

The Loop



SCI-FI NOVEL

Jan Kaluža

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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_/)

Chapter 4: The Glass (Nox)

HOW THIS CHAPTER WAS SHAPED

Patron brief - YarnSpirit

- **Píseň / soundtrack**

[Pavel Čadek - Nikdy nevíš \(oficiální video\)](#)

- **Emoce po kapitole**

Mám mnohem jasnější představu o tom, jak funguje svět Smyčky.

- **Situace v kapitole**

Někdo změní názor během jediného rozhovoru.

- **Drobný moment**

Fyzický dotek.

- **Co kapitola odhalí**

Něco z minulosti.

- **Věta, dialog nebo myšlenka**

vrátit se k myšlence, že žena neodchází pokud si u tebe nechá zubní kartáček

- **Na co dát pozor**

aby děj neztratil přehlednost

- **Co se nesmí stát**

neměl by nikdo umřít

HOW THIS CHAPTER WAS SHAPED

Readers' voice

“Your last fragment went up more than 20 hours ago. Your audience is waiting. Hold their attention and post something new!”

The Loop reached out for the first time at nine in the morning. The second time, shortly after lunch. This was its third attempt to get me to cooperate. Evening was closing in, and my head was full of all kinds of things. None of them, though, led to a fragment I could actually finish.

The fourth glass was supposed to be the solution. I’d hoped it would steer me toward better thoughts than the last one had. But it seemed like all of them had conspired against me. Along with the release, the guilt, and the bitterness, my mind kept washing up the same image, over and over. Lyra.

I saw her the way the Loop saw her. Blue eyes, golden hair, red lips. Three colors that could always be assembled into the perfect fragment. I could have let myself get swept up in that wave of pathos and sent those few seconds of memory off into the Loop.

Instead, I stared at the champagne glass.

She’d set it down here yesterday, right before she left, a lipstick print still smudged on the rim. For a moment I considered drinking from it. But I was Nox. I was certainly no desperate wreck getting drunk off the glass of the woman who’d left him. So I just left it there and drank from my own instead.

A soft beep announced someone at the door, and I immediately pictured the fragment I’d send out in a few minutes. I could see it clearly in front of my eyes. I open the door, and there’s Lyra standing outside it. Blue eyes, golden hair, red lips. Zoom in on a bottle of champagne in her hand. A gift, a peace offering. I let her in, of

course, act like nothing ever happened. Generosity itself. Then a quick cut, a selfie in the hot tub with the city sprawled beneath us. On the lit billboard behind it all, a simple line:

NO ONE LEAVES NOX.

Already thinking about how to end this little fragment miniseries, I walked slowly to the door and opened it.

The bottle was there. Lyra wasn't.

"Nox!" Corven spread his arms wide, as if surprised to find me in my own apartment. "You look exactly like the numbers suggested you would."

With a sigh, I watched him invite himself in and toss his coat clear across the apartment onto the couch. Bad news, good wine. That was pretty much the whole formula for how this man operated.

"This is a good vintage," Corven said, peeling the foil off the neck of the bottle. "Made the nice old-fashioned way, not that synthetic garbage."

He aimed the bottle out into the room and paused for a moment, thinking.

"You got anything expensive here?"

"Everything."

"Excellent."

The neck of the bottle spun around the room, the cork popped loose, hit the ceiling, and vanished somewhere behind the bar. I checked on the paintings of scantily-clad women on the wall, and before I could say a word, Corven had already filled Lyra's glass.

"Always a pleasure to see you," I lied, "but doesn't the great Corven have anything better to do of an evening than make the rounds of poets with a bottle in hand?"

"Oh come on, Nox, relax a little," Corven said theatrically, pouring champagne into my whiskey glass as well. Still exactly the same as ever. The Loop didn't seem to have changed him one bit. I remembered the days we used to sit around in his old house, dreaming about the day we'd be famous. We'd both managed it, just each in our own way. I made fragments, and he... he simply made sure nobody stood in our way. Corven talked, and people listened. He wasn't a poet, wasn't a politician, wasn't a leader. He was just Corven.

"To your wife," Corven raised his glass, then added, "and to whoever comes after her."

With that he pressed the glass to his lips and wiped away her last trace from my life. I didn't stop him. Honestly, I was glad someone else had done it for me.

