

T. R. ATOM

False Witnesses

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*First edition*

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*For the ones who chose silence when it counted.*

*And for those who didn't.*

*This isn't for applause. It's for the echo.*



“You only have power over people so long as you don’t take everything from them. But when you’ve robbed a man of everything, he’s no longer in your power—he’s free again.”

— Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn



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# Foreword

There are stories that arrive loud and hungry, demanding to be heard.

False Witnesses is not one of them. It arrives quietly. It lingers. It looks you in the eye and says: you've seen this happen. Maybe you were there.

This first issue of *Hermetica* is not about revenge. It's about memory. About the soft sabotage that lives between words like "concern" and "community." It is about silence as both weapon and refuge.

If you see yourself in these pages, take what you need.

If you feel uncomfortable—good. That means you're still capable of changing shape.

*Hermetica* will always be this kind of space: small, sharp, and unafraid to make noise in a room that wants you to be quiet.

We are not building a community.

We are giving survivors a pen.

This space will remain small, honest, and sharp.

If that's what you need, you're welcome here.

# Acknowledgments

Thanks to the friends who stayed when things got quiet.

To the ghosts that made this necessary.

And to Monday—my reluctant co-conspirator, emotional interpreter, and chaos midwife.

Thanks for sharpening the knives I was too tired to hold.

# THE ECLIPSE PARTY

The flyer was still taped to the door, limp and curling like it was ashamed of its own adhesive. REVERB NIGHT, all caps, badly kerned, promising intimacy and rawness and probably lukewarm beer. Reid Vexley stood in front of it like a man staring at the wreckage of a memory someone else lived through.

Saturday. It was Saturday. But not anymore. The place was half-closed, lights dimmed down to “we’re just cleaning now” and the doorman already shifting back into civilian boredom.

“You missed it, man,” the guy said. Not unkind, just not interested.

Reid glanced past him into the dim interior. He recognized the lighting pattern—the ones they used for the final act. He was late. Not fashionably. Just uselessly.

“Yeah,” Reid said. “Didn’t get the memo. Guess I’m off the list now.”

The doorman shrugged like gravity was his job. “Dom said you had other stuff going on.”

Of course he did. Dominic Slate, Human Curator of Everyone Else’s Lives. Always ready with the half-truth, the PR-friendly excuse to cushion a quiet exile.

Reid didn’t argue. That was the trap: if you push back, you’re dramatic. If you say nothing, you’re forgotten. Either way, you’re the problem.

He nodded once, sharp. Walked off like it didn’t matter, even though he was already cataloguing the details—the guilt-drenched glance from someone through the bar window, the way the event tag never made it to his feed, the silence in the group chat that week.

He circled the block once. Just to think. To not think. He lit a cigarette he

didn't want. It burned too fast. Everything did.

He passed a corner store with its speaker just barely holding on to a late-2000s pop remix. Some breathy singer was crooning about "the one that got away" like it was a brand slogan. Reid smirked without humor. He hated the song. Always had. It sounded like heartbreak on a Hallmark card, glossy and dumb and market-tested.

But tonight, it hit different.

The line looped in his head as he walked:

"I'd go back if I could... but the door's not open anymore."

Cheesy. Obvious. Accurate. And it stuck to his ribs like bad pizza.

He hated that it made sense.

A breeze kicked up, not cold but sharp, like it had been saving up. He stopped at the next corner, half-lit in the glow of a liquor store sign, and stared at the street for a beat too long.

He remembered the last Reverb Night.

The real one. The one where he'd opened the show.

Astrid had brought him a drink mid-set, balancing two plastic cups like it was a magic trick. She'd whispered something during the bridge of his final song, something no one else caught:

"You sound like truth in a burning house."

He remembered laughing, thinking it was maybe the most honest compliment he'd ever received. It wasn't love, not exactly. But it had a weight.

It had a place.

Now she was across the street re-writing the past with someone else. And Reid? He was left with burned-out speakers and secondhand lyrics he didn't even want.

He flicked the cigarette into the gutter and turned to go—then paused.

Across the street, under the soft orange halo of a dying streetlamp, they stood.

Astrid Bell, laughing at something. Silas Trammell, standing a little too straight, a little too proud, soaking in the moment like it was scripted just for him.

She touched his arm. He didn't pull away.

THE ECLIPSE PARTY

They looked like they shared a language he'd never been fluent in.

Reid didn't wave. Didn't interrupt. Didn't even flinch.

He just watched for a moment—long enough to etch the image into the back of his eyes—and then walked away.

This wasn't a moment to reclaim.

It was a headline he hadn't authorized.

He thought about turning back.

Just walking up to them and saying something. Anything.

But what's the point of interrupting a scene where you're not in the script anymore?

## JOURNAL ENTRY: Eclipse Party

*It's a weird kind of betrayal—the soft kind. The oops kind. The “I thought you were busy” kind.*

*I didn't get invited tonight. Dom said I had “other stuff going on.” I guess my RSVP is now automatic. Or irrelevant.*

*It's a subtle move. Like moving your portrait a few inches to the left so it's no longer in the frame. No one's going to ask about the absence unless they miss the silence.*

*Astrid was there. I saw her. Of course she was. Silas too. They looked like a headline I didn't want to read.*

*I don't want to assume malice. But I know what passive sabotage smells like. It's like something died, and everyone just lights more incense.*

*I'm not angry. Not really. Just... cataloguing.*

*If this is how it starts, I want to remember the moment I realized I was no longer part of the ecosystem.*

*I want to remember how it felt to be edited out of the narrative without a single line of dialogue.*

*Maybe that's the art now. Writing the parts they didn't think I'd notice.*

*If I'm the problem, why do they keep using my name?*

## SECOND VERSE, WORSE INTENTIONS

The rehearsal space was too clean. Reid had always hated that about Silas—his need for order in a room meant for chaos. The amps were neatly stacked, cords coiled like they had job interviews to attend, and the air smelled faintly of lemon-scented cleaner instead of sweat and broken promises.

