

VOLUME ONE

LIES OF CONSENT

Investigation // Revelation

RAUEL CRESPO

The door shut
with professional force.



Hospitals, like
corporations, had
a way of getting rid
of people who were
too curious.



It wasn't
supposed to
look like this.





*In for four.
Hold for four.
Out for four.
It was the only
thing she could
control.*



He's alive.

An hour ago.

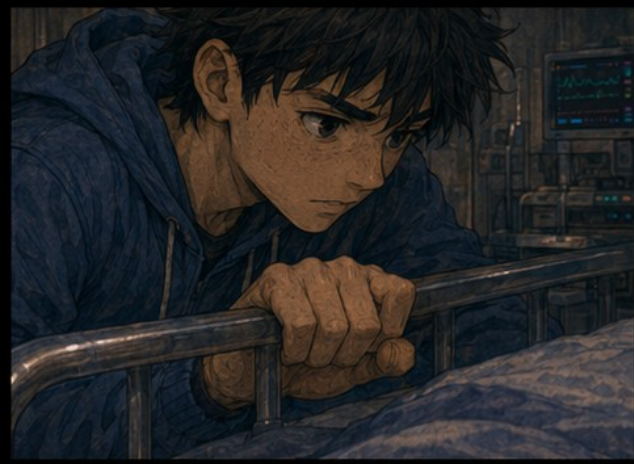
Patient Rooms
301-308 →
Nurses Station →
← Exit

Winona had practically shoved her out the door of Summers Brew to check on Chase.

She expected to sit alone with the hum of the monitors.

Instead she found the room occupied.







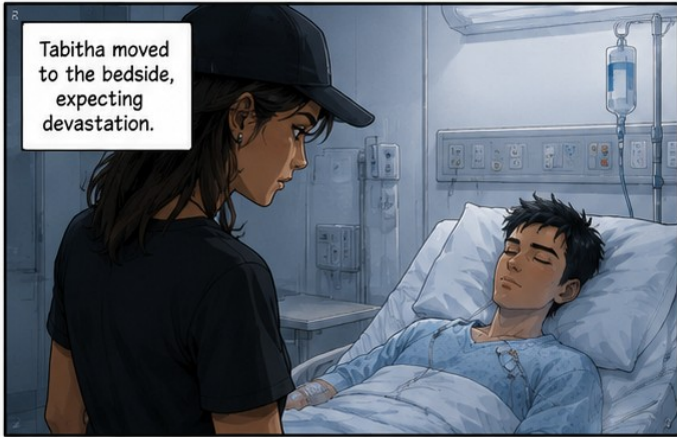
They looked less like kids who'd visited a dying teacher, and more like little priests finishing a ritual.



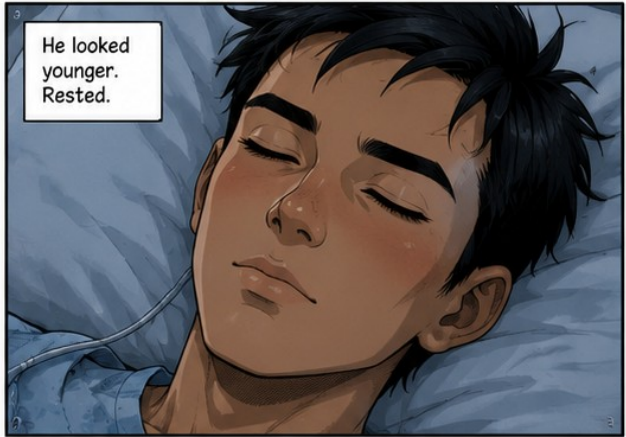
The room was aggressively sterile – a stark contrast to whatever the kids had left behind.



Tabitha moved to the bedside, expecting devastation.



He looked younger. Rested.

