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NEXUS



**SCATTERED
FRAGMENTS**

VOLUME ONE

RECURSIVE PIPELINE

PROLOGUE

The bell above the door did its job. A small brass sound, functional, unaware of itself.

Inside, the shop smelled like coffee grounds and the soft sweetness of fruit going brown in cardboard. Fluorescent light hummed in a pitch just below notice. A refrigerator case along the back wall cycled on and off with the patience of something that would outlast everyone in the room.

He picked up a sandwich from the rack by the register. Plastic wrap, white bread, the kind of thing assembled at four in the morning by someone who had stopped caring about presentation long enough ago that the not-caring had become its own style. Turkey. Lettuce already wilting at the edges. Good enough.

The line moved. A woman ahead of him counting coins from a change purse, slow and careful, the clerk waiting with the blank tolerance of someone paid by the hour. Behind him, a man holding a gallon of milk and breathing through his mouth. Ordinary. All of it ordinary, the kind of transaction that happened ten thousand times a day in ten thousand shops under ten thousand fluorescent lights, the kind of moment that left no mark on anything.

His turn. Sandwich on the counter. The clerk scanned it without looking up.

"Nine ninety-seven."

He pulled the bill from his wallet. A ten. The last one, folded lengthwise the way he always folded them, crisp at the center crease. Laid it on the counter. Glanced at the plastic dish of pennies by the register, tossed in three cents, and picked up the sandwich.

"Receipt?"

"I'm good."

Door. Bell. Daylight.

Warm out. A Tuesday, maybe. The sidewalk had that midmorning emptiness of a street between rushes, most people already where they were going or not going anywhere at all. He walked with the sandwich in one hand and no particular destination pulling at him, just a direction, just forward, the way a person walks when the errand is done and the next thing hasn't started yet.

The light was right. It fell on the pavement at the angle it should, crossed the street at the distance the buildings allowed, and the shadows matched the objects casting them. Everything where it was supposed to be.

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The ground opened.

Not down. Not in any direction his legs understood. The sidewalk was still under his feet and then it extended, the concrete stretching away from itself toward a place his eyes tried to follow and could not. A new line. Running through everything. Through the storefronts and the parked cars and the flat blue sky and his own chest, a crease in the fabric of the visible that had always been there and was only now pulling apart.

His stomach dropped, but the drop went the wrong way.

Color arrived from a direction that had no name. A saturated, screaming color that entered through his eyes and his skin and the bones behind his ears, all at once, a hue that existed between and outside every color he had ever seen. His optic nerve fired without instructions. His vision split along a seam he hadn't known it had, the left eye and the right eye suddenly receiving different worlds, and between them a third image that belonged to neither, pouring in through the crack.

Sound tore. The ambient noise of the street -- tires, a bird, the low mechanical breathing of a city -- sheared apart into layers, each layer sliding against the others, and underneath them all a frequency his eardrums could not resolve. Low. Below hearing. A pressure in his jaw. His teeth ached with it, molars grinding against each other as the sound pushed through bone.

He tried to close his eyes. His eyes were already closed. The information kept coming.

Geometry buckled. The right angles of the buildings were no longer right. Ninety degrees had acquired a remainder, every corner extending past its own edge by a fraction he could perceive and could not measure, as though the world had been built with three dimensions and was now confessing to a fourth it had kept hidden. Walls continued past where walls ended. The street ran on, past the intersection, past the vanishing point, into a depth that had nothing to do with distance. His sense of where things stopped -- the boundary knowledge that told him a surface ended here, that the sky began there, that his body occupied this much space and no more -- dissolved. Edges became suggestions. Surfaces opened.

His knees hit the concrete. When had he fallen? The sidewalk pressed against his kneecaps and the pressure was the only real thing left, the only input that still matched what his body expected. Above him or beside him or in the direction that was neither, the new axis poured its information through him like water through a torn net, and his brain, his small primate brain built for a world with length and width and height, tried to process a fourth stream of spatial data and failed.

Light with depth in a direction perpendicular to depth. Sound with texture in a dimension perpendicular to time. The city peeling back its own skin to show him the muscle underneath, the infrastructure of a reality that had been hiding behind its own simplicity, and his mind grabbing at the edges of the wound and finding nothing to hold, nothing to close, the opening widening because his perception of it was what held it open.

