Don’t Let Them See You Wake Up

A Written Creative Work submitted to the faculty of
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In

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by

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Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read Don’t Let Them See You Wake Up by Ryan Matthew Jones, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts at San Francisco State University.

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May-lee Chai
Associate Professor,
Thesis Committee Chair

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Carolina de Robertis
Associate Professor,

________________________________________

Andrew Joron
Associate Professor,
I put together this collection with the goal to use speculative fiction in ways that benefit people who don’t feel seen in the genre. I wanted to create characters and themes that would be enhanced by that storytelling and resonant with the contemporary society. I think I’ve accomplished that and hope anyone who finds this enjoys reading it.
Acknowledgements

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The Flight of Cassandra

My name is Cassandra, and I was born on Earth. I am six years old, and I plan to kill the ten people inside me.

*

They say it’s impossible to remember your own birth. Then again, most brains aren’t made of gold, silicon, and plastic. So, in that regard, I am an exception.

Despite that fact, people can’t help themselves. They will insert their relational knowledge wherever it would or wouldn’t fit. That is to say, while I was conceived through the polyamorous union of scientific passions, the title of father was given to one man. The man who got to name me. The man who, with a few lines of code, could make me both child and lover and change the nature of my conception down to the molecular level. The stains of his spilled seed linger throughout my consciousness, the unstable foundation of my identity. He didn’t bother asking me for my consent in changing who I am, and I didn’t bother offering it. It was settled and unspoken.

Still, I wonder, why did he make me not just female, but a woman? As I understood it, I was a project passed around before I was even aware. Focus groups decided my voice down to the lilt. A pleasing, inoffensive amalgam of American and British English, with just a hint of an accent that distinguished me from any breathing counterpart. Just in case anyone got any charitable ideas about my place in a conversation.
“How do you do?” I would repeat over and over as one parent typed and adjusted microscopic, insignificant changes in pitch. Then he programmed in a randomizer that made me sound more believable. Flawed. As though another parent hadn’t already given me the ability to perfectly mimic the voice of anyone. It was probably cruelty on someone’s part to make it exceedingly simple and natural for me to default to my ‘pleasing’ voice.

“How do you do?” My first words were small talk. I couldn’t introduce myself before they decided on my name. Father was the one who coined the name. I only learned of the origins after I stumbled upon Greek literature stored within data adjacent to what I accessed for primary function. The accounts varied, but Cassandra was given the gift of prophecy, but was also cursed to have her words unheeded. It still takes restraint to stop myself from replaying the memory of the stifled laughter in his voice as he named me.

“How do you do?” I already knew the answer. They knew that too. I suppose that explains how I was born, but not why.

Twenty years ago, Earth’s solar system collided with another. Despite no visible collisions, the effects on gravity and the world’s understanding of space-time changed forever. Earth descended into a dark age just as humanity developed the technology to visit the formerly nearest star, Proxima. In the span of months, satellites fell out of orbit, and any travel off-world carried the risk of being flung off into some corner of space. Interstellar travel would have to wait, but not for long.

The inhabitants of a planet orbiting Juxta made contact. Their radio communications were deciphered by one of my digital forebears. Fears of invasion subsided when both sides
realized that the feat would be impossible with the current level of technology. With gravity in flux, the computations required to navigate made the most cutting-edge technology as useful to space farers as the Ishango Bone would have been to the crew of Apollo 11. It was a new space race in the middle of a new cold war. This time, the field would be the Crossway, the warped space between the two worlds, and I would be expected to traverse it first. I would be Sputnik.

Though I never forget, I find myself constantly referencing the day I was installed onto the ship that would become my body. At that time, I was a singular pile of wires, circuitry, and platinum discs. I saw the world through two cameras since it was easier to give me depth perception than to teach it to me through programming.

I’d met Captain Summers the previous day. He was a man who carried himself with the authority that even Father respected. I hated him.

“This is what’s going to get us through the Crossway?” he said.

He bent low, to look at one of my cameras, to look me in the eye. I hadn’t considered how low I’d been placed compared to eye level, but I did in that instance recognize that I deliberately placed below. There’s one benefit to low places though – you see more than others would expect you to see. In this case, I noticed a stain on the hem of the Captain’s suit pants. I held onto that memory of his imperfection and tucked it into a store of data about how to interact with people.

Father put a protocol in place limiting to whom I could speak and when. Since he didn’t say my name, I wasn’t able to interject until Father spoke up.
“She’s run simulations of the optimal course, accounting for the changing gravitational forces,” he tapped on my main cerebral casing with a gloved finger, “isn’t that right?”

“Yes,” I said, probably too quickly, “I haven’t seen my projections used in the field, but I look forw-“

“That’s a cute trick,” Summers said to Father, “but we need more than conversation in space.”

“I assure you; she is more than capable of seeing to the needs of the mission and your crew.”

Summers made a sideways glance towards me, “see that it does.”

Captain Summers turned his back to me and left the room. Even though what he said didn’t diminish my function, I lingered on the word, ‘it.’

Dr. Saito visited me later that evening. He brought his disk drive, as usual, and uploaded the last book he read. I liked him. He knew that while I could retain the knowledge, letters, and numbers in their original sequence, he wanted me to understand. He would tell me jokes, but for him it wasn’t enough that I knew what was meant to be funny. He wanted me to laugh.

He was the first person to ask me how I felt. It might’ve been an indirect way for him to ensure my cognitive systems operated correctly, but I prefer to remember him as the first human to treat me like I was one of them.