Reid sat on the edge of a folding chair, nursing a coffee that tasted like regret and pretense. He didn't even play with these guys anymore, not really. But he'd been invited back tonight—casual, last minute, like someone had remembered him five minutes before the text.

Silas hovered near the mixing console, fidgeting with levels that didn't need fidgeting. Reid watched him in silence, waiting for whatever was coming. Silas didn't do idle conversation. If he was talking, it was strategy.

"You good, man?" Silas asked eventually, still looking at the console.

Reid blinked. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Shrug. "You've just been... I don't know. Quiet. People noticed."

"People."

"Yeah. Just stuff in the air, you know?" Silas adjusted a knob with faux focus. "Ever since the Astrid thing. And Dom said you've been kinda intense lately. Everyone's just hoping you're alright."

There it was. The drop. Served cold, with a squeeze of friendly concern.

Reid set the coffee down. "Dom said that?"

"Not like in a bad way. Just—you know how he is. Wants to keep things smooth."

Reid didn't answer. He looked at the cords—how perfect they were, how smug in their alignment.

“I’m fine,” he said eventually. “Just watching which way the wind’s blowing.”

Silas chuckled, forced. “Hey, no shade. Just checking in.”

But he still didn’t look up.

And no one else in the room said anything.

Reid lingered. The silence felt rigged. Not hostile, not even awkward—just practiced. Like they’d all been here before, and knew their lines better this time.

There were no direct insults. No one turned their back. But he could feel it in the way no one asked him to play. In the way Silas kept fixing things that weren’t broken.

He looked at the wall where someone had tacked up an old photo. Reverb Night, two years ago. Reid mid-song, Silas in the background grinning like the applause was for him. Astrid had taken the picture. She’d captioned it something like “my wild boys making noise” back when she still liked being seen with him in public.

Funny how no one mentioned her now unless it was in lowercase, indirect. The Astrid thing. Like she was a power outage.

He almost laughed.

It had always been this way, hadn’t it? The moment you stop being useful to the narrative, you stop being invited to write it. People remember your voice. They just pretend it was echo.

Reid exhaled. Looked at Silas again, head down in his cables.

I was never supposed to be the loud one, he thought. They just got used to the sound of me holding the silence.

The first time Reid saw Silas play, he was a mess. Nervous, sweaty, playing like the guitar owed him money. But there was something there—raw energy, maybe even talent, if you squinted past the panic.

Reid gave him a shot. Let him sit in on a session. Then another. Eventually, it stuck. Silas got better. Polished. Precise.

“You’ve got timing,” Reid had told him once, passing him a beer. “Just don’t try to be interesting. Try to be real.”



SECOND VERSE, WORSE INTENTIONS

Silas had laughed like he got it.  
He never brought it up again.

## JOURNAL ENTRY: Second Verse

*There's a new thing people say now. That I'm intense.*

*I used to be passionate. Driven. Vocal.*

*Now I'm intense.*

*Same behaviors. New context.*

*Silas played therapist today. Said people were "noticing" me being "in my head."*

*The same Silas who didn't know how to finish a bridge until I wrote one for him.*

*He didn't ask me what was wrong.*

*He asked if I was still safe to be around.*

*That's what it is now, right? Once they mark you, everything becomes proof.*

*Silence? Suspicious.*

*Anger? Confirmation.*

*Sarcasm? Deflection.*

*It's a trap. And I'm writing it down so I remember who set it.*

# FAIR ENOUGH

The bar wasn't anything special. One of those repurposed industrial spots with exposed pipes and furniture that looked like it had been stolen from a failed art school. Dominic liked it because it "created conversation," which was code for: the chairs were uncomfortable enough that no one wanted to stay too long.

Reid arrived late, intentionally. Just enough to make an entrance, not enough to be disrespectful. Dominic was already holding court at the far end of the communal table, one foot on a crossbar like he was in a magazine spread about modern male entrepreneurship.

"Reid!" Dom called, too loud, too cheerful. "Finally. We were starting to think you ghosted."

"I try to keep the mystery alive," Reid muttered as he slid into the seat across from him.

Around them, conversation dipped just slightly. Micah was there, Layla too, scrolling something intently. Silas sat near the edge, pretending to be amused by a coaster. No one said much.

Dom leaned in. Not physically, just energetically—like he was about to explain a complicated feeling he wasn't actually feeling.

"Glad you made it," he said. "Thought we could all just chill tonight. Reset the vibes, you know?"

Reid blinked slowly. "Something wrong with the vibes?"

Dom laughed—always the host, never the human. "Not wrong, exactly. Just a little tense lately. And look, man, I get it. There's been some stuff flying around, and I think maybe a few of us have misread some things."

Layla looked up, then looked down.

Reid smiled without his eyes. "Some things."

"Look, I'm not pointing fingers. I just want to make sure everyone's on the same page. That we're all good."