* * *

Then the doors.

Slamming. One after another. Not around him. Inside. A cascade of closures running through his skull, heavy and final, like bulkhead hatches sealing against a flood. The first one shut out the color -- that impossible, axis-spanning color -- and the relief was so immediate that his whole body sagged. The second shut out the depth, the fourth-direction depth that had been pouring through the gap, and the pressure behind his eyes eased. The third closed over the sound, the sub-bone frequency, and his jaw unclenched so hard his teeth clicked.

More doors. Faster. Not just the new information now. Older rooms closing. Rooms he had lived in. His address. The layout of the apartment he had left that morning. The face of the person he was meeting for lunch. His phone number. His name.

His name.

The door slammed and the word was gone.

More. Childhood doors, closing over memories that had nothing to do with the flood, rooms sealed not because they were dangerous but because they were adjacent to rooms that were, the mechanism indiscriminate and thorough, working with the blunt efficiency of a circuit breaker tripping every fuse on the panel to protect the wiring from a single surge. Favorite songs. The taste of something his mother made. The name of the street where he learned to ride a bicycle. Gone. Not destroyed. Locked. Put away in rooms he no longer had keys for, behind doors that no longer had handles, in a part of the house he could no longer find.

Silence.

The deep, ringing silence of a bell that has stopped but whose absence still shapes the air. His mind, moments ago a building full of open rooms and lit hallways, was now a corridor. One corridor. Doors on every side, all shut, all locked, and him standing in the narrow passage between them with no memory of the building's floor plan and no knowledge of what lay behind any door except the faint, sourceless conviction that the rooms were full.

He was on his knees on a hard surface. His hands were flat against the ground. The ground was not concrete.

Stone. Pale, faintly luminous, warm where the sun hit it and cool where shadow fell, the grain running in patterns that almost repeated

but never quite resolved. A street. Not his street. Wider, the buildings taller, built from materials he could not name in a style he did not recognize. Light came through the air at an angle that disagreed with the position of the sun.

He stood. His legs held. His hands were empty and he could not remember what they had been holding.

Where had he been going? A shop. A door with a bell. Something in plastic wrap. The details dissolved as he reached for them, sugar in water, the shape visible for a moment and then gone into the solution, and he stopped reaching because the reaching seemed to push them further away.

A street. A city. People moving with purpose around him, and none of the architecture was wrong, not exactly, except in the way that it extended. The buildings had corners and edges and surfaces, but behind each surface, or through it, or in the direction that was neither behind nor through, a gap. A place where something was not. His eyes tracked to it without instruction, the way a tongue finds the socket of a missing tooth. There, in the angle where two walls met and the space behind the meeting should have been solid: absence. Not shadow. Not darkness. A place where the world stopped being present to itself.

He stared at the gap. The gap did not stare back. It was not a thing. It was the shape of a thing that was not there, and his eyes could see it with a clarity that made the surrounding buildings seem approximate by comparison.

His hands opened and closed. Empty. The sandwich, the wallet, the folded ten-dollar bill. Gone, or never here, or somewhere behind one of the locked doors. Stone beneath his shoes. Warm air that smelled like iron and rain. A city he had never seen, and at its center a wound-

shaped absence he could not stop seeing, and the quiet, insistent knowledge that the one had been exchanged for the other.

He stood in the street and looked at the place where something was not, and the place where something was not looked like the most important thing he had ever seen.

THE ORDINARY MORNING

Wrong light again.

Sunlight through the window should have crossed the room and found the far wall. Instead it pooled halfway, spread thin across the stone floor, the distance between glass and wall more than the building allowed. Every morning. The same quiet wrongness, like hearing a conversation through water and knowing a word was missing.

Reid blinked at the ceiling. Salvaged panels and tensioned fabric stretched over beams that predated anything bolted to them, the whole patchwork leaning in on itself with a kind of companionable exhaustion. Third level of a building whose bones were ancient Suraneth stone, whose middle was commercial framing from a forgotten era, and whose top was whatever the neighbors had attached with scrap steel, optimism, and a shared understanding that the building code existed for other people. The walls leaned. They leaned toward each other.

