

Chapter 1

The curtain opens, and Purcell steps out into the light.

They bow once before sitting down. The crowd hesitantly claps like they're not sure they should be, then quiets once they rest their hands on the piano.

Purcell knows they're going to play perfectly. They've been practicing these songs for months.

They take one last deep breath, hold it, count the opening rhythm in their head, and play.

The weight of the keys is familiar under their fingers, and the lurching pedal stays placed firmly under their foot. They smile as they perform, leaning and syncing their body to the music.

Their songs pass quickly. They're barely thinking as the muscle memory guides them through each section. Instead, they take note of how their lucky ring on their middle finger flashes in the lights overhead and how they have ice cream in the fridge at home to celebrate tonight.

This venue is close to their house, so they drove here instead of taking a train like they normally would before a concert. As they perform the last song, they look forward to hopping in their little red car and sleeping in their own bed tonight.

When it's over, Purcell hesitates to lift their hands. There's

an odd film over the white keys like they stared up at the lights too long, and it left an afterimage.

They try to blink it away, lift their hands, feel the room inhale, waiting to applaud.

Purcell sits back to stand, but their back hits something where there should be open air. And that afterimage just won't go away.

The applause starts, but it's wrong.

"Hello? You're alright," a man's voice comes from the shadow, which they try to wipe from their eyes again. "Whoa! Be careful! You might scratch your glass!"

Some faraway force is restraining their arm, like they're being pushed underwater.

They wrench their arm out of its grip, hitting their face by accident, and release a startled noise that they can't feel in their throat.

The rumbling applause for their performance hasn't stopped, but they're no longer seated at the piano.

A man's face comes into focus, someone they don't recognize, bearded but young, with clothes covered in oil and grease stains, and a worried expression.

"I'm Tallis. You're alright. Try to slow down. It's okay."

Purcell tries to take a deep breath, but their diaphragm is frozen. They panic at the choking sensation and move to tear at whatever is immobilizing them.

Everything feels *wrong*, far away, abstracted. Purcell is sure it's from shock, but they've never been this disoriented before. They don't drink—don't go out with friends. They're pretty sure they haven't been kidnapped. Nothing explains how they're in this messy garage filled with metal junk and a man they've never met. He's trying to keep their hands from ripping

their restraints off.

But then they really look at their hands. They look at their body.

They've been forced into some metal shell, with silver and chrome pieces where their torso should be. There are gaps of nothing on their sides where organs should go, a thinner frame than would fit their skeleton at a bare minimum. Their hands are lifeless and cold material where they should be flesh and blood.

"You're safe. You were in a simulation."