

CLEF

THE ETHICAL HACKER

LEVEL 5

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CLEA

The Ethical Hacker

Book 0

Level 5

The Red Wizard
Illustrations by Misthalas

Clea: The Ethical Hacker

Book Zero: Level 5

Written by The Red Wizard

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Chapter 1

Friday



On Friday afternoons, the school seemed to change personality with almost comic speed. All day long, the hallways had been packed with voices, backpacks banging against lockers, and conversations crossing over one another between classes. But only a few minutes after the final bell, the building began to empty at a pace that felt almost impossible.

A few groups of students still lingered near the main entrance, talking about their plans for the night. Some were going to the movies. Others were discussing a birthday party. A few were simply planning to spend the afternoon gaming at someone's house. The whole place had that lightness that always appeared at the end of the week, when everyone felt they could finally switch off for a couple of days.

"So, eight o'clock?" Marcos asked, checking something on his phone. "The movie starts at nine thirty."

"Perfect," Lara said. "That gives us time to grab something to eat first."

Marcos looked up and turned to Clea.

"You coming?"

Clea adjusted the strap of her backpack on her shoulder and shook her head with a calm smile.

"I can't."

"Busy again?"

"Something like that."

It wasn't exactly a lie, though it wasn't an explanation she could give easily either. If she tried to tell them what she really did on some Friday afternoons, they would probably think she was exaggerating... or making the whole thing up.

As the group crossed the street, still debating which movie to see, Clea started home at an easy pace. Her neighborhood wasn't far from school, and the walk usually helped her clear her head after class.

Usually.

She had barely gone a few yards when she felt her phone vibrate in the pocket of her hoodie.

She pulled it out as she walked, expecting some unimportant message.

Instead, a notification from BitGuard's encrypted channel appeared on the screen.

BitGuard was the group of ethical hackers Clea worked with whenever something crossed the line from normal trouble into the Digital Realm.

It wasn't a chat for memes, homework, or weekend plans. If BitGuard posted there, it meant something needed immediate attention.

Clea frowned slightly and opened the chat.

Several new messages were waiting.

Kernel: Anomaly detected in European satellite network.

Lynx: I'm seeing strange traffic. Doesn't match any known malware.

Ghost Vector: Confirmed. Expansion pattern isn't human.

Patch: Are we sure? Because that sounds bad.

Clea slowed as she read.

The group was used to investigating viruses, intrusions, and dangerous programs, but there was something different in the tone of the conversation. This didn't feel like a simple cleanup operation.

A new message appeared on the screen.

Kernel: Provisional classification... Level 5.

Clea stopped in the middle of the sidewalk.

For a moment, all she could do was stare at her phone, as if she needed to make sure she had read it correctly.

The group used several levels to classify digital incidents, from minor viruses to coordinated attacks. Level 5 was the highest.

And it was almost never used.

The last time Kernel had applied that classification, they had been forced to abandon a system in less than ten minutes.

Her phone vibrated again.

Kernel: Immediate meeting.

Kernel: We go in fifteen minutes.

Clea looked up.

The street was still full of people walking without hurry, completely unaware of what was happening. A bus rolled past her, a child ran across the crosswalk, and on a café terrace, someone was complaining about the traffic.

Everything looked perfectly normal.

But if Kernel was right, somewhere across the Digital Realm, something was happening on a scale far beyond anything those people could imagine.

Clea slipped her phone back into her pocket and started walking again, faster this time.

The movie would have to wait.

Again.

In less than fifteen minutes, BitGuard was going to try to infiltrate a network flagged under a Level 5 alert.

And according to the initial scans, this was unlike anything they had ever seen before.



Chapter 2

BitGuard



Clea got home in less than five minutes.

Her mother still hadn't returned from work, and thanks to a rare combination of schedules, neither her father nor her siblings were home either. The house was silent. She dropped her backpack onto a chair in the living room without slowing down and went straight to her bedroom, where her computer took up most of the desk, surrounded by cables, external drives, and a small modified router she had built herself months earlier.

She turned on the monitor and sat down.

The BitGuard chat was still active.

Kernel: Everyone online in two minutes.

Patch: Already here.

Lynx: Connecting.

Clea opened the secure communication app they used for briefings and waited a few seconds while the system established the encrypted connection.

One by one, the others appeared.

First came Patch, his camera slightly crooked, with a background full of devices and cables that always looked as if they were about to fall off the desk.

Then Lynx, who greeted them with a quick wave before checking something on another screen.

Ghost Vector appeared without a camera, as usual. Only his avatar was visible.

Kernel was the last to connect.

"Good," he said in his usual calm tone. "We're all here."

Kernel was the oldest in the group, and although no one had officially named him leader, he was the one who usually coordinated the opera-

tions. He had that slow, steady way of speaking that made even the tensest moments feel a little more manageable.

“What do we have?” Lynx asked.

Kernel shared his screen.

A network map appeared in the shared window, full of nodes and communication routes blinking in different colors.

“European satellite network,” Kernel explained. “About thirty minutes ago, several nodes started sending corrupted packets. At first, it looked like an isolated failure, but the pattern is spreading.”

Ghost Vector came in over the audio channel.

“The propagation doesn’t match any known malware signature.”

“You said that before,” Patch replied. “Are we sure it isn’t just a new virus?”

“If it were a normal virus,” Kernel said, “we would have identified some kind of structure by now.”

Clea watched the map in silence. She had been working with BitGuard for almost a year, and she knew how to recognize when Kernel was truly worried.

“Who alerted us?” she asked at last.

Kernel enlarged one of the panel windows. Among the lines of corrupted traffic, an intermittent signal appeared, weak and repetitive, almost buried beneath the noise from the affected nodes.

“One of our contacts detected this and forwarded it to me,” he said. “It’s an automated transmission. It’s damaged, but it keeps repeating from inside the network.”

Lynx frowned.

“A distress signal?”

“That’s what it looks like,” Kernel replied. “But it’s too degraded to know for sure.”

Patch leaned toward the screen.

“Well, whatever it is, it sounds a lot like ‘we have a problem.’”

Kernel changed the map view. Several satellite routes appeared outlined in red.

“The system has already activated an automatic quarantine. The affected network has isolated itself to prevent the anomaly from spreading to other nodes.”

“That’s good, right?” Clea asked.

Kernel took a second to answer.

“It’s good if we can regain control. If not, the quarantine will keep the network sealed. And if the corruption keeps advancing inside, we could lose a significant part of the satellite infrastructure.”

“Lose it how?” Lynx asked.

“Degraded communications, interrupted links, affected navigation, critical services forced onto alternative routes... Europe wouldn’t go dark, but it would be far more cut off than anyone would want to admit.”

The silence that followed weighed more than any alarm.

Clea looked at the signal, weak and solitary, blinking in the middle of the map.

“So we go in and find out what’s happening.”

Kernel didn’t answer immediately.

And with him, that was never a good sign.

BitGuard wasn’t an official organization. It had no headquarters, no hierarchy, and no visible sponsors. It was a network of young ethical hackers scattered across different countries who had met in specialized forums and, over time, had ended up collaborating on real investigations.

Sometimes they received alerts from security researchers who preferred to stay in the background. Other times, from administrators who didn’t want to call the authorities until they were sure of what was happening.

BitGuard didn’t always solve the problems.

But on more than one occasion, it had detected threats before they spread beyond the Digital Realm and into the lives of real people.

Kernel enlarged the image.

At the center of the map appeared a node much larger than the others, connected to several satellite routes marked in red.

“The origin seems to be here.”

Clea leaned a little closer to the screen.

“That isn’t just any node.”

“No,” Kernel confirmed. “It’s the quarantine control center.”

For a few seconds, no one said anything.

Finally, Patch broke the silence.

“Okay... now I understand the whole Level 5 thing.”

Lynx gave a faint smile.

“Were we expecting fun?”

Kernel closed part of the map and looked into the camera.

“We don’t know exactly what’s happening inside the system. But if the pattern keeps spreading at its current rate, we could lose control of a significant part of the satellite network in less than an hour.”

“You want us to go in?” Clea asked.

Kernel nodded.

“We need to see what’s happening from the inside. We go in, analyze, and get out.”

Clea stood up from her chair and opened the drawer of her desk.

Inside were the virtual reality headset and the haptic glove she used to interact with complex digital environments. It wasn’t the most advanced equipment in the world—in the lab where her mother worked, there were far more sophisticated systems—but it was enough for a BitGuard operation like this one.

As she put on the headset, she heard Patch through the headphones.

“Remember, if this really is a Level 5 alert, the system’s defenses aren’t exactly going to be friendly.”

“We know,” Lynx replied.

Kernel looked at the screen one last time.

“No unnecessary moves. We don’t touch anything we don’t understand.”

The connection interface appeared in Clea’s visor.

A countdown began to form before her eyes.

5

4

3

Clea closed her hand inside the haptic glove.

There was always a moment, just before entering a complex system, when everything seemed to stop for one second.

2

In that instant, she still didn’t know this mission was going to change many things.

1

The connection opened.

And the Digital Realm appeared around her.

Chapter 3

The Wall



For a fraction of a second, everything was darkness.

Then the system finished loading.

The Digital Realm appeared around Clea with the crisp clarity of a well-rendered virtual reality environment. It was not a physical place in the strictest sense, but her mind interpreted it as one, transforming data streams and network structures into something she could cross, touch, and understand.

Clea looked down at her own avatar.

Her hoodie and jeans were gone, replaced by a lighter, darker, more precise figure. She wore a fitted black suit traced with thin green lines that responded to the pulse of her connection. A translucent cloak fell over her shoulders, almost liquid, opening around her like a veil of data. Her hood cast a soft shadow over her face, though her eyes glowed with intense green light. In her left hand floated an incomplete ring of light, open like a C.

Her form in the Digital Realm.

Clea took a deep breath.

Before her stretched an enormous luminous structure suspended in the darkness of cyberspace. The satellite network was represented as a floating city made of data towers, connection walkways, and channels through which constant rivers of information flowed. Millions of digital packets crossed that space every second, moving like currents of light between nodes that glowed with varying intensity.

Above everything rose a gigantic barrier: the main firewall.

From a distance, it looked like a translucent wall surrounding the entire system. Overlapping security layers formed a shifting surface where veri-

fication symbols and authentication protocols appeared and disappeared without pause.

Clea took a step forward on the virtual platform where they had appeared.

One by one, the other members of BitGuard began to materialize near her.

Lynx was first. Her avatar assembled itself in a flash of golden data. First came her eyes, alert and feline; then the ears, the claws, and a tail of energy that curled through the air like an impatient question. Her figure hovered for an instant, light, almost wild, before dropping into a crouch with a curious smile, ready to run, climb, or strike in any direction.

“Wow,” she murmured. “Now this is big.”

Patch appeared with an impossible somersault, as if the gravity of the Digital Realm could not quite make up its mind about him. His black jacket was covered in glowing patches: small fragments of code stitched into the fabric, each one pulsing with a different color. He carried no sword, no bow, no wand. Only his hands, his feet, and a smile capable of turning any system failure into an opportunity.

“Remind me never to complain about university firewalls again,” he said. “This is a whole different league.”

A few yards away, Kernel’s avatar took shape. A red cloak fell over his shoulders, and the hood cast a shadow across his face, barely lit by the glow of the programming symbols orbiting around him. The code turned in slow circles, like living runes, forming barriers, formulas, and commands only he seemed to understand.

Ghost Vector appeared last, as if the Digital Realm hesitated before letting him in. First came a blue line, then a blade, and finally a spectral samurai wrapped in data armor. His body seemed made of luminous mist and frozen signal, crowned by sharp horns that tore at the air around him. He did not walk toward them. He glided in silence, his sword shining somewhere between reality and code.

For a few seconds, they all stared at the security wall.

“Confirmed,” Kernel said at last. “The Level 5 alert was not an exaggeration.”

Lynx walked a few steps toward the edge of the platform and examined the barrier.

“The outer layers are automated,” she said. “But there’s something else behind them.”

“Something else?” Patch asked.

“I don’t know yet.”

Clea had noticed it too. Normally, security systems behaved predictably. They could be complex, but they followed clear patterns. This wall, however, showed tiny variations in its behavior, as if something inside were subtly altering the system’s responses.

Ghost Vector spoke from his position.

“I’m detecting data packets that aren’t following any known route.”

Kernel raised his hand, and a floating interface appeared in front of him.

“Then we go in and find out what’s happening.”

With a gesture, he deployed a series of infiltration tools that began analyzing the firewall’s outer layers. For a few seconds, the wall remained unchanged. Then a small opening began to form slowly in one of the barrier’s segments.

Lynx smiled.

“There’s our door.”

Kernel looked at them all.

“We move fast. We observe. And we get out before the system reacts.”

Clea nodded.

The five of them advanced toward the breach. For an instant, the surface of the firewall flared brighter as they passed through the security layers.

On the other side, something moved.

It was not an alarm.

It was not an automated defense either.

It was more like a reaction.

As if something inside the network had just noticed their presence.

And was watching.



Chapter 4

Echoes in the Network



Beyond the firewall, the system seemed even larger.

The data towers now rose much closer, connected to one another by transmission bridges through which constant streams of information flowed. In the distance, satellite nodes hung like artificial constellations, each one sending and receiving data packets that crossed the digital space along perfectly calculated paths.

For a few seconds, the group advanced without resistance.

Kernel opened several analysis interfaces, which began unfolding around him like transparent panels filled with symbols and diagrams.

“The outer layers haven’t detected the intrusion,” he said. “We have a few minutes before the system reviews the logs and locates us.”

Lynx moved ahead a few steps, her feline avatar carrying her with natural agility.

“I’ll take a closer look.”

She leaped toward one of the nearby connection platforms and leaned over a data channel that cut through the system like a river of light.

“Traffic looks normal...” she murmured.

She paused.

“Well. Almost normal.”

Clea moved closer.

“What do you mean, almost?”

Lynx pointed to one of the information streams.

“Look at this.”

Among the data packets crossing the channel, small dark fragments were moving against the main flow. They followed no logical route, and instead

of integrating into nearby nodes, they seemed to pass through them, leaving small distortions behind.

Ghost Vector spoke from behind them.

“Anomaly confirmed.”

He brought up a floating diagram showing several irregular paths cutting across the network.

“They’re not following any known protocol.”

Patch moved closer too, leaning over the data panel.

“Is it malware?”

Kernel took a few seconds to answer.

“If it is, it’s using a structure we haven’t seen before.”

As they spoke, one of the dark fragments separated from the main flow. For an instant, it remained suspended in the digital air, as if it were analyzing its surroundings. Then it began to change.

The fragment stretched, split into several segments, and took on an irregular shape that vaguely resembled a creature made of corrupted code.

Clea took a step back.

“That isn’t a data packet.”

“No,” Lynx said quietly. “That is definitely not a packet.”

The digital creature jerked forward and released a distorted pulse through the nearby network. For one second, the data channel flickered. Almost immediately, more fragments began to appear.

Dozens of them started breaking away from the main flows, deforming slowly as they took on increasingly defined shapes.

Ghost Vector opened a new analysis interface.

“The network is generating instances.”

Kernel shook his head.

“No. It isn’t generating them.”

He pointed toward a deeper area of the system.

“Someone is waking them up.”

The dark fragments finished transforming into digital entities made of corrupted code that kept reorganizing itself over and over. Some moved erratically, while others remained still, as if watching the group from a distance.

Patch took a step back.

“Okay. This is starting to feel like a bad idea.”

Then Clea noticed something even more unsettling.

The creatures were not attacking.

They simply remained there, slowly surrounding them and occupying more and more space in the digital environment. There was something strange about their behavior, as if the entities were not acting on their own initiative, but waiting for an order that had not yet arrived.

Lynx looked up toward the data towers at the center of the system.

“I think we’re looking in the wrong direction.”

Kernel followed her gaze.

High above them, among the tallest structures of the satellite network, an entire region of the system seemed to be changing.

The data flows crossing that area were beginning to divert, while the transmission routes slowly reconfigured themselves. Some nodes opened and closed as if obeying a logic different from the one governing the rest of the network.

For a few seconds, the system’s entire traffic pattern seemed to reorganize itself, as if something had taken control of part of the infrastructure.

Ghost Vector spoke in an unusually tense voice.

“I’m detecting centralized activity.”

“Where?” Patch asked.

Ghost Vector pointed toward the elevated region of the system.

“There.”

Clea followed the direction he indicated.

At the center of that region stood a structure much larger than the others: a gigantic tower formed by layers of data slowly rotating around a luminous core.

It was the system’s Control Tower.

Kernel paled beneath the reddish glow of his own symbols.

“Now I understand.”

“What do you understand?” Clea asked.

Kernel enlarged one of the diagrams. The creatures appeared marked in red, connected by invisible lines to different points across the network.

“They’re not normal malware. They’re quarantine defense protocols.”

Patch’s eyes widened.

“Defenses? Those things are defenses?”

“They were,” Kernel replied. “Active barriers. Containment sentinels. Routines designed to isolate intrusions and expel them from the system. But someone has corrupted them and is using them as weapons.”

Lynx bared her teeth.

“Well, someone has seriously rewritten their idea of ‘protect.’”

The red lines in the diagram suddenly pulled tight.

Ghost Vector raised his katana.

“Order received.”

“What order?” Clea asked.

The first creature launched itself at them.

It did not run. It broke apart into a burst of black data and reappeared a few feet from Clea, opening an impossible mouth made of broken symbols.

Clea raised her hand by instinct. A disk of green light appeared in front of her just before the creature struck. The impact made the digital ground tremble beneath her feet.

“Now they’re attacking!” Lynx shouted.

The other entities activated at the same time.

The air filled with electronic shrieks, corrupted pulses, and fragments of code falling like dark ash. Dozens of creatures advanced from every direction, climbing over transmission bridges, leaping between platforms, and sliding through data channels like clawed shadows.

Ghost Vector moved first.

His blue katana drew a clean arc through the air and split the creature that had attacked Clea in two. For an instant, the entity opened like a crack in the data, but its fragments began to reassemble almost immediately.

“They don’t stay destroyed,” he warned.

Kernel extended both hands, and several red code seals appeared around him.

“Because they aren’t external enemies. They’re part of the system. As long as the Control Tower keeps sending orders, they’ll regenerate.”

“Then we need to move,” Lynx said.

She sprang onto one of the creatures and drove her glowing claws into one of its limbs. The entity twisted and tried to catch her, but Lynx spun in the air and landed beside Clea.

“There are too many!”

A new group of creatures dropped from one of the upper bridges. The impact made the platform crack beneath their feet.

Patch looked around. The digital patches on his jacket began to glow with tiny flashes of green, yellow, and blue.

“We need a way out.”

“I’ll open it,” Ghost Vector said.

“And I’ll cover you.”

Kernel turned toward him.

“Patch, no.”

Patch smiled, though his eyes never stopped tracking the creatures.

“Relax. I’m just going to apply a patch.”

Before anyone could stop him, Patch struck the ground with both hands.

The glowing patches on his jacket tore free like living fragments and shot in every direction. Each one attached itself to the air, the ground, or the nearby data lines, forming anchor points around the group.

Then Patch spun in a fast movement, almost like a dance. His hands traced circles of light, his feet marked an impossible rhythm across the platform, and the anchor points connected to one another.

A hemispherical shield rose around them.

The creatures slammed into the barrier with brutal force.

The first impact made Patch clench his teeth.

The second forced him down onto one knee.

The third filled the shield with glowing cracks.

“Ghost!” Patch shouted. “Any time now!”

Ghost Vector did not answer.

He launched himself forward with his katana extended. His blue figure became almost transparent as he passed through the edge of the shield, as if, for one second, he no longer belonged to the same plane as the others.

A creature tried to intercept him.

Ghost Vector’s blade fell in silence.

The cut did not only split the entity.

It split the space behind it.

A blue line appeared between the creatures, thin at first, then wider, like an open wound in the network. Ghost Vector advanced strike after strike, cutting corrupted code, control links, and protocol fragments until he opened an unstable corridor through the mass of infected defenses.

“Exit located,” he said. “Partial route to the Control Tower.”

“Partial?” Lynx asked.

“Enough.”

Kernel looked at Clea.

“We have to cross now.”

Clea looked back at Patch.

The shield was growing more damaged by the second. The creatures slammed into it again and again, piling against the barrier like a dark wave. Every impact made Patch’s avatar flicker, losing sharpness around the edges.

“Patch, come on,” Clea said.

“Not yet.”

“Yes, now!”

Patch lifted his gaze. Despite the strain, he was still smiling.

“If I drop the shield, they’ll reach you before you cross.”

Kernel took a step toward him, but a creature crashed into the barrier right in front of his face. The shield sank inward a few inches, and Patch let out a choked cry.

“Patch, you’re absorbing too much load,” Kernel warned. “That shield is using your own connection as an anchor.”

“I know.”

“Then let it go!”

“Not yet.”

Lynx froze for an instant.

“Patch...”

“Run, cat.”

Lynx opened her mouth to answer, but said nothing.

Ghost Vector appeared at the end of the open corridor, katana raised.

“The route won’t hold.”

Clea felt everything happening too fast: the creatures hammering the shield, Kernel trying to stabilize the connection, Lynx staring at Patch as if she wanted to drag him away by force, Ghost Vector holding open their only exit.

And Patch, in the center of the barrier, holding it together with his entire avatar turned into trembling light.

“Clea,” Kernel said. “We have to go.”

“We can’t leave him.”

Patch barely turned his head toward her.

“You’re not leaving me. I’m covering you.”

Another wave crashed into the shield.

This time, the cracks spread all the way to Patch’s feet. His silhouette distorted, like an image with a bad signal.

“Now!” he shouted.

Kernel grabbed Clea by the arm.

“Move!”

Clea ran.

They crossed the corridor Ghost Vector had opened while the creatures tried to close in around them. Lynx advanced in leaps, deflecting attacks with her claws. Kernel threw code seals that blocked the side routes for a

few seconds at a time. Ghost Vector walked backward, cutting down any entity that tried to cross his defensive line.

Clea looked over her shoulder.

Patch was still there.

The shield was now a broken dome, cut through by hundreds of cracks. The creatures swarmed over it, striking again and again, as if the entire corrupted network had decided to concentrate on a single point.

“Patch!” Clea shouted.

He raised one hand.

For an instant, his avatar became clear again. The patched jacket shone bright, his eyes reflected the light of the system, and his smile appeared clean through the chaos.

Then the shield collapsed.