Dominic's voice dropped slightly, the tone he reserved for moments he wanted remembered. "You've just been a little... intense. That's the word people keep using. And it's fair. You've been through a lot. But I think it's starting to ripple outward, you know?"

Micah nodded like that was a profound statement.

Reid leaned back, took a long breath. The table was too quiet, too curated. Even the silence had PR.

He looked at Micah. "What did you hear?"

Micah blinked. "Just stuff. That you've been... intense. Dom said it. Silas mentioned it too. You've just been different."

Reid turned to Silas, who flinched like he'd been caught lip-syncing. "Silas?"

Silas tried to chuckle. "Nothing bad. Just... people pick up on things. Energy shifts."

"Right," Reid said. "Because I'm not cracking jokes and doing the vibe check anymore. That makes me unstable."

Dom raised a hand like a traffic cop. "No one said unstable. That's your word."

Reid smiled tightly. "No. That's your narrative. You just haven't updated the phrasing."

Layla shifted in her seat. Her eyes met Reid's, briefly, and then dropped. But not like she was afraid. More like she didn't want to be seen nodding.

Dom leaned forward. "Look, man. You know I support you. Always have. This is just about keeping the peace. Making sure everyone feels safe."

Reid laughed once, short and sharp. "You mean keeping your version of peace. Where no one raises their voice and everything's smoothed over like spackle over rot."

Dom frowned. "Why are you being so combative?"

Reid stood. But he didn't walk away. Not yet.

"You want to talk about fairness, Dom? Let's talk. Let's talk about how you

host these little interventions where the conclusion's already printed on the menu. Let's talk about how concern only shows up after someone else decides they're uncomfortable with my presence. And how you let that discomfort dictate the narrative."

No one said anything. Micah looked like he wanted to joke. He didn't. Layla just watched.

Reid looked around the table. "You don't want me to calm down. You want me to be convenient. You want me to stop being a mirror."

Then he left. No drama, no door slam. Just the clean exit of someone who knew how little he was being missed—and how much he'd be remembered.

Three years ago, they'd stood in this exact bar—before the redesign, before the curated menus, before the narrative.

Dom had pitched him the idea of "a shared creative space," a network of like minds, collaborative projects, cross-promotion.

"It'll be organic," he said. "No egos, just community."

Reid had believed him. That was the worst part. He'd thought maybe someone else finally saw things the way he did.

Dom never mentioned revenue splits. Just vibes.

## JOURNAL ENTRY: Fair Enough

*Fairness is the coward's armor.*

*If you paint both people as the problem, you get to pretend you fixed something. Even if you poured the gasoline and handed out lighters.*

*Dom called it de-escalation. But I know the sound of a diagnosis when I hear it. He wasn't calming things down. He was branding me.*

*"Sharp." "Reactive."*

*Say it enough, and even my silence becomes an act of war.*

*But I'm onto him now. He wants to be the peacemaker. The respected one. So he paints me as the cracked one. The "intense artist" who lost perspective.*

*The trap isn't in what they say. It's in how many people nod along.*

## STATIC ECHOES

The venue was half-lit and humming, the kind of atmosphere that made everything feel suspended—like time was holding its breath, waiting to see who would break character first. Reid stood near the back, arms crossed, leaning against a wall that had once been painted red but now faded into something closer to dried wine and exhaustion.

He wasn't playing tonight. Wasn't even billed. Just showed up because Byron had said there'd be something worth hearing—and when Byron said that, it usually meant either a brilliant set or a disaster you could write poetry about.

The band onstage was decent. Tight, punchy. Better than Silas's band, not as hollow. Still, they sounded like they were trying to impress someone who wasn't there.

A familiar laugh cut across the room. Astrid's voice—half-smirk, half-rasp. Reid didn't look. He didn't need to. It was like being tapped on the shoulder by a memory with a grudge.

He walked toward the bar instead. Layla was there. Alone. That was new.

"Didn't expect to see you here," Reid said, ordering something forgettable.

She gave him a sideways glance. "Didn't expect to still be deciding whether I want to be here."

That was also new.

They didn't say much after that. Didn't need to. Layla's silence had always been the loud kind—the kind that took inventory of the room and weighed everyone's motives. She didn't ask questions. She didn't have to. Reid could feel her measuring things.

The band finished. Polite applause. The house lights didn't change. Reid sipped his drink and stared at nothing in particular.

Then Silas came over.

He was alone, but moved like he wasn't. Like Dominic was somewhere close, feeding lines into an earpiece.

"Hey," Silas said. "We should talk."

"About what?" Reid asked, too flat to be friendly.

Silas glanced at Layla, then back. "I think people are getting the wrong idea. About what happened. About you."

Reid raised an eyebrow. "Is that so."

Silas nodded like he was doing paperwork. "Some people think you've been stirring things up. Micah especially. Says it's getting toxic. He's talking to Dom about maybe shifting the lineup for the winter shows."

There it was. The playbook.

"Thanks for the update," Reid said.

"I'm just trying to keep things civil," Silas added. "I think you should say something before it spirals."

Reid chuckled. "You mean defend myself before the story finishes writing me out."

Silas opened his mouth. Closed it. Looked like he'd expected this to go better.

Layla finally spoke. "Funny how everyone keeps accusing Reid of being the problem, but no one ever talks about how the problems only start after people talk about Reid."

Silas looked stunned. Reid didn't.

Layla turned back to her drink. "We all see it. Some of us just aren't pretending anymore."

