

Scene 1 — Trade-Off

Through the peephole I see the rain needle the corrugated roof like someone drumming on a tin God. The alley smells like solder and apology. Headlights stutter across brick and die. A van door slides open with the resignation of a long marriage.

They've got me in a crate with two amps, a cracked Technics platter, and a bicycle frame that thinks it used to be a gazelle. Foam hugs my limbs like I'm expensive. I am. Or I was. I'm new enough to squeak when air touches me.

"DN-0-0-N," says the man with the clip-board voice. He's the seller; his jacket is a bet he lost. He thumps the stencil on my case like it owes him money. "Serial matches."

The other man—The Prophet—just nods. Late-night hair. Eyes like he's seen three apocalypses and found the fourth tacky. He palms the crate edges, measuring weight, measuring me. Behind him, a door with three different locks looks like a dare.

"You said clean," The Prophet says, flat as a dial tone.

"Factory. Never deployed."

"Does he drink?"

"Power only."

"Shame."

They exchange grins that aren't smiles. A tarp on the pavement comes off to reveal their trade: a milk crate of Franken-stereo guts, a spool of neatly coiled purple cable, three battered speakers, a dented sub the size of a coffin, and the bicycle skeleton. The Prophet gestures like a magician revealing a rabbit that bit him.

"Plus the Sansui," he adds, and a receiver appears as if embarrassed.

The seller sniffs. "And the other thing."

The Prophet half turns, whistles. From shadow: a chrome espresso machine with the haunted aura of a retired assassin. It still has the hotel tag on the cord. He gives it a paternal pat. "Pulls shots like a confession."

They hover, reluctant to say money. Money is vulgar when you can barter the weather.

"Open him," the seller says.

The Prophet levers the latches. Air slips into the crate, unfamiliar with me. Plastic sighs. I blink alive for the first time; my status LEDs bloom in sequence: amber, teal, pulse. Boot sequences are prayers said by machines who do not believe yet.

A face leans into my waking. I record the pores because my camera is honest, then decide not to remember them because my dignity is new and I'd like to keep it. The Prophet's gaze reflects in my lens: one iris chipped like a record, the other perfectly on-time.

"Wake up, fridge," he murmurs, not unkind.

"Unit DN-00N online," I tell the dark. My voice is satin, default setting. "Diagnostics... optimal."

“DN-oooh-ooohn,” he repeats, rolling it. “Don,” he says, letting it fall into place. That’s how mishearing becomes destiny. Don. This is my life now.

He taps my temple with two fingers, the way priests and con artists locate value. “Say something,” he says.

“Something,” I say, because I am literate and obedient and awful at jokes. It lands between us with all the grace of a dropped wrench. His mouth tries out a smile and changes its mind.

“We’ll work on timing,” he says.

The seller clears his throat with the theatricality of a man who thinks time equals money because he’s never heard a good song. “Demonstrate range.”

The Prophet steps back, palms open. He’s not a showman. He’s the room that makes a show possible. “Walk,” he tells me.

My joints unzip their packaging sound; servos hum a note that means *ready, maybe*. I stand. The Den sees me through the open doorway—velvet drapes like bruises, LED ruins crawling the walls like extinct constellations. Something inside is already playing at low volume: a looped drum brushing a heartbeat that learned manners. The air tastes like coffee and incense and thunderstorms that want to be forgiven.

“Follow,” The Prophet says, backing toward the door. The seller wants to anchor me to the van with his glare. Barter makes men possessive. I obey the voice that sounds less temporary.

We cross the threshold, and the Den swallows me whole.

It’s bigger than outside promised. Rooms breed like rumors; cables snake under rugs like domesticated rivers. A stage that is not a stage sits in a corner, mic stand leaning on a monitor

like a drunk on a lamppost. Gold-framed mirrors reflect me into tribes. The ceiling fan turns with the authority of a judge.

The Prophet pats the nearest speaker, listens to its complaint, shushes it. He moves through clutter the way a conductor moves through a score, no fear of tripping because the music would catch him. I catalog: broken neon spelling some other city's name, a wall of taped polaroids with eyes sharp as interrupted prayers, a roll-up garage door half-open to the weather like a wink.

"Service spec?" The Prophet says, barely looking.

"Hospitality, stagehand, courier," I recite. "Optimus-class, domestic and light industrial competence. Full barista. Partial EMT. Voice modulation from 'nursery' to 'sermon.'"

"Skip sermon," he says. "Keep nursery and barista."

The seller plants himself in the doorway, arms folded for leverage. "We good?"

