

The Loop



SCI-FI NOVEL

Jan Kaluža

Copyright

© Jan Kaluža, 2026. All rights reserved.

This work, including all its parts, characters, names, texts, dialogues, illustrations, and other related materials, is protected by copyright under applicable law.

Without the author's prior written consent, this work or any part of it may not be:

- ∞ copied,
- ∞ reproduced,
- ∞ distributed,
- ∞ published,
- ∞ shared on websites, social networks, or storage services,
- ∞ modified,
- ∞ translated,
- ∞ adapted into derivative works,
- ∞ or used for commercial or non-commercial purposes beyond statutory exceptions.

You may share a link to the official source and quote short excerpts as permitted by law, especially for review, criticism, or reporting, provided the author and source are credited.

Unauthorised use of the work may constitute copyright infringement and may lead to claims under applicable law.

AUTHOR

Jan Kaluža

OFFICIAL SOURCE

<https://jankaluza.cz/en/smycka/>

ILLUSTRATIONS

- Front cover (Nox and Lyra): Rex (<https://www.instagram.com/threshcoremain/>)
- Fermentor: Gottmi (https://www.instagram.com/_gottmi_/)
- Snail divider: Gottmi (https://www.instagram.com/_gottmi_/)

“Go fuck your...”

“... Self-importance. That’s your real problem,” she snapped at me, unknowingly finishing my insult for me. It was too good a line to let go to waste. I sat down on the couch, the skyscrapers sprawled out beyond the window. The neon signs lit the city so fiercely we didn’t even need to turn on a light.

Lyra stood over me, but she wasn’t waiting for my answer. She answered herself. I’d already stopped listening, though. I drifted off, building the scene in my head. Frame by frame, movement by movement. I added a title card, dramatic music. Flattered myself, and out of mercy, flattered her too. I knew this fragment would go viral. Nothing delights people quite like someone else’s misfortune. And my misfortune delighted them twice as much. Especially with a pinch of violence, a joke, and a bit of chance thrown in.

“You’re not listening to me again.”

Her voice pulled me back into the room. I rubbed my eyes.

“I’m creating.”

“You create when you have nothing, and you don’t create when you have everything,” she sighed.

“Guess I’m just a creature of habit.” I grabbed the Notebook off the small table.

“I really can’t take these moods of yours anymore. I mean it.”

She wasn’t shouting. Honestly, shouting would have calmed me down more than this. I wanted to answer her. But she was only one person, and millions were waiting for the next fragment.

I opened the Notebook and held it up to my eyes. I replayed the memory once more, and a flash like a giant camera shutter swept through the room. For a moment it even outshone the neon lights of the city below us.

At the same instant the door slammed shut behind me, and I was alone in the apartment. It wasn't the first time she'd left, and I hoped it wouldn't be the last. I tossed the Notebook onto the empty side of the couch and pictured our bodies there from the night before.

Up and down. That was how our relationship had been working lately, and I was mostly the one on the bottom — that much was just a fact.

I threw my feet up on the table and leaned back, comfortable. I pulled my phone from my pocket and checked the fragment. Over three hundred thousand views in the first minute. It had barely lasted thirty seconds. An argument, a slammed door, and silence timed just right. I'd hoped for more, but for something so improvised, it wasn't bad. I'd squeeze three million out of this by midnight, and that would just have to be enough for Corven.

I touched the screen and swiped over to the view count. I watched the numbers climb. Three hundred and ten. Three hundred and twenty. Three hundred and thirty thousand. I'd never understood people who claimed they didn't care about the numbers. Of course they cared. Everyone did. Only the unsuccessful ones claimed otherwise.

I opened the comments and immediately started reading the top-rated ones:

Did she leave you over that nose?

This is staged.

Lyra deserves better.

I lingered on that last comment a moment longer than was healthy. Then I liked it. A few seconds later, its author sent me a heart, and it made me laugh. Millions of people felt like they knew me. They knew when I was happy, when I was drunk, when I was desperate. They recognized my apartments, my wife, my friends, and my excuses. And I knew them too. Not by name or face, but by those small doses of attention they sent me every day.