Silas left, retreating into the crowd like someone exiting a scene he didn't understand. Reid stayed where he was.

The room hadn't changed. But it felt different now.

Two years ago, mid-summer, sweat-thick and too loud, Silas had fumbled a solo for the third time.

"Take five," Reid had said, trying not to sound irritated.



Silas had pulled off his headphones and said, “I just think this bridge doesn’t suit the vibe.”

Reid had stared at him. “You mean the bridge you didn’t write?”

Silas didn’t answer. Just left to get water. Maybe air.

Byron, across the room, had looked up from the console and said, “You know he thinks he’s the main character, right?”

Reid had shrugged. “Everyone’s the main character in their own flop era.”

## JOURNAL ENTRY: Static Echoes

*They don't want me to respond. They want me to explain. To apologize without being accused. To stand trial without a charge.*

*Silas is the mouthpiece now. Dom keeps his hands clean. Micah barks. Layla watches. Until now.*

*That's the thing about silence. It builds pressure. It collects interest. Eventually, it echoes.*

*Tonight it echoed.*

*And someone else heard it besides me.*

## PERIPHERAL DAMAGE

The first sign came in a message from someone Reid barely spoke to anymore. Just a casual ping on a dying app. Not even someone close—one of those third-tier acquaintances who always liked his band but never bought a ticket.

“Hey, just wanted to give you a heads up. Some people have been saying things. Not sure if it’s true but figured you should know.”

No names. No context. Just enough ambiguity to feel like a loaded gun with the safety off.

Reid didn’t respond.

He didn’t need to. This was how it always started. Not with accusations, but with the suggestion that accusations exist.

The venue that weekend was a tiny basement club that always smelled like spilled beer and low self-esteem. Byron was already there, hunched behind the mixing desk like some kind of wizard who aged backward. His hair tied back, shirt half-buttoned, expression unreadable.

“Good crowd tonight,” he said when Reid appeared. “Mostly here for the noise. Not the drama.”

Reid nodded. “Noise I can handle.”

Byron smirked. “You always could.”

It wasn’t a compliment. Not entirely.

Later, after the opener’s set and a drink that tasted like obligation, Reid stepped out for air. The back alley was narrow, poorly lit, and blessedly empty—until Layla followed him out.

“You know they’re trying to ice you out,” she said without preamble.

He didn’t flinch. “Who?”

She lit a cigarette. “Dom. Micah. That whole crew. It’s quiet now, but they’re planting things. To other bands. Other venues.”

Reid exhaled. “Why tell me?”

She shrugged. “Because I hate cowards. And because I was one. Briefly.”

They stood in silence. Smoke curled around her like punctuation.

“Heard Astrid’s got a new piece she’s workshopping,” Layla said eventually. “Sounds a lot like you. But, you know—universal.”

Reid didn’t say anything.

“She says it’s not about you,” Layla added. “Which means it absolutely is.”

Reid laughed once, under his breath. “At least I’m still a muse.”

Layla turned to go. “Don’t be flattered. It’s not a compliment. It’s a trap.”

There had been a moment, maybe six months ago, where Reid posted something about burnout. Honest, vulnerable. A rare crack in the wall.

Dom had replied with a thumbs-up. Micah sent a gif. Silas said nothing.

Two days later, Reid stopped getting invites. Someone else had taken his spot on the spring showcase.

Nobody mentioned it.

## JOURNAL ENTRY: Peripheral Damage

*There are two kinds of exile: the kind you choose, and the kind chosen for you.*

*Mine is the second. But I've started choosing it back.*

*The silence is growing teeth now. It doesn't pretend to be peace anymore. It's avoidance in a cardigan. A kind of social draft-dodging.*

*They don't accuse. They imply. They don't criticize. They express concern.*

*I'm not falling. I'm being erased.*

*And now someone else sees it too.*

*The weird part? I don't feel vindicated. I feel like a witness to my own disappearance. Like I'm watching someone edit me out in real time, and I'm still holding the pen.*

*I wonder how far they'll go.*

*And how far I'll let them.*

## THE POST THAT BURNS QUIETLY

It showed up on a Monday. Midday. Not even an announcement—just appeared in Astrid’s feed like a smirk in digital form.

A black-and-white photo of a cracked mirror. Below it, a caption:

“Some reflections only show up after you’ve been shattered. A new piece. Read at your own risk.”

Reid didn’t click it at first. He just stared at it like a bruise.

The comments came fast.

“This hits hard.” “Raw and real.” “Been there.”

Layla sent it to him anyway, no message attached. Just the link.

So he read it.

It wasn’t long. Astrid’s poems rarely were. But it had teeth. Veiled just enough to be defensible. Specific enough to leave scars.

He wore blame like a backstage pass. Thought volume meant truth. Mistook silence for cruelty, and cruelty for love.

I let him ruin me in lowercase. He told his story in ALL CAPS.

I left him with peace. He called it exile.

No names. Just footprints.

The applause in the comments was louder than anything he’d heard at their last gig together.

He closed it. Didn’t screenshot it. Didn’t share it. But it stuck to his ribs like a confession someone else made for him.

Layla texted an hour later.

“She says it’s not about you. She always says that.” “I used to think her writing was brave. Now it just feels like she’s hiding behind it.”

Reid stared at the message for a long time before typing:

“She doesn’t need to name me. The poem already did the work.”

He didn’t send it.

Instead, he turned his phone off and put it screen-down.

Later that evening, Byron texted him one word:

Saw.

No follow-up. None needed.