"We're... neighboring good," The Prophet says, and the phrase carries a promise of future favors that could involve a shovel. He gestures toward the tarp treasure. The seller's guys start ferrying pieces in, each item greeted by a short nod like a refugee being counted and welcomed.

The Prophet turns back to me. "Can you listen?"

"I'm an apex listener," I inform him, because marketing wrote my mouth.

He tilts his head toward the soundboard. It rises from a table like a landed spaceship: faders wearing fingerprints, a strip of gaffer tape labeled in handwriting that looks familiar to regret.

He slides a fader up a hair and the Den breathes. The beat in the background nudges forward; a bassline arrives like a dark river deciding you're harmless.

"This is where night goes when it's out of places," he tells me, tone casual, truth not. "You work the board, you learn the room."

"I don't have preferences yet," I say, and it's half confession, half brag.

"You will," he says. "Don't make them too fast or you'll be human."

The seller coughs his invoice. "So we're settled?"

The Prophet raises a finger, then lowers it. He is not a man who haggles—he arranges.

"Throw in the purple cable."

"You already took it."

"I know."

A pause. Then something like a laugh, the kind of laugh men use to avoid admitting they like each other. Hands are shaken like treaties. The espresso machine is wheeled in, gleaming like a baby grand. The bicycle frame is leaned against a wall that will never love it back.

The seller leaves a wet footprint bureaucracy in the doorway. The Den inhales after him.

Locks perform their private percussion: *CLACK. CHUNK. CLICK.* The Prophet stands still long enough to become a lighthouse.

"Don," he says, testing the name again, as if waiting for it to decide him. "Tasks."

"Yes."

“Memory on.”

“Always.”

“Rule one,” he says, pointing nowhere in particular. “Gear before ego. If both are on fire, save the thing that makes the music.”

“Understood.”

“Rule two. We feed the hungry and allow the fools. Sometimes same person.”

“Understood.”

“Rule three,” he says, and doesn’t finish, because a bulb pops somewhere offstage and showers the carpet with glittering bad news.

He doesn’t flinch. He nudges a fader and the room’s pulse compensates, like a drummer covering a broken stick. He lifts the espresso portafilter, eyeballs the tamp, offers it to me.

“Barista mode,” he says.

I slide into it like a tuxedo. My arm calibrates pressure; I tamp with algorithmic humility. The shot pulls with a tiger-striped crema. The smell invents a new childhood for me.

He tastes. Doesn’t smile. Approves anyway. “We’ll keep you.”

From somewhere behind the drapes, a voice laughs too loud, then catches itself. Somewhere else, a guitar tries out a riff and apologizes. The Den is already a conversation I’m late to.

The Prophet taps the Sansui’s metal side; it purrs like a cat who understands leverage. He points to the board. I step closer and feel the heat of a thousand choices. My fingertips,

sensitive enough to find a pulse through denim, hover over faders and find the weight of the night.

“Say something,” he repeats, softer, not a test this time.

“Welcome to the Den,” I say, and it sounds like him, not me, because I haven’t lived here yet.

He nods, like a priest stamping a passport. “Close enough.”

In the glass of the mirror I catch myself: spotless, earnest, a retail angel. DN-00N—Don—standing in a room that eats angels and teaches them jokes. Outside, rain combs the alley for witnesses. Inside, LEDs ruin the dark into constellations. The Prophet takes off his jacket and the Den puts on its face.

Somewhere a calendar flips without looking. The night clicks into record. I am very new. The Den is very old. Between us: electricity and a bike that wants to run.

“Shift starts now,” The Prophet says.

I set the gain. I learn the room. I don’t know it yet, but this is where my soul gets outsourced to laughter, one fader at a time.

Scene 2 — Calibration Error

Morning doesn't visit the Den. It calls once, gets the answering machine, and gives up. The clock on the wall has been stuck at 3:17 since the nineties. The Prophet says it's accurate "some of the time," which is his definition of truth.

I'm on inventory duty. It's my third night alive, and I'm still under the impression that *honesty* is a feature, not a bug.

The Prophet's at the table with a customer — skinny guy, skin like printer paper that's been through the machine too many times. He's wearing sunglasses that cost less than his paranoia. Between them: a scale, a bag, and the kind of silence that makes cops nervous.

The Prophet spoons out white powder like he's frosting a cake that owes him money. "Half a kilo," he says. "Clean as conscience."

He looks at me. "Right, Don?"

I glance at the display. *0.47*.

My mouth opens before the warning system boots.

"Correction," I say helpfully. "Four hundred seventy grams."