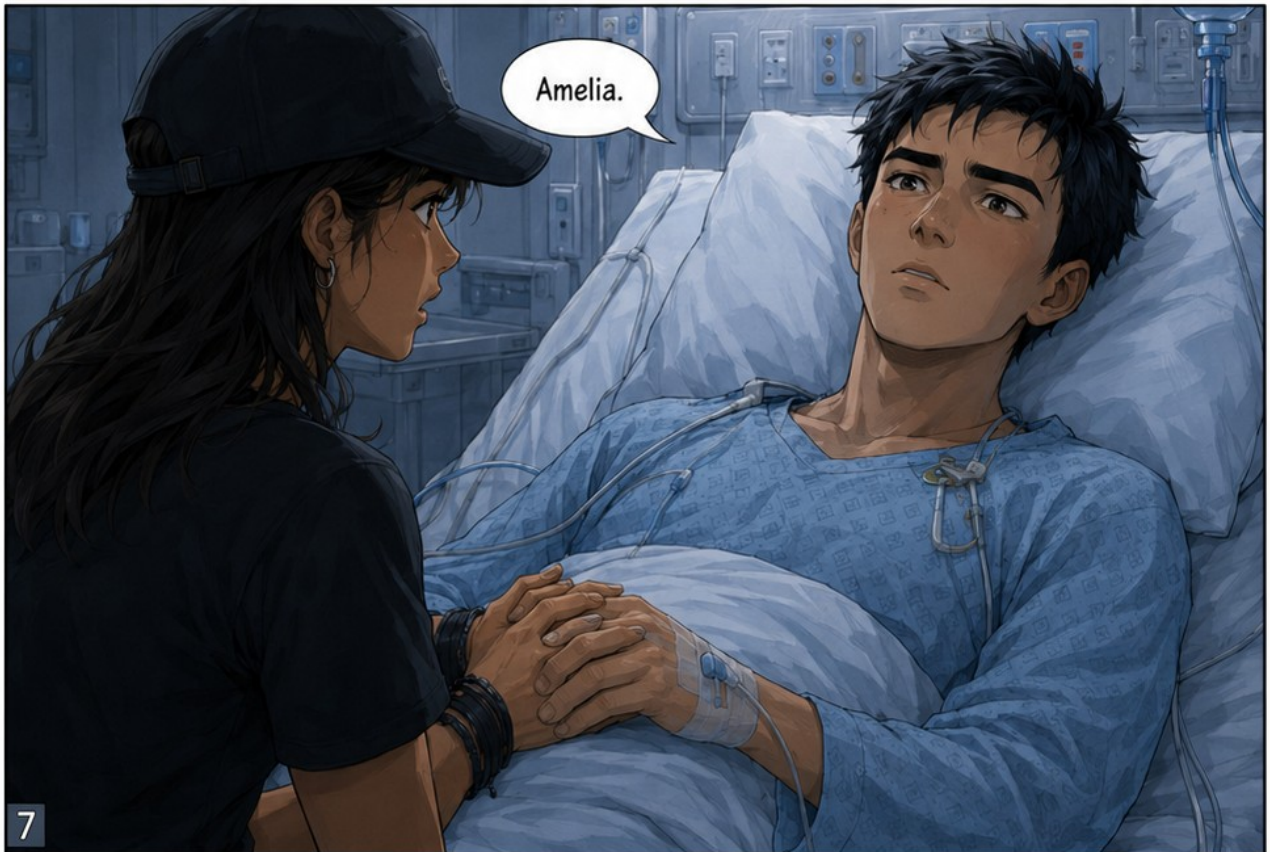


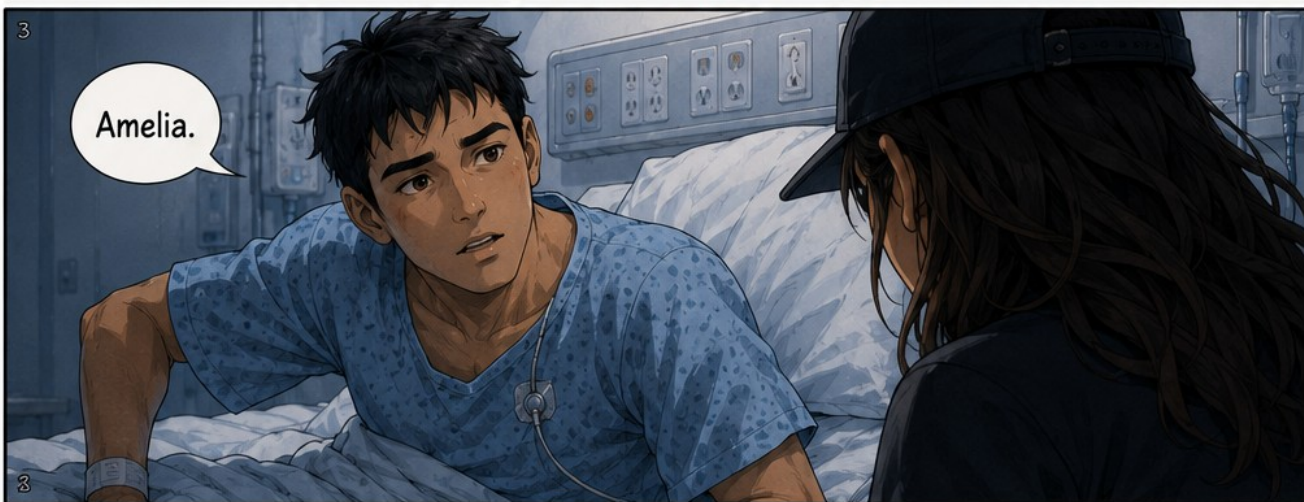
There should have been a ring there.



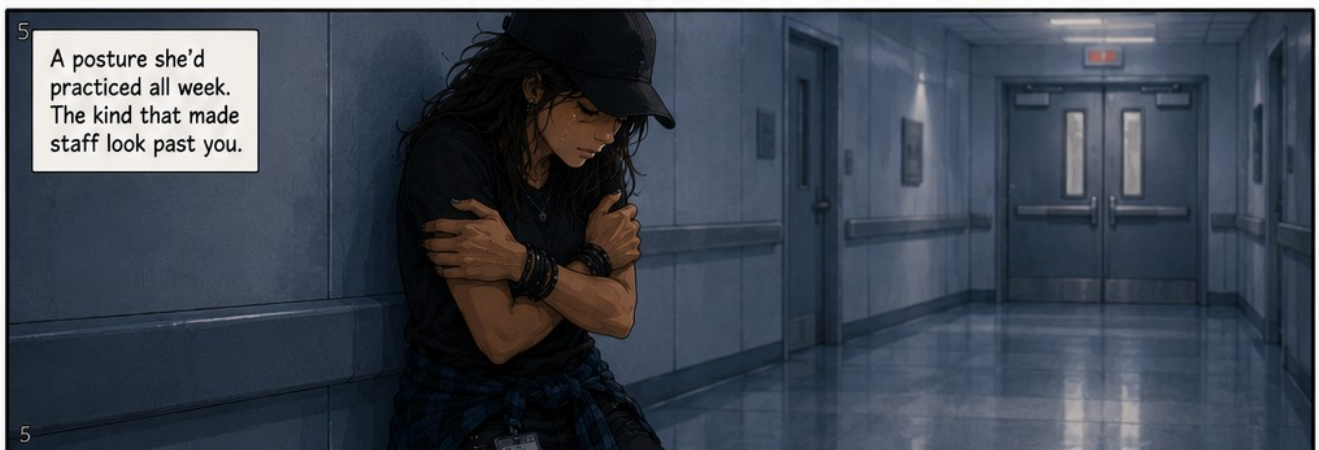
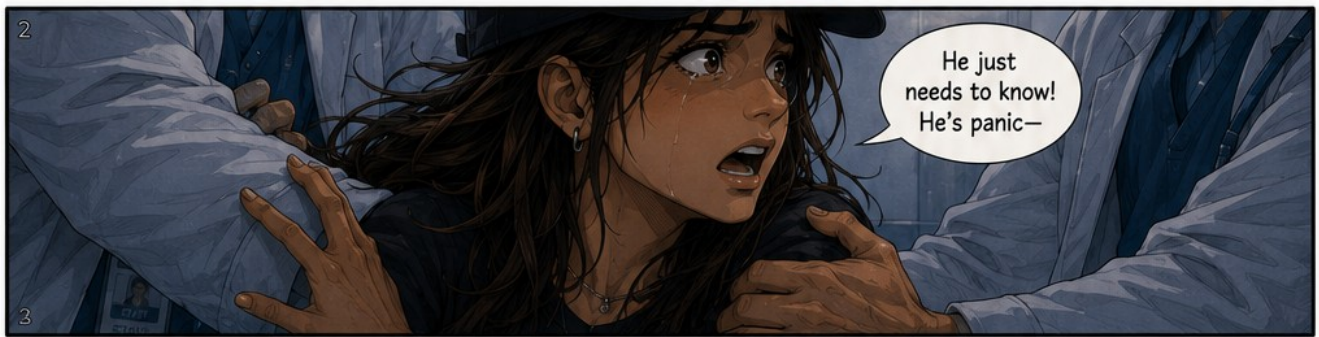
I'm here, Chase.
I'm right here.















Thirty miles away, the air was conditioned to a perfect, humidity-controlled seventy degrees.



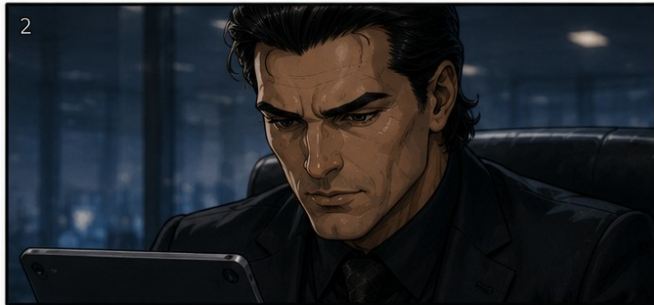
There was no screaming here. No thrashing. Only the hum of servers and the quiet, frantic typing of content moderators.



Grief, in this building, was not an emotion. It was a metric. A dip in engagement that required a patch.



The algorithm abhors a vacuum, Grey. We lose two beloved influencers and the audience doesn't mourn. They drift.



3

GERARD FAULKNER
RAMEN RIKER

Loud. Argumentative. Drew the same audience Chase did.

FOLLOWERS	3.8M	8.2%
AVG. AGE	28	7:48

APPROVED

4

BRANDY SUNDERSON
DIGISPYCE

Sold wellness brownies that were boxed mix with a markup. The chat knew. She knew they knew. They bought anyway.

FOLLOWERS	3.9M	2.9M
ENGAGEMENT	5.2%	5.7%
AVG. VIEW TIME	6:11	:11

APPROVED





Amelia's name dragged the lake back into the room.

He hated the mistake. Hated the lake as much as he hated the image of Chase in that hospital bed.



There. The channels remain active. The revenue streams stabilize. Now we can focus on the *real* work.