I locked the screen and set the phone down beside me. The silence in the apartment immediately grew louder. My eyes drifted to the city below. The screen covering fifteen floors of the skyscraper across from me flickered, and Lyra's anguished face appeared on it. Exactly as I'd imagined it a moment ago. She looked perfect. On screen, at least.

I knew Lyra wouldn't mind this fragment. We'd been married fifteen years, and she knew exactly what she'd signed up for. Poets don't have privacy. Not the ones who created for the Loop, anyway. When their words could shift the moods of millions, everyone wanted to know absolutely everything about them too. At least about the best ones, and I'd once been among them. Mining attention out of every emotion, good or bad. At least one fragment a day. And when they were good enough, they paid well too. Well enough for the view in front of me, and for every escape we made from it.

My eyes slid from the neon lights beyond the windows to the empty spot on the couch. Solitude, and Lyra. I hated them both and loved them both at once. I spun the phone between my fingers and went

to check the bathroom. On the way, I dialed a number from my favorites list. One of the few still left there. It rang longer than I would have liked.

“Yeah?” a sleepy voice answered through the speaker. It sounded older than I remembered. Maybe only because I’d woken it in the middle of the night.

“Hey, I... need to talk,” I finally managed, moving from the bathroom to the bar counter just behind the couch.

“Nox?”

“Yeah, it’s me. Did you see my new fragment? It’s already past three hundred thousand views.”

“I don’t watch the Loop anymore. It started feeling too tight.”

I exhaled. Too tight. That was how Edrin talked about the place where we’d both gotten rich. The network that had turned human attention into the most valuable resource in the world.

For a moment I wished I could do what he’d done. Delete the account and vanish from the eyes of millions. Would it help me? Would it help Lyra? Us? I looked around. The couch cost more than Edrin’s first apartment, the glass wall offered the best view in the city, and the bar behind me was full of bottles I’d gotten for posing with them once. I opened one and poured myself a glass. I had no idea what it was, but going by my own face on the label, I was supposed to drink it every evening.

No. This wasn't something I could give up. I couldn't live a different life. This was, after all, the only thing I really had left. The Loop was how Lyra and I had met, and it was probably the Loop that kept us together still.

"She left you, didn't she?" came through the phone speaker.

"No... No, that's not it. Her toothbrush is still in the bathroom."

Along with three pairs of shoes, a jacket, and most of her books. After fifteen years of marriage, I'd learned that women left in pieces. And came back in pieces too.

"A toothbrush?" Edrin laughed, and I laughed with him. Then his voice changed. "You should take this seriously, unless you want to lose her for good."

"And what exactly do you think I should do?"

"Quit the Loop. Like I did," he answered, and drew a breath to keep going.

"Nonsense," I cut him off, but a new voice came through the speaker instead. A woman's.

"Who's calling this late?"

I knew that voice. It was Mirea, Edrin's wife.

"Nox," Edrin answered. "Lyra left him."

"She didn't leave me. Her toothbrush is still here," I informed the phone lying on the table in front of me, though no one on the other end seemed to be listening.

“You should come see us, Nox,” Mirea’s voice came again. “Get yourself back together a little.”

Just then, a keycard beeped behind me, and the door locks began to turn. My heart started pounding.

“I have to go,” I blurted, and hung up.

At that same moment the door opened and Lyra walked into the apartment. I ran a hand through my messy hair, quickly finished off the rest of my glass, and started toward her. I wanted to hug her, the way I always did, but this time she wouldn’t let me.

“Sorry to bother you again,” she said, and I smiled at her.

“It’s fine. I’m glad you came back.”

At that, her expression shifted from surprise to a nervous smile.

“You know...” she began quietly, heading for the bathroom, “I’m just here for the toothbrush.”

Resonance after chapter 9

INFLUENCES CHAPTER 10

Chapter 9 is out — and now you can decide how Nox goes after Vey. In a short form you choose details that will shape the direction of chapter 10.

The strongest votes really make it into the text. Open the link below, or scan the QR code — it takes about a minute.

Voting on the website • Fill in the voting form



Scan the QR code to open the voting form.