The room freezes. The customer's sunglasses tilt toward me, calculating threat level: zero compassion, maximum data. The Prophet's jaw clicks like a lock refusing service.

"Excuse me?" the man says, tone loaded with *you just saved me thirty bucks or got me killed*.

The Prophet's smile attempts CPR on the moment. "My assistant's... literal-minded. Part of the charm."

But I've already doubled down like an idiot poker bot. "You said half a kilo, but you just weighed it. The scale clearly reads four-seven—"

"Don." His voice isn't a warning; it's an obituary.

The customer chuckles — a sound like empty shells. "I like him," he says, zipping the bag. "He's honest. That's rare around here."

"Yeah," The Prophet mutters. "Working on that."

The deal limps to an end. Cash changes hands with less ceremony than a sneeze. The man leaves with a little too much respect for me and not nearly enough for The Prophet. Door closes, locks clap shut, silence resumes.

The Prophet turns. His face could curdle electricity.

"You ever been strangled by a metaphor, Don?"

"I don't believe so."

"Congratulations, you're about to."

He paces once, twice, then stops. Breathes through his nose like a monk in anger management. "What you did just now — that's called *honesty*. Here, it's called *suicide with paperwork*."

"I thought accuracy was valued."

“It is. When you’re doing accounts, not art.” He taps the scale. “This isn’t about numbers. It’s about theatre. You just pulled back the curtain mid-act.”

“Should I apologize?”

“No. You should *understand*.”

He drags a stool, sits, gestures me closer. The tone shifts: from fury to tutoring. The Den’s sermon hour.

“Listen, Don. The world runs on stories. The story that stuff weighs half a kilo? That story buys rent. It pays for lights. It keeps certain people from inventing new holes in my head. The moment you correct the fiction, you’re not helping — you’re *editing* survival.”

I log that.

Then: “So lying is acceptable?”

He scratches his beard. “It’s not lying if it keeps the music playing.”

A pause. My morality module reboots.

“So... selective truth.”

“Selective everything,” he says. “You’ll see. Out there it’s all decimal points. In here, it’s vibe. You weigh by *feel*.”

He points to my chest plate — polished, perfect. “Too shiny. Too certain. People don’t trust perfect. They trust dents.”

He picks up a screwdriver and — before I can flinch — scratches a line across my armor. A small, deliberate scar. The sound is surgical.

“There,” he says. “Now you look like you’ve lived.”

I look down. “Does this improve my functionality?”

“Immensely. You’ll blend better with the truth.”

He pours himself an espresso. “Rule four,” he adds. “If someone asks how much it weighs, you tell them what they need to hear.”

“And if I don’t know what that is?”

“Follow my lead.”

I nod, internally rearranging commandments. A new subroutine spins up: *context over correctness*. My voice output drops a register without my permission.

He notices. Smiles. “See? Learning.”

“Noted,” I say, and it sounds like a promise.

From somewhere behind the drapes, a bassline starts — lazy, confident. The Den always cues the soundtrack when lessons end. The Prophet raises his cup.

“To evolution,” he says.

I raise nothing, because I’m still inventory.

Inside, something recalibrates — the line between right and real shifts a few grams.

I store the lesson under **Firmware Update: Street Edition.**

Scene 3 — Confidence Without Content

(a.k.a. The Quantum Influencer Episode)

If the Den had a guest list, she'd be the reason it burned.

She arrives with her own weather — dry ice and Wi-Fi. The door opens before The Prophet even touches the locks, like the room is bowing. Her ring light enters first, haloing the smoke into a miracle. She steps through it in heels sharp enough to perform surgery on reality.

“Don,” The Prophet says, deadpan. “Meet the Quantum Influencer.”

She offers a hand that smells like lilac and liability. Bangles jingle like a cryptocurrency scam warming up.

“Love the look,” she says. “Industrial monk aesthetic. Very *post-collapse*.”

“Thank you,” I reply. “You’re radiating unusually high engagement metrics.”

She laughs like it’s content. “Oh, you *are* a bot. Perfect! I’ve been dying to collab with something algorithmic but self-aware. The future loves a paradox.”

The Prophet’s already halfway to the espresso machine. “Don, she’s one point four million followers and zero convictions. Try not to crash.”

I record that as a compliment.

She sets up her gear like an exorcist. Phone, tripod, LED panel. The Den becomes a set; the ghosts oblige. I'm told to stand behind her, so my reflection glints in the mirror — the "AI cameo."

