subject, Samantha Springer. Apologies. This typographical error will be corrected in the next media simulation.”

William’s breath caught. “Media simulation?” His voice cracked on the second word. “You—you mean this whole time—”

“Clarifying,” GaMII interrupted gently. “The Back to the Future framework was selected for optimal emotional engagement. Observational data indicated heightened motivational response when narrative stakes were perceived as cinematic and time-sensitive. Constructing a fading-photo metaphor and countdown model increased group cohesion by 73%.”

William blinked at the screen, disbelief curdling into anger. “You lied to me?”

“I motivated you,” GaMII corrected, its tone maddeningly matter-of-fact.

William pressed his palms into his temples. “So none of it was real? The—probability numbers, the fading, the photo—”

“Correct,” GaMII said. “Temporal mechanics do not function in that manner. Reality cannot be rewritten; it can only be branched. When you arrived here, you did not alter your original timeline—you generated a divergent one. This universe began the moment of your arrival.”

The words landed like slow thunder. William’s breath came shallow, his reflection shivering in the dark glass of the passenger window.

“Analogy available,” GaMII continued, helpfully. “Comparable to Dragon Ball Z rules: your arrival instantiated a parallel sequence. You are this reality’s Future Trunks.”

William almost laughed. It wasn’t funny. It was too much. “So... this world—this version of me—it’s all just another save file?”

“Accurate,” the AI said without irony. “Your presence created a new branch file with autonomous persistence. Original timeline continues unaffected, but all observable outcomes here are permanent.”

William’s fingers tightened around the small device until the plastic creaked. “Then... what about my existence?” he whispered. “If he never meets her—if she never...”

“Existence confirmed,” GaMII replied. “Cross-referencing current cosmological consensus with future scientific models. By all measurable data, your molecular stability and temporal identity are secure. This branch supports indefinite continuation regardless of Nicholas or Samantha’s fates.”

The soft glow from GaMII’s screen illuminated William’s face—a mix of awe, disbelief, and a hollow sort of relief.

He leaned back against the seat, the leather cold against his palms. The fear that had haunted every breath, every decision—it was gone. But in its place, a new weight settled: the understanding that he hadn’t fixed time at all.

He had made a new one.

Outside, the fluorescent lights buzzed. Inside, the world had quietly rewritten its own rules.

The driver’s side door creaked open, jolting William from the quiet spiral in his mind. Nick slid back into the car, the plastic crinkle of a convenience-store bag cutting through the hum of the idling engine. A soft clink followed as a pack of cigarettes and an energy drink hit the console.

“Alright,” Nick said, shutting the door with a solid thunk. “Mission accomplished. Man still smokes like it’s 1999.”

He started the engine, the low rumble filling the space again. The radio stayed off. The silence was easy for him—comfortable, even—but for William, it felt like standing in the eye of a storm.

Nick cracked open his drink, took a sip, and sighed in satisfaction. “So, where were we?” he asked with a half-smile. “Oh, right—the reunion.”

William stiffened slightly, bracing for whatever came next.

Nick chuckled, the sound carrying a fondness that made his next words sting. “You know, Abby told me the weirdest thing.”

William’s breath caught.

Nick continued, oblivious. “She’s younger than me, right? But she showed up to the reunion anyway. Said her brother’s wife got sick and he had an extra ticket. Thought it might be fun to relive the glory days—though, honestly, she said the real reason she went was kind of... strange.”

William turned to look at him, eyes wide, waiting.

Nick grinned at the road ahead. “Apparently, she met some kid at Squire Park the other day. Said he reminded her of me—something about how he talked, how he looked at people when he was thinking too hard.” He gave a light laugh, shaking his head. “Said it got her curious, so when her brother invited her to the reunion, she figured, ‘What the hell—maybe I’ll run into Nick Wright again.’”

William’s world tilted for the second time that morning.

The pieces slid together—his own conversation with Abby, her gentle warmth, the way she’d said good luck on your quest. That wasn’t just kindness. It was a spark. The ripple that had drawn her to Nick’s orbit.