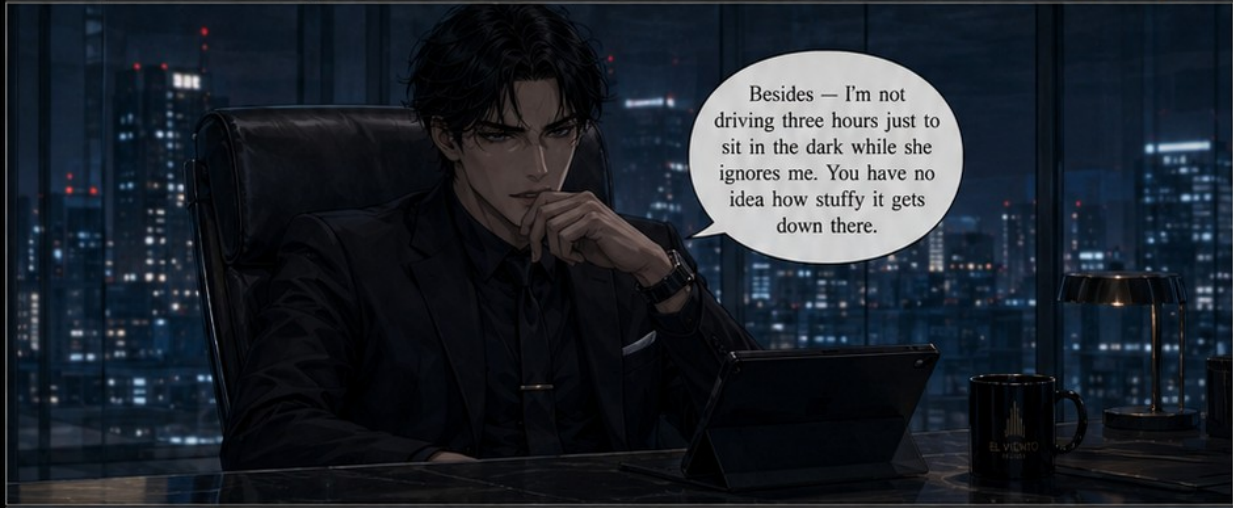
Verifying the status of Eden?



The flower's safe in Eden. It's only been six days.

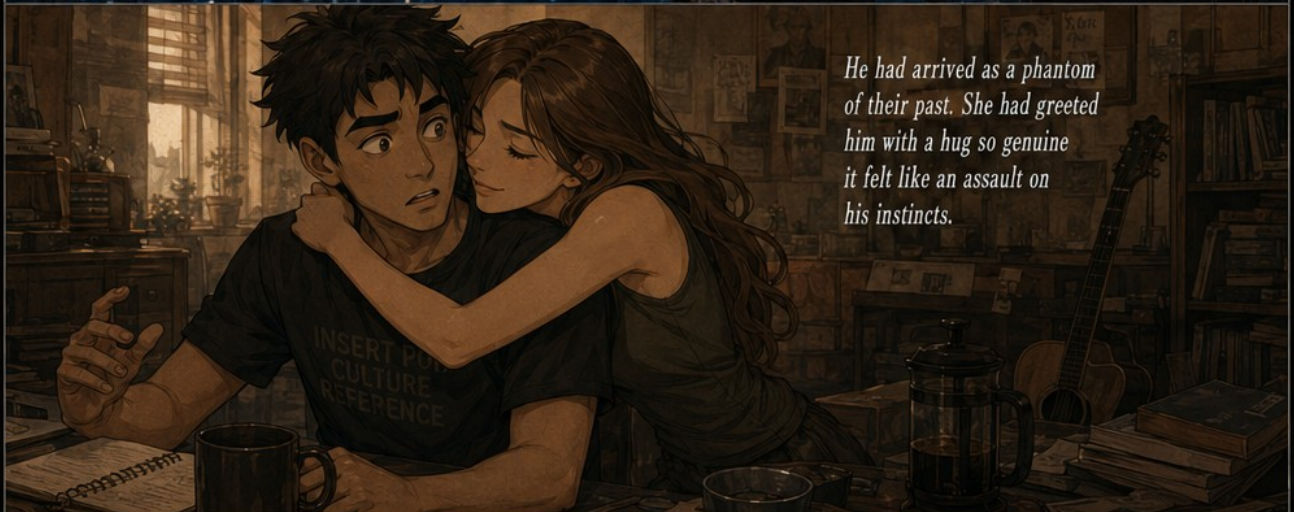


We left enough food and water for two weeks.



Besides — I'm not driving three hours just to sit in the dark while she ignores me. You have no idea how stuffy it gets down there.









Olivia sent an update. The suit's delayed a few days — calibration issues. Actually, better this way. Gives us the window we need for Hawaii logistics. Tactical advantage.

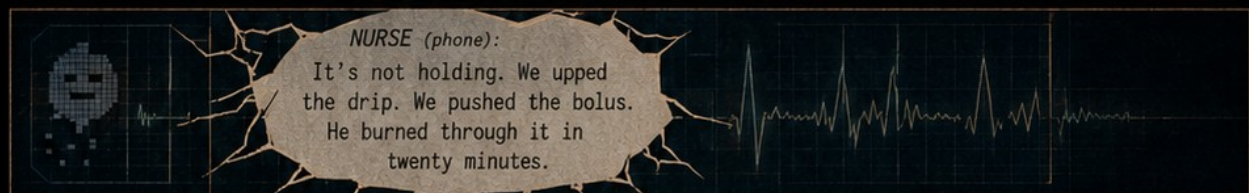


Pretty. Good.





Report.

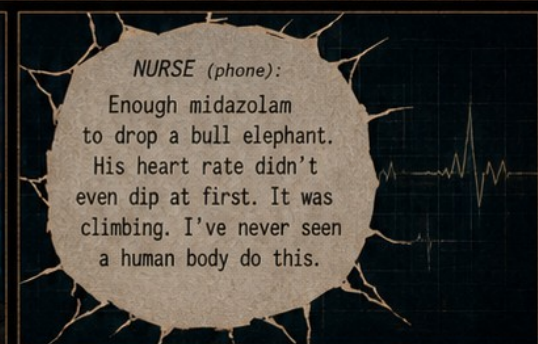


NURSE (phone):

It's not holding. We upped the drip. We pushed the bolus. He burned through it in twenty minutes.



Clarify. How much, and what did you use?

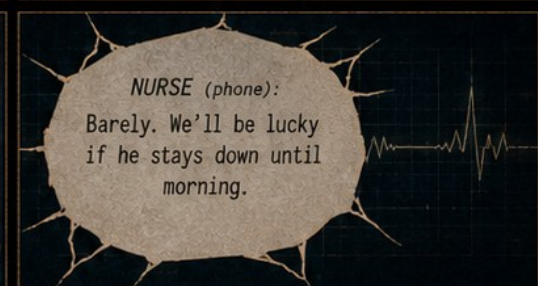


NURSE (phone):

Enough midazolam to drop a bull elephant. His heart rate didn't even dip at first. It was climbing. I've never seen a human body do this.



Is he down?



NURSE (phone):

Barely. We'll be lucky if he stays down until morning.



The dosage described would have put his own dense, cold-blooded frame in a coma for a week.

Chase shouldn't be thrashing. He should be dead.



We have a problem.



Contract dispute? Give them an extra five percent.




Chase is waking up.




He's nothing like Alfonso. Nothing like Shen. Those two — our family. We're evolved. Chase is still human. He *has* to be.




He's metabolizing the sedative. He'll be fully conscious within twenty-four hours. Possibly sooner. They can't keep him down *without* killing him.




Then we don't buy time. We change the feed before the chat runs away with it. I moderate the room, Grey.




I need to be at his bedside before he opens his eyes again. He's going to be completely broken. He needs a friend right now. Not a medical team.