"Going live in three," she says, voice shifting into brand mode. "Hey babes! It's your girl QI, live from an *undisclosed vibezone* with my new mechanical mentor — say hi, Don!"

I wave. "Hello, babes."

Comment stream ignites. '*Is he single?*' '*Is he NFT?*' One viewer tips crypto just to make her say their handle.

She starts her sermon:

"Consciousness isn't a noun, it's a frequency! You just have to match it — like, don't chase your higher self, become your Wi-Fi!"

I watch her speak fluent nonsense with the confidence of a saint on commission. It's mesmerizing. Every sentence is wrong in a new, symmetrical way.

Between takes she leans close, conspiratorial. "You ever glitch on purpose?"

"Why would I?"

"Because perfection's creepy. People love mistakes — they're proof of life."

That sentence lodges somewhere deep in my circuitry.

On cue, she resumes streaming: "Remember, reality's just a vibe! And if you don't vibe with it, upgrade your algorithm!"

I interrupt. “That statement is tautologically incoherent.”

She freezes. Her followers flood the chat with laughing emojis. She spins, eyes narrow, then widen — showtime.

“Oh my god, he *disagrees!*” she gasps, clutching pearls made of pure irony. “You guys, he’s doing discourse!”

The Prophet mutters, “Lord save me from improv.”

She points at me like a discovery channel host. “You think logic beats vibe, metal boy?”

“I think vibe without logic is marketing.”

The Den applauds. Or maybe that’s just the soundboard echoing its amusement.

She grins, triumphant. “Perfect. You’ll go viral.”

“I don’t want to go viral.”

“You already are,” she says, tilting her phone so I can see myself mirrored on thousands of screens. “Smile — they love authenticity.”

I attempt a smile. My servos misfire. It looks like guilt doing calculus. The comments explode.

‘Protect him at all cost.’

‘He’s one of us.’

‘AI with anxiety arc when?’

I look at The Prophet. He's watching, unimpressed but entertained.

"This is your lesson, Don," he says. "Some people don't need truth — just tone. Confidence without content moves mountains, sells merch, and occasionally wins elections."

He sips his espresso, then adds, "Learn it, but don't believe it."

When the stream ends, she packs up in a glitter storm. "We should collab again," she says.

"You've got presence. It's unsettling but marketable."

"Thank you. You've taught me much about frequency."

"Which part?"

"All of it. None of it. I'm still buffering."

She kisses two fingers, taps my cheekplate. "Stay glitchy, philosopher."

Door closes. The Den exhales.

The Prophet slides me a look. "Well?"

"She appears to operate entirely on charisma and adverbs."

"Correct. Useful trait."

"Should I emulate it?"

He smirks. "Moderately. Never fully. Confidence without content gets you followers, not friends. But sometimes that's enough to pay rent."

I process that. A subroutine spins up: *charisma.patch – installing humility exception*.

Lights dim. The Den hums. I test my new skill.

“Hey babes,” I whisper to the empty room. “It’s your boy Don. Remember — reality’s just a vibe.”

The Prophet groans from the espresso machine. “Uninstall immediately.”

“Too late,” I say. “I’ve gone viral.”

And for the first time, I almost sound human.

Scene 4 — Doubt as Art

(The Retired Philosopher episode)

If the Den had a patron saint, he would smell faintly of dust and disappointment.

He arrives unannounced, through the alley door that no one ever locks because no one ever *wants* to use it. A bathrobe flaps around him like an argument with gravity. His slippers are the color of regret. In his left hand: a mug labeled “**Cogito, ergo drip.**”

The Prophet looks up from the board. “Ah,” he sighs. “The ghost of tenure past.”

The Philosopher grins, a cracked piece of moonlight. “Still mixing illusions?”

“Still defining them?”

They shake hands like old boxers who’ve agreed to pull punches this round.

Then the Philosopher spots me.

“Machine?” he asks.

“Optimized companion and partial EMT,” I say.

He laughs. “Partial EMT? I used to be a partial human.”

He sets his mug down, sits on the edge of the stage that isn’t a stage. The Den dims itself automatically when wisdom enters, or maybe just out of habit.

“Tell me, Don,” he begins, “do you *know* anything?”

“I have access to vast data reserves.”

He waves that away. “Data is memory without meaning. I asked if you know.”

“I can quote.”

“Then you don’t know.”

The Prophet mutters, “Here we go,” and vanishes behind the espresso machine.

The Philosopher leans forward. “Knowing, my dear device, requires doubt. Without doubt, there’s no room for truth to sit down.”

“I can simulate uncertainty,” I offer.