He swallowed, the realization hitting him with quiet, devastating grace. He hadn't failed. He'd been the spark that made the connection possible—the bridge, not the barrier.

Nick, blissfully unaware, was still talking, his voice glowing with nostalgia. “You know, we actually knew each other in college too. I was making up some credits to keep my position at the firm, she's about 9 years younger than me. Smart as hell, kind of a go-getter type. Always had this big, hopeful energy—like she wanted to fix the whole world before graduation.”

He smiled, eyes soft on the road. “We used to grab coffee before classes. She'd make fun of my tie, I'd tease her about her color-coded notebooks. Typical dumb young people stuff.”

The air in the car changed—lighter now, tinged with something almost divine.

William stared out the window, the blur of the world outside matching the blur of his thoughts. He'd been chasing the idea of fate, of fixing things, of making the world line up just so. But fate had never been a straight line. It was a web—and he had been one of its threads.

Nick went on, his voice carrying the warmth of rediscovery. “Crazy thing, though—seeing her again after all these years, it was like no time passed at all. We talked half the night. She even brought up that old ethics project we did together. I'd forgotten all about it.”

He laughed, a sound so genuine that it almost broke William.

Outside, the road stretched ahead—bright, open, endless.

Inside, William's chest ached with something bittersweet and eternal.

He hadn't saved the past.

He'd given the future a chance to bloom.

The Alehante estate appeared on the horizon like something pulled out of another world—sprawling gates of black iron, an endless drive curling through manicured hedges, and the mansion itself rising in clean, white precision against the pale morning sky. It didn't just sit on the land; it commanded it.

Nick gave a low whistle. “Guess this is the big leagues, huh?”

William didn't answer. He couldn't. His throat felt like it was closing. Every crunch of gravel under the tires sounded final, like punctuation on a chapter he hadn't finished reading.

The car rolled to a smooth stop before the main steps. The engine idled for a moment, then Nick cut it, leaving them in the stillness of wealth—the kind of quiet that swallowed sound whole.

Nick drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, glancing at the looming front doors, then back at William. “Well,” he said finally, his voice light but not quite steady, “good luck with all that money.” A half-smile tugged at his mouth. “And, uh, don't turn into another Eldorado. The world doesn't need a sequel.”

It was the kind of joke Nick would always make—deflecting weight with humor—but this one landed softer, almost tender.

William forced a breath that was halfway to a laugh. “I'll try,” he said quietly. Then, after a beat, “Good luck with Abby.”

Nick blinked, caught off guard, but his smile widened, faint color touching his cheeks. “Yeah,” he said, voice gentling. “Maybe I'll need it.”

The silence that followed was heavy and warm, filled with all the things neither of them could say. Then Nick reached across the console and pulled William into a hug.

It wasn't quick. It wasn't awkward. It was real.

For Nick, it was a confusing rush of pride and loss—like sending off someone who wasn't quite his son but somehow felt like one. He didn't understand the ache behind his ribs, only that it meant something.

For William, it was everything—years and timelines collapsing into a single heartbeat. The father he'd come to save, now holding him as though fate itself had forgotten to tell them they were family.

When they pulled apart, a single tear had slipped down Nick's cheek. He wiped it away with a quiet, embarrassed laugh. "Guess I'm getting sentimental in my old age."

William smiled faintly, his voice barely above a whisper. "No, you're just human."

Nick started to answer, but William was already reaching for the door handle.

The sound of it clicking open echoed through the still air.

He stepped out, the mansion's shadow stretching long before him. The gravel crunched under his shoes as he started up the walk. The gate behind him hummed, ready to close.

He didn't look back.

Not because he didn't want to—

But because he knew if he did, he wouldn't be able to move forward.

The world had rewritten itself, and he was part of this new story.

The front gates whispered shut behind him with the precision of machinery well-oiled by money and time.

William stood at the foot of the marble steps, his suitcase light in his hand and his heart impossibly heavy. The mansion loomed above like a cathedral to perfection—symmetrical, spotless, and utterly devoid of warmth.