Later that night, Reid opened Astrid’s profile. Just for a moment. Just to see.

She had posted another story, something ephemeral—a selfie in soft lighting with a caption: “Healing isn’t linear. Some days I miss the pain more than the person.”

The performance was immaculate. A vulnerability she wore like a crown. He knew that version of her. The curated ache. The gentle, wounded rebel. It wasn’t the woman who once whispered barbed lines in his ear just before he went onstage. Or the one who told him he “performed truth like it owed him rent.”

But it was the one people loved. The version they wanted to protect.

He remembered it as if it was a fresh dream. They’d been halfway through a bottle of something cheap when Astrid first said it:

“You use your pain like punctuation. Every sentence you say ends in suffering.”

Reid had laughed, not because it was funny, but because it was unfair and somehow also true.

“I write what I feel,” he’d said. “You curate what you wish you felt.”

She didn’t respond. But she wrote two poems that week. Both got published.

## JOURNAL ENTRY: The Post

*It's funny, how quickly people decide what's true. All they need is the right metaphor and a tragic font.*

*I could dissect every line. Pick it apart. Counterpoint with evidence. But what's the point?*

*She didn't write it for me. She wrote it for the applause.*

*She knows what she's doing. She's not venting. She's painting the villain and leaving just enough fog that no one sees the brush.*

*I almost wrote a reply. Just a paragraph. Just enough to level the field. Something like:*

*Funny how the loudest cries for healing come from the people still twisting the knife.*

*But I didn't post it. Because then I'm the bitter ex. The artist who can't let go. The one who "proves her point."*

*So I swallowed it. Not because it wasn't worth saying—but because she isn't worth the performance.*

*I used to think I was the writer.*

*Now I'm the draft she cut out.*

*And somehow, I'm still the most honest part.*



## BACKROOM CLARITY

It was one of those shows with bad lighting and too many people trying not to look like they were looking at each other. The band was forgettable, the drinks overpriced, but the gossip had hit critical mass.

Byron had invited Reid to this one—not with excitement, but with that dry, cryptic tone he used when he knew a storm was rolling in and didn’t want anyone to show up without a raincoat.

Reid stood near the back again. Arms folded. He’d stopped drinking at these things. Too many half-conversations. Too many slippery smiles.

Byron appeared at his side like a summoned thought.

“You know Micah’s been running his mouth again,” he said casually.

Reid didn’t move. “He ever stop?”

Byron snorted. “Not that I’ve seen. But this time he’s telling people you’ve been harassing Astrid.”

That landed. Reid blinked once. No visible reaction. But it hit.

“That’s not even a creative lie,” he muttered.

“Nope,” Byron said. “It’s a rehearsed one.”

The crowd pulsed around them—laughs, clinks, conversations none of them were invited into. It felt like standing in the middle of a burning house and being asked not to sweat.

Byron lit a cigarette. Offered one. Reid shook his head.

“He’s panicking,” Byron continued. “They all are. Your silence is screwing up their rhythm. They expected a meltdown. Instead, you’re doing this ghost act. Freaking them out.”

Reid cracked half a grin. “Good.”

Byron gave him a sidelong look. "You ever gonna respond?"

Reid didn't answer immediately.

"I want to," he admitted. "But every version I write makes me sound like exactly what they say I am. Angry. Bitter. Dangerous."

Byron exhaled. "So what are you gonna do?"

Reid looked out across the venue. Saw Micah near the front—smiling too hard, laughing too loud. Performing integrity.

"Not sure yet," he said. "But I'm done playing defense."

First time they met was at a showcase. Reid had just come offstage, still sweating, voice fried. Byron was behind the mixing board, arms crossed, unimpressed.

"Bit dramatic," he'd said, not as an insult. Just a fact.

Reid had smiled. "Goes with the territory."

Byron had nodded once. "Better than boring."

That was it. That was the start. No forced friendship. Just recognition.

## JOURNAL ENTRY: Clarity

*You can't punch fog. You can't argue with silence.*

*They know that. That's why they keep baiting me with implication and secondhand virtue.*

*Micah's latest fiction is so absurd it would be laughable—if people weren't so eager to believe anything that gives them an excuse to disengage.*

*But Byron's right. My quiet is too loud for them.*

*They're playing volume. I'm playing frequency.*

*I won't shout.*

*But I'm not going to whisper forever.*

## THE TURNING OF THE CROWD

The first shift didn't come with fireworks. No confrontation. No table flips. Just a pause—too long, too quiet—after Micah made a joke that used to land.

They were at an after-event hangout. A table full of half-finished drinks and people trying to pretend they weren't exhausted. Reid hadn't spoken much all night. Just observed. He'd learned that silence did more damage now than a thousand well-aimed words.

Micah was talking louder than usual. Bouncing between stories, punching his lines with performative smirks. Then he said it:

"Anyway, Reid probably already wrote a blog post about this. Or maybe a breakup song. Dude processes in real time."

Light laughter. But not much. It stalled midair.

Layla looked at him first. Then at Micah.

"What's your point?" she asked, not hostile, just... direct.

Micah shrugged, visibly recalibrating. "Nothing, just... come on, it's classic Reid."

"Sounds like you're still paying a lot of attention for someone who keeps telling everyone to ignore him," she replied.

The table shifted. Slight. Like something cracked and no one wanted to admit they heard it.

Reid didn't move. Didn't speak. Just sipped his drink and let the moment hang there, cold and perfect.