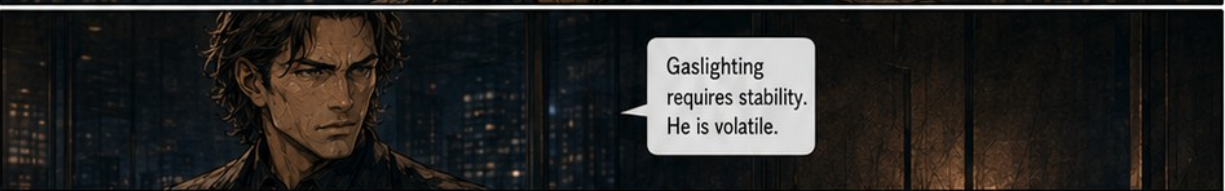
And when do you plan on letting him know the truth?




When it's safe. Once the suit's calibrated and Amelia's out of Eden, I'll tell him enough. Maybe all of it. Maybe we laugh about it in Hawaii someday.



But until she's out of that lake, he needs the fire. An ending. People survive endings. They destroy themselves over loopholes.



Gaslighting requires stability. He is volatile.



He's confused. And confusion looks for an anchor. I will be that anchor.

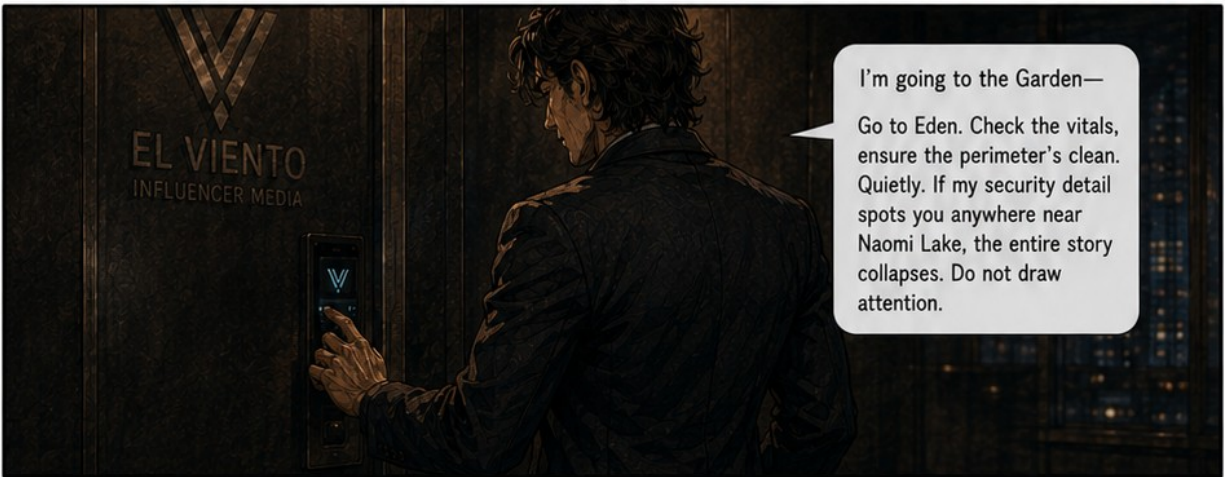
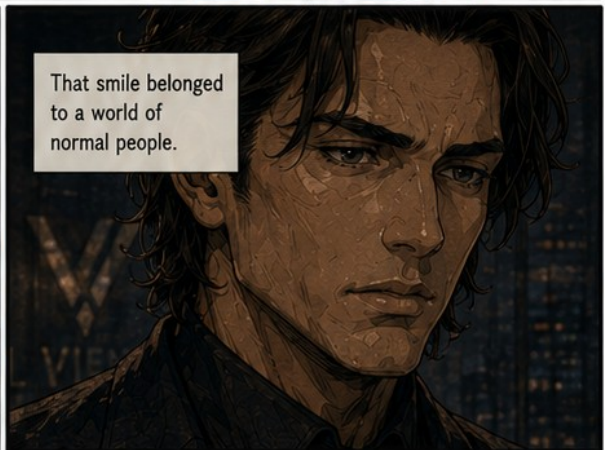
A random Tuesday afternoon clawed its way to the surface.



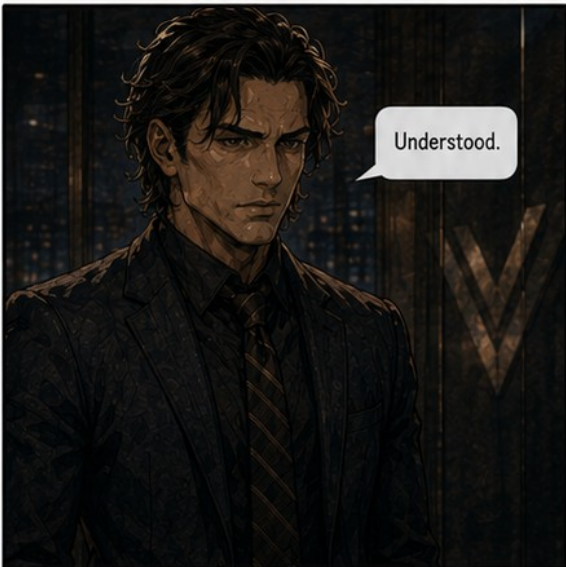
Direct result of him using her memory space to install a game. She hadn't yelled. She'd just given Elvis a mildly annoyed, fond smile.



That smile belonged to a world of normal people.

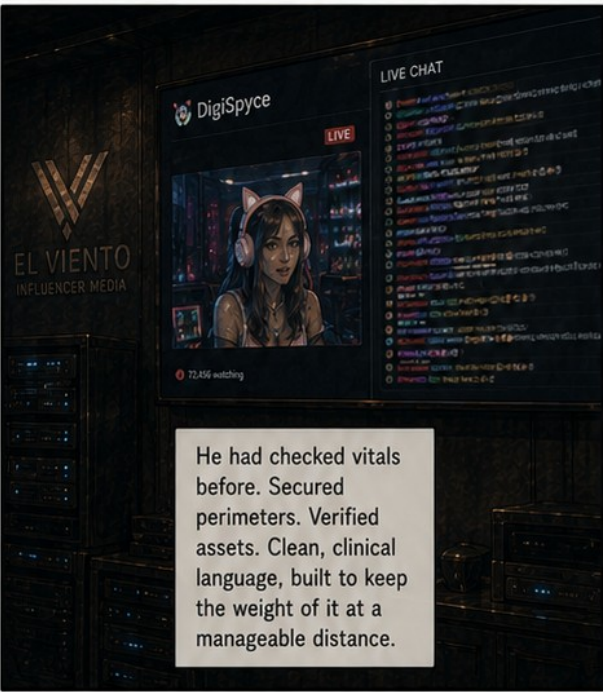


I'm going to the Garden—
Go to Eden. Check the vitals, ensure the perimeter's clean. Quietly. If my security detail spots you anywhere near Naomi Lake, the entire story collapses. Do not draw attention.