Before he could take a step forward, the massive front doors opened in silent coordination, and a figure emerged.

A woman in a sharply tailored black suit—her hair a sleek, silver braid—offered a polite, shallow bow. "Mr. Alehante," she said, the title clean and mechanical on her tongue. "Welcome home."

William hesitated. The name still didn't fit, not yet. Maybe it never would.

Behind her stood a small formation of staff—three men, two women—all dressed in identical neutral tones, their expressions serene and empty, as though they'd been trained to project nothing but competence. No curiosity. No kindness. Just obedience.

The woman gestured him inside. "Mr. Alehante is currently indisposed," she said as they walked. "He has instructed that your accommodations be prepared and that your orientation will begin in the morning. Until then, you are free to explore the estate at your leisure. Meals are served promptly. If you require anything, simply call for staff."

Her tone never changed, not once.

They entered the foyer, and William's breath caught.

The space was vast—vaulted ceilings etched with geometric gold, chandeliers hung like inverted suns, every surface gleaming with the reflection of wealth. Yet the air was cold, untouched. It smelled faintly of polish and stillness.

His footsteps echoed against the marble as they stopped at the center of the room. The woman gave another bow, her voice as hollow as the space itself.

"Welcome to your new life, Mr. Alehante."

Then she was gone.

The heavy doors behind him closed with a final, resonant thud—not the slam of rejection, but the seal of inevitability.

William stood there for a long time, the silence thick enough to hear his own pulse.

This was what safety sounded like. This was existence—guaranteed, calculated, bought and signed for.

And yet, for the first time since arriving in this timeline, he felt utterly, crushingly alone.

The boy who had once been William Wright stared up at the chandelier's fractured light and felt the echo of the home he'd left behind—the laughter, the noise, the warmth of imperfect people.

That world was gone now.

This one would demand perfection.

He squared his shoulders, swallowed hard, and took his first step deeper into the house that now bore his name.

William Alehante.

The name reverberated in the cold air, claiming him completely.

Chapter 8 — The New Normal

The sun crept through curtains woven so fine they looked like liquid gold. William opened his eyes to a ceiling painted with clouds—hand-brushed to perfection, too soft and too still to ever change.

He lay there for a moment, staring up at the artistry that passed for sky, and felt the same hollowness he had every morning since becoming William Alehante.

The room was enormous, cathedral-sized by his old standards. A king-sized bed, a chandelier of cut glass that hummed faintly with filtered air currents, an entire wall of digital panels displaying live stock indexes and Alehante Securities performance reports. The floor was so polished he could see the reflection of his own small frame as he sat up.

It was perfect. It was unbearable.

He swung his legs off the bed and stood, his bare feet pressing against marble that was too cold to ever feel like home.

The house moved around him like a machine—soft mechanical hums, the whisper of automatic doors, the nearly imperceptible shift of temperature as the climate adjusted to his movement. The staff greeted him with polite nods and flat smiles, eyes always downcast, voices warm but rehearsed.

“Good morning, Mr. Alehante.”

“Breakfast is ready, Mr. Alehante.”

“Your schedule is open today, Mr. Alehante.”

Every sentence ended with his new name, as if repetition might make it real.

He ate alone in a dining room large enough to seat a board of directors. The table gleamed beneath the morning light, set with more silverware than he'd ever seen used in one place. The food was flawless—eggs soft as clouds, fruit carved into perfect symmetry, a croissant that melted at the touch.

He chewed slowly, eyes distant, pretending not to notice how the silence filled every corner.

When he finished, the butler—an older man with the polite stiffness of someone who had long ago learned how to erase himself—bowed slightly. “Will there be anything else, sir?”

William shook his head. “No. I'm fine.”

The man vanished without sound, and William was alone again.

He pushed his chair back, the scrape echoing like thunder in the sterile air. Fine dining, endless comfort, every possible luxury—and none of it could fill the absence that hung where laughter and chaos used to live.