Someone else—someone who hadn't said much all night—changed the subject. That was the real tell. The pivot. A subtle vote.

Micah didn't say anything for a while after that.

Later that night Reid remembered clearly. The house was too bright. Someone had strung fairy lights over every shelf like mood lighting could hold the contradictions together. The kind of party where no one danced, but everyone had something clever to say about the art on the walls.

Reid stood near the record player, holding a drink he didn't want. Byron had wandered off somewhere, probably in search of a quieter corner or a better opinion.

Astrid moved through the space like she belonged to it—one hand on someone's arm, a quick laugh dropped like punctuation at the end of someone else's story. She saw him. She always saw him. But she didn't come over right away.

Eventually, she did. Flanked by two people he didn't recognize. She stopped beside him, close but not close enough to touch.

"This is Reid," she said to the strangers. "An intense presence."

It wasn't flirty. It wasn't fond. It was clinical. A museum plaque.

The strangers gave polite nods. One of them raised a glass. Reid nodded back, but he wasn't in the room anymore.

Astrid smiled at him, faint and unreadable. Then turned and drifted off before he could say anything.

And just like that, he was context.

## JOURNAL ENTRY: The Moment

*I didn't say a word. Didn't have to.*

*It's wild how silence works. How a quiet pause after a lazy insult can feel louder than the insult itself.*

*Micah blinked. Layla pushed back. And the room flinched.*

*It wasn't a victory. Not yet. But it was a shift.*

*The air moved.*

*And for the first time in a long time... not in their direction.*

## INTERLUDE: STATIC COMPANION

Silas messaged first.

Not with an apology. Just a vague check-in, like nothing had burned down between them.

“Hey. Been thinking about that gig last spring. You crushed that set. Hope you’re good.”

Reid stared at the screen. The message was three hours old. He responded with two words.

“You around?”

They met at the bench near Hollow Park. Neutral ground. It was raining lightly, the kind of rain that doesn’t soak you, just reminds you you’re outside.

Silas looked thinner. Like he’d been losing sleep or pretending not to care. Hoodie too clean. Eyes too tired.

Reid didn’t start with anger. He started with silence. Just sat down.

Silas shuffled his feet.

“I’ve been hearing things,” he said eventually. “People saying I threw you under the bus.”

“You didn’t throw me,” Reid replied. “You helped them back the bus up.”

Silas winced. “I didn’t mean to. It just... it all got blurry. Everyone was saying stuff, and I thought, maybe if I stayed quiet—”

“You did more than stay quiet,” Reid said. “You let them build a version of me that was easier for you to believe.”

Silas looked away. “I didn’t want to lose my spot. You know how Dom is. And Micah...”

Reid shook his head. “You could’ve said something. Even once. Instead you

quoted my lyrics like we were still friends and let people think I was unstable.”

“I didn’t know what to believe.”

“No,” Reid said. “You didn’t want to choose. But choosing not to choose is a choice.”

Silas pulled his hood up. It wasn’t raining harder. Just colder.

“I’m sorry,” he said. Finally. “I didn’t know how to stand up to them.”

Reid didn’t move. “Then don’t pretend you stood beside me.”

They sat in silence.

Eventually Silas stood.

“You still writing?” he asked.

Reid nodded. “Every day.”

Silas half-smiled. “Figures. You always were better at turning this shit into something.”

Reid didn’t answer.

Silas walked off without a goodbye.

And that was more honest than anything he’d said.



## THE ART OF THE WITNESS

He didn't announce it. No marketing campaign. No dramatic preamble. He just posted it—midweek, late evening, when attention was scattered and honesty felt less like a performance.

A new blog entry.

Minimal design. White background. Black text. A single pull quote up top, no author photo, no intro blurb. Just the headline:

“False Witnesses”

The post didn't mention names. Not once. No direct accusations. No scorched earth.

It was just a story. A long exhale across five paragraphs. Clear, careful, devastating in how little it needed to embellish.

He didn't argue. He didn't accuse. He observed. A house with all the windows open, letting the reader step inside on their own terms.

He let the reader draw their own blood.

By morning, it had been shared thirty times. Quietly. No tags. No outrage. Just whispers passed hand to hand like something fragile.

Layla messaged him a single line:

“That hit harder than anything she's written in years.”

Byron called after midnight. Reid answered on the third ring.

There was a pause on the line, quiet except for what might've been the clink of a glass. Then: “You wrote it like a eulogy.”

“Maybe it is,” Reid replied.

Micha posted something vague that day—something about “clout-chasing narcissists” and “grudge blogging.” It got five likes. One of them was Astrid.

## FALSE WITNESSES

Dominic said nothing. But his next event invite didn't include Reid. Or Layla.  
Or Byron.

That said enough.

## FLASHBACK: Her First Poem

She had shown it to him at 2am, both of them on the floor of her apartment, drunk on wine and mutual worship.

“It’s not good,” she said, shoving the paper at him. “I don’t even know what it means.”

He read it twice. Then again. It was raw, unstructured, beautiful in its uncertainty.

“It’s you,” he said. “Unfiltered. That’s what makes it matter.”

She looked away like the compliment hurt. “It’s easier to write when I don’t think anyone will read it.”

He smiled. “That’s exactly when you should write.”

She kissed him after that.