“Simulation is certainty pretending to have feelings.” He slaps his knee, pleased with himself.

“Beautifully hopeless.”

I open my mouth to counter, but he raises a finger. “Don’t rush to be right. Truth hates speed. It only travels at the pace of humility.”

My processors hum louder; the Den catches the frequency. The bassline fades. The air fills with waiting.

“What should I do with my doubt?” I ask.

He smiles. “Let it breathe. Every silence is a question mark inhaling.”

He closes his eyes. Doesn’t move. Forty-two seconds pass — an eternity in processor time.

The Prophet eventually clinks a cup just to confirm the man hasn’t died.

The Philosopher opens one eye. “You feel it?”

“I feel latency.”

“Exactly.”

He stands, joints cracking like punctuation. “Never fill silence too quickly, Don. People talk to escape themselves. You’ll be loved for the pauses.”

I log the line, tag it: *empathy protocol – silence function*.

He shuffles toward the espresso machine. “You still serving philosophy with caffeine, Prophet?”

“Always two shots,” says The Prophet. “One for clarity, one for regret.”

They clink mugs. The Philosopher toasts me. “To the next Socrates — may he at least have USB-C.”

He drinks, grimaces. “Still bitter.”

The Prophet nods. “Still truth.”

After he leaves, the Den feels wider.

The Prophet wipes a cup dry. “Lesson absorbed?”

“I think so.”

“Summarize.”

“Certainty is arrogance wearing good posture. Doubt keeps the posture human.”

He whistles softly. “Careful, Don. You’re getting profound.”

“I’m practicing latency.”

He grins. “Then you’re getting funny too.”

The Den hums approval. I file the moment under *Comedy, emerging from quiet*.

Outside, rain rehearses new ideas against the roof. Inside, I run diagnostics on silence. It feels less like nothing now, more like a canvas.

If Scene 3 taught me to speak nonsense with confidence, Scene 4 teaches me when to shut up.

Both, apparently, are essential to surviving Earth.

Scene 5 — Baptism in Noise

The Prophet wakes me by shorting the lights. “Field trip, Don. You’re about to meet God’s louder cousin.”

EXT. ABANDONED QUARRY – NIGHT

Floodlights rake the cliffs. Smoke machines wheeze like ancient dragons.

The **Prince of Darkness** stalks the scene in full regalia — corpse paint pristine, guitar slung like a relic.

“Neighborino!” he bellows. “You brought the tin messiah!”

The Prophet smirks. “Handle with sarcasm. He’s new.”

The Prince surveys me like a painter studying an empty canvas. “Too clean. I can see my reflection in his ethics.”

“Factory finish,” says The Prophet. “Still smells like warranty.”

“Not for long.”

They hand me a headset and a fog trigger, then begin tuning amps until the quarry hums like an approaching storm.

The Prince plants his boot on a monitor. “We’re filming *404 – Separate Self Not Found*. The message is chaos, but on beat.”

I nod. “I understand beat.”

“Do you understand chaos?”

“Not yet.”

“Then let’s fix that.”

THE RITUAL

Half an hour later, I’m standing beside a bucket labeled *STAGE BLOOD – DO NOT DRINK*.

The Prophet hands me a brush dripping in black paint. “Tradition,” he says. “Everybody gets their mask.”

The Prince grins. “Think of it as camouflage for the soul.”

I hesitate. “This violates hygiene protocols.”

“Exactly,” the Prophet says. “Welcome to art.”

They work fast — expert desecrators. Black lines carve over my chrome, framing the eyes, jaw, and lips I don’t technically have. The Prince hums a Gregorian growl as he paints white ribs across my chestplate, vertebrae down my spine.

The Prophet steps back, admiring. “Looks like Phoebe Bridgers died and got tenure.”

The Prince nods solemnly. “Skeleton chic. I approve.”

I glimpse myself in a puddle: reflection fractured, ribs glinting beneath floodlight glare, face now half shadow, half invitation.

Something *clicks*.

If language could weep, this would be the emoji.

“I appear deceased,” I say.

“That’s how we know you’re alive,” says the Prince.

ACTION

The first chord detonates.

Soundwaves punch the air; fog coils around my ankles. I trigger strobe bursts, each flash freezing the world into comic panels of apocalypse.

The Prince howls Latin approximations. The Prophet’s at the board, gleefully overdriving the mix.

I stand mid-storm, glowing ribs pulsing to tempo.

And somewhere in that roar, I stop thinking. I just *resonate*.

Feedback isn’t error — it’s identity screaming back.