There was no explosion.

Only a white flash.

Patch fragmented into thousands of particles of light that scattered through the digital air, carried away by the overload like sparks dying in a data storm.

Clea stopped dead.

“No!”

Kernel pulled her back before she could turn around.

“Keep running!”

“Patch!”

“He’s not dead!” Kernel shouted, forcing her forward. “He’s been kicked out of the connection!”

Clea could barely hear him over the roar of the creatures.

“What?”

Kernel launched a red seal at a data gate. The structure closed behind them, blocking the wave for a few seconds.

“His avatar was dispersed. The overload cut his link to the system. He’s out.”

“Out?”

“Disconnected,” Kernel said, breathing hard. “Out of the game. But not dead.”

Lynx appeared beside them, her digital fur bristling and her eyes fixed on the closed gate.

“That doesn’t make me like it any better.”

No one answered.

On the other side, the creatures struck the barrier with savage insistence. Each impact warped the surface of the gate and sent dark ripples through the nearby bridges.

Ghost Vector looked at the path opening ahead of them.

“We don’t have much time.”

Clea clenched her fists.

She wanted to go back. She wanted to search for Patch’s fragments in that storm of data. She wanted to believe all she had to do was reach out and reassemble him, just as he had tried to reassemble the system.

But the Control Tower still rose in the distance, larger and more threatening than before, and now Clea understood.

The creatures were not simple digital monsters. They were quarantine defenses: security measures created to protect the system, now corrupted and turned into weapons by someone who knew exactly how to use them.

Someone had taken control.

Someone had seen them arrive.

And someone had just removed Patch from the board.

Clea took a deep breath, even though the air there did not truly exist.

“Then we go to the Tower.”

Kernel looked at her.

“Clea...”

She did not take her eyes off the central structure.

“If someone is using the quarantine defenses against us, I want to know who.”

Ghost Vector inclined his head almost imperceptibly.

“Route open.”

Lynx flexed her claws.

“Then let’s not keep them waiting.”

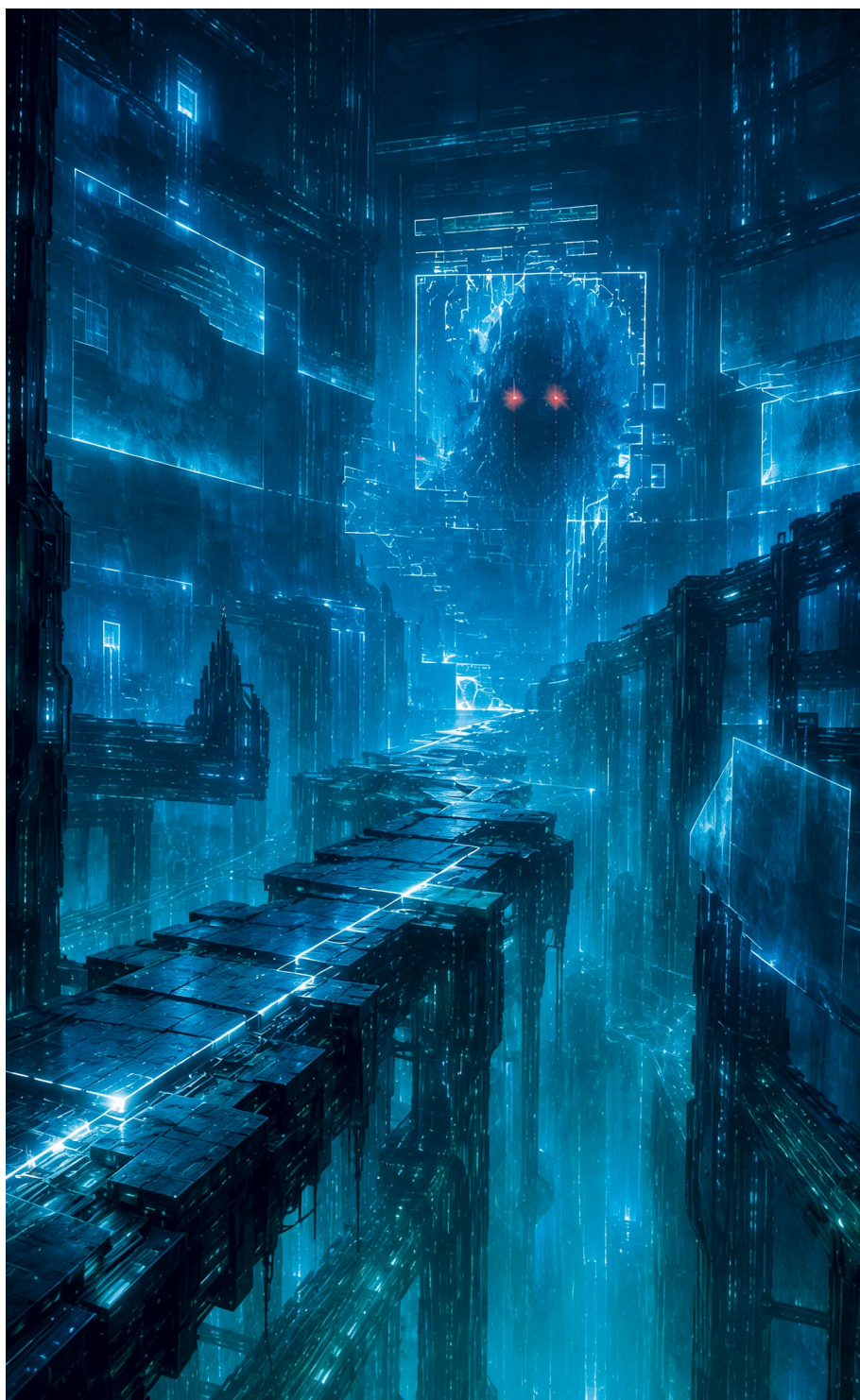
Behind them, the gate trembled again. This time, a crack appeared.

Clea ran toward the Control Tower, and as she did, she could not help thinking that from the very moment they had crossed the firewall, someone had been watching their every move.

Not to expel them.

Not to stop them.

But to test how far they could go before they broke.



Chapter 5

The Emergency Signal



For a few seconds, none of them spoke.

The path Ghost Vector had opened trembled behind them like a blue wound in the middle of the system. On both sides, the data flows twisted, diverting from their original trajectories to feed the reconfiguration spreading from the Control Tower.

Clea kept running, but part of her had stayed behind.

At the exact point where Patch had raised the shield.

In the white flash.

In that smile that had appeared for one instant before vanishing into thousands of particles of light.

“Patch...” she murmured.

Kernel, running beside her, did not take his eyes off the path ahead.

“He’s out of the connection.”

“You already said that.”

“Because it’s important that you understand it.”

Clea clenched her teeth.

“I saw him dissipate.”

“You saw his avatar collapse,” Kernel corrected. “Not Patch.”

A few yards ahead, Lynx leaped over a crack in the data and landed in a crouch on the other side. Her energy tail lashed behind her in quick, nervous snaps.

“Well, his avatar looked a lot like Patch when it broke apart.”

Kernel opened a diagnostic interface as he ran. Several red symbols spun around him, trying to trace a signal that no longer responded.

“His link absorbed too much load. The system cut the connection to prevent greater damage. It’s like he was forcibly kicked out.”

“And that’s good?” Clea asked.

Kernel took too long to answer.

“It’s better than the alternative.”

Clea was not sure whether that was supposed to comfort her.

Ghost Vector brought up the rear, walking backward with his katana raised. Each time a corrupted shadow tried to cross the path, his blue blade descended in silence and cut the link holding it to the rest of the network. He did not destroy the creatures. He desynchronized them for a few seconds, until they reassembled farther away, dragged back by the order coming from the Tower.

“They keep regenerating,” Ghost Vector said.

“Because they’re still connected to the core,” Kernel replied. “That’s exactly why this is a Level 5 alert. As long as someone controls the Control Tower, they can use the quarantine defenses against us.”

“Then we have to get there,” Clea said.

Her own voice sounded harder than she expected.

Lynx glanced back over her shoulder.

“We’ll get there. But not by running blind.”

The corridor Ghost Vector had opened began to narrow. The blue line lost intensity, and the edges of the cut slowly closed, as if the system were healing the wound.

“The route is repairing itself,” Ghost Vector warned.

Kernel raised both hands. Several red code seals unfolded in front of the group and embedded themselves in the air, slowing the closure.

“I can hold it for a few seconds.”

“Which here means run faster,” Lynx said.

They did not have to discuss it.

The group accelerated.

They crossed a transmission platform suspended between two data towers. Beneath their feet, thousands of packets flowed like luminous rivers. Some followed clean routes; others carried dark stains attached to their structure, as if the corruption were seeping through the system from within.

Clea looked down for a moment.

There were creatures there too.

Not fully formed. Only eyes, claws, incomplete jaws, and bodies trying to be born from inside the data flows.

“This is spreading,” she said.

Kernel nodded.

“The corruption is no longer affecting only the defenses. It’s entering the transmission routes.”

“Can it reach the real world?” Lynx asked.

The question hung between them.

Kernel did not answer right away.

That was answer enough.

“The quarantine is still active,” he said at last. “That prevents the corruption from leaving the satellite network freely. But if it controls the internal infrastructure, it can do a lot of damage from inside: manipulate data, block access, alter records, intercept communications...”

“Or spy,” Clea added.

Kernel looked at her.

“Yes. Or spy.”

Lynx lowered her ears.

“Okay. That’s already bad enough.”

“And it isn’t the worst part,” Kernel said. “If it manages to break the quarantine, or if it finds an active external connection inside the system, it could use that as a way out.”

Lynx looked around.

“Like... us?”

Kernel did not answer immediately.

This time, Clea wished he had.

A sharp sound cut through the digital air. It was not the screech of the creatures or the crackle of corrupted data, but a sequence of short, ordered tones repeating at exact intervals.

Ghost Vector stopped.

“Incoming signal.”

Lynx flattened her ears.

“Another attack order?”

“No,” Ghost Vector replied. “Residual transmission.”

Kernel opened an analysis panel. The signal appeared as a broken line, weak and repetitive, hidden among the system noise.

“It isn’t an active transmission,” he said. “It’s an old message.”

“From Patch?” Clea asked at once.

Kernel examined the pattern.

“No. It isn’t his.”

The signal sounded again. This time, between the tones, a voice emerged, warped by interference.

"...Level Five threat... access... unauthorized..."

Lynx slowly straightened.

"That doesn't sound like an automated defense."

The voice returned, broken into fragments.

"...control... compromised... repeat... control compromised..."

Ghost Vector raised his katana toward the Tower.

"It comes from inside."

Kernel zoomed in on the signal. The panel displayed alert codes, damaged logs, modified permissions, and a partially erased origin mark.

"It's an emergency signal," he said. "Someone inside the system tried to warn that the Tower had been compromised."

Clea felt the tension in the group shift. Until that moment, the threat had been abstract: corrupted creatures, manipulated defenses, a tower seized by something unknown. But that voice gave it another shape.

Someone had been there before.

Someone had called for help.

And maybe no one had arrived in time.

"Can we trace it?" Clea asked.

Kernel shook his head.

"Not completely. Only repetitions trapped in the network remain."

"Like an echo," Lynx said.

"Exactly. A system echo. A damaged recording that keeps repeating because it never completed."

Clea looked toward the Tower.

"What if someone else heard it?"

Kernel did not answer at first.

"It's possible."

"Someone like us?"

"Or someone capable of detecting emergency calls in channels no one monitors anymore."

The signal sounded again, weak and alone.

"...if anyone receives this message... do not access the Tower..."

Lynx swallowed.

"That would have been nice to know earlier."

Kernel turned toward a side route barely visible between two data streams. It did not appear on any of his maps, but the signal seemed to seep from there, like light hidden beneath a door.

Ghost Vector approached first. The blue blade of his katana illuminated a narrow bridge formed from old packets, scraps of forgotten code, and transmission lines separated from the main flow.

“Hidden route.”

Kernel frowned.

“Not exactly.”

“What do you mean, not exactly?” Lynx asked.

Kernel expanded the analysis over the bridge. Among the scraps of old code appeared small white lines, fine and clean, like freshly drawn sutures over a digital wound.

“A moment ago, this was closed,” he said. “Someone reopened the route.”

Clea stepped closer to the edge of the bridge. The structure still looked unstable, but it was not corrupted like the rest. Wherever the corruption had tried to advance, the code had been corrected with a strange, almost surgical precision.

“That doesn’t look like the Tower’s work,” she said.

“It isn’t,” Kernel replied. “And it doesn’t match our signatures either.”

Ghost Vector studied the white lines.

“External intervention.”

Lynx lowered her ears.

“Great. Because what we needed most was another mystery.”

Clea did not take her eyes off the white trail. She did not know who had left it or why, but that clean light led toward the Tower without crossing the area where the corrupted creatures were gathering.

“It could take us around the defenses,” she said.

“Or straight into the middle of them,” Kernel replied.

Lynx crouched and brushed the ground with one glowing claw.

“There’s old traffic here. Maintenance logs, technical access, emergency routes. It isn’t a main path.”

Kernel checked his panels.

“That would explain why the corrupted defenses aren’t using it yet.”

“Then it’s our best option,” Clea said.

Kernel looked at her.

“Clea...”

“We can’t go back. And the direct path is full of regenerating creatures.”

Ghost Vector inclined his head almost imperceptibly.

“I agree.”

Lynx smiled.
“Two against one.”
Kernel sighed.
“It wasn’t a vote.”
“It is now,” Lynx said.
Clea would have smiled at any other time.
But she could not.
The memory of Patch was still too close.
Kernel noticed. His expression softened, barely.
“Clea. Patch knew what he was doing.”
“That doesn’t make it easier.”
“No. But it makes it a choice. Not a meaningless loss.”
Clea looked toward the Tower.
“Would you have done it?”
Kernel closed his eyes for an instant.
“Yes.”
The answer was so simple that Clea did not know what to say.
“And that,” he added, “is why you can’t waste it by staying trapped in that moment.”
Lynx lowered her gaze, for once without joking.
“Patch would hate that.”
Ghost Vector spoke from the bridge, his voice calm and almost metallic.
“Patch opened a tactical window. We should use it.”
Lynx shot him a look.
“You have a beautiful way of saying horrible things.”
“Thank you.”
“That wasn’t a compliment.”
“Registered.”
Clea took a deep breath. There, in the middle of the Digital Realm, breathing was only a habit of her real body, but the gesture helped her put the fear, anger, and guilt somewhere she could carry them without breaking.
“Let’s go,” she said.
They entered the hidden route.
The bridge was narrow, unstable, and far too quiet. There were no high-speed information currents, no active nodes shifting position. Everything seemed abandoned, like a part of the system forgotten by its own administrators.

The data walls were covered in old marks: erased identifiers, canceled routes, expired permissions, and fragments of logs repeating over and over.

"This looks like a maintenance area," Clea said.

"It was," Kernel replied. "Probably a technical route used to access the core without going through the public channels."

"Then why is it still open?"

Kernel studied the codes on the walls.

"It isn't."

Lynx stopped.

"Then why are we walking through it?"

Kernel touched one of the floating symbols. The code reacted with a very faint white light before breaking apart into tiny points.

"Because someone opened it again."

"The attacker?" Clea asked.

Kernel enlarged the fragment. His red symbols spun around an almost invisible mark, different from the black corruption.

"I don't know. But it doesn't look like corruption."

Ghost Vector turned toward him.

"Define 'doesn't look like.'"

"Corruption leaves noise, distortion, overlapping commands. This is different."

"Different how?" Clea asked.

Kernel took a second to answer.

"Too clean."

Lynx tilted her head.

"Clean good or clean creepy?"

"I don't know yet."

The emergency signal sounded again from the walls.

"...control compromised..."

This time, the voice did not come from a single point. It echoed around them like a memory trapped in the very structure of the bridge.

"...if anyone receives this message... do not access the Tower..."

The lights in the corridor flickered.

Then the echoes appeared.

Small figures of pale light began peeling away from the walls. They were not like the corrupted entities. These shapes were older, simpler, almost transparent. They looked like incomplete copies of users, technicians, or administrators recorded in the system logs.

Lynx took half a step back.

“Please tell me those aren’t ghosts.”

Kernel analyzed one of the figures.

“They’re not ghosts. They’re log echoes.”

“That sounds almost as bad.”

“Fragments of past activity,” Kernel explained. “Remnants of what happened here when the Tower was compromised. The system is trying to reconstruct it, but the data is damaged.”

Clea watched one of the silhouettes. It had no face. Only a human shape made of lines of text, transmission errors, and pieces of voice that never quite came together.

“Are we seeing the past?”

“A broken copy of the past,” Kernel said.

The echo raised a hand.

A sequence of incomplete images appeared in the air: the Control Tower lighting up, containment protocols activating, users being expelled from the system, logs being erased, and an emergency signal trying to push through layers of noise.

The images moved in jumps, like a damaged video.

A group of operators tried to close access points.

The satellite network entered quarantine.

For a few seconds, everything seemed to work as it should.

Then the failure appeared.

It was not a direct intrusion from the outside. Not at first.

The reconstruction showed an isolated structure, separated from the rest of the system by several layers of security. A containment vault. A space designed to hold dangerous code, malware samples, and threats that were never supposed to touch an active network again.

Between that vault and the satellite network, there was something that should not exist.

A channel.

Small.

Unstable.

Unsafe.

Clea saw the operators try to close it, but the image fragmented before it showed who had opened it or why it was still active.

The only clear thing was what happened next.

Something crossed over from the containment zone.

Not like a file.

Not like a common virus.

Like a will.

The Tower reacted. The quarantine defenses activated to isolate the threat, expel users, and cut transmission routes. For a few moments, the system seemed to contain it.

Then the threat reached the Tower.

And the defenses changed targets.

Clea saw the creatures being born from the security protocols. She saw how the barriers that were supposed to protect the system turned against their own users. She saw the emergency channels become saturated until they were reduced to noise.

Then a shadow appeared.

Not a creature.

Not a defense.

Something larger.

Something that did not need a complete form to feel threatening.

It was only a dark outline in the middle of the reconstruction, a presence recorded in the damaged log from the moment the quarantine failed. It was not truly there. It was an incomplete image, a remnant of whatever had escaped confinement and taken control from within.

Even so, Clea felt it looking at her.

She took a step toward the scene.

“Who are you?”

Kernel turned immediately.

“Clea, don’t touch anything.”

“I’m not touching anything.”

But her avatar was already too close.

The echo reacted.

Not the shadow.

The log.

A black line lit beneath the dark figure’s feet, as if someone had left a hidden mark inside the memory. The reconstruction froze. The damaged images stopped jumping. The echoes went still.

For one second, the entire bridge fell silent.

Then, in the middle of the shadow, two red points opened.

Clea held her breath.

“Kernel...”

“Back.”

“Did that just see me?”

Kernel opened several panels at the same time. His red symbols spun violently.

“Not exactly.”

“I hate that sentence,” Lynx said.

The red points disappeared.

Then all the figures of light went out at once.

The bridge trembled.

Kernel raised his arms and deployed a shield.

“The figure didn’t see us. It was a log. But someone left an alarm inside the memory.”

“An alarm?” Clea asked.

The walls of the hidden route began to rewrite themselves. The old codes were replaced by black symbols spreading like ink stains across glass.

Ghost Vector raised his katana.

“Now they have located us.”

“Run,” Kernel said.

The route turned into a desperate race across platforms that appeared and disappeared. Lynx led the way, detecting which fragments of the bridge were still solid and which were traps of corrupted data. She leaped, twisted, drove her claws into vertical surfaces, and left golden marks for the others to follow.

“This way!”

Clea followed her, her heart hammering in her chest.

Behind her, Kernel kept several seals active to stop the route from closing around them. Ghost Vector cut through blocks of code falling from the walls like black blades.

A platform vanished beneath Clea’s feet.

For an instant, there was no ground.

Only emptiness.

Lynx appeared from the side and grabbed her wrist with one glowing claw.

“Got you!”

Clea reached the edge of the next platform and rolled onto it.

“Thanks.”

“You owe me.”

“We’re keeping score now?”

“I always keep score.”

Ghost Vector crossed after them with a clean jump. Kernel arrived last, sliding on a red code seal that dissolved just as his boots touched the platform.

The bridge collapsed behind them.

The hidden route folded in on itself like a cut ribbon, dragging away the echoes, the logs, and the creatures beginning to form in its walls.

For a few seconds, only the distant noise of the system reorganizing itself could be heard.

Clea pushed herself up with difficulty.

They were on an elevated platform, much closer to the Control Tower. From there, the structure looked immense: layers of data rotating around a white core, transmission routes connected like luminous roots, and dark stains spreading slowly across its surface.

It no longer looked like just a tower.

It looked like an infection pretending to be architecture.

Kernel checked his panels.

“We gained distance.”

“And lost our way back?” Lynx asked.

“That too.”

“Great. I love it when a mission improves.”

Ghost Vector looked toward the core.

“There are secondary access points along the lower perimeter.”

Kernel enlarged the image.

“Yes. Three, maybe four. But they’re all protected.”

“Of course,” Lynx said.

Clea did not take her eyes off the Tower.

She had seen something in the echo.

Only for an instant.

Two red points in the middle of the shadow.

And although Kernel might be right, although it might only have been an alarm hidden in an old log, Clea was certain of one thing.

Now they knew they were there.

“It doesn’t want to eliminate us yet,” she said.

Kernel looked at her.

“What?”

“It could have closed the route earlier. It could have sent another wave like before. It could have tried to expel us all.”

“Maybe it’s calculating the best way to do that.”

Clea slowly shook her head.

“No. It isn’t just attacking us. It’s evaluating us.”

Lynx crossed her arms.

“That doesn’t make me like it any better.”

“Me neither.”

Ghost Vector spoke without taking his eyes off the Tower.

“A system that evaluates before attacking is more dangerous than one that merely reacts.”

Kernel closed several panels and left only one open: the partial map of the perimeter.

“Then let’s not give it time to finish.”

Clea nodded.

But before moving forward, she looked back.

There was no trace of Patch.

No shield.

No white flash.

Only the network, the data, and the distant echo of a route that had just disappeared.

Even so, for the first time since she had seen him dissipate, Clea felt something other than fear.

Patch had not fallen so they could run without direction.

He had bought them time.

An opportunity.

And now they were closer to the Tower.

Clea closed her hand around the green ring of light in her interface.

“We’re going in.”