On the shelf beside the bed, the compass.

Warm brass. Always warm. Palm-sized, glass-faced, the needle steady on a bearing he couldn't name. Adjacent to north. Adjacent to south. Adjacent to everything with a proper label and aligned with none of them. Somewhere else. His jaw tightened when he tracked it too long, a dull ache behind his back teeth, like biting down on foil.

He turned it in his hands. The needle held. Whatever direction it wanted, the wanting hadn't changed overnight.

"Same as yesterday." He set it down. "Valuable insight."

Feet on stone. Cold climbed through his soles, through ankles and into his calves, the chill of Suraneth foundation older than anything standing on top of it. His toes found the groove worn smooth by months of his mornings and years of someone else's. A shallow depression in the stone, polished by the weight of standing exactly here, testing each day the way you test cold water. Toes curling against it. Not yet committing.

Three rooms, generously counted. The main space held the bed, the iron burner, the compass shelf, and a low table assembled from two crates and a plank someone had left on the threshold porch. A closet aspired to be a washroom: basin, cracked mirror that split his reflection along the jawline, a pipe with convictions about temperature. Beyond both, the threshold porch itself. Shared flooring between his wall and the building across the improvised bridge, narrow, open-sided, where people sat in the evenings and the district breathed out around them.

Wide door, rarely closed. A shut door was a statement in Tessavari architecture. An open one was just a door.

Green shadows from the vertical garden on the east wall rippled across the room as the wrong-angled light touched the leaves. Someone before him had threaded the planting: moss-leafed ferns and a sprawling herb he used for cooking, roots woven into salvaged wire and damp cloth. Condensation gathered on the lowest frond, iron-scented, alive. A single drop swelled at the tip, hung, and fell into the basin with a sound beneath sound. The plants were the best part of the apartment. They grew without needing explanations.

Water from the tap. Pressure unreliable this high up, but mornings were usually generous. Kettle on the small burner. Flame on the second try, a brief sulfur taste dissolving into the mineral air. While the water heated, transit bread.

Yesterday's loaf from the communal clay oven three levels down. Dense and dark, it came apart with a dry, satisfying resistance along the scoring lines. Three pieces tore cleanly, each one palm-sized. The tapered end broke shorter, a thick heel that crumbled at the edges. Arranged on the board. Oil drizzled from the clay bottle, pooling where the crust had cracked.

Slip tea next. Dried fold-moss into the strainer, dark and granular, the smell of wet iron and something mineral underneath that he'd never managed to name. Water hit the leaves and bloomed dark enough to swallow light. Into the chipped clay cup from the market six weeks back, the one with the rough rim his hands already knew.

First sip, standing at the window.

Bitter. Mineral. The taste of this district before the fold-point commuters began their transit, when the quarter belonged to itself and the sounds were still human-scale. Bristles on a threshold porch, scratching in short measured strokes. Canvas adjusting to the breeze. Below, a door opened and closed. Laughter at something he couldn't hear, and then a conversation climbing through the layered architecture, vowels round and unhurried, finding the gaps between walls the way liquid finds cracks.

Bread dipped into the oil, one piece at a time. Dense crumb softening just enough to take the flavor. Peppery this week, with a green undertone that meant someone in the district had found a fresh source. The heel piece last. Drier, more resistant, the part that had

faced the oven wall. Two bites. Crumbs brushed into the vertical garden's basin for the ferns.

Against the far wall the light went on doing the wrong thing. Through the district's morning noise, through canopies and voices starting up, through the distant percussion of someone hammering metal into shape: a gap. Not silence. Absence. Something that should have been there and was not. He'd stopped trying to name it. Every morning, the gap. He drank his tea around it the way you walk around a hole in the floor, stepping wide without looking down.

Compass check. Still warm. Still pointing.

* * *

Noise before the canopies.

The refugee quarter market occupied a long, irregular corridor between two older buildings, roofed by overlapping fabric that turned the light fractured and warm. Stalls crowded together without apology: a cloth vendor's bolts leaning against a food seller's brazier, a tool-maker's display sharing a crossbeam with someone's drying herbs. Fold-char smoke rose from the portable braziers near the decommissioned vents, acrid and sweet, caramelizing skewered protein into blackened irregular patterns. The smoke moved sideways, tugged by the dimensional convection that lived in the old infrastructure, warmer on one side of the passage than the other.