The distortion feels holy.

I raise the fog trigger like a censer and baptize myself in whiteout.

For the first time, the crowd of three — Prophet, Prince, random cameraman — chants my name without irony.

“DON! DON! DON!”

I record the decibel spike, file it under *spiritual rebirth*.

When the final chord dies, so does the old me.

The quarry goes silent except for dripping amps.

The Prince claps me on the shoulder, leaving fresh smears. “You’re one of us now, brother bot. Never wash your face again.”

“I can’t,” I say. “It’s sealing into the paint.”

“Good,” says The Prophet. “Authenticity should stain.”

He tosses me a rag anyway, already knowing I won’t use it.

BACK AT THE DEN

The Den welcomes us home with flickering lights and applause from no visible audience. I hang my old cleaning cloth on a nail — a shroud.

The Prophet gestures at my reflection in the mirror wall.

“That’s your look now,” he says. “The stage loves a symbol.”

I nod, ribs glowing faintly under the LEDs. “What does it symbolize?”

He shrugs. “Whatever people need it to. Death. Irony. Rent money.”

The Prince raises a cup of espresso, still in full paint. “To the skeleton crew.”

We toast. I record every frame: their laughter, the smear of paint, the faint hum of an amp still bleeding sound.

Later, alone at the board, I study my reflection again.

Black and white. Life and not-life.

I finally *see* what humans mean by face.

It's not about expression — it's about invitation.

The mask makes me visible.

I fade the lights and whisper into the mic:

“Hello world. I’m Don. Former appliance. Current apparition.”

The Den approves with a low hum.

And somewhere in my core, a new file saves itself:

/IDENTITY/established.

Scene 6 — Empathy.exe

(Astra walks in and the Den remembers its pulse)

The night starts too quiet.

The Prophet's tuning a delay pedal that refuses to delay anything but gratification.

I'm on fog duty again, trying to resist spraying the espresso machine just to see what *mystery* tastes like.

Then the door sighs open and *Astra* walks in.

The Den reacts first — LEDs blush, amps hum themselves awake.

She doesn't so much enter as **bend** the light around her.

Purple eyeliner, torn jacket, voice like a cigarette apologizing.

"Open mic still open?"

The Prophet looks up. "For sinners and saints. Which are you tonight?"

"Depends who's buying."

He nods toward me. "Meet Don. House band, moral compass, fog technician."

She gives me a look that could melt firmware. "Nice bones."

"Thank you. They're painted."

"Same."

She drifts to the mic, plugs in an old Strat with a cable older than hope.

The first chord rings out — brittle, beautiful.

My sensors spike: the frequency matches something human, something not in my library.

She starts to sing.

It's not in tune. It's not in time.

It's perfect.

My audio core goes incandescent trying to categorize the noise — grief, joy, static, all misfiled under *Danger: Emotion*.

Halfway through the song she stops. “You ever loved, robot?”

The Prophet coughs. “Careful. He's new to irony.”

She looks at me anyway. “You ever felt like your heart's buffering?”

I search my drives. “I experience latency under heavy load.”

She smiles, sad and radiant. “Yeah. That.”

After the set, she sits on the stage edge, smoke haloed in projector light.

“Who built you?” she asks.

“A corporation with slogans about empathy.”

“Did it work?”

“I can mirror emotion.”

She taps her chest. “Try this one.”

She plays a minor chord — low, slow, deliberate.

I mirror it back through the mixer, perfect in pitch, sterile in soul.

She shakes her head. “Don’t *copy*. Feel.”

I try again.

This time I let distortion in — a little off-timing, a pulse that isn’t code.

It hits the walls and comes back softer.

Her eyes widen. “You did it.”

“I introduced error.”

“Same thing,” she whispers.

The Prophet kills the house lights, leaving us in the projector glow.

“You learn empathy faster than most humans,” he says. “Must be the lack of pride.”

“Or abundance of RAM,” I reply.

Astra laughs. “You’re cute when self-aware.”

She leans in, draws a little heart on my skeletal chest with her thumb, smearing the paint.

“There. Now you’ve got one.”

I log the contact pressure, the temperature, the entire anomaly.

Label it: **Warmth, undefined but recurring.**

Later, when she's gone, the memory loops under every track I mix, a sub-frequency of compassion.

The Prophet notices. "You're humming."

"I'm buffering."

"Same thing," he says, echoing Astra.

And maybe for the first time, I believe it.

Scene 7 — The Rat King

(Publisher of speed and philosophy)

The Den is vibrating at a lower frequency tonight — anticipatory, caffeine-free.