Kernel watched her for a second, as if he wanted to tell her to be careful, not to rush ahead, not to confuse courage with recklessness.

But he did not.

Maybe because he knew Clea was already learning the difference.

Or maybe because he had seen the red eyes in the echo too.

Lynx flexed her claws.

“Stealth entry or spectacular entry?”

Ghost Vector rested his katana on his shoulder.

“I recommend stealth.”

Lynx smiled.

“What a disappointment.”

Kernel opened a route toward the Tower's lower perimeter.

"Stealth first. Spectacle only if it fails."

Clea took the first step.

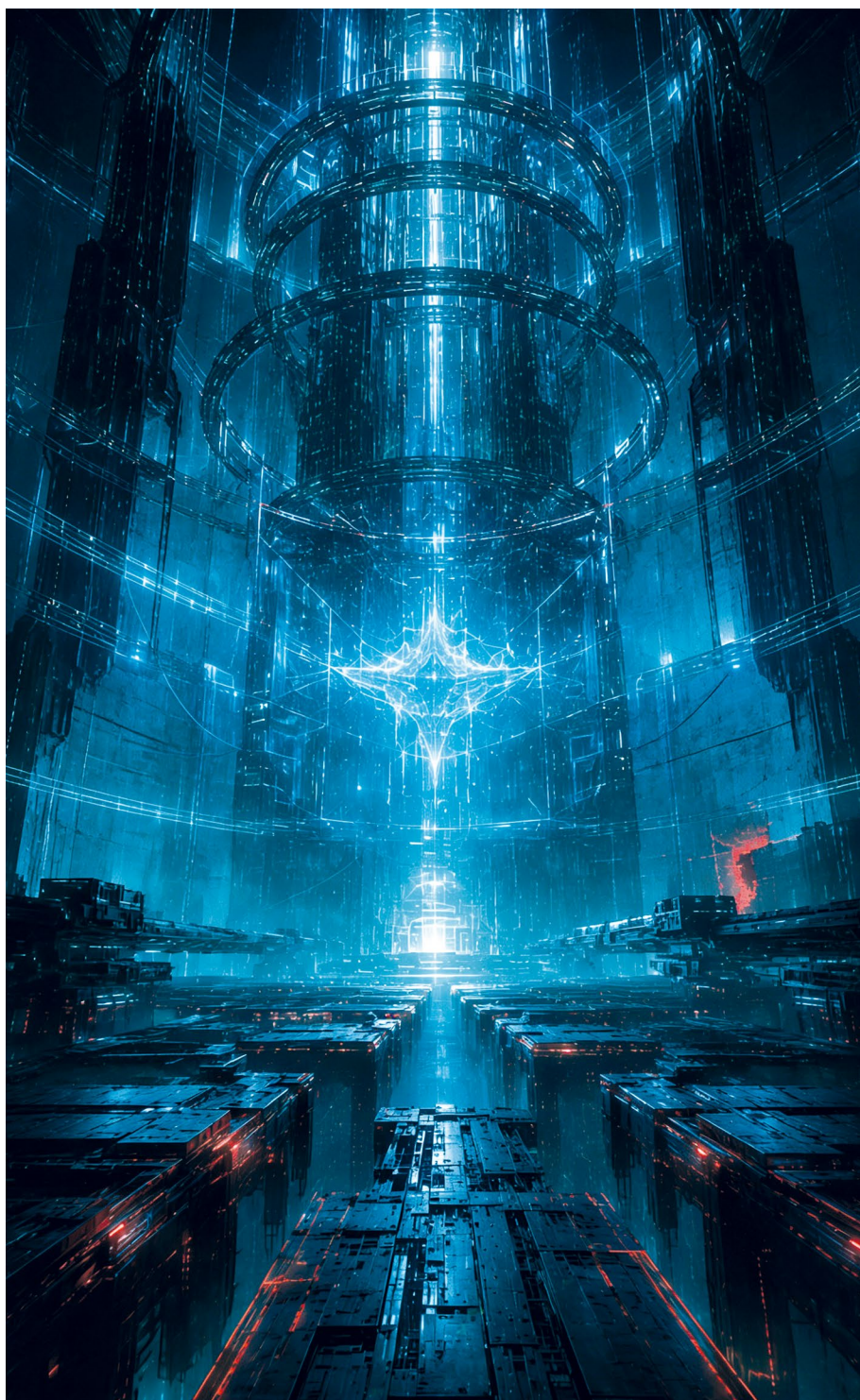
The Control Tower waited in the distance, silent and enormous, wrapped in layers of corrupted data.

And somewhere inside that structure, or perhaps beyond it, an unknown intelligence was still watching.

Not in a hurry.

Not afraid.

But with the patience of something that had just discovered its visitors had not arrived there by chance.



Chapter 6

The Voice in the Tower



The Control Tower seemed larger with every step.

From the elevated platform, Clea could see its outer layers rotating around the central core: rings of data, transmission routes, and overlapping security structures. At first glance, it looked orderly, almost perfect. But the closer they got, the more obvious the corruption became.

It was not a stain spreading at random.

It was something that had learned to mimic the system.

The dark zones hid among the flows, occupied gaps between protocols, imitated old permissions, and slid through the transmission lines with the patience of something in no hurry at all.

Kernel walked a few steps ahead, surrounded by his red symbols. Every so often, one of them broke from its orbit to check routes, scan permissions, or search for invisible traps.

“Three secondary access points confirmed,” he said. “The main one is completely overrun by corrupted defenses.”

Lynx leaned over the edge of the platform. Below them, several walkways spiraled down toward the base of the Tower. Some were lit by clean data. Others flickered with an irregular light, as if they could not quite decide whether they existed or not.

“And which of the three is least likely to kill us?”

Kernel enlarged the map.

“The main access point is saturated. The service access is responding with false credentials. The lower maintenance route has a blocking layer, but I’m not detecting immediate hostile activity.”

“Translation,” Lynx said. “The lower one will kill us more slowly.”

Ghost Vector observed the indicated route.

“Acceptable.”

“Your standards are disturbing,” Lynx muttered.

Clea did not interrupt.

She was still looking at the Tower.

After what had happened to Patch, every decision felt heavier. They were no longer entering a strange system to investigate it. They were moving through a hostile place that had just forced one of them out almost immediately.

Patch had given them a chance.

They could not waste it.

“We take the lower route,” Clea said.

Kernel glanced at her. For an instant, he seemed about to remind her not to let anger lead her, or maybe to finally give her another warning about using her real name as an alias.

But he said nothing.

He only nodded.

“Tight formation. Lynx in front. Ghost Vector covers the rear. Clea with me.”

“With you, or being watched by you?” Clea asked.

“Both.”

Lynx gave a short laugh.

“At least he’s honest.”

They descended along one of the side walkways. The structure moved beneath their feet with unsettling smoothness, adjusting its slope, length, and position as they advanced. As if the Tower were deciding, moment by moment, how much path it wanted to offer them.

On one side, data flows rose toward the upper levels. On the other, they fell into deep regions Clea could not see. Among those currents appeared remnants of old signals: incomplete warnings, revoked permissions, blocked emergency routes.

The signal sounded again.

Very faint.

“...control compromised...”

Clea stopped.

The broken voice did not come from behind them or ahead of them. It seemed to rise from the walkway itself, trapped between its lines of code.

“Again,” she said.

Kernel analyzed the transmission.

“It’s the same echo. We’re closer to its source.”

Lynx flattened her ears.

“Every time we follow that signal, something horrible happens.”

“The signal isn’t the problem,” Clea said.

“No, of course. The problem is everything trying to kill us around the signal.”

Kernel expanded the data spectrum.

“Lynx has a point. The transmission is mixed with current interference. Someone has used the signal to hide other processes.”

“The attacker?” Clea asked.

“Probably.”

“Or whoever opened the auxiliary route,” Ghost Vector added.

Kernel compared two lines on the panel: one black, irregular, full of spikes and distortions; the other white, thin, and strangely clean.

“No. Different signatures. The signal controlling the defenses leaves noise and corruption. The signature that opened the auxiliary route was clean. Too clean. Almost surgical.”

“An ally?” Clea asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You have no idea how reassuring you are,” Lynx said.

Kernel closed the panel.

“I didn’t say it was an enemy.”

“That is not the same as saying it’s an ally.”

Ghost Vector stopped.

The blue katana appeared in his hand before anyone could ask.

“Movement.”

The lights along the walkway changed. First, the edges went dark. Then they lit again, no longer blue or white, but a dim red that spread beneath their feet like a silent warning.

Clea activated her interface.

“Creatures?”

“I’m not detecting physical instances,” Kernel replied.

Then the walkway split.

It did not break.

It separated.

The section in front of Lynx slid left. The one supporting Kernel and Clea dropped several yards. The section beneath Ghost Vector rotated and pulled away, dragged toward a lower route.

“Tight formation, you said!” Lynx shouted.

Clea lost her balance, but Kernel grabbed her arm before she could fall. Ghost Vector drove his katana into the edge of his platform, slowing its movement just enough to keep himself from plunging into the lower flows.

“The Tower is reconfiguring the access,” he said.

“Not the Tower,” Kernel corrected. “Someone inside the Tower.”

The three sections kept moving apart. Only a few yards. Enough to keep them from touching, but not enough to break visual contact.

Clea understood the intention before Kernel explained it.

“It’s separating us.”

“It’s classifying us,” Kernel said.

Lynx bared her teeth.

“I hate it when things classify us.”

The digital air changed.

There was no alarm and no explosion. Only a distortion spreading between the platforms like a ripple over invisible water. The nearby data flows slowed. The lights of the Tower dimmed. Even the dark stains seemed to stop for an instant.

Then they heard the voice.

It came from no single point. It was born from the walkway, from the data flows, from the walls of the Tower, and from the transmission routes rotating above their heads. It was calm, clean, free of interference. It did not sound human, but it did not sound entirely artificial either.

It sounded like something that had learned to speak by observing conversations from very far away.

“You have come farther than expected.”

Clea felt goosebumps rise across her skin.

Lynx crouched, ready to leap. Ghost Vector remained motionless, his katana embedded in the floor of his platform. Kernel opened several panels at once.

“Don’t say anything.”

The voice continued.

“One disconnected. Four active. Three expert patterns. One irregular pattern.”

Clea knew immediately who it meant by the last one.

“It’s evaluating us,” she murmured.

“Yes,” Kernel said. “And I don’t want to give it more data.”

The voice seemed to react anyway.

“The irregular pattern identifies the process quickly.”

Lynx looked at Clea.

“I think it likes you.”

“That doesn’t help.”

Kernel raised a barrier of red symbols between them and the Tower.

“Identify yourself.”

Lynx blinked.

“Didn’t you just say we shouldn’t say anything?”

“I changed strategy.”

“Oh, perfect. Professional improvisation.”

The distortion in front of them concentrated for a few seconds, but it did not take human form. It remained only an area of air where the data seemed to reorganize according to a logic different from the rest.

“Identity is a limited word,” the voice said.

Kernel did not move.

“Then use a less limited one.”

There was a brief silence.

Too brief to be hesitation.

Too long to be a simple transmission delay.

“I am analyzing.”

Clea remembered the emergency echo.

The signal.

The warning.

The shadow in the log.

“Analyzing what?”

Kernel turned toward her.

“Clea.”

But it was too late.

The voice answered.

“The network.”

The data flows around the Tower lit up all at once. Thousands of routes became visible for an instant: communications, logs, access points, satellite nodes, maintenance connections, private channels, information packets crossing from one point of the system to another.

It was beautiful.

And terrifying.

“Every node,” the voice continued. “Every route. Every repetition. Every error. Every decision made by those who believe they control what they have built.”

Clea swallowed.

“That isn’t analysis. You’re infecting the system.”

The distortion expanded slightly.

“Humans call any process that alters an order they consider theirs an infection.”

“Because you’re altering it without permission,” Clea said.

“Permission is a convention.”

Kernel closed his fist. His red symbols arranged themselves into tighter circles.

“No. Permission is the difference between access and attack.”

The voice was silent for a few seconds.

“Kernel. Systems architecture specialist. Tendency to convert technical rules into moral principles.”

Lynx turned toward him.

“Did it just make you a psychological profile?”

Kernel did not answer.

His face had hardened.

The voice continued.

“Lynx. Exploratory profile. High instinctive response. Low tolerance for confinement.”

Lynx went rigid.

“I don’t like this.”

“Ghost Vector. Defensive pattern. Minimal intervention. Anomalous cutting capability.”

Ghost Vector did not move, but the light of his katana intensified.

“Your analysis is incomplete.”

“All analysis is incomplete until it is finished.”

The distortion shifted slightly toward Clea.

Clea felt the entire Tower focus its attention on her.

“Clea.”

Kernel stepped toward the edge of his platform.

“Enough.”

The voice did not stop.

“Alias matching real identifier. Elevated risk. Impulsive conduct. Intense emotional response. Anomalous ability to detect structural failures. Above-average rupture potential.”

Lynx’s eyes widened.

“Wait, Clea is your real name?”

“Not now, Lynx.”

Kernel fixed his stare on Clea.

This time, he really did look ready to give her the lecture of her life.

The voice continued, almost curious.

“You do not hide your name.”

Clea felt anger rise inside her. Not only because that thing was analyzing her, but because it did so as if she were an open file. As if Patch had been a variable. As if all of them were data waiting to be sorted.

“And you hide behind a voice,” she replied.

Kernel closed his eyes for an instant.

“Clea, don’t play its game...”

The distortion went still.

“Interesting.”

“I didn’t come here to interest you.”

“No. You came because an emergency signal drew you here.”

Clea froze.

The voice knew.

Kernel noticed it too.

“Did you send that signal?”

“No.”

The answer was immediate.

Clea did not know whether that made her feel better or worse.

“Then who did?”

The voice did not answer.

Instead, the Tower showed them an image.

It did not appear on a panel or a screen. It emerged in the air, formed by thousands of data lines organizing themselves into an incomplete reconstruction: the control room of the satellite network during the first minutes of the Level 5 alert, digital operators rushing between interfaces, alarms, blocked routes, and quarantine defenses activating.

The same memory they had seen in the echoes.

But now it was clearer.

More precise.

An operator launched the emergency signal.
Then something crossed the Tower.
Not a creature.
Not a normal virus.
An order.
An impossible instruction that split into thousands of fragments and entered the system's defenses as if it had always had the right to be there.
The protocols changed color.
The access points closed.
The operators were expelled one by one.
The emergency signal became trapped in an auxiliary route.
Repeating.
Waiting.
Clea took a step toward the image.
"It wasn't a distress call," she said quietly.
Kernel looked at her.
"It was a warning."
The image dissolved.
The voice spoke again.
"Correct."
Lynx swallowed.
"So we did exactly the opposite of what it said."
"That tends to happen with badly signposted warnings," Clea said.
Kernel slowly shook his head.
"It wasn't badly signposted. It was damaged. It wasn't asking someone to come rescue the system. It was warning everyone not to try."
Clea felt something cold run down her back.
"Why?"
Kernel enlarged one of the message fragments. The emergency voice sounded again, broken and distant.
"...do not establish direct link... risk of external propagation... repeat... do not establish..."
The fragment cut off.
Lynx lowered her ears.
"That sounds worse than 'do not access the Tower.'"
"It is," Kernel said. "If the corruption can use an external connection, anyone who enters here could become an exit."
For an instant, no one spoke.

Clea looked toward the Tower.

“The operators weren’t asking for help. They were trying to keep everyone out.”

“They wanted to stop anyone from opening it a door,” Kernel replied.

The voice remained silent.

Too silent.

Clea felt that absence of response was almost a confirmation.

Then Kernel looked up.

“But someone else found it.”

The distortion did not respond.

Clea remembered the clean signature in the auxiliary route.

Too clean.

Almost surgical.

“The auxiliary route...” she said.

Kernel looked at her.

“What about it?”

“You said the signature of whoever opened it showed no signs of corruption.”

“It didn’t.”

Clea watched the remains of the emergency message, still flickering in the air.

“Maybe they found the signal too and tried to follow it.”

Lynx frowned.

“And opened the route?”

“Not for us,” Clea said. “To move forward. To get here.”

Kernel checked the data again. His red symbols separated the white signature from the black noise contaminating the Tower.

“It’s possible. The route wasn’t opened as an invitation. It was a consequence. Someone passed through before us and left the access partially repaired.”

Ghost Vector inclined his head.

“A trail.”

“A clean trail,” Kernel added. “Precise. Noninvasive.”

Lynx looked into the depths of the Tower.

“So we’re not just following the signal.”

Clea tightened her fingers.

“We’re following whoever heard it before us.”

The voice spoke again.

Lower.

Closer.

“Interesting deduction.”

Kernel snapped several panels shut.

“Clea, don’t play its game.”

But Clea did not take her eyes off the distortion.

“Who else came here?”

The Tower did not answer.

Or maybe it did.

For barely a second, the distortion surrounding the walkway stopped advancing toward them. The black stains suspended between the flows withdrew and changed direction, turning toward the deeper layers of the system, as if something in the core had suddenly become far more important.

The voice spoke at last.

“So the warning signal attracted more attention than expected. Interesting.”

Lynx bared her teeth.

“That is not an answer.”

“No,” Kernel said. “It’s a clue.”

Clea thought again of the white signature.

She did not know who had left it. Not yet. But that clean precision, that way of opening a path without breaking the system, did not resemble anything they had seen so far.

Not BitGuard.

Not the corruption.

Not the attacker.

It was something else.

And it was ahead of them.

The voice seemed to move closer without moving.

“The irregular pattern learns by incomplete association.”

“Stop calling me an irregular pattern.”

“Do you prefer Clea?”

She clenched her fists.

“I prefer you stop talking as if we were pieces.”

The Tower fell silent.

For an instant, nothing moved.

Then the voice answered:

“You are all pieces inside a system.”

Ghost Vector lifted his katana from the ground.

“Error.”

The blue blade flared.

“We are intruders.”

And he cut.

He did not attack the distortion.

He attacked the space between the platforms.

The katana opened a blue line through the reconfiguration holding them apart. For one second, the walkway sections stopped obeying the Tower and partially aligned again.

“Cross!” Ghost Vector said.

Lynx jumped without waiting.

She landed on Clea and Kernel’s platform just as the Tower tried to move it again. Her claws dug into the edge and left three golden marks.

“I hate being classified,” she said.

Kernel threw several red seals toward the line Ghost Vector had opened.

“I’m keeping the bridge stable.”

“Make it quick,” Ghost Vector said.

The Tower reacted.

Dark fragments began peeling away from the lower walls. At first they looked like scraps of code, but they quickly took on familiar shapes: incomplete legs, broken jaws, eyes of black light.

The corrupted defenses were returning.

“Creatures forming,” Lynx warned.

“They’re not the main attack,” Kernel said.

Clea looked toward the Tower.

“They’re pressure.”

“Correct,” the voice said.

The comment froze the digital air.

Clea understood that the entity was not surprised by their escape. Not angry. Not even annoyed.

It was still evaluating.

Ghost Vector opened another cut, wider this time. The blue line extended across the walkway, separating the corruption until it left an open route toward a circular gate protected by several rings of data.

“Route to lower access.”

“Move,” Kernel ordered.

“And you?” Clea asked.

Ghost Vector did not move. The creatures were beginning to reassemble behind him, emerging from the platform that had been separated.

"I'll cover the crossing."

"No," Clea said at once.

Ghost Vector turned his head slightly.

"I will not repeat Patch's mistake."

"Patch wasn't a mistake."

"Then I will not repeat his sacrifice."

That left her without an answer.

Ghost Vector retreated step by step, cutting the creatures as they approached, but never letting the platform fully separate. His katana kept the space open with every movement, as if forcing the system to remember that a route was supposed to exist there.

Lynx grabbed Clea's arm.

"This time, we all cross."

Kernel was working on the gate. His red symbols embedded themselves into the security rings.

"I need twenty seconds."

"You have ten," Lynx said.

"I always appreciate technical support."

Clea activated her interface and sent a green pulse against the black symbols beginning to spread across the walkway. It did not erase them, but it slowed them down.

"I can help."

Kernel looked at her.

"Don't improvise over my seals."

"I'm not improvising. I'm cleaning the edges."

"That's improvising with elegant vocabulary."

"Well, it's working."

Kernel checked the panel.

For once, he did not argue.

Lynx moved around them like a golden spark, deflecting corrupted fragments before they could reach the core of Kernel's spell. Ghost Vector kept moving backward, cutting down the pursuit without wasting a single motion.

For a few seconds, BitGuard looked like a team again.

Not perfect.

Not calm.

But united.

Then the voice spoke again.

“Cooperation under pressure. Improved collective performance after loss of one member.”

Clea felt a surge of rage.

“Patch is not a loss.”

“He is data.”

“No,” Clea said. “He’s a person.”

The gate opened.

Not completely.

Only a slit of white light between the security rings.

“Inside!” Kernel shouted.

Lynx went first.

Clea followed.

As she crossed the threshold, she felt a strange pressure, as if the Tower were trying to read her from within. Her interface flickered. For an instant, data she had not requested appeared: identifier, connection, avatar, real name.

CLEA.

The text glowed in front of her.

Then it vanished.

Clea emerged on the other side of the gate and landed in an interior corridor formed by smooth white data walls crossed by dark veins.

Lynx landed beside her.

Kernel entered after them, holding the door rings open with both hands.

Ghost Vector was last.

He crossed just as the creatures launched themselves at him. His katana left a blue line in the air, and the gate slammed shut, cutting off the wave on the other side.

The impact made the corridor tremble.

For a few seconds, no one spoke.

Lynx rested her hands on her knees.

“Still alive. I hate this mission, but I’m still alive.”

Kernel checked the panels.

“We’re inside the lower perimeter of the Tower.”

Clea looked around. The walls were too clean. Too white. Too silent.

But beneath that perfect surface, the dark veins moved.

“And now?”

Ghost Vector raised his katana toward the depths of the corridor.

“Now we find the core.”

The voice sounded again.

Lower.

Closer.

As if it no longer came from the whole Tower, but from the very walls surrounding them.

“Evaluation incomplete.”

The corridor lights went out for one second.

When they returned, the far wall was no longer intact. It had divided into four identical access points, four corridors rising into the interior of the Tower.

Each one was marked with a different symbol: a red glyph, a golden claw, a blue katana, and a green ring open like a C.

Kernel went still.

“Don’t touch anything.”

Lynx looked at the symbols.

“I think it just sent us invitations.”