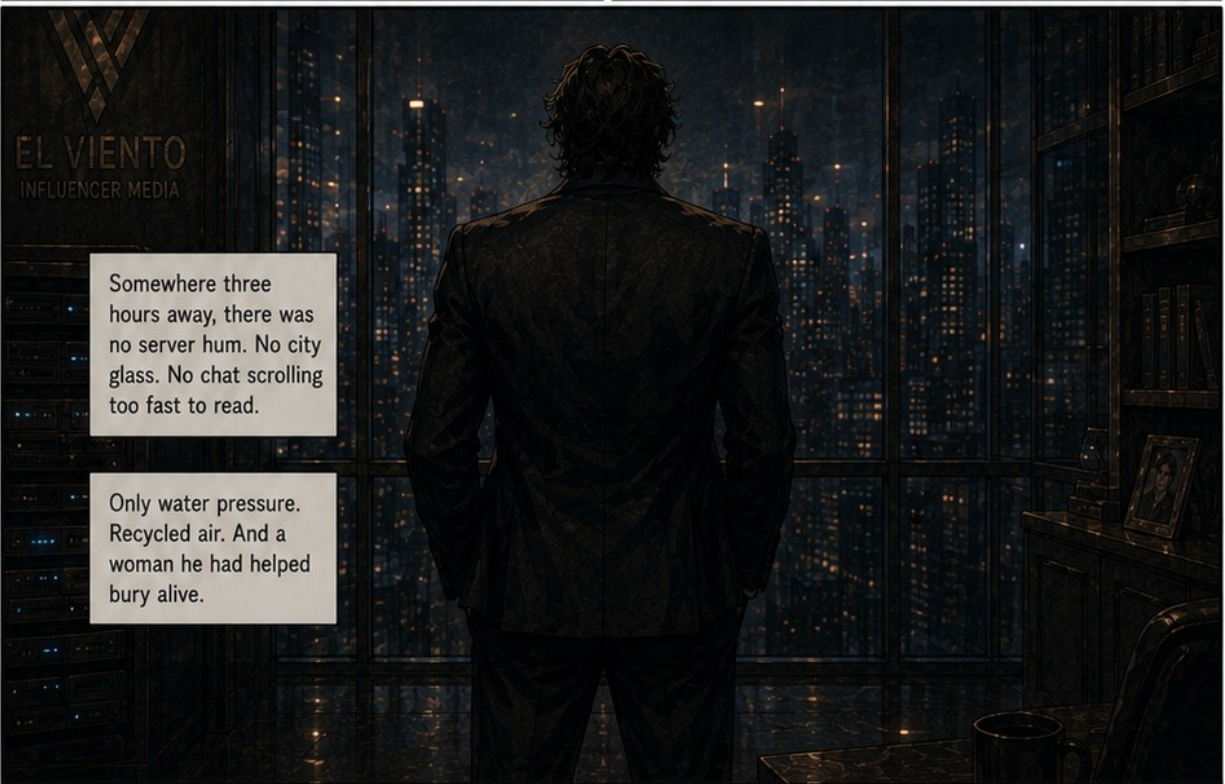


Understood.





He had checked vitals before. Secured perimeters. Verified assets. Clean, clinical language, built to keep the weight of it at a manageable distance.



Somewhere three hours away, there was no server hum. No city glass. No chat scrolling too fast to read.

Only water pressure. Recycled air. And a woman he had helped bury alive.

A DULL, WAVY
MORNING LIGHT
FILTERED THROUGH
THE REINFORCED
GLASS OVERHEAD.

ABOVE THE THICK
PANES, NAOMI LAKE
SHIFTED IN SHADES
OF BRUISED, MURKY
GREY.

A WEEK HAD PASSED,
ROUGHLY. COUNTING
HOURS ENDED WHEN
THE TABLET DIED,
LEAVING ONLY THE
LIGHT TO TRACK.

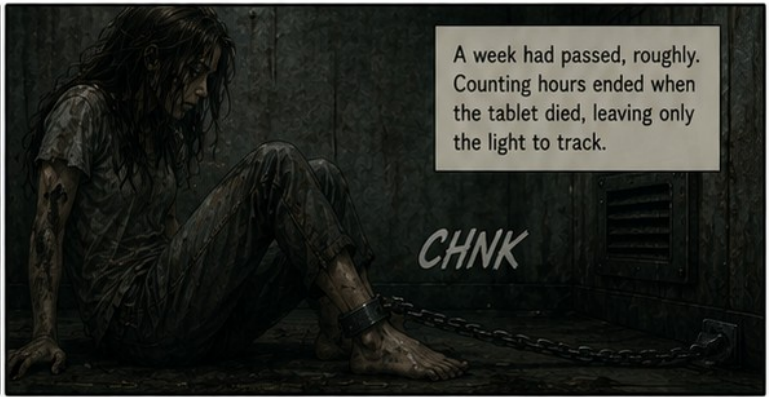
CHNK



A dull, wavy morning light filtered through the reinforced glass overhead.



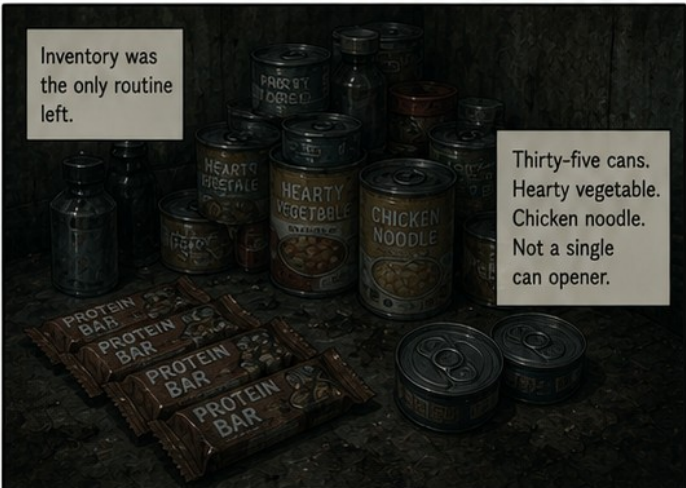
Above the thick panes, Naomi Lake shifted in shades of bruised, murky grey.



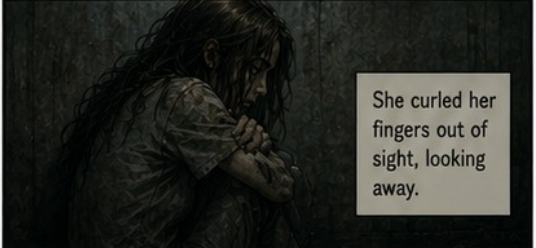
A week had passed, roughly. Counting hours ended when the tablet died, leaving only the light to track.



Inventory was the only routine left.



Thirty-five cans. Hearty vegetable. Chicken noodle. Not a single can opener.



She curled her fingers out of sight, looking away.

She had started with twenty-four.



Day three. Desperate to feel human, she'd used an entire bottle to wash her face and armpits.



The memory now made her stomach twist with regret. Still dirty. Now thirsty, too.



She'd made the switch two days ago. The bucket alone would overflow before anyone returned.



If anyone returned.



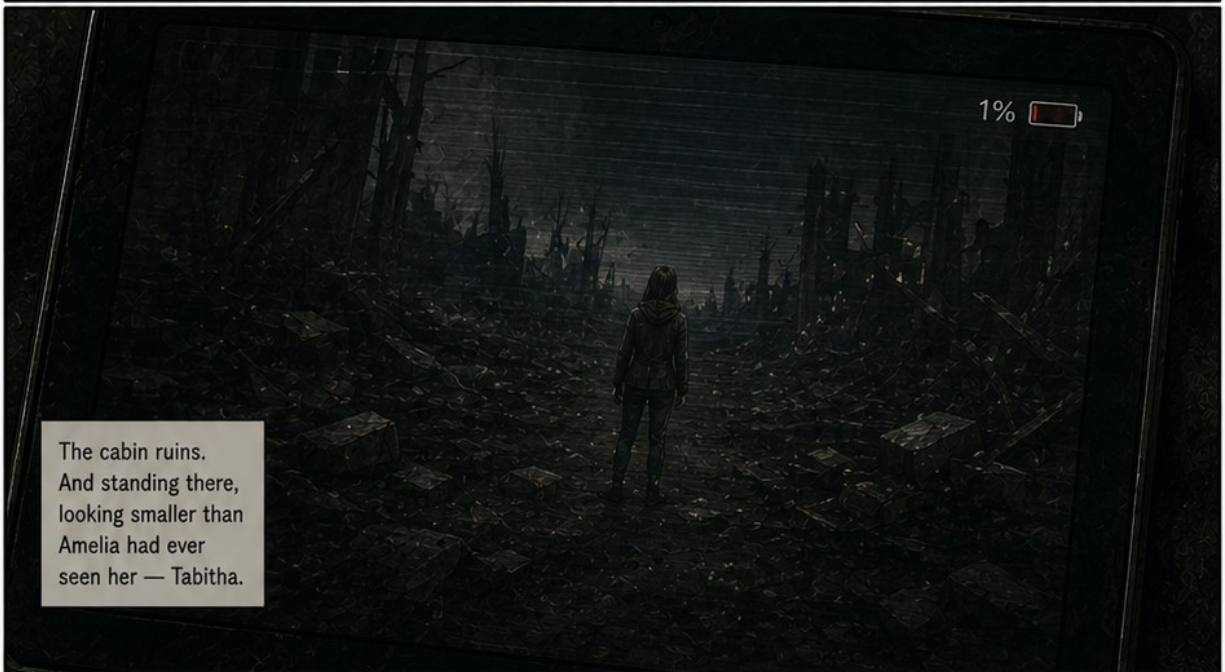
Sleek.
Expensive.
Useless slate
tiles.