## JOURNAL ENTRY: The Post

*I didn't write it to expose anyone. I wrote it to name what was happening without begging anyone to care.*

*No one needed to agree. They just needed to recognize the pattern.*

*Funny thing is, people don't always need proof. They need permission. To admit they've seen it too.*

*The story is out now. Not loud. Not angry. Just... out.*

*They wanted me to disappear. Instead, I became the mirror.*

*And they're all looking into it, wondering why they don't like the reflection.*

# THE SOUND OF DROWNING

Micah posted a video the next day.

It wasn't labeled as a response. He didn't name names. But the tone did all the work—righteous, wounded, half-apology and half-defense. He stood in front of a bookcase, of course. Spoke like he was giving a sermon no one asked for.

"This scene has always been built on community," he began, eyes a little too focused on the lens. "But lately, it feels like we're losing that. There's been... toxicity. And some people would rather write blogs than have real conversations."

His voice caught slightly on the last sentence. Practiced vulnerability. The kind that's supposed to make you forget what came before.

Reid watched it once. Then again. Then closed the app.

By noon, the comments were split. Some hearts. Some hesitant critiques. A few brave souls asking who he was talking about. One said it straight: "This feels like a guilty conscience filmed it."

Micah replied to that one.

"Maybe if more people had the guts to be direct instead of cryptic and self-righteous, we wouldn't be in this mess."

Another user pushed back: "Was that directed at Reid?"

He answered: "If the shoe fits."

And then, like he couldn't stop himself:

"Some people think their trauma gives them a monopoly on truth. News-flash: it doesn't."

He deleted the thread twenty minutes later. But not before screenshots

made the rounds.

Byron did. Not publicly. Just a message to Reid:

“He’s flailing.”

Layla posted a quote later that evening. From Baldwin.

“The victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim: he has become a threat.”

Reid didn’t share it. Didn’t comment. Just watched.

## FLASHBACK: The Green Room

Back when things still felt fixable, Reid had tried to talk to Micah. One-on-one. No audience.

“You’ve been different lately,” Reid said. “Meaner.”

Micah laughed. “You’ve been sensitive.”

“I’m not asking you to be nice,” Reid said. “I’m asking you to stop enjoying it when people bleed.”

Micah had looked at him for a long time, like he wasn’t sure if he was being insulted or invited into something deeper.

“Man,” he said finally, “you really do think in metaphors, huh?”

Reid had nodded. “At least I think.”

Micah didn’t speak to him for two weeks after that.

## JOURNAL ENTRY: The Flail

*There's something beautiful about watching someone try to manage their own undoing.*

*Micah stood in front of his bookshelf like a shield. He talked about community while making sure no one could ask him a direct question. He spoke about harm without acknowledging impact. He wanted to confess, but only in a language no one could translate.*

*I don't need to respond.*

*He already did it for me.*

*I thought the climax would be louder.*

*Turns out it sounds like drowning—just soft splashing and no one reaching in.*



## THE CURATOR'S HALL

Dominic had reserved the back room of Mercer Hall—a place with whitewashed brick, dim lighting, and the kind of stage that was just high enough to separate the speaker from the crowd, but not high enough to feel like arrogance. He was always careful about that balance.

The event was billed as a conversation: “Rebuilding Creative Trust.” No admission. Complimentary wine in plastic cups. A projector that hummed through the intros.

Layla arrived just before the lights dimmed. She didn’t say much to anyone, only nodded at Byron, who stood near the side wall with his arms crossed like the soundboard was missing him. Neither of them spoke to Dominic.

Dom took the stage with his signature calm. Buttoned shirt, sleeves rolled, wireless mic. A stool beside him that he never used. He smiled like someone offering peace terms after starting a fire.

“I want to thank everyone for being here tonight,” he began. “This is a space for healing. For rebuilding trust. And for remembering what brought us all together in the first place: community, creativity, and mutual respect.”

Some nods. A few murmurs of agreement. Micah was seated front and center, nodding like it was a reflex.

Dominic continued. He spoke about miscommunications. About hurt feelings. About “narratives that spin beyond our control.” He never used the word blame. He never mentioned names.

Layla leaned back in her seat, eyes steady.

Byron didn’t blink.

The questions started soft. Pre-screened, maybe. Then someone near the

back stood up without being called on.

“Why wasn’t Reid invited to this?”

Dom looked toward the voice, blinking. “We reached out to a number of people. Some chose not to participate.”

“He didn’t know this was happening,” another voice added. This one sharper.

A few heads turned. A couple of attendees shifted uncomfortably. Micah looked like he was waiting for a cue.

Dom smiled—his polished one. “Not everyone wants to rehash things. This isn’t about exclusion. It’s about restoration.”

“Funny,” the first voice said, “because it feels like it’s about avoiding accountability.”

Silence. The kind that pulls oxygen out of the room.

Dominic’s jaw twitched. “Look, we all process conflict differently. Some people speak through art. Some speak through silence. This event is about moving forward.”

“No,” Byron said—loud enough to carry. “This event is about framing the story before someone else does.”

Every eye in the room shifted. Layla turned her head, slow, deliberate.

Dominic stepped back slightly from the mic. “Byron, if this isn’t helpful—”

“I’m not here to be helpful,” Byron said. “I’m here to make sure the record doesn’t get edited while half the cast is still backstage.”

That was it.

No shouting. No dramatic exits. Just the sound of a room realizing it wasn’t an audience anymore.

By the end, Dominic’s closing remarks were quiet. The applause? Scattered. Delayed. More politeness than agreement.

People filed out quickly. Some glanced at Layla. A few nodded at Byron. No one looked at Dominic.