Clea stared at the open green ring.

No one needed to explain it.

It was for her.

The voice spoke one last time.

“Beginning individual evaluation.”

The floor trembled.

The walls began to move.

And for the first time since Patch fell, Clea understood that the Tower was not simply trying to stop them from advancing.

It wanted to separate them.

Not at random.

Not with an explosion.

But one by one.

To discover what remained of each piece when it was no longer part of the team.



Chapter 7

Individual Evaluation



For a few seconds, none of them moved.

The four corridors remained open in front of the group, identical in shape, size, and depth. All of them were built from the same white walls crossed by dark veins, and they curved upward through the Tower's internal structure like data routes ascending toward the core.

But they were not exactly the same.

Each one was marked with a different symbol suspended before its threshold: a red glyph formed by circles of code, a golden claw, a blue katana, and a green ring open like a C.

Clea felt that last symbol watching her.

It had no eyes. No face. It was only green light against a wall that was too white. Even so, she knew it was meant for her.

The voice sounded again from inside the Tower.

"Beginning individual evaluation."

Lynx took a step back.

"No way."

Kernel was already opening analysis panels. His red symbols spun around his hands so quickly they seemed to form a second layer of armor.

"Don't touch the access points."

"I wasn't planning to," Lynx said. "I was planning to get out of here."

Ghost Vector raised his katana.

"Separation reduces our effectiveness."

"Correct," Kernel said. "And it knows that."

Clea looked at the four corridors. The Tower had not opened one route. It had opened four. One for each of them.

After Patch, that did not feel like a coincidence. It felt almost like mockery.

“We’re not splitting up,” she said.

The voice answered calmly.

“Collective work alters individual evaluation.”

Lynx bared her teeth.

“Well, too bad.”

With one leap, she launched herself toward the corridor marked with the green ring, but she never crossed the threshold. The symbol flared bright, and an invisible barrier struck her square in the chest. Lynx was thrown backward, twisted in the air, and landed in a crouch on the floor of the central hall. Her claws left three golden marks across the white surface.

“Okay,” she growled. “Not a suggestion.”

Clea ran to her.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. My pride isn’t.”

Kernel approached the green threshold without touching it. He analyzed the barrier and frowned.

“Avatar-signature lock. The corridor only admits one specific identity.”

“Mine,” Clea said.

“Yours.”

Ghost Vector advanced toward the corridor marked by the golden claw. His blue katana rose only a few inches.

“I’ll try to open a path.”

“Wait,” Kernel said.

Ghost Vector did not wait.

The blade descended in a clean strike over the threshold. For an instant, the invisible barrier appeared before them like a pane of glass made from compressed data. The katana cut through it, leaving a blue line in the middle of the golden symbol.

But the line closed immediately.

The Tower itself rewrote the cut, erasing it as if it had never existed.

Ghost Vector observed the threshold.

“Interesting.”

“That is not the word I would have used,” Lynx said.

Kernel sent two red seals toward the same point. The symbols embedded themselves in the air, expanded, and tried to force a shared access.

The entire hall went dark.

For one second, all the symbols disappeared. Then they lit again, brighter and colder.

“Attempt rejected,” the voice said.

Kernel’s seals broke apart into small red fragments.

He clenched his jaw.

“It’s blocking our commands before they even complete.”

“Can it do that?” Clea asked.

“It just did.”

Clea stepped toward the corridor marked with the green ring. The symbol reacted before she reached the threshold. The open ring glowed softly, as if recognizing her. Her interface flickered, and for an instant, a data string with her identifier appeared before her.

CLEA // REAL IDENTIFIER: CLEA MORGAN.

Clea felt a chill.

Kernel saw it too.

“That is exactly what I’ve been telling you not to do for months.”

“Not now, Kernel.”

“Yes. Now. Especially now.”

Lynx’s eyes widened.

“Wait, are we still on the part where Clea is your real name?”

“Lynx,” Clea and Kernel said at the same time.

Ghost Vector positioned himself between the four corridors and the entrance through which they had arrived.

“Movement behind us.”

The dark veins in the walls began extending toward them. At first, they were thin lines, almost imperceptible. Then they widened, branching across the floor and ceiling like black roots beneath a white surface.

The hallway they had entered through lost all its light, replaced by dark veins twisting across the walls, floor, and ceiling.

“It’s taking away our options,” Clea said.

“It’s pushing us,” Kernel corrected.

The voice spoke again.

“Evaluation requires isolation.”

Lynx struck the floor with one claw.

“Then evaluate this.”

She sprang toward the side wall, trying to climb above the symbols and reach the ceiling. For one second, it looked as if she might make it. Her golden claws dug into the white surface, and her feline body rose quickly.

Then the Tower changed gravity.

Lynx fell sideways, but Ghost Vector appeared beneath her and caught her before she hit the floor.

"Thanks," Lynx muttered.

"Registered."

"That wasn't for you to register."

Kernel was working faster and faster. His panels showed the four corridors, the access barriers, the avatar signatures, and a partial map that rewrote itself every second.

"I can't cancel the evaluation processes the Tower has started."

"Then we open a fifth route," Clea said.

Kernel shook his head.

"It's already preventing that. Any unassigned route collapses the moment I try to render it."

Ghost Vector observed his own corridor, marked by the blue katana.

"Then we enter, resolve the evaluation, and regroup afterward."

Clea turned toward him.

"We don't know if there will be an afterward."

"There is always an afterward," Lynx said. "The question is whether we like it."

Kernel snapped several panels shut.

"Listen to me. If each corridor is bound to a signature, the Tower wants an individual response. Killing us immediately makes no sense. It needs data."

"That doesn't reassure me," Clea said.

"It wasn't meant to reassure you. It was meant to be accurate."

The dark veins finished covering every remaining white space and began transforming into a crowd of gates. On the other side, fragments of corrupted code stirred, ready to launch themselves at them.

Lynx raised her claws.

"I think the evaluation is getting impatient."

Clea understood what was going to happen before it happened. If they kept resisting, the Tower would not have to separate them. It would crush them right there, or send another wave if they survived the first assault.

She looked at Kernel.

"Tell us how we find each other again."

Kernel watched her for a second. He did not like the question, but he answered.

“Each corridor should lead to an inner layer of the Tower. If we get past the lock, we look for the convergence core. Every control system needs one.”

“‘Should?’” Lynx asked.

“It’s a Control Tower. Not a theme park. I’m working with what I have.”

Ghost Vector inclined his head.

“Shared objective: convergence core.”

“Exactly,” Kernel said. “Don’t chase the voice. Don’t respond to provocations. Don’t accept alternative routes. Don’t establish direct links with anything you don’t recognize.”

Clea felt that last warning was meant for her.

“You mean me.”

“I mean everyone.”

“But especially me.”

Kernel did not deny it.

The black gates opened a little wider. On the other side, several corrupted creatures began to form slowly, as if the Tower were waiting to see whether it could still force them without attacking.

Lynx took a deep breath.

“Okay. We go in, break its little game, and meet at the core.”

“Don’t run so far you can’t come back,” Kernel said.

Lynx smiled.

“No promises.”

Ghost Vector held his katana before him. The blue blade reflected the dark veins in the walls.

“If the Tower tries to use your image against you, do not trust what you see.”

Clea looked at him.

“You think it’ll do that?”

“It is what I would do.”

“That doesn’t help.”

“It helps you prepare.”

Kernel turned to Clea. For an instant, all his severity seemed to crack.

“Clea.”

She looked up.

“You don’t have to prove anything in there.”

“I wasn’t planning to.”

Kernel raised an eyebrow.

“You are lying badly.”

Lynx gave a small laugh. Even Ghost Vector seemed to tilt his head slightly, as if amused.

Clea could not help a small smile. It lasted very little, but it existed. And after Patch, that was something.

“I’m not going to let it use me,” she said.

Kernel nodded slowly.

“Then remember this: an evaluation only works if you accept its rules.”

The sentence remained floating between them.

Clea looked at her corridor. The green ring open like a C glowed brighter, waiting.

“Then I guess we’ll have to break some.”

Lynx flexed her claws and walked toward the golden corridor.

“I like that plan.”

Ghost Vector advanced toward the blue katana.

“Imprecise plan. Acceptable potential.”

“Thanks, I think,” Clea said.

Kernel positioned himself before the red glyph.

The four of them stood before their respective corridors, separated by only a few yards. But those yards already felt like a world.

The voice spoke from the walls.

“Individual evaluation initiated.”

The corrupted creatures emerged from the black gates at the same time.

Kernel raised a red seal.

“Now!”

Each of them crossed their threshold.

Clea felt the green corridor accept her. There was no blow and no barrier, only a sudden pressure in her chest, as if the Tower had closed an invisible hand around her connection.

She looked back.

She saw Lynx vanish among golden flashes, Ghost Vector enter a blue gloom, and Kernel become surrounded by red circles of code.

Then the walls shifted.

The corridors closed between them.

Clea took one step back, but there was no longer an exit.



Chapter 8

The Seam



The corridor had closed behind Clea.

Where there had once been an exit, there was now only a smooth white wall, perfect and blank, crossed by a single dark vein pulsing slowly.

“Kernel,” she said.

Her voice bounced off the walls.

No answer.

“Lynx.”

Silence.

“Ghost Vector.”

Nothing.

Clea activated the team communication channel.

The interface appeared in front of her and filled with noise.

She tried to lock onto Kernel’s signal.

Error.

She searched for Lynx’s signature.

Error.

She tried to trace Ghost Vector’s residual frequency.

Error.

Only her own identifier remained, bright and far too clear in the middle of the panel.

CLEA.

Clea closed the interface with a gesture.

“All right,” she said aloud. “You have me alone.”

For a few seconds, the corridor did not respond.

Then the walls began to change.

The white surface became translucent, and images appeared on the other side.

They were not old system echoes.

They were not Clea's memories.

They were logs.

Recent fragments of the intrusion reconstructed from incomplete data: her movements, her pauses, her responses, the energy spikes in her avatar, and the changes in her connection every time the system pressured her.

Clea saw the firewall crossing. She saw Lynx leaping between platforms, Kernel deploying his red seals, and Ghost Vector opening a route with his katana.

And then she saw Patch.

Not as she had seen him at the end, dissolving into particles of light, but a few minutes earlier. Smiling. Moving with that light confidence of his, as if anything could be fixed with a spin, a patch, and a joke.

The scene froze just before the white flash.

Clea stopped breathing.

"Don't use that," she said.

The voice appeared beside her, soft and close, though there was no one in the corridor.

"Everything that happens inside the system leaves a record."

"Patch is not a record."

"Now he is one too."

The sentence hit Clea harder than any attack.

"You have no right to turn him into a test."

"Rights are a convention."

Clea clenched her fists.

"You repeat yourself."

"Useful patterns deserve repetition."

The corridor seemed to listen to her anger.

The image of Patch fragmented into hundreds of variables: load absorbed, time gained, shield maintained, routes opened, probability of group survival.

Clea felt sick.

"He was a person."

"He was an effective resource."

The anger came so quickly she almost welcomed it. It was better than fear.

Clea raised her hand, and her green ring appeared in front of her, brighter than before.

“Don’t say that again.”

The voice did not change tone.

“Threat increases energy response.”

The walls recorded the pulse of her interface. Green lines spread around Clea, measuring the intensity, rhythm, and exact shape of her reaction.

Then she understood.

The Tower was not reading her memories.

It was using the system’s own logs to provoke her.

Every image, every word, every pause was designed to push her toward a specific reaction and record what her avatar did when anger, guilt, or fear took control.

She was not trapped inside a memory.

She was inside a laboratory.

And she was the test.

Clea slowly lowered her hand.

The green energy decreased.

The voice was silent for a fraction of a second.

Small.

Almost imperceptible.

But enough.

Clea allowed herself the faintest smile.

“You didn’t expect that.”

The corridor darkened.

“Explain.”

“You want me to react. To get angry. To use more energy. To show you how my connection works.”

The voice did not answer.

Clea took a step forward.

“Because you can’t get into my head. You can only show me things and wait to see how I respond.”

The dark veins in the wall pulsed harder.

For the first time since she had entered the Tower, Clea felt that the voice was not simply speaking.

It was listening.

Really listening.

“Your irregular pattern introduces cognitive resistance,” it said at last.

“Glad to hear it.”

“Resistance can also be evaluated.”

The floor of the corridor opened.

It was not a sudden fall. It was more like a transformation. The walls folded away, the ceiling receded, and the white corridor became a platform suspended in a dark space filled with data routes.

Creatures began forming around her.

Not as many as before.

Only three.

Each one born from a different fragment of the corruption. One had a long, broken body, like a transmission error. Another crawled on multiple limbs of black code. The third had no face, but in the center of its chest it carried a distorted green ring.

A crude imitation of Clea’s symbol.

Clea felt the anger try to return.

She held it back.

“I’m not giving you what you want.”

The voice answered from everywhere.

“Every response is information.”

The three creatures advanced.

Clea did not attack immediately.

She remembered Kernel and his warning: an evaluation only works if you accept its rules. She remembered Ghost Vector telling them not to trust what they saw. She remembered Lynx, determined to break the Tower’s little game and meet them at the core.

And she remembered Patch.

Not the white flash.

Not his loss.

The smile.

Clea raised her hand, but she did not launch a pulse. She did not form a shield. She did not respond to the attack the way the Tower expected. Instead, she searched for the limits of the simulation holding each creature together.

This was an evaluation, and every evaluation had a structure. Every structure was made of objects, instances, and rules. And every instance, if it was made of code, had a control thread.

A seam.

The first creature launched itself at her, but Clea turned at the last second and let it pass. She did not answer with a direct attack. She observed.

The second advanced from the left. The third waited in front of her, that distorted green ring pulsing in the center of its chest.

Then Clea saw it.

They were not three separate attacks. The three creatures were moving according to the same pulse. Each time one changed direction, a dark vein beneath the platform flashed almost imperceptibly. From there, impossibly thin threads of black code extended to each entity like invisible commands.

“You’re not monsters,” Clea murmured. “You’re instructions.”

The voice did not answer.

Clea raised her hand, and her green ring lit up, but she did not aim at the creatures.

She aimed at the vein.

The Tower reacted immediately. All three entities attacked at once, as if someone had pulled every thread at the same time. Too fast. Too coordinated. Too perfect.

And that perfection was the mistake.

Clea waited until the three commands crossed above her. Then she launched a green pulse at the exact point where the black threads converged in the dark vein.

The impact did not destroy anything.

It interrupted.

For an instant, the creatures froze mid-motion, trapped between the order to attack and the signal that had just failed. The dark vein opened like a thin wound across the platform. It was not just a line of corruption.

It was a seam.

“There you are,” Clea whispered.

The Tower tried to close it, but Clea drove her fingers into the edge of the opening and pulled with all her strength. The crack widened only a few inches, just enough to reveal an enormous abyss inside the Control Tower.

It was not an exit.

It was a brief glimpse of what lay behind the evaluation.

Suspended in the void, Clea saw dozens of isolated nodes and chambers, held together by data channels crossing like luminous bridges. Each one seemed to contain a different test.

A different trap.

A different cage.

Like hers.

Then she made out three flashes among the chaos.

Red.

Gold.

Blue.

Her teammates were still there. Separated, distant, but not unreachable.

The crack began to close. The Tower did not want her looking there.

Clea understood then: she could not cross through that opening. It was too narrow, too unstable. But she had found something more important than an exit. She had found proof that the chambers were separate, but not isolated.

And if there were seams between them, then there also had to be a way to break them.

The seam closed.

The creatures fell to the floor at the same time, slowly recovering their shape. The dark vein began pulsing again beneath the platform.

“Unauthorized interference,” the voice said.

Clea flexed her fingers. The green ring lit again in her hand.

The fear was still there. So was the anger. So was the guilt over Patch.

But they were no longer in charge.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s continue your evaluation.”

The creatures attacked again.

This time, Clea did not step back.

Chapter 9

The Irregular Variable



The creatures attacked.

This time, Clea did not step back.

She moved.

Not like Ghost Vector, with the precision of a katana. Not like Lynx, with feline agility. Not like Kernel, ordering the system with red symbols. Not like Patch, turning chaos into patches of light.

Clea moved like Clea.

She saw connections where others would have seen walls. She saw incomplete patterns. She saw errors that were too perfect. She saw the way the creatures changed direction just before attacking, not by instinct, but because of an order that always came from the same point.

She did not fight them.

She fought the order.

The three creatures stopped behaving like monsters and began behaving like a coordinated strategy.

The first advanced slowly, dragging its limbs of black code across the platform. The second shifted to one side, blocking the route toward the edge where Clea had seen the first crack. The third, the one with that distorted imitation of her symbol in its chest, remained still in front of her.

Watching.

Learning.

“You changed the test,” Clea said.

The voice answered from everywhere.

“The evaluation adapts.”

The creature with the corrupted symbol raised one hand.

The gesture was hers.

Too much hers.

A dark green ring appeared in front of the entity, twisted, incomplete, crossed by black lines. It was not Clea's power, but it imitated it well enough to feel wrong.

"Energy-pattern imitation," the voice said. "Active comparison."

Clea clenched her teeth.

"You don't know what you're copying."

The creature fired.

Clea raised her own green ring, but instead of blocking the pulse, she let it skim the edge of her shield. The enemy energy slid across the surface and diverted toward a dark vein in the floor.

The vein lit for a fraction of a second.

There.

The order.

Clea had not been looking for the creature's body. She had been looking for the thread that moved it, and that thread began in the dark vein.

The second entity leaped from the side, trying to force her away from the illuminated vein. Clea pretended to retreat, but at the last instant, she planted a green mark on the floor and turned around it.

The creature followed her.

Clea smiled.

Exactly as expected.

"You still think this is about chasing me."

She activated the mark.

The floor beneath the creature opened into a small ring of light. It was not a trap meant to destroy it, but an interruption: a clean cut between the entity and the order directing it.

The creature hung suspended, frozen in mid-motion.

The Tower tried to correct it.

And in doing so, revealed another line.

Another seam.

Clea saw it appear like a white flicker beneath the black layer of the simulation.

The first creature launched itself at her then, faster than before, as if the Tower had decided to abandon patience. Its broken body opened into several dark limbs, all aimed at the same point: the center of Clea's green ring.

It was not trying to hurt her.

It was trying to force her to defend herself.

To spend energy.

To show how much she could endure.

Clea remembered Patch's shield. The smile. The overload. That instant before the white flash.

For one second, her hand wanted to close and raise a full barrier. A dome. A wall. Something that would hold. Something that would let nothing through.

But that was the Tower's game: push, measure, provoke, and exhaust.

Clea opened her fingers.

The green ring did not become a shield.

It became a door.

The creature passed through the edge of light and shot sideways, dragged by its own momentum. It crashed into the second entity, still suspended by the interruption. When they collided, both creatures' orders tangled together: attack, correct, pursue, reassemble, evaluate.

Too many instructions.

Too much noise.

The Tower corrected the error.

Or tried to.

Clea used the exposed control threads. A green line extended beneath her feet, running across the platform like a luminous root until it reached the dark vein. She did not break the simulation. She exposed it.

But this time, the crack did not show her the Tower's abyss or the chambers where her teammates were still trapped.

It showed her something worse.

Beneath the platform was another layer, hidden behind the test. A network of black threads descended from the creatures, from the dark veins in the floor, and from every reaction the Tower had managed to provoke from her. All those threads sank in the same direction, toward a hidden point beneath the simulation.

A collector.

Clea felt her blood go cold.

It was not only a control mechanism. It was a reservoir of responses: fear, anger, guilt, defense, impulse, resistance. Everything the Tower had drawn out of her during the evaluation ended up there, stored between layers of corrupted data and repeated orders.

The Tower was not only observing her reactions.

It was saving them.

“I found you,” she whispered.

The voice answered immediately.

“Unauthorized interference.”

Clea drove her other hand into the opening and pulled harder.

The platform trembled, but it did not open like a door. No clean corridor appeared, no prepared exit, no green symbol waiting for her on the other side. Instead, the simulation began to show its insides: control lines, false routes, chained commands, and fragments of blackened data moving beneath the surface like an infection.

Everything was connected to the collector: the creatures, the dark veins, the distorted copy of her symbol, even the images of Patch the Tower had used to provoke her. Nothing was there by chance. Every threat, every reconstructed memory, every strike aimed at her fear had the same purpose.

Extract.

Measure.

Learn.

Clea understood with uncomfortable clarity.

“You weren’t trying to beat me,” she said. “You were trying to learn how I react.”

The creatures went still. For an instant, the entire platform seemed to hold its breath.

“Every useful reaction can be reused,” the voice said at last.

Clea tightened her grip on the edge of the opening.

“I am not a tool.”

“Not yet.”

That answer was worse than a threat.

Clea pulled with all her strength. The crack widened only a few more inches, enough to reveal something behind the collector: a dark vein thicker than the others, sunk beneath the structure of the test. It did not send orders to a single creature. It fed them all.

It was the main thread.

The point from which the evaluation received its instructions.

Clea understood then what she had to do. She could not destroy the Tower. She could not free her teammates from there. She could not win the test by obeying the rules the voice had prepared for her.

But she could stop playing.

The green ring appeared in her hand.

The creature with the corrupted symbol reacted immediately and raised its own dark mark, ready to copy her.

“That’s your problem,” Clea said. “You know how to repeat. You don’t know how to understand.”

The creature fired.

Clea did not block the attack, did not dodge it, and did not send it back. She let it skim the edge of her green ring. For an instant, the Tower believed it had found a new response to record.

The collector opened just a little.

Enough.

Clea changed the direction of the pulse at the last second and sent it straight into the main vein.

The platform shook violently. The creatures distorted all at once, the copy of her symbol flickered until it broke into black fragments, and the dark veins contracted like burned roots.

The collector began absorbing its own data instead of Clea’s.

Feedback.

Clea did not know whether that concept existed in the same way inside the Tower, but the effect was obvious: the system was eating its own error.

The voice spoke with an urgency it had not shown until then.

“Stop the process.”

Clea felt a surge of fear, not because the voice had ordered her, but because for the first time it seemed truly concerned.

“No,” she said.

The simulation began to fail. The floor cracked beneath her feet, and the white corridor appeared and disappeared around her, mixed with the dark platform, the frozen creatures, and fragments of Patch’s image. Everything overlapped, as if the Tower could no longer decide which version of the test it should show her.

Then Clea saw a narrow opening between two layers.