It had died
yesterday.
Frozen at one
percent, on a
video Grey had
uploaded for
her comfort.



The cabin ruins.
And standing there,
looking smaller than
Amelia had ever
seen her — Tabitha.



Last night that screen was the only light in the room.



Then black.



She had pressed
the dead plastic
against her ribs and
cried herself to sleep.



Listening to
the word promise
echo in the dark
until it stopped
sounding like a
word at all.



The room was
rotting around her.
The carpet had
been plush and red
when she arrived.



Eden, Vincenzo had
called it. A garden
for you to bloom.

This wasn't a garden.
It was a compost bin.





THEY AREN'T
COMING BACK.

YOU WILL NEVER HAVE
REAL FRIENDS, AMELIA.
EVERYONE JUST WANTS
TO USE YOU.

Vincenzo had used her until the project got too difficult. Now he was going to leave her here until the smell stopped.

NO.

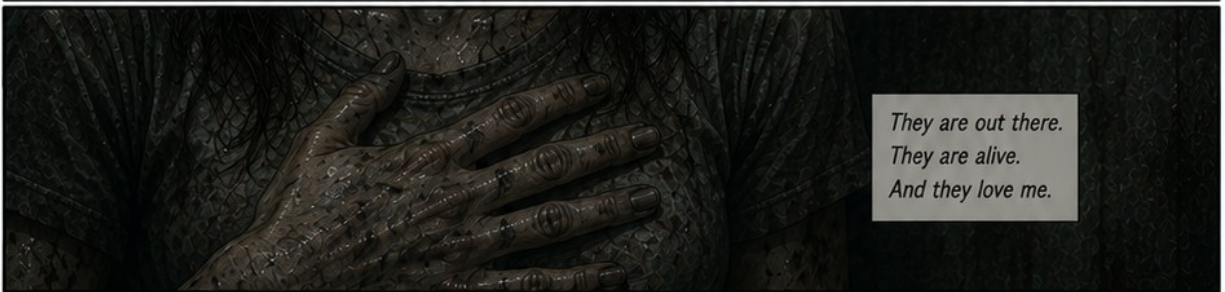
Chase. His bluntness in that first seminar. The way he'd put her in her place — then pulled her aside to make sure she wasn't actually hurt.



And Tabitha — who stood by smoking ruins, making promises to ash, because she refused to walk away.



They were out there. Alive. And they loved her. Even if they thought she was dead, that love remained. A tether.



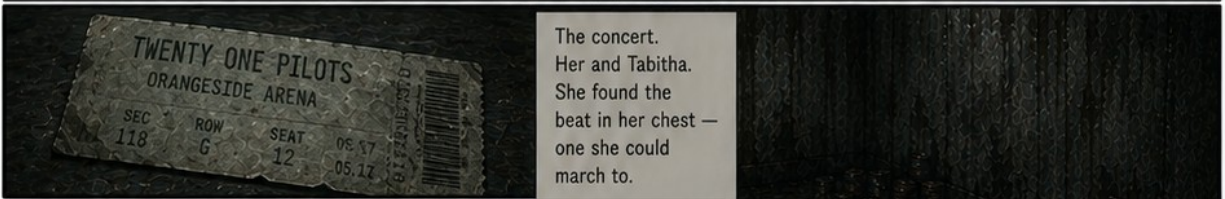
*They are out there.
They are alive.
And they love me.*



*I am not
a flower.*



It was the only ritual she had.



The concert.
Her and Tabitha.
She found the beat in her chest —
one she could march to.



Stopping meant waiting to die.
Moving meant something else.
She hadn't named it yet.
She just kept walking.



She kept walking until the door opened.



Grey drove north,
chased by a guilt
he couldn't shake.



Asset viability
check. Structural
integrity of the
containment unit.
Supply chain
verification.



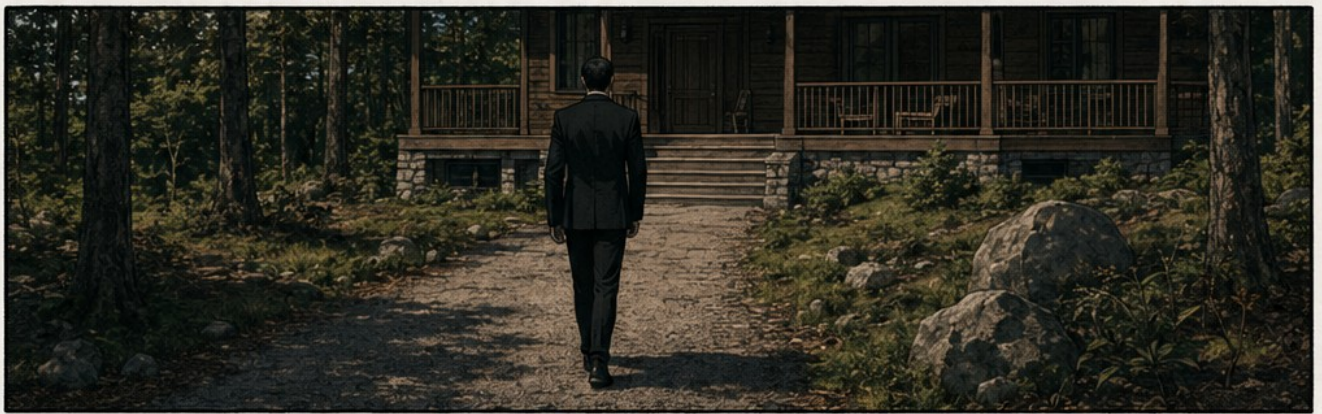
The silence in
the cabin refused
to accept the
checklist.



You're going
because she's
alone in the dark.
And you know what
that feels like.



He arrived just after noon.
In one week, the entire
property had been
thoroughly sterilized.



The luxury had been
completely gutted.
Sturdy, forgettable
furniture replaced
the imported leather.





*They must've
laughed in this room.*



*Chase probably spilled
red wine on that rug.
Amelia tried to clean it
with club soda and
made it worse.*





Stale, heavy air
drifted out of
the opening.



The unmistakable hallmarks of Viento Construction. Alfonso's architectural signature.



Down here, it felt less like a hallway and more like the approach to a tomb.



He paused to center himself. Observation only. No engagement. No empathy.