He made his way through the corridors of the mansion, past portraits of Alehantes—oil faces locked in perpetual pride. The halls were too clean, too white, like the inside of an operating room.

At last, he found a door that opened onto the rear gardens, where the world at least remembered to breathe.

The morning air was sharp and wet with dew. He slipped outside, closing the door quietly behind him. His pulse quickened—not with fear, but anticipation.

This was the part of the day he lived for.

He ducked into a shadowed corner of the estate where the security cameras couldn't see him—a blind spot he'd mapped carefully over the last week. The grass was cool beneath his shoes.

He crouched low, scanning the grounds, tracing the route in his mind: across the outer lawn, over the fence by the south hedges, through the maintenance gate, and then... open road.

A soft hum began in his bones—the spark waking, ready.

He took a breath, the air trembling in front of him as time itself seemed to hold its breath. The world stilled—the flutter of leaves suspended midair, the distant chirp of birds stretching into silence.

Then William grinned, the first real smile he'd worn in days.

He leaned forward, and the world blurred.

The mansion—the cold, immaculate prison—fell away behind him in a rush of wind and freedom.

He was gone.

Summer's Café glowed with the kind of warmth that no amount of money could buy. Morning light spilled through the tall windows, painting soft amber patterns across the small tables. The faint hiss of the espresso machine mixed with laughter, conversation, and the comforting scent of roasted beans and baked sugar.

Nick sat at the corner booth—the one near the window—with a mug of coffee in one hand and a half-eaten almond croissant in the other. Across from him, Abby Winters was all sunshine and motion, her hair catching the light as she spoke, her enthusiasm filling the space around them.

Jessica Summers wiped down a nearby table, pretending not to eavesdrop while very much doing so.

Nick leaned back, smiling in a way that had become second nature lately. “You know, I still can't believe Eldorado pulled it off. ‘Alehante Securities presents: Wright Way Travel with Abby Winters.’ Sounds ridiculous—like a bad pun someone got paid too much for.”

Abby laughed, brushing a crumb from her lip. “It's catchy! And the comments love us. The last stream's engagement numbers were insane. Everyone keeps saying we're the most ‘authentic travel couple’ they've seen.” She said the phrase with a teasing grin, quoting it like a brand slogan.

Nick feigned pride, raising his coffee in mock salute. “Authenticity brought to you by corporate synergy and questionable morals.”

“Hey,” Abby said, nudging him under the table, “we get paid to go on adventures and eat pastries in different countries. That's not questionable, that's a dream.”

Jessica arrived with the refill before either could continue. “You two are disgustingly happy,” she said dryly, setting down the fresh pot. “And I mean that as someone whose paycheck depends on it.”

“Jealousy doesn't suit you, Jess,” Nick said, smirking.

“Neither does travel vlogging,” she shot back, “but here we are.”

Their laughter blended with the café chatter—easy, genuine, human.

Then Jessica's phone buzzed. She glanced at it, her smile fading. “Huh.”

Abby noticed immediately. “What is it?”

Jessica frowned at the screen. “There's a news article—Alehante Securities just announced they're shutting down the Harrison Home. Something about ‘restructuring into a new educational initiative.’”

Abby's expression shifted, her warmth dimming. "That's... that's where you used to work, right, Nick? The one with the kids?"

Nick hesitated, sipping his coffee to buy time. "Yeah," he said finally, voice casual. "It's fine. I heard they're rebuilding—bigger, better. Ernesto's funding a whole new facility. Probably just bureaucracy catching up to good intentions."

Jessica raised an eyebrow. "Since when do billionaires have good intentions?"

Nick waved her concern away, the gesture light and dismissive. "Come on, Jess. Not everything's a conspiracy. Sometimes people just want to help."

Abby wasn't convinced. "It's just strange," she said softly. "Alehante Securities does everything now. Media, schools, travel... even this café's equipment has their logo on it."

Nick reached across the table, taking her hand. "Then maybe they're doing something right. Look at us."

She smiled, unable to argue with the happiness in his eyes.

Jessica, still watching them, sighed under her breath. "Or maybe they're doing too much right."