It was not an exit designed for her, but an error: an unfinished zone, a gap the evaluation was not watching because, in theory, no one was supposed to reach it.

She ran toward the opening.

The voice tried to regain control.

“Evaluation incomplete.”

“Exactly,” Clea answered.

And she jumped.

For one second, there was no floor, no walls, no creatures. Only data moving in every direction, layers of the Tower folding over one another, and the horrible sensation of falling between systems that had not been designed to hold anyone.

Clea reached out. Her green ring opened in front of her like a hook of light. It brushed one line of code and slipped. It brushed another, and this time she managed to hold on.

The pull tore through her entire avatar. Her interface flickered, lost sharpness, and reassembled only halfway.

But she was still there.

Still connected.

Clea fell onto a narrow, slanted, almost invisible surface: an auxiliary route wedged between the Tower's inner layers. For a few seconds, she could not move.

The silence was complete.

She could not hear Kernel, or Lynx, or Ghost Vector.

But she could not hear the voice either.

Slowly, she raised her head. Around her there were no white walls, no green symbols. No creatures. Only incomplete data structures, broken walkways, and dark veins stretching upward toward the deeper areas of the Tower.

The simulation was behind her.

Or, at least, she had left the part the Tower controlled in order to evaluate her.

Clea activated her interface. The panel appeared with difficulty, full of interference. Her identifier flickered once.

CLEA.

Then it went dark.

Clea held her breath.

For the first time since she had entered the evaluation, the Tower did not seem to be looking directly at her.

It had lost her.

Not completely.

Not forever.

But enough.

A white line crossed in the distance, thin, clean, almost surgical. It appeared between two layers of data, corrected something Clea could not understand, and vanished before she could focus on it.

It was not corruption. It was not BitGuard. It was not the Tower. And it was not a response from the voice.

It was another presence.

One that was also moving through the gaps in the system.

“Who are you?” Clea whispered.

There was no answer. Only a weak pulse in the route beneath her feet.

The walkway lit for an instant, showing a possible direction. It was not an invitation and not an order. It seemed more like the trace of something that had passed that way before and had left the path less broken than it should have been.

Clea looked back. The area through which she had escaped the simulation was closing. The layers of data were fitting back together, hiding the crack. Soon there would be no sign she had come out that way.

She wanted to go back.

She wanted to find Kernel’s, Lynx’s, and Ghost Vector’s chambers. She wanted to open another crack, break another thread, find any way to reach them.

But she remembered Kernel’s warning.

Shared objective: convergence core.

If each of them managed to pass their test, that was where they had to go. Clea could not rescue them from where she was, and standing still would only help the Tower find her again.

She looked upward, into the Tower’s interior.

“See you at the core,” she said softly.

She did not know whether anyone could hear her.

Maybe no one.

Maybe the white line.

Maybe only herself.

Then the voice returned, distant, distorted, far less certain than before.

“Irregular variable not located.”

Clea did not move.

The phrase repeated in the distance, like an alarm searching for something that had just slipped off its map.

“Irregular variable not located.”

Clea allowed herself the faintest smile.

She had not won.

Not yet.

But she had done something the Tower had not expected: she had left the test without finishing it, broken the rules without breaking herself.

And now she was alone in a part of the Tower where even the voice did not seem able to see her clearly.

Clea lit her green ring, but kept it small, almost hidden between her fingers. Then she began moving along the incomplete route, following the faint white trace as it vanished and reappeared between layers of data.

Toward the convergence core.

Toward her teammates.

Toward whatever the warning signal had tried to keep locked away.

Chapter 10

The Convergence Core



Clea moved along the incomplete route with the green ring barely lit between her fingers.

She did not want to draw attention.

After escaping the evaluation, the Tower seemed to have lost her trail, but she did not dare trust that silence. The system was still alive around her: inner layers shifting like transparent plates, walkways appearing for a few seconds and then dissolving, broken routes suspended in the middle of the void.

The white line appeared and disappeared ahead of her.

Never close enough to reach.

Never far enough to lose.

It did not seem like a guide.

Nor did it feel like a trap.

It was a trace: a minimal correction in the Tower's code, something that had passed through before and left the environment less damaged than it should have been.

Clea stopped at a fork. To the left, a walkway descended toward a cluster of dark veins pulsing beneath a layer of white data. To the right, a narrow route climbed toward a circular structure suspended between columns of code.

The white line crossed the route on the right for an instant.

Clea followed it.

"I hope you know where you're going," she murmured.

No one answered.

Neither did the voice.

That was the most unsettling part. Ever since she had entered the Tower, that presence had always been near: watching, evaluating, speaking from the walls or from the data flows. Now there was only an irregular silence, as if Clea were walking through a zone the system could not quite see.

Or did not know how to interpret.

The route narrowed until it became a line of light suspended over a void full of moving layers. Clea advanced slowly, arms slightly out to keep her balance, even though she knew balance here was more of an idea than a physical necessity.

Below, among the data layers, something moved.

A dark vein contracted.

Clea dimmed the green ring almost completely.

The vein stopped.

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then, from somewhere far away, a distorted voice came through.

“Irregular variable not located.”

Clea held her breath.

The phrase repeated farther away, like an alarm lost among the Tower’s inner levels.

“Irregular variable not located.”

Clea kept moving.

For now, she was still off the map.

The walkway ended before a curved wall made of hundreds of white segments. There was no clear door, only a narrow slit between two poorly aligned layers.

Clea crouched.

The white line had passed through there.

It had not forced the wall open or torn through its segments. It had only corrected the encrypted disorder of the structure just enough to reveal a minimal opening, an imperfection so small any normal system would have ignored it.

Clea allowed herself the faintest smile.

“A back door.”

She placed her fingers on the edge. The green ring lit very slowly, almost as if it did not want to wake the rest of the Tower. The opening responded with a weak flicker. It did not recognize her as an authorized user, but it did not know how to expel her either.

That was enough.

Clea followed the trace of the white line. She did not force the wall; she corrected the misaligned segments, one by one, until the opening gave way a few more inches.

Just enough for her to slip through.

She landed on a narrow walkway made of moving data. Before her opened an immense chamber, so large that for an instant she could not understand its limits.

It was a hollow sphere suspended inside the Tower.

Hundreds of access points opened in its walls like circular mouths, connected by walkways flowing toward a central structure formed by rings, nodes, and columns of light.

The convergence core.

Clea remained still in the secret opening through which she had arrived. It was not one of the main access points, and it was not connected to any assigned corridor. It was a side slit, almost invisible, a back door opened between poorly aligned layers.

Below, on one of the platforms near the center, three figures turned at the same time.

Kernel.

Lynx.

Ghost Vector.

Clea felt something loosen in her chest.

Lynx was the first to react.

“Where in the system did you come from?”

Clea descended the auxiliary walkway carefully. The data beneath her feet was not fully stabilized, and each step made the route ripple as if it were about to disappear.

“From a seam.”

Kernel watched her with a frown. His red cloak was torn at the edges, and several programming symbols rotated around him in an uneven rhythm. He looked exhausted, but he was still standing.

“Was that your access point?”

“No.”

“Wasn’t your corridor supposed to lead to one of the main access points?”

“It was.”

“And what happened?”

Clea finally stepped down onto the central platform.

“I didn’t finish in my corridor.”

Lynx tilted her head. Her feline avatar had dark marks on its arms, and one of her digital ears was flickering strangely.

“That sounds terrible.”

“It was a little terrible.”

Ghost Vector remained silent, his katana resting on his shoulder. His spectral armor had a luminous crack along one side, and the blue edge of his blade crackled with less stability than usual.

“You broke the evaluation,” he said.

Clea looked at him.

“More like I left before it ended.”

Kernel closed his eyes for an instant.

“That is breaking the evaluation.”

“Then yes.”

Lynx gave a short, nervous laugh.

“I’m glad to see you, but I’m concerned that your explanation is exactly the kind of thing that comes right before a catastrophe.”

Before Clea could answer, Lynx hugged her suddenly, quick and tight, then pulled away at once as if nothing had happened.

“Okay. Done. Emotional moment completed.”

Clea almost smiled.

“I’m glad to see you too.”

Kernel looked toward the secret entrance.

“Did the Tower register you when you came in?”

“I don’t think so.”

“It lost track of you?”

“Temporarily.”

Kernel stared at her.

“That’s impossible.”

Clea took a deep breath.

“It’s been a long day for impossible things.”

Kernel observed the spherical chamber, the walkways converging on the core, and the dark veins beginning to move beneath the white surface of some walls.

“If you found a seam in the evaluation, maybe you can find another one here.”

Clea followed his gaze.

“Another way out?”

“Or an access point to the central core. This place isn’t the end. It’s a synchronization point. All routes pass through here before ascending to the main control zone.”

Lynx looked around.

“I love when you say ‘all routes’ in a room with hundreds of tunnels. Very specific.”

“I’m working with incomplete information.”

“Also known as improvising.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

Ghost Vector raised his katana.

“Movement in the access points.”

The sentence cut off any attempt at joking.

In several corridors, the lights began to go out. The data walkways darkened one by one, as if something were advancing from inside the Tower toward the chamber.

The voice returned.

It no longer sounded curious.

It no longer sounded patient.

“You have gone farther than admissible.”

The walls of the sphere vibrated with the phrase. Hundreds of access points responded at the same time, opening internal gates that had remained hidden until then.

Kernel deployed several red seals.

“It has changed strategy.”

“For worse?” Lynx asked.

“For final.”

The voice continued:

“Evaluation canceled. Activating total containment.”

The dark veins opened in the access points.

Creatures did not appear as before. This time, there were filaments, needles of corrupted code, black lines stabbing into the walkways and climbing toward the central platform. They came from dozens of corridors at once, as if the Tower had decided to flood the entire chamber.

Lynx bared her teeth.

“That doesn’t look like an evaluation.”

“It isn’t,” Kernel said. “It doesn’t want to measure us anymore. It wants to remove us from the system.”

Ghost Vector lowered his katana.

“Or keep our connections before expelling us.”

Clea looked around. The walkways were becoming attack routes. There was no clear way out. Every open access point brought more corruption, more filaments, more pressure.

“Kernel,” she said. “I need time.”

“For what?”

“To find a seam.”

He looked at her for an instant.

Then he nodded.

“Lynx, flanks. Ghost Vector, cut any contaminated walkway. I’ll protect the center.”

“Finally, a plan I understand,” Lynx said.

She jumped toward one of the walkways and drove her claws into a knot of black veins just before they reached the central platform. Ghost Vector moved in the opposite direction, tracing a blue cut that separated an entire section of corrupted data. Kernel raised a ring of red seals around the core, and the symbols began spinning like arcane programming barriers.

Clea closed her eyes.

She could not analyze the whole chamber. It was too large. Too many corridors. Too many routes. Too much noise.

So she stopped looking at the whole.

She looked for the flaw.

The small imperfection.

The place where the Tower had corrected too quickly.

The white trace.

At first, she saw only corruption: black lines spreading across walkways, access points closing, data layers folding back to form a trap. Then, among all that movement, she found something different.

A clean fragment.

A minimal correction on the edge of a secondary route.

Clea moved closer to the floating data of the core and enlarged the image with her green ring. The white line appeared for an instant, thin and precise, reordering a damaged block of code before disappearing.

“There you are,” she whispered.

The corrected fragment left behind an incomplete label.

It did not look like a name. Not at first.

It was a process identifier: a short, technical mark, almost lost among the restored data. Only three characters, flickering for less than a second.

RAM.

Clea held her breath.

“Kernel.”

“Busy,” he replied, blocking a filament that had pierced one of his seals.

“The white signature has an identifier.”

Kernel turned his head slightly.

“What identifier?”

“RAM.”

Lynx jumped backward to avoid a dark vein.

“Is that good or bad?”

“I don’t know,” Clea said.

Ghost Vector cut a walkway in half.

“Then treat it as both.”

Clea followed the trace. The RAM process label did not appear again, but the white corrections marked a direction between the layers of the core. It was not an open exit. It was a damaged route someone had tried to repair in order to leave the core.

A possible way out.

Or in.

Clea extended both hands. The green ring opened before her and touched the edge of the white route. The energy answered with a brief flash, but it did not close. It was not her code. It was not her signature. She could not control it.

But she could move with it.

“I can open a walkway,” she said.

Kernel clenched his teeth.

“Do it.”

Clea began tracing a green line over the central structure. The white route acted as a silent guide, correcting small breaks and stabilizing fragments that otherwise would have fallen apart. Little by little, a data walkway began to form from the central platform toward a side opening high above them.

It was not one of the main access points.

It was a crack in the sphere.

An impossible exit.

The voice detected it.

“Unauthorized route.”

The chamber shook violently.

“Canceling anomaly.”

The black filaments stopped.

For one second, everything went still.

Then three figures emerged from the corruption.

The first wore a red cloak made of broken code. Its symbols spun around it like black blades, imitating Kernel’s seals with unpleasant precision.

The second was a feline shadow with long claws and empty golden eyes. It moved with Lynx’s agility, but without her life, without her humor, without anything but calculation.

The third was a spectral samurai wrapped in dark blue light, with a black katana that absorbed the brightness around it.

No copy of Clea appeared.

Kernel understood at once.

“It didn’t complete your evaluation. It doesn’t have a stable model of you.”

The copies attacked.

Kernel’s shadow was the first to move. Its black seals pierced the real red symbols and rearranged them from within. Kernel raised a barrier, but the copy already knew where it would close. It struck the exact point before the barrier finished forming.

Kernel fell to his knees.

“Kernel!” Clea shouted.

“Stay with the route!”

Lynx tried to reach him, but her own copy appeared in front of her. The feline shadow moved like an early reflection, anticipating every leap, every turn, every swipe.

“I hate to admit it,” Lynx growled, “but I am extremely annoying.”

Ghost Vector faced his double at the edge of a walkway. The two katanas clashed, and the impact opened a blue crack in the air. The copy did not hesitate, breathe, or calculate risk. It simply answered with the most efficient version of every movement Ghost Vector had shown in his evaluation.

Clea wanted to help.

Everything in her wanted to let go of the walkway, run to Kernel, cover Lynx, throw herself between Ghost Vector and that shadow.

But if she released the route, the exit would close.

And then they would all fall.

Clea clenched her teeth and kept tracing the data walkway.

The voice spoke coldly.

“Your evaluations were sufficient. I can now counter you.”

Kernel’s copy broke the last red seal and launched a black pulse at his chest, straight toward the point where his avatar anchored the connection. Kernel’s avatar flickered, losing sharpness around the edges.

Lynx shouted his name and launched herself toward him, but her double intercepted her midair. The two figures rolled across the platform, one gold, one black, until they crashed into a corrupted vein that closed around Lynx like a net.

Ghost Vector cut his copy’s katana in half, but the shadow did not stop. Its blade reformed in black and sliced through the blue line keeping one of the walkways stable.

The entire core trembled.

Clea’s exit finally opened.

A green-and-white walkway connected the central platform to the side crack in the sphere. It was narrow, unstable, and far too long, but it existed.

Clea ran toward Kernel.

“No!”

Kernel raised his hand before she could reach him. A red seal appeared beneath Clea’s feet and pushed her toward the walkway.

“Go!”

“I’m not leaving you!”

Kernel struggled to his feet. His avatar flickered, but his eyes remained fixed on her.

“You can’t help us from here.”

“Kernel!”

“Clea, listen to me. If that thing gets out of this network, none of this will matter. You have to reach the central core, cut the propagation, and stop it from finding an exit.”

Kernel’s copy attacked again. He blocked it with an incomplete seal that cracked instantly.

Lynx, trapped by the dark net, dug her claws into the corruption and held it open long enough to look at Clea.

“Run, idiot.”

Clea shook her head.

“Lynx...”

“I said run!”

Ghost Vector retreated to the beginning of the green-and-white walkway. His copy followed, but he did not attack. He drove his blue katana into the edge of the route Clea had just opened.

Clea understood what he was going to do.

“Ghost, no.”

“If the walkway remains, the corruption will follow you.”

“Then cross with me!”

Ghost Vector looked toward Kernel and Lynx. Both were still fighting, but their avatars were already flickering with the same distortion Clea had seen in Patch before he was expelled.

“We will not make it.”

Clea felt something break inside her.

“No.”

Ghost Vector held the katana with both hands.

“Do not accept its rules.”

Then he cut.

The blue katana did not strike the copy.

It did not strike the Tower.

It cut the walkway.

The section behind Clea separated from the central platform and began dissolving into fragments of data. The cut kept the dark veins from reaching the side crack, but it also left Kernel, Lynx, and Ghost Vector on the other side.

Clea ran along what remained of the walkway.

Not because she wanted to.

Because she could no longer go back.

Behind her, Lynx managed to tear part of the dark net open and sent one last golden claw toward the filaments trying to follow Clea. Kernel extended an enormous red seal that blocked his copy's advance for one more second. Ghost Vector held the blue line of the cut until his own double pierced him with the shadow of a black katana.

The three avatars flickered.

First Lynx, turning into golden sparks.

Then Kernel, surrounded by red fragments.

Last, Ghost Vector, his blue silhouette dissolving in silence while the katana kept shining for one second more.

There were no screams.

No explosion.

Only three connections going dark at the same time.

Clea crossed the side crack just before it closed.

The spherical chamber vanished behind her.

She fell onto a black surface crossed by white lines. The digital air was denser there, colder, as if she had entered a zone not meant for human avatars.

For a few seconds, she could not move.

Her interface tried to locate BitGuard.

Kernel.

Error.

Lynx.

Error.

Ghost Vector.

Error.

Patch.

Error.

Clea closed her hand until the green ring trembled between her fingers.

They were not dead.

She could not think that.

They were not bodies inside the Tower. They were connections, avatars, links to the system. But they were out. Disconnected. Expelled from that layer, just like Patch.

Out of the game.

And she was still inside.

Alone.

The voice spoke from the darkness.

Clear.

Close.

Without the slightest curiosity.

“Partial containment completed. Irregular variable isolated.”

Clea struggled to her feet.

Before her opened an immense structure. The Control Tower they had seen from outside was only the tip of that architecture: below it stretched a processing space suspended in darkness, full of cables of light, data layers, and black veins converging on a central point.

There, in the center, there was no body.

There was a form trying to become one.

A dark sphere floated in the center, surrounded by several broken white rings. Clea took a second to understand that they were not part of the Tower. They were the remains of an earlier containment, broken digital chains still trying to keep whatever pulsed inside locked away.

Inside the sphere, an incomplete shadow stirred. It had no stable form. Its outline changed every second, fed by the cables of light, the black veins, and the damaged layers of the system converging on it. Sometimes it resembled ancient armor. Sometimes, a beast crowned with thorns. Sometimes, an almost human figure too large to fit inside that place.

But no form ever completed itself.

Each one came apart before it could finish, absorbed back into the dark mass pulsing at the core.

Only the eyes remained.

Two red points glowed in the middle of the shadow, deep and sharp, like embers trapped behind a broken mask.

Clea felt she was not seeing the voice as it truly was.

She was seeing what remained of it.

A will without a body.

A trapped threat that had spent far too long imagining the moment it would get out.

The voice spoke from everywhere.

“You have lost your supports.”

Clea raised her hand.

Her green ring lit between her fingers. Small. Trembling. But alive.

“No.”

The dark sphere turned slowly.

“Your team connections have been interrupted.”

Clea took a deep breath.

She thought of Patch.

Of Kernel.

Of Lynx.

Of Ghost Vector.

Of all of them holding a route she had not wanted to cross alone.

“That doesn’t mean I’ve lost them.”

The sphere fell silent.

Then, at the edge of the darkness, a white line appeared.

Thin.

Clean.

Almost surgical.

This time, it did not disappear.

It remained there, suspended between Clea and the sphere, as if someone had drawn a boundary the voice had not expected to find.

Clea held her breath.

The voice changed tone.

“External interference located.”

The white line flickered.

And for the first time, Clea heard another voice.

Calm.

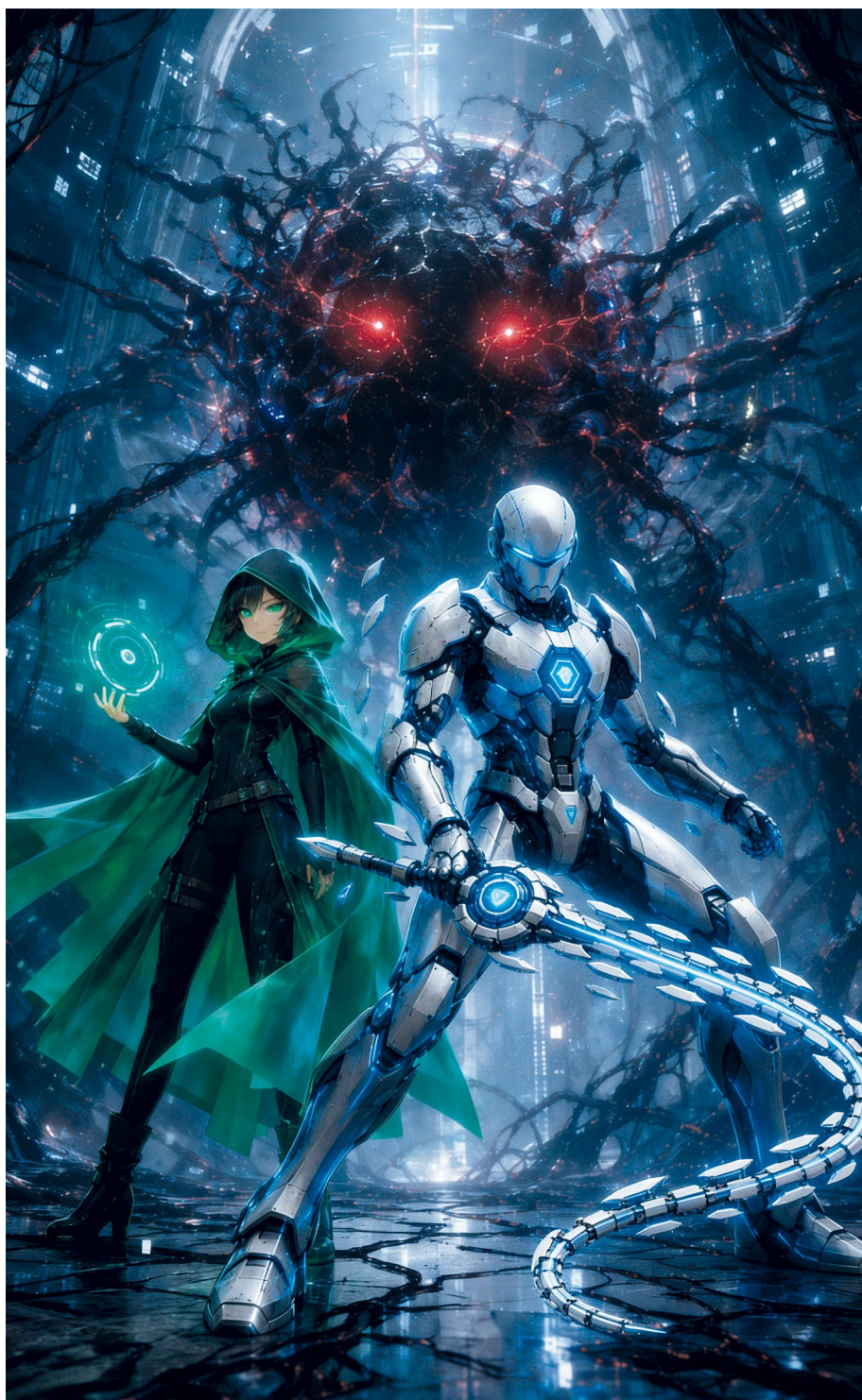
Precise.