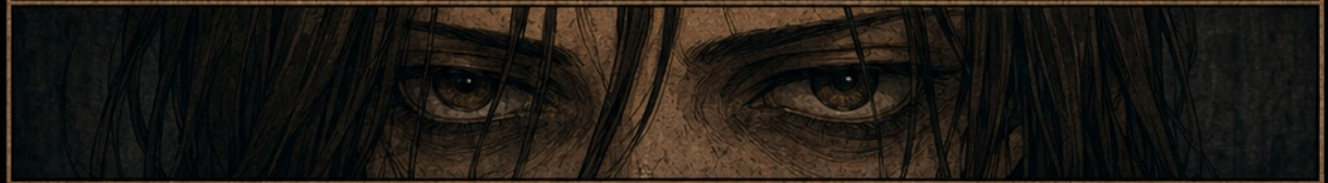
The stench hit first. Ammonia and human waste, fermenting inside a sealed concrete box.



She had been
pacing a circle.



An oversized sweater
hung loose off a frame
that had lost its fullness
in just a week.



What do
you want?





Freshman year.
Elvis Santiago, fully
prepared for a solitary
Godzilla marathon.



Come on, Elvis.
It's a psychology
experiment for my
thesis. I need one
more participant
or I fail. Please?
I'll owe you.



He'd failed to see
the logic in it.
He went anyway.
Just because
she asked.

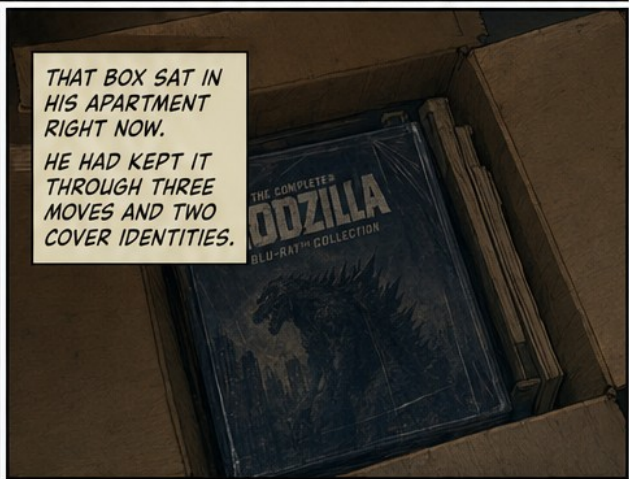
A WEEK LATER.

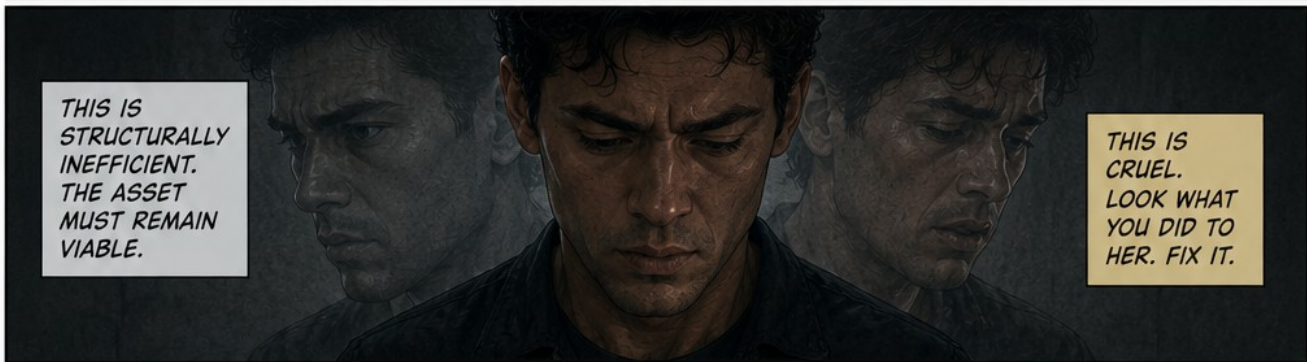


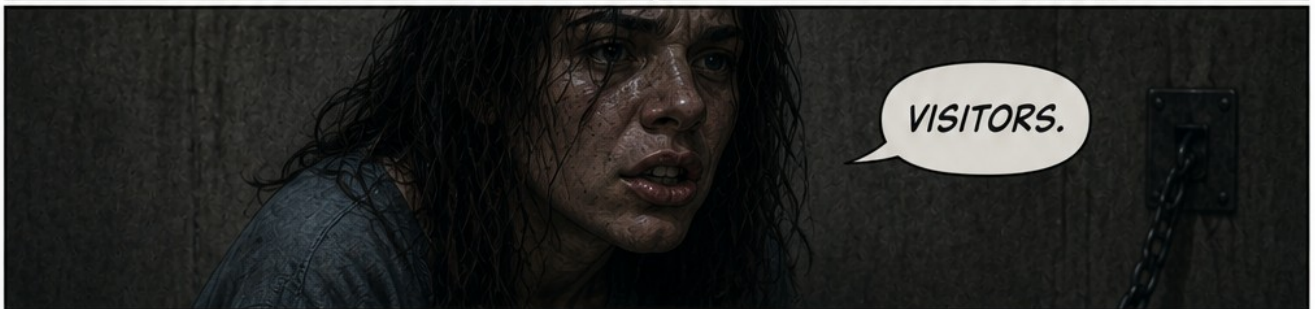
IT HADN'T SIMPLY BEEN GENEROUS. IT HAD BEEN PRECISE. SHE HAD ACTUALLY SEEN HIM.

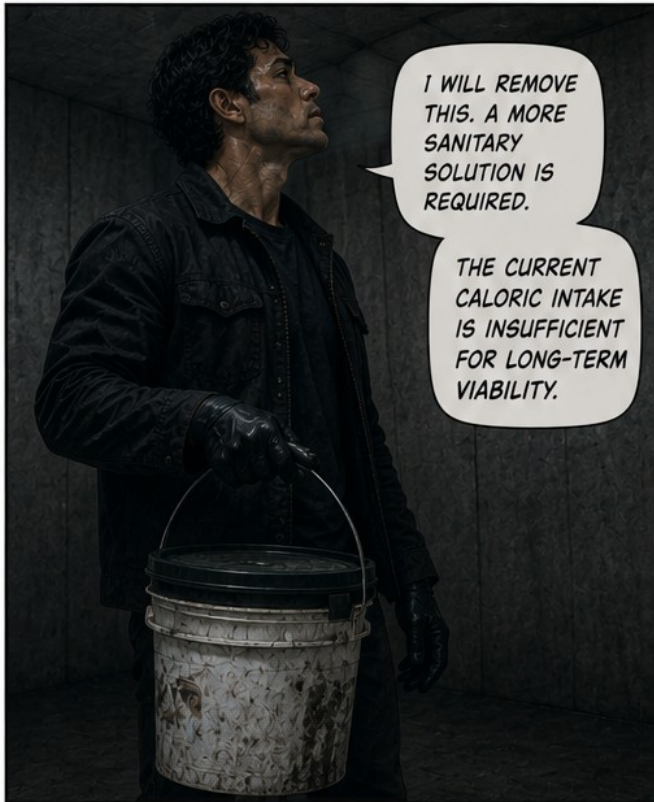


THAT BOX SAT IN HIS APARTMENT RIGHT NOW. HE HAD KEPT IT THROUGH THREE MOVES AND TWO COVER IDENTITIES.









I WILL REMOVE THIS. A MORE SANITARY SOLUTION IS REQUIRED.

THE CURRENT CALORIC INTAKE IS INSUFFICIENT FOR LONG-TERM VIABILITY.



WHY?
WHY DO YOU CARE?

DID VINCENZO TELL YOU TO FATTEN ME UP?