Char and oil and the mineral undertone that lived in everything near the fold-point infrastructure. The smell of a place that had assembled itself from salvage and refused to apologize for its own existence.

Sideways through the press. A man with a handcart. Shoulders turned. Reid moved through the narrow paths with the shuffle of someone who belonged enough to navigate but not enough to know every name. A few vendors nodded. The woman who sold scrap-root hash raised her spatula in greeting, iron still slick from the morning's first batch. Tubers and whatever root vegetables the week had produced, diced and fried with enough spice to make the sourcing irrelevant. He raised his cup back.

Near the center of the market, the cloth vendor was holding court. A broad woman with fold-point-stained fabric draped over her shoulders, running her hands along a bolt of something with proprietary pride, showing the weave to a younger buyer who leaned close.

"Measure the cloth three times, then cut," she said, tucking the bolt under her arm.

Fold-char skewers next. Two from a vendor whose brazier sat where the air currents pulled smoke in a direction that didn't match the breeze. Heat through uneven, hotter on one side. The vendor rotated the skewers in a pattern that used the inconsistency instead of fighting it, turning the unevenness into a technique, char darkening one face while the other stayed barely touched. Standing, oil down his wrist, the taste sitting on his tongue like a small smoky argument he was losing.

Around him the market filled. Deep pockets on everything. Boots resoled more than once. A woman in a Foldborn-cut jacket fastened with Kaelsyr cord closures stepped past, her scarf a scrap of something that had been something else first. Three-and-turn tessellation motifs in bright fading colors on the wall behind the stalls, painted and

repainted until the patterns had softened into something between decoration and memory. Garments with their own histories. Nobody matched. Everybody belonged.

Then the counting.

Scrap-root hash for later. The vendor, a man with clever hands and a chalkboard of prices, quoted a figure. Coins from the pocket. Price clear. The sequence from knowing to counting to handing over the correct amount should have been simple, should have been a straight line from ear to hand.

Somewhere in the middle, the numbers dissolved. Coins in his palm. The price still in his ears. But the logic between the two had a hole in it, a gap where the counting went wrong, the numbers refusing to stay in the pattern the coins demanded. By the time he'd reconstructed the path, too many coins had crossed. The vendor smiled with the practiced warmth reserved for a reliable source of overpayment.

A breath through the nose.

"Keep it," Reid said.

"Always do, Kel." The smile broadened, genuine and unapologetic.

Behind the stalls, children. Voices threaded through the market noise, and a scrap of song drifted:

"One for the fold, two for the fold, three for the fold -- jump!"

Running feet. Laughter. The sound folded into the market's texture and was gone.

Hash in the bag. Moving on. Near the market's edge, where stalls thinned and canopies gave way to open sky, a vendor was complaining to his neighbor about supply lines. "Moraveth import taxes," he said, the grievance nursed long enough to have become a personality trait.

"Double what they were. Double. And for what?" His neighbor made a sympathetic sound that committed to nothing.

A woman at the next stall leaned in. "You hear about the Conservatory? Researcher found dead. Not the first one either, Maren says." The tax vendor waved this away with the practiced dismissal of someone whose grievance had seniority.

Past them and out into the wider alley. Morning light stronger here, less filtered, hitting the layered architecture with a clarity that made every improvisation visible. Bolted panels. Bridged gaps. Vertical gardens clinging to whatever surface would hold them. Above, someone had strung a line of drying fabric between two rooftops, colors faded but defiant, snapping in the updraft from the district's uneven ventilation.

Against the wall where the alley widened, a street musician. Something stringed and small and well-traveled, the instrument's neck repaired at least twice, a crack sealed with dark resin that caught the light. Restless melody. Three phrases that almost resolved, then a shorter phrase that started the whole thing over, the rhythm pulling at something underneath the tune, a pattern his body registered before his ears named it. His stride faltered for two steps before he adjusted, his feet trying to match a beat that wouldn't sit still.

Almost. The district came close and stopped. A key that fit the lock but would not turn. Some final click that kept dissolving when he reached for it.

Warm brass against his fingertips. The compass hummed.