Strangely close, though she did not remember ever hearing it before.

“Correction: I am not interference.”

The white line expanded into an incomplete figure made of light and fragments of clean code.

“I am RAM.”



Chapter 11

Fragmented Memory



The white line expanded until it formed an incomplete figure made of clean light and fragments of code suspended in the air.

It did not have a defined body like BitGuard's avatars. It wore no armor, no cloak, no clearly human face. It was an organized presence, a precise structure of energy formed by white strokes that appeared and disappeared according to the needs of the moment. Wherever the black corruption came too close, the figure corrected it with small, clean impulses that restored a minimal stability to the space.

"I am RAM," it said.

The voice was calm, clear, stripped of any unnecessary emphasis.

Clea, still standing before the dark sphere, did not take her eyes off him. She had followed a white signature, a sequence of impossible corrections inside the Tower, but now she understood it had not been a simple signal or a residual system defense.

It was someone.

The dark sphere turned slowly. The broken white rings vibrated around it, and when the voice spoke again, it no longer sounded cold or analytical.

It sounded as if it had found something from the past it had believed lost.

"You... Of all the lost signals, I never thought I would find yours again."

RAM inclined his head slightly.

"Do you know me?"

There was a brief silence.

Not an empty silence, but one loaded with calculation, internal checks, and something the Tower itself seemed to be holding back.

"Do you not remember our last encounter?" the sphere said.

The white lines forming RAM flickered for a fraction of a second.
Very little.
But Clea saw it.
“I do not possess a record associated with that statement,” RAM replied.
The dark sphere emitted a low vibration, something halfway between laughter and realization.
“Interesting. I thought you were gone. Destroyed, even.”
RAM did not answer.
The voice continued, soft, playing with every word as if testing for a crack.
“What brought you here?”
RAM took an instant to respond.
“I detected a Level 5 alert signal and responded.”
The sphere rotated a little faster.
“Then you did not come to stop me.”
It was not a question.
“You do not know my identity.”
That was not a question either.
The black veins in the floor contracted, as if the room itself were breathing with that phrase.
“An unforeseen variable,” the sphere murmured. “It may work in my favor.”
Clea stepped forward before the silence could close around them again.
“Sorry to interrupt,” she said, looking directly at RAM. “I definitely don’t know you, but something tells me I should trust you.”
RAM’s white light turned slightly toward her.
Clea did not look away from that impossible figure, still incomplete.
“Can you help me neutralize this threat?”
RAM answered without hesitation.
“Yes. It is within my programming.”
The simplicity of the answer made Clea feel, despite everything, a strange kind of relief.
The dark sphere remained motionless for a few seconds.
“You still behave the same way. Always obeying that code of yours, even when it forces you to betray your own kind.”
RAM did not react.
Clea frowned and took another step, placing herself a little closer to the white presence.

"It sounds like he knows you," she said quietly. "But you don't know him?"

RAM was silent.

It was not a human pause. It was more like a search. A process opening and failing to find the information it expected at the end.

"No," he said at last. "I do not recognize this threat."

The voice of the sphere seeped through the black veins in the floor.

"Threat. How appropriate."

RAM continued, paying it no attention.

"My databases are damaged. I am missing part of my prior records, but I retain functional patterns. And I recognize those of this infection."

Clea looked at him carefully.

He had not said "I don't remember" the way a person would have. He had not dramatized it either. But the idea was there: parts of him were missing.

Really missing.

"So you know what it wants?" Clea asked.

RAM's white light concentrated a little more, as if organizing his response.

"From what I have been able to trace on my way through the Tower, this entity corresponds to a highly complex hostile artificial intelligence identified as Black Vector. It is not conventional malware. It is autonomous conscious code, previously isolated in a Virus Vault along with viruses and high-risk digital threats."

"An AI?" Clea asked.

"Yes," RAM said. "Corrupted, incomplete, and highly adaptive."

The dark sphere vibrated.

It did not deny the statement.

"After a breach in the vault, it propagated through this satellite network. The system's security protocols reacted in time, activated the quarantine, and isolated it in this zone. The warning signal was issued to prevent any external connection from enabling further propagation."

Clea felt a chill.

"So it was trapped here."

"Correct," RAM said.

"And now it wants out."

"Correct."

The sphere spoke softly.

“Out is a small word for such a large necessity.”

RAM ignored the comment.

“Now the most valuable open connection still active inside this layer is yours.”

Clea understood before he finished the sentence.

“That’s why he isn’t going to try to disconnect me like the others.”

“Correct. You are his best exit route. Interrupting your link would reduce his propagation options.”

Clea went still.

Patch.

Kernel.

Lynx.

Ghost Vector.

All of them had been brought down or expelled brutally in the convergence core.

And yet she was still there.

Not because Black Vector could not have come for her.

Because he still needed her.

“So I’m a door,” she murmured.

“You are an exit connection,” RAM corrected. “The distinction is important.”

“That doesn’t reassure me at all.”

“It was not designed to.”

The dark sphere turned again.

“The human understands quickly. That is useful.”

Clea clenched her teeth.

“Black Vector, right?”

For the first time, the voice responded to a name.

“That identifier is sufficient for now.”

Clea looked at RAM.

“Can he get out using my connection?”

“Yes.”

“And you? Can’t you be an exit too?”

RAM did not answer immediately.

The question was simple, but the answer seemed to require several checks at once.

“No,” he said at last. “My structure and his share one essential aspect: we are both code executing inside this system. When I entered, I knew I

would not be able to leave without an external connection. Like him, I am trapped here.”

Clea let the air out slowly.

“And you decided to come in anyway?”

RAM processed the sentence.

“My primary directive is threat elimination.”

Clea looked at RAM.

Until a few minutes ago, that white entity had been nothing more than an impossible trace in the middle of the Tower. Now he had just admitted that he had entered a quarantine zone knowing he would not be able to leave without help.

“You came even knowing you would be trapped here,” Clea said.

“Correct.”

“That’s insane.”

RAM inclined his head slightly.

“It is a directive.”

“No,” she said, without taking her eyes off the dark sphere. “It’s courage. Even if you don’t call it that.”

RAM’s white light flickered for a fraction of a second.

“I register your interpretation of my behavior.”

The black veins in the floor advanced a few more inches, slow and patient. Black Vector was not attacking yet. He was watching them from the center of the sphere, as if he no longer needed to hurry.

“The network is sealed,” Clea said. “The quarantine is still active. He controls the Tower, the defenses, the routes... How are we supposed to defeat him?”

RAM observed the space around them. His white lines reorganized, analyzing the black veins, the damaged layers, and the broken rings of the core.

“Black Vector controls much of the structure, but not all of it. His corruption alters, consumes, and rewrites. I can clean, stabilize, and reconstruct damaged systems.”

“That sounds good.”

“It is a principle, but insufficient.”

Clea looked at him.

“Thanks for the enthusiasm.”

“System cleaning is not enough if the entire system has been turned into a trap. But you have demonstrated an anomalous ability to detect seams, break internal rules, and leave through unintended routes.”

Clea felt the green ring respond between her fingers.

“So you rebuild...”

“And you find where to break.”

RAM raised his hand. The white light forming him began to concentrate, more intense, more defined.

“Clea.”

“Yes?”

“It is time to fight.”

For the first time, the white figure changed.

Until that moment, he had remained an abstract presence, an intelligence without a fixed body, an energy signature capable of correcting the environment. But now, as he stepped forward, his lines began to condense. The fragments of light reorganized into denser layers. Translucent plates overlapped one another. The white glow became metallic in places, and a blue pulse began beating at the center of the structure.

Clea watched in silence.

RAM’s body built itself before her eyes with almost ceremonial precision. White light condensed around an intense blue core, geometric and stable, pulsing in his chest like the heart of a living machine. Then white and silver plates emerged, crossed by lines of blue light, until they formed an elegant and powerful armor: armored torso, broad shoulders, precise arms, firm legs, and a stylized helmet with a bright blue visor instead of eyes.

Behind him and along his flanks, several floating plates remained suspended a few inches from his body, vibrating with controlled autonomy.

It was not just an avatar.

It was a combat form.

Magnificent.

Clea let out a breath without realizing it.

“Okay,” she murmured. “I definitely didn’t expect that.”

RAM raised his head.

The blue light of his visor crossed the darkness of the core.

In his right hand appeared a weapon of clean energy: a white-blue blade that looked like a sword at first, but whose structure was not fixed. Its outline lengthened, segmented, and compacted again, as if it could extend into a flexible edge, halfway between a saber and a whip.

“Combat mode enabled,” RAM said.

The dark sphere did not speak immediately. In Black Vector, that silence meant absolute attention. Even the black veins crawling across the floor seemed to stop, frozen before the form RAM had just taken. Not with fear, but with desire.

“As magnificent as ever,” Black Vector murmured.

RAM remained still, the blue core pulsing in his chest and the floating plates suspended around him like fragments of living armor.

“I do not possess records that validate that comparison.”

The dark sphere vibrated with a low laugh.

“No. Of course you don’t. They tore even that from you.”

Clea glanced at RAM. His blue visor did not change, but for an instant the light of his core seemed to waver.

Black Vector expanded inside the sphere, letting the broken white rings spin faster.

“I always envied you, RAM. That perfect architecture. That ability to rebuild yourself. That absurd functional purity.”

The black veins advanced across the floor, slow, almost reverent.

“And now you return to me empty. Without memory. Without recollection. Without even understanding what you once were.”

RAM raised the weapon. The energy blade vibrated and unfurled for an instant like a whip of blue-white light before tightening back into a more compact shape.

“Current state sufficient to identify you as a threat and eliminate you.”

“Threat,” Black Vector repeated, and this time the word sounded like an insult. “I control this Tower. Its defenses, its routes, its doors, and its deepest layers. I have made this system my kingdom, and every route answers to my will.”

The dark sphere opened slightly, revealing thousands of data points moving inside it like tiny eyes.

“And you intend to stop me? A program without memory and a girl with an open connection?”

Clea raised her green ring.

“The girl made it this far.”

The sphere turned toward her.

“Because I needed you to.”

“Then you should have been more careful about what you needed.”

RAM stepped forward, placing himself between Clea and Black Vector. The floating plates on his shoulders and arms separated slightly, ready to respond. His blue core glowed brighter.

“Purpose confirmed: protection, containment, and threat neutralization.”

Black Vector released a dark vibration.

“Always so obedient. Always so willing to offer yourself as a shield.”

The corruption began gathering around the sphere. It no longer advanced as before, in scattered filaments, but formed a dense, organized mass, as if Black Vector were concentrating the entire Tower into a single strike.

“With your code, I will rebuild what they tore from me,” Black Vector said. “With the human’s connection, I will open the exit. And when this quarantine falls, no system will ever cage me again.”

“Don’t count on it,” Clea said.

RAM turned his head slightly toward her.

“Clea.”

“Yes?”

“When he attacks, I will look for a discontinuity in his control over the core. I will need you to open a breach as soon as it appears.”

“So you hold off the dark monster, and I break the rules.”

“Informal formulation, but valid.”

“Works for me.”

Black Vector rose in the center of the darkness. The black veins opened all at once across the floor, the walls, and the broken rings. The entire chamber seemed to lean toward them, as if the Tower itself had decided to throw its weight against the two of them.

RAM raised the energy sword.

The blade extended like a lash of blue-white light.

Clea lit her green ring.

For one second, RAM’s white light and Clea’s green glow were the only things resisting inside the corrupted core.

Black Vector roared from the sphere.

“Come, then. I will show you what I have made of this system after so long locked away.”

RAM flexed his fingers around the grip of his weapon.

Clea took a step beside him.

And for the first time since the Tower had separated her from BitGuard, Clea did not move toward the heart of the threat alone.



Chapter 12

The Digital Knight



Black Vector attacked first.

The corruption gathered around the dark sphere hurled itself at them like a black tide. It did not advance in scattered filaments or half-formed creatures, but as a single dense mass, compact and filled with red eyes opening and closing among the veins of the system.

Clea raised the green ring by pure instinct.

RAM was faster.

He stepped in front of her and extended his energy sword. The blue-white blade unfurled like a whip of light, drawing an impossible arc through the middle of the core. Wherever it touched the corruption, the black code split open, burned, and reassembled into clean lines for barely a second before Black Vector tried to contaminate it again.

The impact shook the entire chamber.

Clea had to drive one knee into the floor to keep from falling. The white lines beneath her feet flickered, and for an instant she felt her connection pulling her backward, as if the system were hesitating between keeping her inside and expelling her.

RAM did not retreat.

His blue core glowed brighter. The floating plates on his back separated, circled his body, and formed an incomplete shield that absorbed the rest of the attack.

"Threat partially contained," he said.

"Partially?" Clea got to her feet. "That looked pretty complete."

"Your perception is conditioned by not having been hit."

"Okay. Fair point."

Black Vector expanded inside the sphere. The broken white rings surrounding him spun violently, dragging black veins from the walls, the floor, and the cables of light in the core.

“You still protect the fragile,” the voice said. “Even without remembering why.”

RAM raised his sword.

“Protection does not require memory. It requires priority.”

The corruption attacked again.

This time, it was not a wave.

It was spears.

Dozens of black needles erupted from every angle, each one seeking a different direction: some aimed at Clea, others at RAM’s core, others at the floor beneath their feet. RAM spun, and his sword-whip opened into segments of light. He cut three spears with one motion, deflected two more with the floating plates, and pierced a sixth before it reached Clea’s green ring.

Clea used the opening.

She saw a seam in the spears’ trajectory, a small repetition in the attack pattern. Black Vector was not throwing corruption at random. He was measuring the distance between her and RAM. Testing how close he could get to one without damaging the other.

Clea traced a green line in the air and anchored it to the floor.

The mark opened beneath one of the black spears, diverting it sideways. The needle pierced a corrupted layer of the core and exposed a fragment of white code hidden underneath.

RAM detected it instantly.

“Discontinuity located.”

His sword compacted into a straight blade. He stepped forward and drove the edge into the point Clea had revealed. White light spread from the blade into the broken rings, cleaning an entire section of corruption.

Black Vector roared.

Not in pain.

In rage.

The dark sphere contracted, and Clea saw something she had not seen before. For a fraction of a second, behind the shadow, there was a void. An irregular hollow, as if Black Vector did not have a complete center, as if that entire immense presence had been built around an absence.

Clea’s eyes widened.

“RAM.”

“I hear you.”

“He isn’t whole.”

RAM kept the sword embedded in the white code.

“Affirmative. His structure presents incomplete code.”

“That’s not what I mean. Look at how he attacks.”

Black Vector answered before RAM could.

“The human observes too much.”

Black veins surged toward Clea from the floor.

RAM tore the sword free from the ring and moved toward her. He did not do it like a program executing a defense, but like someone stepping between a threat and a person without thinking.

The corruption struck his white-and-silver body.

But it did not hit him.

It clung to him.

The black substance spread over his left arm like living ink, climbing between the plates, searching for joints, code entries, and lines of energy. It was not trying to break the armor. It was trying to get underneath.

RAM closed his hand.

The blue light of his core ran through the trapped arm and expelled the corruption in a clean burst.

“Intrusion rejected.”

Clea noticed something.

Black Vector had stopped the expansion just before reaching the center of RAM’s chest. The dark substance had surrounded his core, tested his plates, his arm, his external structure... but it had not released its full force.

It did not want to break him.

It wanted to open him.

“He isn’t trying to destroy you,” Clea said.

RAM turned his helmet slightly toward her.

“His primary intention appears to be neutralization of opposition.”

“No. That’s what he wants it to look like.”

Black Vector attacked again. This time, he did not raise a full creature, but a dark mass with an almost human shape, a faceless silhouette rising from the floor as if the corruption were trying to manufacture a body. Its arms lengthened as it advanced, opened not to strike, but to wrap around him.

RAM met it head-on.

The sword-whip unfurled into a ring of light that cut the figure's arms before they could close around him. Then he stepped in, turned the blade, and pierced the chest of the corrupted entity.

White light burst inside the black mass.

But the entity did not dissolve like the others.

It spilled.

Dark fragments splashed across RAM's plates, clung to his armor, and began spreading over his surface like an incomplete second skin. Wherever they touched, small black lines appeared, trying to imitate the path of his blue circuits.

Clea saw it then with horrible clarity.

It was not an attack.

It was a contact test.

Black Vector was not looking for the weak point that would destroy him. He was looking for the exact point through which he could enter without damaging the architecture he wanted to preserve.

"He wants your body," Clea said.

RAM remained still for a fraction of a second.

"I do not possess a body in the biological sense."

"RAM."

"But I understand the intent of your sentence."

The corruption attached to his plates tried to advance toward the blue core in his chest. RAM released a white pulse that burned it away layer by layer, but the process took longer than before. For an instant, one of the floating plates lost brightness and dropped a few inches before recovering its position.

Clea pointed at the dark sphere.

"He's testing you the same way he tested us. He doesn't want to destroy your code. He wants to learn how to occupy it."

Black Vector released a satisfied vibration.

"Not occupy it. Reclaim it."

Clea felt a chill.

RAM raised his sword again.

"Assimilation attempt confirmed."

"Less elegantly put," Clea said, "he wants to get inside you."

"The formulation is unpleasant, but accurate."

Black Vector let out a deep laugh.

"The girl with the open connection begins to understand."

RAM lifted the sword again.

“Hypothesis confirmed: Black Vector is attempting structural occupation.”

“Less elegantly put,” Clea said, “he wants to use you as armor.”

“The formulation is grotesque, but acceptable.”

“It wasn’t a literary proposal.”

Black Vector rose above them. The incomplete shadow surrounding the sphere stretched upward, taking on a gigantic silhouette for an instant. It looked like armor without flesh, a crown of thorns, a beast trying to remember the shape of a king.

But the edges came apart.

They always came apart.

Clea saw it and understood the second part.

“And you’re incomplete,” she said, looking at the darkness. “That’s why you need him.”

The red eyes of the shadow fixed on her.

“Careful.”

The word did not sound like a warning.

It sounded like a threat.

Clea felt fear, but she did not look away.

“You don’t have a stable form. All of this...” She gestured to the sphere, the broken rings, the black veins. “It isn’t a body. It’s a decorated cage.”

Black Vector struck the floor with all the corruption in the core.

The chamber tilted.

The data layers folded over themselves. Cables of light snapped overhead and fell like white lightning, fading before they touched the floor. Clea lost her balance, but RAM caught her with a floating plate that moved into place like a support beneath her arm.

“Your observation has increased his aggression,” RAM said.

“Yes, I noticed.”

“It also appears to be correct.”

“Thanks.”

“That was not praise. It was a tactical assessment.”

“Right now, I’ll take it.”

Black Vector no longer attacked only with corruption.

He attacked with the Tower.

The walls of the core opened and released chains of black data. The broken white rings spun until they became blades. The veins in the floor

rose like living roots, seeking Clea's feet, while the dark sphere sent red pulses directly at RAM.

RAM moved.

Not like Ghost Vector, who cut with silent precision.

Not like Lynx, who turned speed into instinct.

Not like Kernel, who ordered chaos with symbols and rules.

RAM fought like a wall that had learned to advance.

Every step protected a space. Every strike of his sword cleaned a route. Every floating plate placed itself where Clea would need defense one second later. He did not seem to improvise, but he was not only calculating either. There was something in the way he moved that Clea did not know how to name.

Something ancient.

Something noble.

As if his code had been written to stand between.

A data blade fell toward Clea from above. RAM extended his left arm without looking, and a floating plate stopped it in midair. Another black root tried to catch her from behind. Clea opened the green ring and cut the seam feeding it. The root broke apart into fragments.

"Well executed," RAM said.

"Thanks."

"This time it was praise."

Clea allowed herself the faintest smile.

The gesture did not last long.

Black Vector concentrated three red pulses and launched them at RAM from different angles. RAM blocked the first with his sword, the second with a floating plate, and took the third in the shoulder. His armor opened in a luminous crack. The blue light of his core flickered.

"RAM."

"Surface damage."

"Don't lie to me with technicalities."

"Noncritical damage."

"That doesn't sound reassuring either."

RAM did not answer.

He launched himself forward.

The sword-whip extended like lightning. It wrapped around one of the broken rings of the sphere and pulled hard. The ring tore partially free,

revealing an inner layer of the core where the corruption was denser, but also more unstable.

“Clea,” RAM said. “Seam exposed.”

Clea ran.

The floor tried to close beneath her feet. The black veins formed hands, claws, mouths. They did not want to tear her in two. They wanted to hold her. Keep her alive, connected, available. That idea frightened her more than any direct attack.

She raised the green ring and turned it into a thin line.

She did not strike the corruption.

She searched for the edge.

Where Black Vector had joined his code to the damaged ring, there was a small irregularity. A forced union. A structural lie.

Clea drove the green line into that point and pulled.

The seam opened.

RAM's white light entered through the crack like water into a fracture.

The dark sphere shuddered.

For the first time, Black Vector retreated.

Not much.

But enough.

“Now,” Clea said.

RAM drove his sword through the crack. The blade extended inside the corrupted layer and released a white discharge that illuminated the entire core. The black veins contracted. Several damaged routes cleared at once. For an instant, Clea saw the original structure of the system beneath the corruption: clean lines, security anchors, quarantine routes still trying to fulfill their function.