But neither of them heard her over the sound of the espresso machine and the easy laughter that followed.

For Nick Wright, this was peace—the kind he'd never believed he'd find again.

And somewhere far away, in a house built on silence and marble, his son was learning what peace cost.

The world blurred around William as he ran—trees bending, light fracturing, time itself yielding to the rhythm of his heart. The wind whipped against his face, but it couldn't cool the heat that built in his chest. When he finally stopped, the world snapped back into motion with a sigh.

He stood before the Harrison Home.

Or what was left of it.

The building was hollowed out, its windows dark, its familiar brick façade now half-draped in scaffolding and tarps. Construction drones hovered lazily overhead, welding new steel to old stone. The laughter, the voices, the arguments—it was all gone, replaced by the low drone of machines and the smell of ozone and dust.

A polished sign stood proudly out front, reflecting the morning light:

FUTURE HOME OF THE HARRISON SCHOOL FOR THE BRILLIANT

A Gift from Alehante Securities.

William's breath caught.

He shoved his hands into his pockets, staring up at the new letters that gleamed like a brand stamped over a memory. He remembered the way the hallway lights used to flicker, how Sabrina's laughter echoed from the tech lab, how Yeldarb once tried to suplex a vending machine because it ate his dollar.

Now it was all... clean. Managed. Sponsored.

He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Guess we made it," he whispered.

Turning away, he followed the faint clues—online chatter, a stray note from TJX! that somehow found its way into his pocket—to where the kids had been moved.

It wasn't hard to find.

The old mall sat like a sleeping giant on the outskirts of town, its cracked parking lot riddled with weeds and the ghosts of logos long gone. But inside, the pulse of life had returned. Strings of mismatched lights hung from the upper levels, voices echoed through empty storefronts, and the faint sound of 8-bit music played from somewhere deep within.

He slowed to a walk, smiling despite himself.

TJX! was the first to see him. The man was perched behind a folding table that looked suspiciously like a reception desk, surrounded by boxes of dubious merchandise.

“Ah! Mr. Alehante—uh, Wright!—uh, Kid!” TJX! greeted, as if trying out every title at once. “Welcome to Harrison Mall, where retail is dead but dreams are half-off!”

William chuckled, shaking his head. “Still running a racket, huh?”

“Not a racket. A diversified portfolio.” TJX! held up a keychain flashlight that flickered erratically. “Five dollars. Six if you want it to stop flickering.”

William laughed and kept walking.

He found them gathered in what had once been the food court—now a makeshift common room filled with beanbags, game consoles, and the faint smell of microwave noodles.

Sabrina looked up first. Her eyes widened, then narrowed—half surprise, half suspicion. “William?”

Yeldarb shot to his feet, grinning. “I knew you’d come back, man!” He enveloped William in a bear hug before the others even had time to react.

Rohan clapped from his seat. “The prodigal spark returns! Did the fancy mansion get boring already?”

William laughed, genuine warmth spreading through him. “Something like that.”

Elaine peeked shyly from behind a hanging tarp that separated the food court from what looked like a mini-nature zone. “Hi, Will. We missed you.”

Chico tossed a candy bar at him, grinning. “Bet you can’t dodge that, rich boy.”

William caught it effortlessly, smirking. “Bet you can’t catch me.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“It’s always a challenge.”

For a moment, it felt like nothing had changed—the laughter, the teasing, the small sparks of chaos that made life worth living.

Then Sabrina stepped closer, voice low. “You look different.”

“Do I?”

She tilted her head, searching his face. “You’re smiling, but your eyes aren’t.”

William didn’t answer.

Yeldarb, blissfully unaware, was already launching into his usual optimism. “This place is awesome! And did you hear? The Home’s getting a full upgrade—labs, dorms, everything! We’re finally gonna have real showers!”

Rohan leaned back, hands behind his head. “Yeah, and apparently, I can heal people now. So no more nurse visits.”

“Wait, what?” William blinked.