I raised my glass with him. Not because I agreed with what he'd said. I was just starting to sense this would be a long evening, and I had no intention of turning down wine from an actual vineyard.

Corven finished his glass, handed me the empty one, and headed off down the hallway without any explanation.

“Second door on the left,” I called after him, refilling the glass in the meantime.

“I know,” he called back, already opening the closet. When he returned, he took the refilled glass from me, stopped by the window, and gazed out at the city.

“I’d kill for this view,” Corven mused, even though he could have bought the whole building outright.

“It’ll do,” I nodded, feigning modesty. Transparent flattery was still flattery.

“Shame I don’t see your face in today’s top ten on the Loop’s front page.”

Ouch. That one stung. So that’s why you’re here, you bastard. You want to make sure with your own eyes that I’ll keep creating. That this little episode with Lyra hasn’t changed me enough to walk away like Edrin did. You still need me. After all these years. Just like before. The thought tickled my ego in exactly the right spot. The great Corven himself, descending to the top floor of this skyscraper, just to check that I was all right. I walked over slowly to join him and the view of the city.

“Don’t worry, Corvy,” I addressed him the way I used to when we were younger, and he flinched slightly at the nickname.

“I’ve got tons of ideas. Maybe a series, Nox Before Nox. Archive footage, my first apartment, my first girlfriend...”

“Sure,” Corven cut me off, “young Nox was popular, but...”

“I’m still young.”

“Your audience isn’t. They’re aging, Nox, and the young ones aren’t replacing them. Look for yourself.”

Then he set his glass down on the floor and pulled his phone from his pocket. He found the graphs way too fast for it to be a coincidence. From the moment I’d let him in, this whole evening must have been building toward exactly this moment.

A thin red line tracking my career appeared on the screen. Like a thread of my life, weaving through the years. Rising and falling. Corven talked about how a young brain held attention far longer, and how old viewers were dying off. About how I needed to diversify my audience base, or I could go under fast. I only half-listened, though. To me it was just marketing nonsense.

I watched the line. Every peak looked like a knot, and I tried to remember the specific fragment, the specific event behind it. Yearly summer vacations on beaches. Yacht parties. Movie and game reviews. Investigative pieces. Investment advice. I’d churned through so many formats in my life that even I was a little surprised looking back at it now.

But then the line of my success began to fade and drop. It wasn’t a sharp decline. The whole thing had kicked off with one big fall, and I still remembered that date even now. Edrin’s departure. I never made it back to the top after that. We’d been working on the Before the Loop series back then, essentially documenting how it had all begun. Snails, incubation tanks, fermenters, attention. The people who’d been tangled up in all of it. And above all, the story of the first poet. The person whose voice had woken the Loop, and who hadn’t

even left a name behind. Over the years he'd become a legend. Every version of the story started with him, but none of them ever gave him an ending.

"...won't renew your contract unless you reach new people, Nox. It's that simple."

That sentence perfectly severed the thread of my thoughts and sent blood surging into my head. My contract with the Loop had, until now, been something I'd taken completely for granted. A piece of paper I just signed every year. I glanced at the date glowing on top of one of the buildings in the city below us, and my stomach clenched.

"But that's next month, Corven! You're just going to let me die off after all these years?"

"Oh, not at all," Corven laughed, throwing an arm around my shoulders, "dying doesn't get much viewership. You usually can't build a series out of it, and broadcasting your own death is tricky at best."

Then his smile vanished for a moment.

"Don't mistake my visit for a guarantee, Nox. If you don't get those numbers up, the contract's over. The Loop hasn't been a bunch of friends for a long time now."

"But without the contract, I'm out of Pulses." I shook his arm off and looked him in the eye. For the first time all evening.

"Right," Corven nodded to himself and started patting down his pockets, as if searching for a used tissue. "I've also got two pieces of good news... the first one is... damn, where did I put them... ah... here they are..."

He opened his palm, and his fingers glowed with a faint light.

“Pulses. Two for you, two for her, but if I were you, I’d keep all four and cut the girl loose. Might come in handy, in case our plan happens to... well... not pan out?”

“Our plan?” I didn’t understand, but I quickly took another month of my life from his palm anyway. For a moment it occurred to me that Lyra’s share might come in handy for me too. I shoved the thought away immediately. I was a bastard, sure, but I wasn’t a killer.