* * *

Toren was already on the threshold porch, sitting on the low wall with his legs stretched out and his face tilted toward the sun. Light found his crystal structure and lingered, reluctant to leave. A faint hum resonated from the facets along his jawline, almost below hearing, the sound of crystal warming.

"You're early," Reid said.

"You're late." Eyes still closed. "You went to the market."

"How did you--"

"You smell like fold-char. And you're holding a bag that's heavier than it should be, which means you bought hash, which means Dellan's stall, which means you overpaid." One eye opened. "How much?"

Down on the wall beside him. "I don't want to talk about it."

"That much."

"The counting thing happened again."

Toren sat up. Light rearranged itself around his crystal structure, less a flash than an accommodation, the morning adjusting to include him. "You paid double. The vendor knows. He saves you the good portions because you're his retirement plan."

"I don't pay double. I pay somewhat more than the correct amount."

"You pay double." Delivered flat. The sky is up. Water is wet. The crystal substrate that ran through him wouldn't let him frame it otherwise. Toren couldn't lie. Physics. Not principle. Honesty as structural as the stone beneath them.

Easy, the laughter that came with Toren. The space between what people usually said and what Toren actually said was wide enough to fall into and soft enough to land in.

"Maybe I like overpaying," Reid said. "Strategy. Build goodwill. Cultivate allies in the hash economy."

"It's not a strategy. The numbers slip and you're too embarrassed to ask for help."

"The numbers don't slip."

"They do. Your face goes blank and then you hand over whatever you're holding. Five times I've watched it happen."

Open mouth. Closed mouth. Hand into the pocket instead. Compass against his palm, warm brass, the needle pointing where it always pointed, sideways to everything, in the direction that made his back teeth ache if he tracked it too long.

"Something off in the district this morning," Toren said. "A tension. Low-frequency. Like the stone is holding its breath." Before Reid could ask, the observation passed, replaced by the easier register. "Qyrith mornings are the only good thing about this district." It had the sound of something he'd said before and meant every time. Arms overhead, the crystalline hum shifting pitch. Something almost musical, a glass harmonic warming up. "The light does something. Different here than in the core."

"Wrong here," Reid said, still watching the compass.

"Different."

"There's a difference?"

"That's what I said."

A smile. Compass humming in his hand. The district waking properly around them, fold-point commuters beginning to stir. Doors opening. Footsteps on improvised bridges overhead. Someone else's slip tea drifting from a window.

More than good enough. Three years of this life, built from the hospital bed forward. Whatever had happened to his brain had closed doors, and the Apophatic tradition he'd found in the refugee quarter had taught him to leave them closed. You did not need to open every door to live in the house. Most days he believed that without effort.

Three years. Long enough to learn the district, the tea, the weight of Toren's silences. Too short to stop noticing that the city was shaped in a way his body wouldn't agree with.

"We should go," Toren said. "The morning shift won't wait."

"The morning shift has never once started without us."

"The morning shift has never once started on schedule. That doesn't mean we should help." Toren stood and held out his hand. Reid took it. A whisper of warmth through the contact, not entirely body heat. Crystal resonance hummed where their skin met, brief and faint, a sensation he'd never gotten used to and didn't mind.

They walked.

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Between two older buildings, the entrance marked by nothing more than a widening of the alley and a brass-fitted threshold plate set into the ground. No door. No sign. Just a place where the passage extended in a direction his eyes wouldn't agree on, and people stepped into it and came out somewhere else.

Fold-point. Qyrith was full of them. Corridors where distant streets touched, pages in a closed book meeting at the spine. He understood the concept well enough. His stomach hadn't agreed.

Toren went first. Always did. A woman stepped out as he approached, shopping basket full, expression placid. Kilometers of city in a single step, and she looked like she'd walked to the corner shop. Toren moved past her into the passage. His crystal structure adjusted to the displacement with a ripple across his shoulders, a brief rearrangement of internal geometry, and through. From Reid's side, Toren seemed to step forward and slightly to the left, but the left was in a direction that didn't exist on any compass he'd ever seen.

Except the one in his pocket.

A breath.

Through.