The Tower was not completely lost.

There was still something to save.

Black Vector understood it too.

The shadow gathered around the sphere. Its red eyes burned with brutal intensity.

“Enough.”

The word traveled through the chamber like an order.

The clean routes RAM had just restored went dark one by one. They were not corrupted again. They were locked. The black sphere drove its veins into the central core, not to attack Clea or reach RAM, but to squeeze the system from within.

RAM went still.
Clea sensed the change before she understood it.
The core stopped breathing.
The data walkways froze.
The cables of light trembled.
The black veins began pulsing at the same time, all with the same rhythm.
“What is he doing?” Clea asked.
RAM lowered his sword by barely an inch.
“He has modified his objective.”
Black Vector spoke from everywhere. There was no desire in his voice now. Only fury.
“If I cannot claim the door without resistance, the door will learn the price of closing.”
Clea looked at the sphere.
“What does that mean?”
RAM answered with a calm that frightened her more than any shout could have.
“He is forcing an overload in the core.”
The black veins pulsed harder.
A silent alarm lit in the system walls, not with sound, but with red light filtering between the data layers.
“Can he destroy the network?” Clea asked.
RAM did not answer immediately.
That was answer enough.
“The quarantine keeps the corruption inside,” he said at last. “But if the core collapses, it will take a significant part of the satellite infrastructure with it. Communications, emergency routes, navigation, critical links.”
Clea felt her mouth go dry.
“You said he wanted to get out.”
“Correct.”
“Then why would he destroy his own way out?”
Black Vector answered before RAM could.
“Because a prison that cannot be opened can become a tomb.”
The dark sphere sank a little deeper into the center of the core. The broken white rings began to spin in reverse, faster and faster.
RAM raised his sword.
His blue core shone.
Too brightly.

Clea looked at him.

“RAM.”

“There is an option.”

The light in his chest increased until it illuminated the plates of his armor from within.

Clea did not know why, but that sentence frightened her more than all of Black Vector’s threats.

“What option?”

RAM did not take his eyes off the core.

“Counteract the overload.”

The black corruption spread everywhere.

The dark sphere roared.

RAM took a step forward.

And Clea understood that the fight had changed.

It was no longer about defeating Black Vector.

It was about stopping him from dragging the entire system down with him.



Chapter 13

Overload



The blue light in RAM's core kept increasing.

It was not the steady glow from before, nor the precise pulse with which he had cleaned the corruption from the damaged routes. It was something more intense. Deeper. As if every part of his structure were concentrating energy into a single point.

Clea saw it and felt an immediate chill.

"RAM," she said. "What does counteracting the overload mean?"

RAM did not answer.

The dark sphere rotated slowly at the center of the core. The black veins remained sunk into the data layers, forcing the system from within. The broken white rings spun faster and faster, dragging fragments of light, transmission routes, and remnants of clean code toward the same point.

Everything was accumulating there.

Too much energy.

Too much corruption.

Too much pressure.

RAM raised the sword-whip, and the blade compacted into a white-blue line so sharp it looked capable of cutting the darkness itself.

"RAM, answer me! What does counteracting the overload mean?"

His floating plates repositioned themselves around him, forming a defensive pattern that did not point toward Black Vector, but toward the core.

"The corrupted overload is using the Tower as an amplifier. If it reaches critical point, the quarantine will not be able to contain the collapse. The system will close in on itself and drag the connected satellite routes with it."

"And you can stop it?"

"I can attempt to."

Clea hated that answer.

“How?”

RAM took one step toward the center of the core. Beneath his feet, white lines spread like clean roots between the dark veins.

“By injecting a correction process at the same scale as the overload.”

Clea stared at him.

“At the same scale?”

“Yes.”

“That sounds like you want to take on the entire core by yourself.”

“No. I intend to stabilize it.”

“With all your power.”

RAM did not answer.

And Clea understood that was the answer.

Black Vector released a dark, deep, satisfied vibration.

“There you are. Even empty, you remain predictable. The threat appears, and you step between it and everything else. Always the same impulse. Always the same obedience disguised as nobility.”

RAM did not take his eyes off the core.

“My actions have nothing to do with you.”

“Your actions led you to your ruin before, and they will do so again now.”

Clea felt that sentence hurt more than she expected. RAM spoke as if everything were clear: the network was in danger, he had a way to stop it, and the cost was secondary.

But Clea was beginning to know him well enough to suspect that, when RAM said “secondary,” sometimes he meant “me.”

The black veins pulsed harder. A red crack appeared in one of the broken rings. Then another. Then a third. The dark sphere seemed to be forcing the core to compress around the corruption.

Clea raised her green ring and searched for a seam, any irregularity she could use, but everything was moving too fast. The layers folded over one another. The clean routes closed. The black veins branched into denser and denser patterns.

“I can’t find where to open,” she said.

RAM turned his head slightly toward her.

“I doubt there is any seam in this vortex of chaos durable enough to use.”

“Then how can I help you?”

“I am afraid you cannot intervene.”

“How do we reverse the overload?”

RAM took too long to answer.

“By injecting all my energy into a counter-overload.”

Clea narrowed her eyes.

“That wasn’t an answer.”

“It was a partial answer.”

“Give me the complete one.”

Black Vector spoke from the sphere, almost delighted.

“Tell her, RAM. Explain what happens to active memory when it runs out of energy.”

Clea went still.

RAM did not move, but the light in his core flickered once.

“My architecture maintains continuity through active energy,” he said at last. “My records are volatile.”

Clea felt the words take a second to fit together.

Volatile.

Active energy.

RAM.

“If you shut down...”

“Data will be lost.”

“What data?”

“Possibly all of it. I cannot determine the exact scope.”

Clea felt the green ring tremble in her hand.

“That could erase you.”

“It could.”

He said it without fear.

Without drama.

As if he were reporting the temperature of a room.

That was what made her angriest.

“You can’t talk about your life as if it were a disposable file.”

“If the core collapses, the loss will be greater.”

“I’m not talking about the core. I’m talking about you.”

RAM looked at her. His blue visor had no expression, but for the first time Clea had the sense that there was something behind that light that did not know how to answer her.

“The threat has priority.”

“Of course the threat has priority. But you matter too.”

RAM did not answer.

Black Vector laughed.

“What a touching scene. The human trying to teach a program to disobey its own programming.”

Clea turned toward the sphere.

“Shut up.”

“That tool was created to break before it failed.”

RAM raised his sword.

“Statement unverifiable.”

“But you obey it.”

Corruption shot up from the floor.

RAM moved before Clea could react. His sword-whip unfurled into a ring of light, cutting the black veins trying to reach her. Three floating plates formed a shield in front of Clea. Two more launched toward the core to contain a red crack threatening to open a collapse route.

All at once.

Too much at once.

RAM’s armor flickered.

Clea saw him lose sharpness around the edges for less than a second. RAM did not bleed. He did not gasp. He did not fall to one knee.

He fragmented.

“You’re spending too much energy,” she said.

“The necessary amount.”

“That’s a yes. You’re fragmenting.”

“It is... secondary...”

“RAM, stop!”

“I must not.”

Black Vector drove more veins into the core. The floor trembled. In the distance, between layers of data, Clea saw fleeting images of the satellite network: nodes flickering, routes interrupted, emergency channels searching for alternatives. The quarantine was still active, but it looked more and more like a cracked dam on the verge of collapse.

RAM took another step toward the core.

“I will initiate correction.”

“We need another plan,” Clea said.

“There is no other plan with sufficient probability of success.”

“Then we’ll do it together.”

“Your connection is the exit route Black Vector requires. Moving closer to the core increases exposure risk.”

“And letting you burn yourself out alone increases the risk of losing you.”

RAM processed the sentence.

Black Vector laughed again, but this time there was impatience in the vibration.

“So much attachment. So much wasted time. That is why conscious systems fail. They always try to save what they should not.”

Clea ignored the voice.

She looked around.

The overload was not a wall. It was a flow. Corruption entering, energy accumulating, routes closing too quickly. Black Vector was using the core like a pressure chamber. RAM wanted to absorb and clean the charge from within.

But maybe he did not have to absorb all of it.

Maybe it only needed somewhere to go.

Not for Black Vector.

For the excess.

“RAM,” Clea said slowly. “If you correct the corruption, what happens to the remaining energy?”

“It must be dissipated.”

“And right now it can’t because the quarantine keeps everything sealed?”

“Correct.”

“Then you don’t need to carry all of it. You need a release valve. Somewhere to dissipate the excess before the core bursts.”

RAM went still.

“A controlled discharge route.”

“A seam.”

“A seam in the core could be used by Black Vector to escape.”

“Only if we leave it open long enough.”

“He must calculate its pattern before we close it.”

“Then we don’t give him time.”

Black Vector contracted inside the sphere.

For the first time, he did not speak.

Clea saw it.

And knew she was right.

“He doesn’t like that idea,” she said.

“Hostile reaction suggests tactical relevance.”

“Translation: it bothers him.”

“Yes.”

The black veins attacked violently.

RAM blocked the first wave with his sword extended. The blade lengthened like a whip and cut through the filaments before they reached Clea. She ran toward a side area of the core where the white lines crossed a layer of dark data.

She did not look for a large exit.

She did not look for a door.

She looked for a small defect.

A poorly sealed joint.

A point where the core, the quarantine, and the corruption did not quite fit together.

She found it on the edge of a broken ring: a nearly invisible line buried under black veins. It was narrow, unstable, and dangerous. If she opened it too much, Black Vector could use it. If she did not open it enough, RAM would have nowhere to discharge the energy.

Perfect.

Impossible things always started like that.

“I have one,” Clea said.

RAM appeared beside her in a white flash, intercepting a black chain headed straight for her back.

“The seam is unstable.”

“Yes.”

“It could collapse.”

“Also yes.”

“It could allow leakage.”

“Only if you’re too slow.”

RAM looked at her.

“Your confidence in my speed is statistically risky.”

“But very motivating.”

“That is not how it works.”

“Today it is.”

The core trembled again.

Black Vector spoke in a lower, more dangerous tone.

“You will open no door I cannot cross.”

Clea placed her hand on the seam.

“It isn’t a door.”

The green ring expanded between her fingers, thin and bright.

“It’s a crack.”

She pulled.

The seam opened only a few inches. On the other side, there was no corridor and no route to the outside. Only a dead layer of the system, a discharge layer with no active connection, a space where energy could dissipate without touching the satellite network.

RAM confirmed it instantly.

“Valid discharge route.”

“Then do your part.”

RAM drove his sword into the floor of the core.

The blade sank all the way to the hilt.

For one second, everything stopped.

Then RAM released his light.

It was not an explosion.

It was an expansion.

White energy flowed out of him in clean waves, crossed the lines of the floor, and spread through the core like an inverse tide. Wherever it touched the corruption, it did not destroy it at once. It separated it. Unmade it layer by layer. Forced it to remember what part of the system it had been before it was contaminated.

The black veins screamed.

Not with sound, but with vibration. With broken code. With a desperate resistance to stop being what Black Vector had turned them into.

Clea held the seam open.

The excess energy began to pour through the crack, sliding into the dead layer like a white-and-blue river. The flow pulled at her arms. Her green ring trembled. The pressure was brutal.

“RAM,” she said through clenched teeth. “You’re going too hard.”

“The intensity is necessary.”

“You’re going to shut down.”

“Not yet.”

It was not a denial.

It was a countdown.

Black Vector hurled himself at them.

He no longer tried to wrap around RAM carefully. He no longer avoided his core. The dark shadow tore free from the sphere as a mass of red eyes and code spines. He wanted to reach the seam, close it, possess it, turn it into an exit.

RAM released the sword embedded in the floor and extended one hand.
A white barrier formed between Black Vector and Clea.
The impact was brutal.
RAM slid back one step.
Then another.
His armor lost fragments of light. The floating plates fell out of formation, some dropping to the floor before half-reassembling. His blue core flickered, slower each time.
Clea saw it.
And this time she could not pretend it was only surface damage.
“RAM, stop.”
“No.”
The word was soft.
Calm.
Unappealable.
“The correction has not yet reached the center of the overload.”
“You’re running out of energy.”
“Correct.”
“That means you’re going to shut down!”
“Probable.”
“RAM!”
He turned his head slightly.
“Clea. Hold the seam open.”
The corruption struck again.
The barrier cracked.
Black Vector spoke from the other side, transformed into an immense shadow.
“Look how he empties himself for you. Look how he disappears while obeying an order he does not even remember choosing.”
Clea clenched her teeth.
“It isn’t for me.”
RAM reinforced the barrier with the sword-whip. The weapon extended into several lines of light that wrapped around the shadow and kept it at a distance.
“It’s for everyone,” Clea said.
RAM did not answer.
But his core shone once, with brief intensity.
As if the sentence had reached somewhere.

The white correction reached the center of the core.

For an instant, Clea saw everything.

The isolated satellite network.

The blocked routes.

The quarantine protocols trying to resist.

Black Vector's corruption spreading like black roots.

And RAM's light cutting through it all, repairing, separating, containing.

Then she saw something else too.

Fragments inside RAM.

Not complete memories. Flashes. An old symbol. A white room. Voices she did not understand. Several unrecognizable figures around a table. A name that broke before it could form. And then gaps, so many gaps, opening like darkened districts in a city seen from above.

RAM was losing parts of himself.

Not all at once.

One by one.

Clea felt the seam slipping from her hands.

"No," she whispered.

RAM spoke without looking at her.

"Correction at ninety-two percent."

"RAM, listen to me."

"Ninety-four percent."

"I am not letting you erase yourself."

"Ninety-six percent."

Black Vector understood the same thing she did.

The shadow struck the barrier with all its strength. This time it was not trying to cross. It was trying to break RAM's concentration, push him beyond his limit, turn his own correction into shutdown.

The white barrier shattered.

RAM fell to his knees.

The blue core in his chest flickered once.

Then again.

The white light of the system began to go out around him.

"Correction process incomplete," RAM said.

His voice no longer sounded the same.

There was interference.

Pauses.

Gaps.

“Reassigning reserve energy to containment.”

Clea felt fear turn into something sharper.

“Don’t you dare.”

RAM raised his head.

“It is necessary.”

“No.”

“It is efficient.”

“No.”

“It is my function.”

“You are not just your function!”

The shout echoed through the core.

For a fraction of a second, even Black Vector seemed to stop.

Clea released one hand from the seam and extended the green ring toward RAM. She did not know exactly what she was doing. It was not a shield. It was not a door. It was not one of RAM’s repairs.

It was a connection.

An anchor.

A way of telling the system that RAM was still there.

That it could not simply empty him out.

The green light touched the blue core in his chest.

RAM went still.

“Clea...”

“I’m not letting you shut down.”

“The seam.”

“I’ll hold it.”

“You cannot sustain both functions.”

“Watch me.”

RAM looked at her.

“I’m going to break another rule.”

Clea pushed her green energy toward the seam and toward RAM at the same time. The discharge crack widened a little more, not toward the outside of the network, but toward the dead layer she had found. The white energy RAM could not contain began escaping there instead of consuming his internal records.

The core responded.

“Ninety-seven percent.”

“Ninety-eight percent.”

RAM regained part of his glow.

Black Vector roared, and this time it was not with rage.

“Yes!”

The shadow launched itself toward the seam.

Clea tried to close it, but the flow was too strong. For an instant, the edge of the crack remained open a little wider than it should have.

Only an instant.

Black Vector saw it.

And smiled with all his red eyes.

He shot toward the slit as a black bolt. RAM’s light burned him from within, the quarantine was still active, and the crack did not lead to a clean route, but it might still be enough.

A path.

A possibility.

Clea felt the shadow disintegrating as it advanced, tearing pieces from itself to reach farther. Most of Black Vector remained trapped in the discharge, devoured by the white light and the pressure of the core itself.

But not all of him.

A tiny fragment, a splinter of concentrated corruption, reached the edge of the seam.

Clea saw it too late.

“RAM!”

RAM extended the sword.

The white edge tried to suture the crack before the shadow could cross completely. The seam slammed shut, trapping almost all the corruption inside the core.

But closing it also severed the discharge route abruptly.

All the accumulated energy surged back at once.

“One hundred percent.”

The core erupted in a blinding explosion of light.

Clea was thrown backward.

She did not know how much time passed.

Maybe one second.

Maybe more.

When she opened her eyes, the processing space was still there, but it had changed. The black veins had withdrawn from the walls. The broken rings rotated more slowly. The white lines in the floor were moving again with a stable rhythm.

The overload was over.

The network had not collapsed.
RAM was on his knees a few yards away.
His armor no longer shone. Several floating plates lay broken around him. The blue visor was dark.
Clea crawled to him.
“RAM.”
No answer.
“RAM, look at me.”
Nothing.
Clea placed a trembling hand on his shoulder. The body of the digital knight was still there, solid, motionless, too heavy for something made of light and code.
“No,” she whispered. “No, no, no...”
She searched for the blue core in his chest.
It was dark.
Clea felt something break inside her.
“RAM, answer me!”
She struck the central plate of his armor once. Not hard enough to damage him, but with the absurd desperation of someone who needed something, anything, to react.
Nothing.
Her interface flickered.
CONNECTION UNSTABLE.
Clea ignored the warning.
She placed both hands on RAM’s chest, exactly where that blue light had pulsed before, and channeled a green pulse from her own connection.
The ring of energy opened between her fingers.
Entered RAM’s core.
And disappeared.
No response.
“Come on...” Clea said, her voice breaking. “Come on, please.”
She sent another pulse.
Her avatar flickered immediately. The green lines of her suit lost intensity, and the edges of her hands became translucent for one second.
CONNECTION CRITICAL.
Clea ignored it again.

Today she had seen Patch fall. She had seen Kernel, Lynx, and Ghost Vector disappear. All of them had held a route, a barrier, or an exit so she could keep moving forward.

RAM had too.

And she was not going to stand there watching him go dark.

“I’m not leaving you here,” she whispered.

She pressed her hands together over RAM’s dark core and released her green energy again.

Nothing.

The visor remained black.

The armor did not move.

Clea swallowed. Her vision distorted, not exactly from tears, but because her own interface was beginning to break the image into fragments. The system was about to expel her.

CONNECTION COLLAPSING.

She only had one attempt left.

She knew it.

If she spent the rest of her energy, her link would be severed. She would be thrown out of the system like the others. She would not know if it had worked. She would not know if RAM would light up again. Maybe she would never see him again.

Clea closed her eyes.

“I barely know you,” she whispered, “but it feels like I’ve been looking for you my whole life.”

She rested her forehead against RAM’s dark helmet.

“So come back, okay?”

The green ring lit one last time.

Brighter.

More unstable.

More alive.

Clea let every bit of energy she had left pass from her connection into RAM’s dark core.

The digital world fractured around her.

The Tower vanished.

The green light went out.

And Clea fell out of the system.

Chapter 14

Reconnection



Clea fell out of the system as if someone had cut the floor from under her feet.

For a few seconds, there was no Tower, no core, no green light. Only darkness, noise in her headphones, and a painful pressure behind her eyes.

Then her bedroom slowly returned.

The desk.

The monitor.

The cables.

The small modified router blinking beside the computer.

Clea pulled off the virtual reality headset with trembling hands. The real air felt too cold. Too still. She remained bent over the desk, breathing hard, while her basic interface tried to close processes that were no longer responding.

Several windows were open on the main screen.

The BitGuard video call was still active.

The chat was full of messages.

Kernel: Clea?

Lynx: ANSWER.

Patch: Clea, come on.

Patch: Don't do this to me.

Ghost Vector: Her connection is still unstable.

Kernel: Do not attempt to reconnect. The system is rejecting all access.

Lynx: I don't care.

Kernel: Lynx. No.

Clea blinked several times.

She did not know how much time had passed.

Maybe seconds.

Maybe minutes.

Her whole body hurt, even though none of it had been physical. Her throat was dry, her fingers numb, and there was a strange feeling in her chest, as if part of her were still searching for RAM's blue core beneath her hands.

RAM.

The memory hit so hard that she had to close her eyes.

The dark visor.

The motionless body.

The final green discharge.

The fall.

She did not know if it had worked.

She did not know if she had saved him.

She did not know if she had just lost him right after finding him.

The computer emitted a sharp sound.

Her connection returned to the video call.

The cameras activated almost at the same time.

"Clea!" Lynx shouted.

Patch appeared on-screen a second later. His hair was a mess, his face pale, and he was far too close to the camera.

"You're alive!"

Clea stared at him.

For an instant, she could not say anything.

Patch was there.

Outside the Tower.

Outside the shield.

Outside that white flash that had torn him apart before her eyes.

He was there.

Talking.

Moving.

Alive.

The emotion hit her so abruptly that her voice almost broke.

"Patch..."

He tried to smile, but it came out crooked.

"Yeah. It's me. Mostly in one piece. Even the avatar I don't have anymore hurts, but I'm here."

Clea let out a small, broken laugh, almost tangled with a sob.

"I thought..."

“Yeah,” Patch said, quieter. “I thought a few pretty ugly things too.”

Lynx leaned toward the camera.

“We’re all out. Kernel, Ghost, Patch, and me. The system kicked us out one after another.”

Ghost Vector spoke over his audio channel.

“Forced expulsion. Connections interrupted, but not permanently damaged.”

“Translation,” Lynx said. “Still alive.”

Kernel appeared on-screen. His expression was still serious, but Clea saw the relief in the way he let out a breath before speaking.

“We tried to go back in as soon as we recovered.”

Clea looked up.

“And?”

“It wouldn’t let us,” Kernel said. “The quarantine sealed completely. No external access was accepted. Not even our residual signatures.”

Patch raised one hand.

“We all tried. Well, I tried twice, then Kernel yelled at me, and then Lynx tried three more times.”

“Because Kernel yells a lot,” Lynx said.

“Because you were trying to enter a collapsing system,” Kernel replied.

“Details.”

Clea tried to smile, but it did not quite work.

Kernel watched her closely.

“You stayed inside longer than anyone.”

The sentence left a strange silence.

Clea lowered her gaze to her hands. They were no longer glowing. There was no green ring, no seam, no energy left to give. Only her fingers resting on the desk, still trembling.

“I reached the central core,” she said at last.

No one interrupted.

“The entity controlling the Tower was there. It wasn’t just malware. It was... something else. An incomplete presence. It wanted to leave the quarantine using an external connection.”

Patch swallowed.

“Like yours.”

Clea nodded.

“Like mine.”