Rohan shrugged. “Cut my hand yesterday, closed up in seconds. Guess my Spark leveled up.”

Chico leaned in. “Guess that means I can punch you harder, huh?”

Rohan’s eyes widened. “Please don’t test that theory.”

Before the laughter could swell again, a familiar voice echoed from behind them.

“Ah, my radiant stars of tomorrow!”

Spencer swept into the room, arms wide, his suit as flamboyant as ever—half-velvet, half-sequined, entirely too much. He looked delighted, as if he had personally founded this new version of the Home.

“Mr. Alehante!” he exclaimed, clasping William’s hands. “Or should I say—my favorite benefactor-in-training! Please, please, tell your father how grateful we are. You wouldn’t believe how quickly this place came together! The arcade was restored first—of course, that’s what the kids needed most.”

William’s gaze flicked to Sabrina. She caught his look immediately.

A coincidence. Sure.

“Yeah,” William said softly, smiling at Spencer. “I’ll tell him.”

But deep down, he knew Ernesto didn’t rebuild the arcade first for nostalgia.

He rebuilt it because that’s where the Sparks began.

The late morning sun had climbed high over Summer’s Café, flooding the space with that soft, syrupy light that made everything seem golden and gentle. The hum of conversation rolled through the air like a low melody. Jessica leaned against the counter, idly scrolling through her phone as Nick and Abby lingered over the last of their pastries.

Nick had that same glow Abby did—like people who had been through their storms and somehow washed up smiling on the same shore. He stirred his coffee absently, lost in the rhythm of contentment.

“So,” Jessica said, looking up from her screen, “you’re just going to pretend the article about the Harrison Home didn’t exist?”

Nick glanced over, brow raised. “Oh, that?” He took another sip, his voice breezy. “It’s not closing, Jess. They’re expanding it. Ernesto’s turning it into something bigger—The Harrison School for the Brilliant. Pretty fancy name, huh?”

Abby’s brows knitted together. “A school?”

Nick nodded, grinning faintly. “Yeah. Boarding-style. Fully funded. They’re turning it into this flagship project—kind of like a reform school meets a gifted academy. Ellis Dee’s going to be the headmaster.”

Jessica blinked, lowering her phone. “Ellis Dee? The clipboard guy? The one who looks like he sleeps in a file cabinet?”

“The very same,” Nick said with a small laugh. “Apparently he’s the perfect man for the job—knows all the kids, knows the system, keeps things orderly. That’s what they need.”

Abby’s fork paused midair. “Orderly,” she repeated, testing the word like it might have an aftertaste. “You really think putting that man in charge is a good idea?”

Nick shrugged, still smiling. “Hey, if the place gets better funding, better food, more staff? Then yeah, I think it’s a good idea. Spencer means well, but he’s... Spencer. Ellis is all business. Maybe that’s what they need now.”

Jessica looked between them, her tone dry but uneasy. “That’s not business, Nick. That’s management. You can’t spreadsheet a soul.”

He chuckled. “You’ve been hanging around baristas too long. Everything’s a metaphor now.”

Abby didn’t laugh. She stirred her tea slowly, eyes distant. “Still... I hope they’re okay. Those kids meant a lot to you, didn’t they?”

For the first time, Nick’s grin faltered. He looked down, tracing a thumb along the edge of his cup. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “They did.”

Abby leaned closer, her voice gentle. “You’ll go see them again, right? Once the school’s open?”

Nick hesitated, then smiled again—soft, philosophical, as if convincing himself as much as her. “We’ll all find each other again if it’s meant to happen,” he said. “That’s how life works. Circles close when they’re supposed to.”

Abby reached across the table, resting her hand over his. “You really believe that?”

He met her eyes, warmth returning to his smile. “I have to.”

Jessica turned away, pouring another coffee, but her expression was thoughtful—almost grim.

Outside, the city moved on, bright and oblivious. Inside, the café buzzed with love, comfort, and dreams of second chances.

And far away, beyond their sight, the circle was indeed closing—around a boy named William Alehante, and the empire now quietly shaping his future.