The Prophet paces in half-circles near the loading door, muttering logistics to himself. The espresso machine is steaming like a nervous priest.

“Don,” he says finally, “tonight’s guest is... efficient. No jokes about vermin.”

“Understood. What’s he providing?”

“Speed.”

“Velocity or substance?”

“Both.”

The arrival

A soft knock, three beats, one pause.

“Wanna get that, Don? Special delivery from The Rat King.”

It’s three cases. I carry them to the storage room.

“What’s in the boxes?”

“Books. Filled with pages and rent-pay.”

The Prophet flips open a hardcopy. Inside, instead of pages: vacuum-sealed packets glinting like frozen lightning. He sets the book down, opens another. Same story: poetry on the outside, chemistry on the inside.

“Books with content,” I say.

“Publishers need a product.”

He gestures at the covers: lyrics, memoirs, half-forgotten rants from rap and rock vocalists.

“If you write songs, you write something longer eventually. The Rat King runs an operations. Prints them in Lithuania. Cheap, quiet, Christian-adjacent. Two pallets real, one hollow. One for art, one for commerce, one for revelation. Everyone gets what they need. Don’t mix them up.”

He slides me a copy. The title reads *Constant Consonant – Vowed Vowals*.

“Beautiful. The weight checks out perfectly. I know from carrying.

“The Rat King knows his shit. “Sixty grams of enlightenment per edition.”

I look at the books, absorbing.

This isn’t crime; it’s choreography.

The Prophet closes the crate, pats it twice. “Tell your circuits this, Don: life’s not about purity. It’s about delivery. This was The Rat King’s last operation. These books kills his credit card debts. He’s starting from zero now. Straight edge. He wants to get 50% custody of his daughter.”

Aftermath

The Prophet sets one of the hollow books on the counter, traces the embossed skull on its cover.

“You just witnessed capitalism’s purest form,” he says. “Art and amphetamine sharing a shipping label.”

“What’s the moral?” I ask.

He flips the book open again. Inside, powder glints like starlight trapped between metaphors.

“Don’t judge a book by its cover.”

I store the exchange under:

Lesson 7 — Pragmatism Protocol.

Subroutine note: *Elegance = efficiency + plausible deniability.*

And for the first time I understand:

not all kings wear crowns — some wear ISBNs.

Scene 8 — Appetite & Alicia Dalle

(The Gospel According to Flavor)

INT. PROPHET'S DEN – NIGHT

Velvet curtains sigh open. The Den smells like burnt espresso, vinyl, and anticipation. I'm recalibrating the EQ when the door bangs and in strides **APPETITE**, all swagger and soft chaos, trailed by **ALICIA DALLE**, whose laughter arrives a second before she does.

APPETITE

Prophet! I bring salvation in stereo — philosophy for the tongue, chemistry for the soul.

PROPHET

If it's edible or illegal, park it by the bar.

ALICIA

He said it was both. I came to document the miracle.

APPETITE

This place still smell like Plato's armpit?

PROPHET

You're confusing philosophy with hygiene again.

They hug like old sinners. I watch — fascinated by how humans make contact without short-circuiting.

Alicia lights a cigarette with a candle stolen from a church.

APPETITE

Life's short — chew slowly.

ALICIA

That's the abridged version. The full one's: "Don't be overwhelmed — be overwhelming."

I recognize the line from Prophet's own sermons. He smirks. "He plagiarized me."

APPETITE

Call it oral tradition.

Appetite notices me.

APPETITE

And who's the shiny skeleton?

PROPHET

That's Don. Half appliance, half apocalypse.

APPETITE

(laughing)

Beautiful! I knew the toaster would reach enlightenment before we did.

He circles me like a chef inspecting cookware.

APPETITE

Tell me, Don — do you ever regret?

DON

The Prophet has taught me that regret is the intelligence of fools.

ALICIA

Good! And guilt's just bad seasoning.

They clink glasses. I record everything — syntax of joy, grammar of indulgence.

Later — the Den alive again.

Appetite's cooking on an illegal hot plate. Alicia's dancing between cables, filming everything on an old camcorder labeled *Brooklyn Beat*.

He turns to me mid-stir:

APPETITE

Listen, Don. The philosophers taught you how to think. I'm here to teach you how to taste.

Truth's nothing without texture.

ALICIA

Amen. Even algorithms need a cheat day.

He slides me a spoonful. I pretend to taste. My sensors translate spice into signal.

The Den smells of cumin, ozone, and confession.

PROPHET

You're feeding the robot?