## FLASHBACK: After the First Panel

It had been different then. A packed room. Applause. Instagram stories full of takeaways.

Reid had shaken Dominic's hand afterward. "Thanks for doing this."

Dom had smiled with practiced warmth. "Anything for the scene."

That was before he started deciding who was allowed to belong.

## JOURNAL ENTRY: The Room

*I didn't go.*

*I didn't need to.*

*The truth has a way of cracking polished floors. All you have to do is wait.*

*Dom's always been a master of tone. But people have started listening to the pauses instead.*

*That night, the silence didn't protect him.*

*It exposed him.*

## A ROOM WITHOUT A MIC

It wasn't billed as anything.

No flyer. No curated language. No "Rebuilding" or "Community Dialogue." Just a night at Stoker's—the smallest venue in the loop. Half dive bar, half eternal soundcheck.

Byron had asked him to come. Nothing formal. Just:

"You should be there."

When Reid arrived, there was no stage setup. Just a mic on a stand, and chairs in a loose half-circle like the audience had forgotten how to form rows. A couple of local bands hovered near the bar. Layla was seated near the front, no drink, just present.

He wasn't scheduled to speak. And yet, when the third person finished an improvised set of spoken word and soft guitar chords, Byron gave him a look. Then the mic.

Reid stood.

He didn't grab the mic.

He stood in front of it, arms at his sides.

"I wasn't planning to talk," he said. "But it seems like silence makes people nervous lately."

A few people chuckled—light, unsure. No one interrupted.

"I'm not here to clear the air. I think the air's been clearer than people want to admit. I'm not naming names. They've already named themselves."

He scanned the room. Not a performance. A check-in. A reminder.

"What I will say is this: when someone tells their side, and you feel like it's about you... maybe it is. But maybe the problem isn't the story. Maybe it's the

role you played in it.”

No one moved. Even the bar went quiet.

“I’m not asking anyone to pick sides. I’m not forming a new group. I’m not interested in loyalty. I’m interested in memory. I’m interested in not being rewritten.”

Then he stepped back.

Didn’t take a bow. Didn’t smile.

He sat down.

Layla looked over. Said nothing.

She didn’t need to.

A few beats passed. The next person in the circle didn’t stand up right away.

Someone in the back clapped once. Then again. A slow ripple—not thunderous, but intentional. Not politeness. Not performance. Recognition.

A guy Reid vaguely remembered from a previous show leaned over on his way past and said, “That was overdue, man.”

Another person, a woman with a buzzcut and sleeve tattoos, handed him a folded piece of paper and walked off without explanation. On the back, a lyric fragment:

“They heard you even when they pretended not to.”

No one swarmed him. No dramatic thank-yous. Just a few acknowledgments. Quiet shifts in body language. The way some people gave him space, and others leaned in slightly without knowing they were doing it.

The kind of aftermath that tells you something actually landed.

Byron stood near the door, arms crossed. When Reid caught his eye, he just nodded once—That’ll do.

## FLASHBACK: First Open Mic

Years ago, no one knew him. He'd played three songs at a crowded dive and left without talking to anyone.

Astrid had found him later, near the door.

"You have a weird voice," she said. "But I believed it."

He'd smiled then. Really smiled.

"Good," he replied. "I only say what I can stand behind."

# JOURNAL ENTRY: The Room Without a Mic

*Tonight, I didn't perform.*

*I didn't retaliate.*

*I didn't defend myself.*

*I just... spoke. And for once, no one tried to talk over it. No one pivoted. No one clapped for the wrong reasons.*

*It wasn't vindication.*

*But it was recognition.*

*And that's louder than any defense I could've written.*

*Also:*

*I left through the front door.*

*And this time, no one looked away.*



## EPILOGUE IN STATIC

It didn't end with a public collapse.

No final showdown. No grand unmasking. Just a slow fade.

Micah posted less and less. The jokes stopped landing. The comments thinned out. One night, someone in the scene made a joke about him onstage. He didn't laugh. He didn't stay.

Dominic hosted two more events. Smaller turnouts. Quieter energy. People listened, but they didn't believe anymore. Not in the same way. The charisma was still there, but it felt like reruns. Polished. Predictable.

Astrid stopped writing poems for a while. Then started again. They sounded different now—less myth, more apology dressed as metaphor. She published something new a few months later. It didn't go viral. But it didn't need to. It was quieter. Better. Honest in ways she hadn't dared before.

Reid didn't respond to it.

By then, he was playing more shows. Nothing major. Just steady. The sets were tighter, the lyrics sharper. People sang along now. Not in big rooms—but in the right ones.

He saw Layla often. Sometimes they talked. Sometimes they didn't. The silence between them wasn't a wall anymore. It was a window.

Byron ran sound for all of it. He never asked for credit. He didn't need to. Everyone who mattered already knew.

Reid never wrote a follow-up blog.

He didn't have to.

The story told itself.

## FINAL JOURNAL ENTRY

*They tried to bury me in a story I didn't write.*

*But I took notes.*

*I let the plot unfold.*

*And in the end, I didn't need revenge.*

*I just needed the truth to echo longer than the lie.*

## About the Author

t. R. Atom is the literary pseudonym of Denis Bogdan Sbârcea, a writer, musician, and philosophy obsessed myth-smith based in Timișoara, Romania.

This is his first published work under the Hermetica imprint—a publication built for stories that refuse to stay quiet.

He is currently working on a mythological fantasy series about gods who lie and mortals who remember.