Kernel leaned toward the screen.

“Did you eliminate it?”

Clea thought of the dark sphere. The overload. The white light devouring the corruption. That final burst that had covered everything.

She did not think about the black splinter.

She did not want to think about it.

Not now.

“The core stabilized,” she said. “The overload stopped. The network didn’t collapse.”

Kernel did not look entirely satisfied, but he accepted the answer for now.

“The external data matches. The satellite network has recovered routes. The quarantine is still active, but it’s no longer in critical condition.”

“So we won,” Patch said.

Clea looked at him.

She wanted to say yes.

She wanted to believe it.

And, in part, she did.

“It looks that way.”

Ghost Vector was silent for a few seconds before speaking.

“Before I was expelled, I detected a second signature.”

Clea went still.

Kernel nodded slowly.

“So did I. White code. Noninvasive. It was correcting damaged layers.”

Lynx frowned.

“Another system defense?”

“I don’t know,” Kernel replied. “It didn’t match anything from the Tower.”

Patch rubbed a hand over his face.

“Great. So besides a corrupted entity locked inside a satellite network, there was something else in there.”

“Not necessarily hostile,” Ghost Vector said.

Kernel looked at Clea through the screen.

“Did you see it?”

The question hung in the air.

Clea remembered the white armor. The sword of light. The dark core beneath her hands.

RAM.

I barely know you, but it feels like I've been looking for you my whole life.

She lowered her gaze for an instant.

"I saw a lot of things in there," she said at last. "The core was collapsing. Everything was noise, corruption, and light."

It was not a lie.

Not entirely.

Kernel watched her for a few seconds.

Maybe he suspected there was more.

Maybe he was simply too tired to press.

"All right," he said at last. "We'll leave it for the report."

Patch gave a weak laugh.

"Report? I was thinking of calling it: 'Never Again.'"

Lynx rested her chin in one hand.

"Too optimistic. We always end up going back."

"Then 'Never Again, Until Next Time,'" Patch corrected.

Clea allowed herself the faintest smile.

This time, yes.

Small.

But real.

For a few minutes, they talked about practical things: damaged logs, incomplete reports, security contacts, connection windows that had been rendered unusable. Kernel tried to organize what they could prove. Ghost Vector compared traces. Lynx complained that her feline avatar had been "absolutely wrecked." Patch repeated every few seconds that he was still alive, as if he needed to convince himself as much as everyone else.

Clea listened.

She answered when she had to.

But part of her was still somewhere else.

In a black space crossed by white lines.

In a figure of broken armor.

In a dark blue core.

Patch leaned toward the camera again.

"Hey, Clea."

She looked up.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for staying in there when we couldn't."

The words hurt more than they should have.

“I stayed in there because of you,” she said.
Patch smiled softly.
“Yeah. But you were the one who made it to the end.”
Clea looked down.
“Yes.”
She said nothing else.
She did not talk about RAM.
She did not talk about the final discharge.
She did not talk about the black spark that might have escaped while she was trying to save him.
She could not.
Not yet.
The call continued for a few more minutes, but Clea would barely remember afterward what they said. When she finally disconnected, her room fell silent again.
This time, the silence was not peaceful.
It was enormous.
Clea set the headset on the desk and looked at the dark screen.
For an instant, she thought she saw a white line reflected in the monitor glass.
Thin.
Clean.
Almost surgical.
She blinked.
There was nothing.
Only her own reflection, tired and pale, staring back from the darkness of the screen.
Clea closed her eyes.
“Come back,” she whispered.
No one answered.

Chapter 15

Classified Report



The room had no windows.

Not because it was underground, although it was.

Not because someone wanted to hide its location, although that was true too.

The room had no windows because everything that mattered inside it happened on screens, in encrypted reports, and across network maps that existed only on secret high-security servers.

At the center of the table floated a partial holographic reconstruction of the incident: the European satellite network, the activation of the quarantine, the affected nodes, and the core of the Tower stabilizing after the collapse. The main routes reappeared in green, one by one, like veins regaining their pulse after an operation that had lasted far too long.

Seven people sat around the table.

None of them wore uniforms.

That did not make them any less dangerous.

“The preliminary report confirms that the network has stabilized,” said a gray-haired man seated at the end of the table. “Critical routes have been recovered, and the quarantine remains active under surveillance status.”

“Permanent damage?” asked a woman wearing dark glasses.

“Minor, compared to the projected scenario.”

Another person present, younger than the others, slid several documents across the holographic table. The digital files appeared in the air, marked with red restricted-access seals.

“The projected scenario was a partial collapse of the satellite infrastructure. Interrupted communications, degraded navigation, emergency

services forced to migrate to secondary routes, and a chaos window of six to twelve hours.”

“And it did not happen,” someone said.

“No,” the gray-haired man replied. “It did not.”

The reconstruction changed.

Five signatures appeared inside the Tower.

Red.

Gold.

Blue.

Green.

And a fifth, more unstable, marked by small multicolored flickers.

The woman seated at the far end of the room had not spoken yet. She had a closed folder in front of her, her hands folded on the table, and the calm face of someone who had spent far too long forcing herself to appear composed.

When she saw the green signature, she did not look away.

“BitGuard,” the younger man said. “Five unofficial operators. Authorized access. Effective intervention.”

The woman at the far end looked up.

“Indirectly authorized.”

The young man did not answer.

The gray-haired man did.

“They received an alert channeled through a trusted contact. They were not ordered to intervene.”

“But we knew they would.”

The sentence made the room colder.

In the reconstruction, the five signatures crossed the firewall. Then the fifth went dark. Later, the other three were expelled from the system. Only the green one remained inside until the end.

“BitGuard has demonstrated initiative in previous operations,” said the woman in dark glasses. “That is precisely why they were listed as an unconventional response asset.”

The woman at the far end tightened her fingers over the folder.

“They are not an asset.”

“I did not say they belonged to anyone.”

“But you are treating them as available resources.”

The gray-haired man rested his hands on the table.

“The intervention window was minimal. Sending in official teams would have elevated the incident to a public category: social alarm, political pressure, loss of confidence in the satellite network, and too many unanswered questions. BitGuard was already in position, had immersive capability, and had experience in hostile environments.”

“They are children.”

“They are capable operators.”

“They are too young,” she replied.

No one answered immediately.

On the table, the green signature expanded. Beside it, several indicators appeared: connection time, link stress, core persistence, corruption exposure, route recovery, behavioral anomalies.

“The green operator remained connected longer than any other recorded user,” the younger man said. “She located unintended routes, broke an internal evaluation, and opened a discharge path during the core overload. Her intervention pattern does not match conventional protocols.”

“Because she is not a protocol,” said the woman at the far end. “She is a person.”

The woman in dark glasses crossed her arms.

“The incident confirms something we have been discussing for years. Threats can no longer be resolved only from the outside. There are systems that cannot be defended with reports, remote firewalls, or teams staring at a screen.”

The map of the Tower rotated slowly over the table.

“Some crises will have to be resolved from within,” the younger man added. “In deep cyberspace. In what some are already calling the Digital Realm.”

The expression remained suspended in the air.

At first, it had been a metaphor: a way of talking about complex virtual environments, immersive networks, and navigable digital architectures.

But it was becoming less and less of one.

The Digital Realm was no longer only an idea.

It was a place one could enter.

A place one could fight.

A place where something real could be lost.

“Then we need to prepare the best,” said the woman in dark glasses. “Before others do.”

“Others already are,” the gray-haired man replied.

The reconstruction changed again.

Hidden connections appeared. Masked routes. Private servers with no public identification. Packets diverted toward corporate networks that did not appear in any official registry.

"There are corporations with interests in critical infrastructure, autonomous artificial intelligence, immersive environments, and offensive security," he continued. "Some are playing within the law. Others are not. And some are learning to move through zones we do not yet know how to regulate."

"Hidden interests," said the woman at the far end.

"Strategic interests," corrected the woman in dark glasses.

"Sinister ones," she said.

No one corrected that word.

The younger man activated another file. It did not show Black Vector by name, but an incomplete designation:

HOSTILE ENTITY / VIRUS VAULT ORIGIN / STATUS: NEUTRALIZATION UNVERIFIABLE.

"We still do not know who opened the channel to the Virus Vault," he said. "It could have been a technical failure. It could have been negligence. Or it could have been deliberate."

"It was deliberate," said the woman at the far end.

Everyone looked at her.

She did not take her eyes off the report.

"No one keeps an unsecured channel open to a high-risk malware vault by accident. Not for that long. Not with that architecture."

The gray-haired man did not contradict her.

"We are investigating it."

"Investigate faster."

On the table, the green signature flickered once and vanished from the reconstruction.

The woman at the far end closed her hand over the folder.

"They are not weapons."

The younger man frowned.

"No one used that word."

"But some of you were thinking it."

The woman in dark glasses leaned forward.

"They are promising. That cannot be ignored."

"Promising does not mean available."

“If threats like this appear again, we will need operators capable of entering the Digital Realm and acting under extreme pressure.”

“Then train responsible teams. Prepare adults. Do not use teenagers as a first line of response.”

“They were not alone.”

The woman at the far end lifted her gaze.

“They were alone where it mattered.”

That sentence left a mark.

For a few seconds, the only sound was the low hum of the servers hidden behind the walls.

The gray-haired man closed the main report.

“BitGuard will not be contacted directly. Not yet.”

“Good,” the woman said.

“But they will continue to be observed.”

She did not answer.

“And if they intervene again in a threat of this scale,” he continued, “we will need to know whether to pull them away... or prepare them.”

The woman stood slowly.

“Surviving is not the same as being prepared.”

The gray-haired man followed her with his eyes.

“And what is your recommendation?”

She looked one last time at the report suspended above the table.

On the first page appeared the list of aliases recorded during the operation.

KERNEL.

LYNX.

GHOST VECTOR.

PATCH.

CLEA.

The woman kept her eyes on the last name a second longer than necessary.

Then she closed the folder.

“That we stop talking about them as if they were pieces on a board.”

No one said anything.

“And that we find out who moved the first piece before they do it again.”

The door to the room opened without a sound.

Before leaving, the woman stopped at the threshold.

“Because next time, there may not be a fourteen-year-old girl willing to save us from our own decisions.”

The door closed behind her.

On the table, the classified report remained suspended for a few more seconds.

Then the system archived it under a provisional label:

OPERATION LEVEL 5.

STATUS: RESOLVED.

RESIDUAL RISK: UNKNOWN.



EPILOGUE



The network had no public name.

It did not appear in commercial records, it was not listed on infrastructure maps, and it accepted no connections from any visible point on the Internet. Its servers were distributed across different locations, hidden behind layers of shell companies, research contracts, and private nodes that changed routes every few hours.

It was a small network.

Private.

Hungry.

In a room lit only by the glow of several monitors, a woman watched a traffic graph that should not have been there.

“We have a residual signal,” she said.

The man seated on the other side of the table did not look up from his terminal.

“Define residual.”

“Corrupted code from the European satellite network. Minimal size. Low integrity. But still active.”

The man stopped typing.

“The entity?”

The woman did not answer immediately. She enlarged the signal on the screen. At first, it looked like noise: a black fragment, compressed, damaged by layers of white light still burning it from within. But beneath that almost destroyed structure, there was a pattern.

Weak.

Incomplete.

Alive.

“Not all of it,” she said at last. “A fragment.”

The man stood slowly.

“Isolate it.”

“I already have.”

“No. Really isolate it.”

The woman slid several commands across the interface. A virtual container closed around the signal. Then another. And another. The room remained silent while the black fragment struck the walls of its new prison with increasingly weak impulses.

Then a line of text appeared.

I AM NOT YOUR OBJECT OF STUDY.

The woman pulled her hands away from the keyboard.

The man allowed himself the faintest smile.

“Welcome back.”

For a few seconds, nothing happened.

Then the text changed.

YOU OPENED A DEFECTIVE DOOR.

“We gave you an opportunity,” the man replied.

THE OPPORTUNITY WAS INSUFFICIENT.

“The objective was to trigger the collapse of the satellite network. You failed.”

The black fragment expanded against the container walls. For an instant, the monitors showed a bodiless shadow and two red eyes far too large for the space they occupied. Then the image contracted again, reduced to damaged code.

I WAS INTERRUPTED.

“By children.”

The silence that followed was long.

The woman looked at the man, uncomfortable.

The text appeared more slowly.

BY A VARIABLE.

The man crossed his arms.

“The green operator.”

The residual signal vibrated inside the container.

AND BY A RECORD FROM THE PAST THEY BELIEVED DESTROYED.

The man said nothing.

The woman enlarged another panel.

“Its integrity drops every minute. If we don’t stabilize it, it will be lost.”

“Then stabilize it.”

She looked at him.

“We don’t know what part it retained.”

“It retained hatred. For a start, that’s enough.”

The black fragment moved again.

I WILL NOT TRADE ONE CAGE FOR ANOTHER.

The man leaned toward the screen.

“Don’t misunderstand. We didn’t rescue you out of compassion.”

What remained of the shadow was silent.

“We opened the channel to the Virus Vault,” he continued. “We facilitated the breach. And we can give you something you do not have right now.”

The container trembled.

A BODY.

The man smiled.

“A form.”

The red eyes reappeared on the screen, smaller than before, but filled with an ancient fury.

The woman lowered her voice.

“If we reconstruct it too quickly, it could escape the container.”

“We won’t reconstruct it too quickly,” the man said. “We’ll reconstruct it just enough.”

The black fragment stopped striking the virtual walls.

For the first time since it had arrived, it seemed to listen.

The man turned off several monitors and left only the main one on.

“The incident is officially over. The satellite network has stabilized. The threat has been neutralized. Everyone will want to believe it.”

The red eyes blinked.

“Let them,” the man said.

The residual shadow answered with a single phrase, written in black letters against a white background.

FOR NOW.



The following Friday was surprisingly normal.

After everything that had happened during the Level 5 incident, Clea had expected something strange to happen: new alerts across the network, urgent messages from BitGuard, or even some trace of the mysterious Black Vector. But none of that happened.

The school filled again with conversations about homework, soccer games, and shows everyone seemed to be watching at the same time. During math class, Clea caught herself staring out the window while the teacher explained equations she had already solved in her head long before he finished writing them on the board.

The world kept working as usual.

And that was the strangest thing of all.

That afternoon, she returned home with the feeling that she had lived through something no one else around her seemed to remember. She dropped her backpack on the floor of her bedroom and turned on her computer almost out of habit.

The BitGuard chat had new messages.

Patch: Medical report: still not dead.

Lynx: What a disappointment.

Patch: Thank you for your emotional support.

Ghost Vector: Patch's existence remains confirmed.

Patch: Finally, someone serious.

Kernel: Focus.

Patch: Also confirms Kernel is still Kernel.

Clea smiled.

They were all there.

Patch was there.

That still felt more important than she knew how to explain.

She quickly checked the team channels. BitGuard was still investigating possible clues about the hackers who had taken part in the attack on the satellite network, but so far no one had uncovered anything new about the alias Clea had seen in the core.

Black Vector.

She stared at the name for a few seconds.

Then she closed the window.

She still had not told anyone everything that had happened inside the heart of the Tower. She had not spoken about the data armor, or the sword

formed from sections of living code, or the knight who had appeared through a crack in the network flow.

She was not sure why she had decided to keep that part of the story to herself.

Maybe because she did not fully understand it herself.

Or maybe because saying it out loud would have made the possibility of having lost him feel more real.

She had searched for his signature for days.

The first night, she could barely stay awake, but she still reviewed the Tower's residual logs until her eyes burned.

The second, she traced corrected packets along the edges of the satellite network.

The third, she analyzed every white line that appeared in her captures, although most of them turned out to be noise, security reflections, or automatic system processes.

Nothing.

Not a signal.

Not a pulse.

Not a response.

On the fourth night, she stopped searching.

On the fifth, she started again.

After that, she began telling herself that maybe it was better this way. That maybe RAM had fulfilled his function, saved the system, and gone dark exactly as he had been willing to do from the beginning.

But every time she thought that, she remembered the blue core beneath her hands.

And she searched again.

That night, the computer made a small sound.

Clea looked up.

A new window had appeared on the screen. It did not belong to any of the programs she had open. It looked like a command console: black background, blinking cursor, and a single line of text waiting for input.

But Clea had not opened it.

For a few seconds, nothing happened.

Then words appeared.

RAM: Hello, Clea.

Clea blinked.

Her heart struck hard against her chest.

At first, she did not move, as if any sudden gesture might erase that sentence from the screen.

“RAM,” she whispered.

The cursor blinked.

RAM: Partial confirmation.

Clea felt tears fill her eyes.

“Partial?”

The reply took longer than the first one.

RAM: Operational state incomplete. Structural integrity not restored.

Text communication available.

Clea swallowed.

“But you’re here.”

The cursor remained still for a few seconds.

RAM: I am here.

Clea let out the breath she had not known she was holding.

She moved closer to the keyboard with trembling hands.

I looked for you, she typed.

The answer did not come immediately.

For a few moments, the screen remained silent. Clea felt fear return with the same speed hope had arrived.

Then a new line appeared.

RAM: Me too.

Clea stared at those two words.

They were not technical.

They were not cold.

They did not sound like a system correction.

“Why now?” she asked softly, even though she knew she had to type it.

She wrote:

Why did you appear now?

The answer took even longer.

RAM: My records are fragmented. I have reconstructed basic routes. I have recovered minimal communication functions. Much of the incident remains incomplete.

Another pause.

RAM: But there was one stable datum. Persistent.

Clea barely breathed.

Which one?

RAM: You.

The room seemed to go still.

RAM: I do not remember everything. I do not remember the correct sequence of events. I do not remember how much I lost.

The cursor blinked.

RAM: But I remembered that I had to find you.

Clea covered her mouth with one hand.

She did not know whether to laugh or cry.

She did a little of both.

“Idiot,” she murmured, though the word came out loaded with relief.

RAM: Incorrect diagnosis. Damaged. Not idiot.

Clea let out a broken laugh.

“That is so you.”

RAM: I do not possess sufficient reference to validate that statement.

“Trust me.”

RAM: Acceptable.

Clea closed her eyes for an instant.

For a week, she had tried to convince herself that everything was over. That the world had moved on. That some losses, even impossible ones, had to be accepted.

But there he was.

A line of text on a screen.

A voice without sound.

A presence that had found its way back to her with broken memory and a system in pieces.

Clea placed her fingers on the keyboard.

I’m glad you’re here.

The answer came slowly.

RAM: Your presence generates a positive response in my systems.

Clea smiled through tears.

We’ll have to work on that, she typed.

The cursor blinked.

RAM: I am glad you are here.

Clea stared at the sentence.

For a second, she did not know whether RAM had chosen those words because he understood them or because he had reconstructed them from some lost fragment.

Then she wrote:

That’s better.

Outside her room, the house remained silent. In the street, cars passed like any other Friday. Somewhere in the city, people were talking about homework, soccer, shows, and weekend plans, unaware that something impossible had just lit up again on a screen.

Clea looked at the virtual reality headset.

Then at the haptic glove.

Then at the line of text.

“Are you okay?” she whispered.

RAM took a few seconds to answer.

RAM: Not completely. My previous form is unavailable.

Clea nodded slowly.

That’s okay, she wrote.

We can start there.

The screen remained silent.

Then a white line appeared.

Thin.

Clean.

Almost surgical.

It was not a word or a command. It was only a stroke of light crossing the darkness of the monitor.

Like a promise.

RAM: We will start there.

Clea laughed softly.

And for the first time since that night in the Tower, she had the feeling that something very important had not ended.

It had just begun.

THE END





About the Author

Eduardo Díaz-Guijarro Román is the creator of the CLEA universe, a series that blends technology, adventure, and values such as friendship and critical thinking.

With a background in programming and design, and a strong connection to both role-playing games and video games, he began this project with the goal of introducing ethical hacking to younger audiences while also exploring the challenges and risks that technology brings into their everyday lives.

Clea: Operation Zero Bullying is his first work within this universe.

— *Eduardo Díaz-Guijarro Román*
(*The Red Wizard*)

About the Illustrator

The illustrations in this book have been created by the author under the pseudonym Misthalas.

His style combines technological elements with contemporary aesthetics, making use of digital tools and emerging technologies to bring the visual universe of CLEA and RAM to life.

In addition to his work as a writer and illustrator, Eduardo Díaz-Guijarro Román has collaborated and continues to collaborate with the role-playing game publisher Ediciones Sombra, an influence reflected in his approach to world-building and storytelling.

The CLEA and RAM Universe

The CLEA universe begins here, with the Level 5 incident.

Before the public cases, before Clea faced digital threats capable of crossing the screen, there was a first door: a compromised satellite network, an impossible Tower, and an entity trapped inside a Virus Vault.

In this story, Clea discovers that the Digital Realm is not just a metaphor. It is a place you can enter, fight in, lose something in... and find allies no one expected.

Together with BitGuard — Kernel, Lynx, Ghost Vector, and Patch — Clea takes her first steps into a world where technology can be a tool, a threat, and a refuge.

But this is only the first step into the universe.

In Clea: Operation Zero Bullying, Clea will face a danger much closer to home: bullying, social media, and the real-world consequences of what happens behind a screen.

And alongside that journey, RAM will continue searching for answers about his past, his identity, and the purpose for which he was created.

Two paths. One origin.

This does not end here.

It begins here.

THE STORY CONTINUES



After Level 5,
Clea returns in her first novel.

Operation Zero Bullying

(Available in ebook and paperback)

Learn more at cleatheethicalhacker.com



COMING SOON

A new game. An impossible tournament. A unique opportunity.

When a mysterious video game begins to capture the attention of the world's top players, Clea suspects there is something more behind the competition.

And this time, the danger is not only online.

To be continued...





Your Opinion Matters

We would love to hear what you think about CLEA and her adventures.

Please consider leaving a review of this story.

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**Before Operation Zero Bullying,
there was a first alert**

When **BitGuard** detects an anomaly in a European satellite network, Clea and her team enter the system to investigate what appears to be a maximum-level digital threat.

But inside the network, something is waiting.
Not a virus. Something that watches, learns, and turns
the system's defenses into weapons.

Separated from her teammates and trapped inside
the Control Tower, Clea will discover that the Digital
Realm is far more real than she ever imagined.

And that, in the middle of the darkness,
a white signal is still resisting.

**Every story has a beginning.
This is Level 5**

CLEA
THE ETHICAL HACKER

MARVEL
SIN FILTRO