Corven picked his glass up off the floor and settled onto the couch.

“Come on, sit down for this one. I did tell you I wasn’t going to just let you die off, didn’t I?”

I sat down beside him and set the Pulses on the table in front of me. Drinking was the last thing on my mind now.

“So this plan...” Corven grinned at me.

“What is it?”

“Bad, for now,” Corven admitted, digging through his pockets again and shifting around on the couch. “Good plans... only come together once someone’s desperate enough to say yes to them.”

A black card appeared between his fingers, silver text and a barcode printed across it.

“No,” I blurted the moment I saw it, “Nox works alone.”

“Like Batman, I know,” Corven nodded, “but Batman had plenty of time. Yours is sitting on the table in front of you right now. And I can’t get you any more of it than that.”

Four capsules, each pulsing flash counting down the seconds of my apparent immortality, and I was starting to suspect I wasn't going to come up with anything better on my own. I took the invitation from his hand and confirmed it was exactly what I thought it was:

Gala of the New Generation

An evening of faces, voices, and stories that will shape the Loop's next chapter.

9/21 — 8:00 PM, Loop Headquarters

"Tomorrow?" I turned to Corven, but he answered as if he wasn't even listening to me anymore. He was watching the bubbles rise in my wife's glass.

"Open bar, Nox. Wines just like this one. Plenty of food. Young poets. And young women too."

"And old Nox."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about, Nox," Corven laughed again, "you need someone to complete you. Like Edrin used to. Like Lyra."

For the first time all evening, he'd used her name. And in the same breath, he'd set her right next to Edrin, as if she weren't my wife anymore, just another missing piece of Nox. Just another person I supposedly wasn't whole without.

I set the invitation back down on the table.

"First of all," I began, more forcefully than I'd meant to, "Lyra's coming back, and second..."

“There’s only one toothbrush in the cup,” Corven chuckled, “but sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“And second,” I clenched my fists, “I don’t need some kid to save my career.”

“Well, you’re right about that much,” Corven agreed, standing up over me the same way Lyra had the day before. “You don’t need him. You need his audience.”

He grabbed his coat and slung it over his shoulder.

“Good talking to you, Nox.” Corven glanced once more at the lit billboard beyond the window. “I hope I see you there tomorrow. You never know what might happen.”

I waited for another argument. Instead, Corven finished his drink, set the glass on the table, and headed for the door. He didn’t look back once. As if my attendance wasn’t even a question, just a line item on his agenda.

He left me in the room with the rest of the bottle, four Pulses, an invitation, and a question I couldn’t say no to.

I ran a finger along the rim of Lyra’s glass, topped it off, and watched the bubbles for a while as they made their carefree climb to the top, popping with a tiny burst and vanishing forever.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and tried calling her again. I needed her advice. If she came back, I was sure we’d figure something out together. She was younger than me. She’d know what to do to get the numbers climbing again. The ringing stopped without anyone answering on the other end. Annoyed, I tossed the phone onto the empty side of the couch and took a drink of wine.

I picked the Notebook up off the table, held it to my eyes, and focused on the evening's events.

Anyone could send a piece of their life into the Loop. Most people did. Hours of real memories, not worth even a few seconds of someone else's attention.

That didn't make them poets, though.

A poet knew where a memory needed to start, where it had to end, and what to cut from it so people would watch all the way through, and come back tomorrow for more.

Corven in the doorway, bottle in hand. His cheerful party smile. The two of us in a friendly embrace. Laughing in front of the Loop's glowing billboard. Handing over the invitation, glasses clinking together.

I left out the graphs, the contract, the fear of death. They didn't fit the rhythm. And they didn't fit me either.

A shot of the whiskey glass filled with champagne, because that was exactly the kind of thing Nox did.

"Young poets. Young women." A burst of laughter and my enthusiastic agreement. Of course I'd love to come.

"The story continues tomorrow night. Like and subscribe. Thanks.
— Nox.

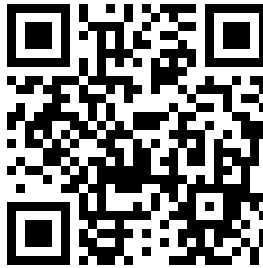
Resonance after chapter 9

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.