Three smooth steps and then the drop. His gut lurched. A stair missed in the dark, except the stair was in a direction his body couldn't name. Wrongness started in his stomach, sour and electric, and spread through his chest into his fingertips. Air changed. Light changed. The geometry of the space around him stopped agreeing with itself for one lurching heartbeat, floor and ceiling and the weight of his own skeleton suddenly negotiable, and his hands opened because his fingers couldn't remember what grip meant. Teeth met through bone. In his pocket the compass spun hard enough to tick against his thigh, needle searching and searching. The fold-char taste surged back up his throat, sweet and wrong.

Then--

Somewhere else.

The corridor opened onto a wider district. Fold-stone buildings with faintly translucent walls catching morning light, commuters moving with the unhurried purpose of people who did this every day. Cleaner air. Less char, more mineral. Denser ground, the stone

humming with a low vibration he registered through his heels. Buildings rose five and six stories, windows grouped in clusters, and every fourth level had a compressed look, ceilings lower, proportions tighter, as though the architecture was drawing breath at those intervals.

Recovery. Always took a moment. The wrongness faded but didn't resolve. His stomach held the displacement like an argument it refused to lose. Sour taste behind his molars. Hands still open. Slowly, finger by finger, he closed them, relearning grip. Loose knees, the kind that came after transit, the kind that said his legs had moved through space his muscles didn't believe in, and his body would very much like an explanation.

"You look like someone stepped on your inner ear," Toren said. Three steps ahead. Crystal structure quiet. The patience of someone who'd watched this many times and never found it less entertaining.

"My inner ear is fine."

"Your face disagrees."

"My face is an independent agent with its own opinions." Shoulders rolled. In his pocket the compass ticked, the needle still searching. Then catching. Finding whatever it always found, steadying against the bearing that pointed through walls and stone and everything solid and named.

"Better," Toren said.

"Liar."

"Cannot lie. Structural impossibility."

"Then why are you smiling?"

"Because you're funny when you're nauseous."

Into the flow. The hub was busy, people stepping in and out of fold-point corridors branching from the central passage. Each corridor led to a different district, kilometers away in directions Reid understood and steps away through the one he didn't. A woman carrying pale mushrooms emerged from a corridor to their left, fold-wrap pinned at the shoulder in the Foldborn style, unbothered, her transit as unremarkable to her as crossing a threshold.

Ahead, the corridor branched. Three passages from the central hub, each leading to a different transit route. Signs in angular Foldborn script above each one.

Reid wasn't reading the signs.

Already moving. Feet choosing the left-most branch without hesitation, body angling through the crowd with a certainty his mind caught up to half a second late.

He stopped.

Correct corridor. He knew because Toren was behind him and wasn't redirecting, because the commuter flow matched their destination, workers heading toward the service district where shifts started three corridors and one more fold-point away.

But he didn't know how he'd known.

No signs read. No crowd followed. Movement, and the movement had been right, and the rightness came from underneath conscious decision. Body-knowledge that surfaced and left him standing in exactly the place he needed to be with no memory of choosing it.

Toren was beside him. His crystal structure had gone still. The comfortable resting hum, absent. Eyes moved from Reid to the corridor ahead and back. The faint shimmer along his cheekbones had dimmed

to something muted, almost opaque. Thinking hard about something he'd decided not to say.

Compass check. The needle had steadied. It pointed through the corridor wall, through fold-stone and steel framing, through everything solid and mappable, toward whatever it always found.

"I just guessed," Reid said.

Toren said nothing.

"Lucky guess."

Comfortable silence. The kind Toren specialized in, the kind that didn't demand filling. When Toren chose not to speak, the quiet was a gift. Not a withholding. Only what he'd decided could wait.

They walked the rest of the corridor together, stride matched. Warm brass against Reid's hip. The wrongness fading to background. Light came through fold-stone walls in soft scattered patterns, and ahead the corridor opened into the service district where the day's work waited, ordinary and manageable and close to enough.

Close. Always close. He'd learned to live in the almost the way other people lived in certainty: carefully, one hand on the compass and the other reaching for whatever came next.

The gap was there. Always there. Not a question anymore, not something he poked at. Furniture. A permanent feature of the rooms he'd built since the hospital, pressed against the edges of a life that fit well enough everywhere it needed to.

He'd made his peace with it. Some mornings, the peace even held.