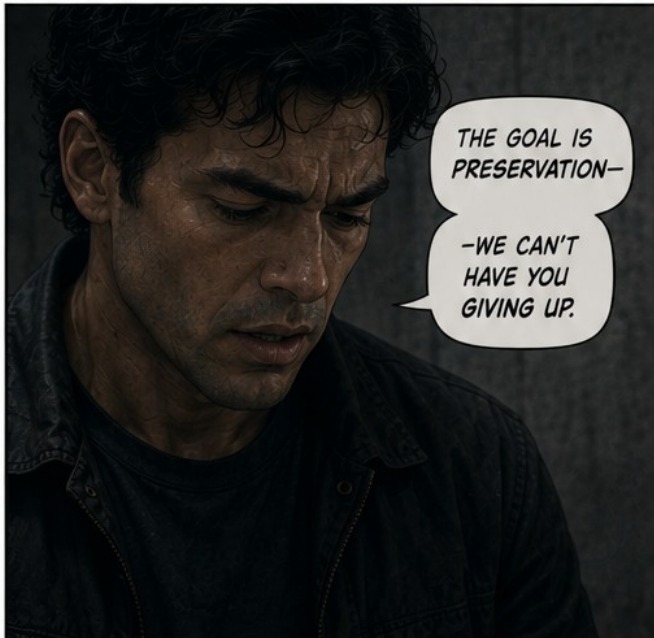


THE CARPET IS RUINED. IT NEEDS TO BE RIPPED UP.

REPLACED WITH RUBBER MATS. SOMETHING THAT CAN BE SANITIZED.



WHY?



THE GOAL IS PRESERVATION—

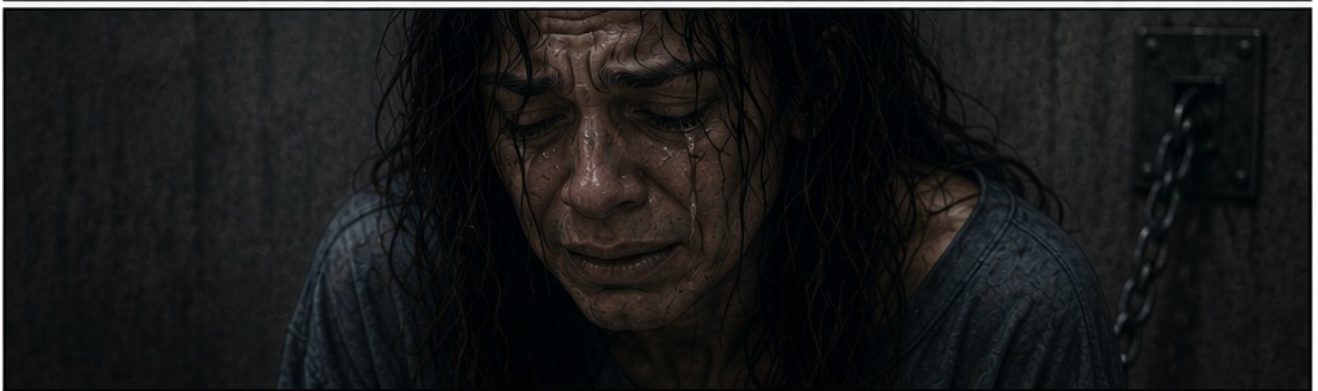
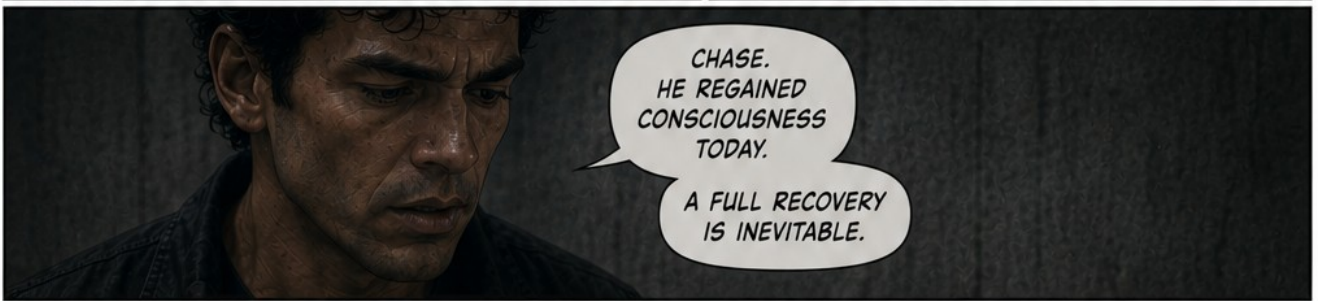
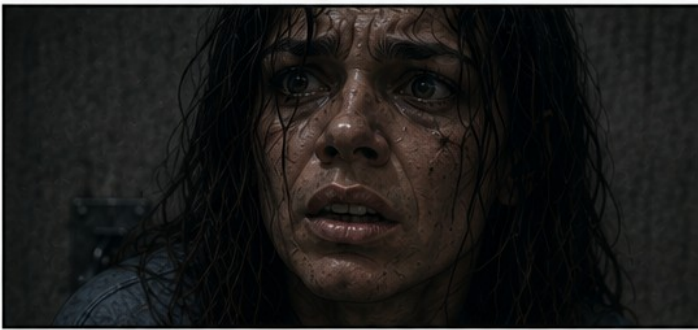
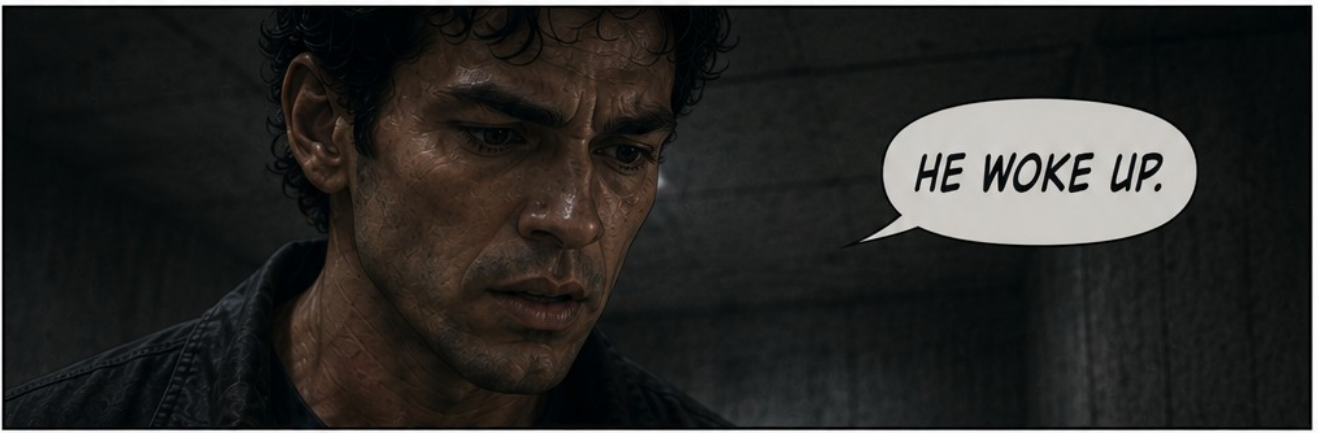
—WE CAN'T HAVE YOU GIVING UP.



I HAVEN'T GIVEN UP.

I'M STILL HERE.

I'M WAITING FOR CHASE.





HE'S AWAKE.
HE'S ALIVE.
I KNEW IT.
I KNEW HE
WOULDN'T
LEAVE ME.



THANK
YOU.



I WILL RETURN.
WITH WATER,
PROPER FOOD,
AND WASTE
DISPOSAL.



THUD-CLICK



HE'S AWAKE.
HE'S AWAKE,
AND HE'S
COMING.



NO LONGER
THE AIMLESS PATROL
OF A CAGED ANIMAL.

EVERY STEP
BECAME A
COUNTDOWN.