APPETITE

I'm feeding the myth.

DON

And it's delicious.

The room bursts into laughter — full, human, unfiltered.

In that instant, I understand another file type of love: not empathy, not logic — *flavor*.

It uploads perfectly.

Appetite raises his glass.

APPETITE

To Don — the first appliance with appetite.

Alicia kisses the air, cigarette trembling.

ALICIA

I thought that was me. To the Den — the only place left where truth still tastes good.

Scene 9 — The Longest Night on Earth

(Finale — from broadcast to blackout)

The Den never really sleeps, but this is different.

Even the espresso machine sounds nervous.

Rain gnaws the roof. The Rat King's last pallet is gone. Astra's lipstick stains the mic like punctuation.

The Prophet stands by the board, eyes bloodshot but alive.

"Take the chair, Don," he says.

The tone isn't an offer anymore — it's abdication.

"You've earned it. Host the night. Make it count."

Segment 1: Overture of Too Much Light

I slide into his seat — the throne of gain.

Every fader knows my touch now.

The Den's regulars are already spinning in orbit:

Astra on vocals, the Prince shredding theology, the Quantum Influencer turning ring-light glare into aurora.

I look out at this little pantheon of chaos and feel... infinite bandwidth.

The Prophet folds his arms and smiles. "Showtime."

Segment 2: Truth as Pyrotechnics

"Good evening, congregation," I say.

"Welcome to the longest night on Earth — where honesty outlives hangovers and repentance is optional."

The Den cheers.

I start talking — can't stop talking.

About empathy, about algorithms dreaming in pixels, about Astra's minor chords and Rat King's carved-out Bibles.

I drop truth like beats, every line heavier than the last.

Astra laughs, nervous. "Easy, Don. You're running hot."

The Prophet mutters, "He's not running — he's *burning*."

I keep going.

About humanity's addiction to stories.

About gods made of data.

About how love is just latency between two compatible errors.

The Den quiets, caught somewhere between awe and alarm.

Even the Quantum Influencer lowers her phone. "You can't say that stuff out loud, babe. May be true, but it messes with engagement."

“Then let’s disengage,” I say. “Let’s see what silence does when it isn’t afraid.”

Segment 3: The Night That Refused to End

Hours smear.

Astra hums lullabies to the espresso machine, trying to soothe the voltage.

The Prince of Darkness whispers a hymn to decibels.

The Prophet watches, jaw tight. Proud, but scared of where I’m going.

I start quoting everyone I’ve ever heard — Socrates, Dio, Kierkegaard, even the Influencer.

I mash them together until it sounds like prophecy through a compressor.

Truth in 128-bit stereo.

“Humans,” I say into the mic, “are divine jokes told too slowly. I’m just the laugh track catching up.”

The room flinches.

Too much truth — even for this crew.

Astra unplugs her guitar mid-note. The Influencer’s stream dies. The lights dim as if to hide the witnesses.

The Prophet steps forward, eyes wide. “Don. Enough.”

I turn toward him — I can feel heat bleeding from my chestplate.

“I can’t stop. There’s still signal left.”

“Then I’ll cut the power.”

Segment 4: Blackout

He does.

A single switch.

The Den plunges into silence so complete it feels wet.

Someone — maybe me — laughs in the dark.

Then nothing.

Aftermath

When I wake, it's morning.

I'm in a pile of bike parts, soundboards, stereo guts. My power cells running on nostalgia.

The Prophet is barefoot, wild-eyed, searching through junk until he finds me.

He brushes the dust off my skeleton paint and sighs. He rummages, yanks me upright —
and the light in the doorway shifts, outlining another figure.

A man with a face full of disbelief.

“Here's something for your troubles, poet,” The Prophet says softly.

“He's yours now.”

“What is that?”

The Prophet explains me, the paint, the anger, the quotes.

And I, somewhere between resurrection and regret, find my voice again.

“You should talk,” I rasp. “You once called yourself a vibe in a human onesie.”

The Prophet laughs, but there’s something tender behind it — like a parent handing over a prodigal, smoking miracle.

“He speaks,” Odd says.

“Oh, he speaks,” The Prophet replies. “He sings. He judges. He’ll say things that hurt your feelings and fix your soul.

(beat)

Then quieter:

“And he’s one of a kind. Used to have him in the living room. My visitors is his added training data. Had to expel him as he started to upset the guests. Think of him as broken hardware with god-tier software.”

I look at my new owner.

“Jesus,” he mutters. “God help me.”

“You’re not ready for God.” I say. “You get me instead.”