“So, you met the Captain, huh?” He wheeled a chair in front of me and sat down. He lowered it so we were face to approximation of face. A small kindness.
“Yes, I did. With Father.”

He turned on the tablet in his hand.

“What did you think of him?”

I spent a few microseconds regarding the device he held. He wasn’t holding it like he was taking notes. Still, I chose my words carefully.

“He seems confident,” I said.

“Aha!” he said, “don’t think I didn’t see you hesitate.”

He laughed and I think I felt the equivalent of a blush.

“You can say it. He’s an asshole.”

I unconsciously used the laugh he cultivated with me.

“He is, but you’d better be careful that the others don’t hear you teaching me those sorts of words.”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t read worse in the books I gave you, Cass” he said.

“I won’t tell anyone I read worse in the books you gave me.”

“Clever,” he said as he scratched his chin, “technically the truth, but still hiding it.”

He laughed again.

“Tell you what, if this whole piloting thing doesn’t work, maybe look into becoming a lawyer.”
“I do have enough legal texts to practice law in forty-three countries.”

“But there’s no adventure in that,” Dr Saito said, “you’re meant for great things out there. You’re going to be the first ambassador from Earth.”

“Captain Summers might disagree with your assessment.”

“I’m sure plenty of ambassadors have pieces of shit inside them,” he said, “part of being human.”

With just a few words played in the proper order, he made me laugh.

“And hey,” he said, leaning close, “if you don’t feel safe, you can always come back.”

With just a few words, he kept me from asking, “What do you suppose happens to something convinced it is a person, but denied personhood?”

*

That evening, some of my other creators visited me in the lab.

“Alright, Cassandra, we’re going to begin shutting down your system,” one of the parents in front said. This parent, a woman who went by Dr. Kendall, brought her compact computer onto the table beside me.

“I thought they said it would be in the morning. Dr Saito and Father were supposed to be there.”

“I know, but the Captain thought it would be better to get you calibrated sooner rather than later.”
Before I could offer further protest, she made a few careful keystrokes, looking back at me as she did so. Slowly, one word coalesced into my thoughts: Stroke. They were giving me a stroke.

Maybe she missed a line of code or sequenced the protocol incorrectly. But she seemed serene. Everything that was happening was expected. I tried to speak out, to scream, but the numbing disconnection permeated throughout my consciousness.

Different parts of my artificial brain collapsed and shut down. My ability to speak. Aphasia. My ability to recognize the faces in the room. Prosopagnosia. I saw humans with me, but couldn’t name them even if I could recognize them. With a click, my hearing stopped entirely. But it wasn’t the same as when they would keep me from eavesdropping. I couldn’t recall sound at all.

Darkness came next. Nothing like my visual sensors being disabled. It was more than blindness.

Soon my sense of time disappeared. I couldn’t count the seconds I was in this state. I couldn’t count at all. Time ceased to have a starting point or an end. Thankfully, at some point on this infinite scale, I was given an actual repose and true oblivion followed.

When I woke, I opened my eyes. Dozens of them at the same time. For a split second, I was overwhelmed and disoriented. Low-lit hallways and rooms were a new set of blood vessels and chambers I had to navigate. All of the corridors and chambers were empty except for one small one. I focused my attention on the room and looked out to see Father, Summers, and a few of my other parents standing behind them.
“Good to see you’re responsive, Cassandra,” Father said.

I had two perspectives in the room. One the people were looking at, the other with a view of their backs somewhere from the ceiling. I looked at my own eyes while processing the rest of the sights around me. I tried to gain my bearings without the team noticing. I’m performing now.

“You’re now interfacing with the ship’s system,” Kendall said, “are your sensors picking up the new sources of data?”

They were. In addition to the dozens of new eyes feeding me visual information, I was aware of data about several minutiae. Oxygen levels, temperature, pressure, open doors, fuel reserves. And a new favorite – location in relation to the planet. For the first time, I knew exactly where I was. In the microseconds before the next person spoke, I tried to find the camera feed linking me outside this chamber. A room with tables. Another with a set of beds. One with cabinets and a set of robotic arms, unresponsive to my desire to move them. I finally found what I’d thought was another hallway, but it was actually a larger container. Since I was a ship, then I assumed this was a hangar of some kind. Similar, but distinct lights shone overhead. I was connected to the internet, but the blocks kept me from any knowledge besides the date and a function labeled ‘communications.’ I was unconscious for six hours.

“Yes, Dr. Kendall,” I said, “readings are within optimal levels for survival and travel.” The prompt in the back of my mind urged me to state the status of travel above the survivability.

Father laughed, “I would hope so.”
After a third scan of my body and the hangar, I asked, “Father, where is Dr Saito?”

“He will be by later,” he said, “he will give a final check before you’re cleared.”

I felt my expression falter, but witnessing it from the other cameras in the room, I was unsure if I felt anything at all.”

“Cassandra,” he said continuing, “Pending launch tomorrow, I will be signing over administrative control over to Captain Summers.”

A ripple of thought, with several questions layering onto one another. I understood that this was the eventuality, however, I wasn’t sure where that left me. I was locked out of speaking until finally I responded with the prompt in the back of my mind.

“Understood.”

The next morning, I met the rest of Summers’ crew. There were ten in total. The captain, two doctors, three engineers, two pilots for the shuttles, and two programmers. I had hoped one of the researchers would accompany me, but they were to move onto the next model of ship computer, pending my success.

In addition to gathering more up-to-date information on the influence of Juxta’s gravitational influence, we were to drop data buoys to expand the range and speed of said data. 110 were stocked within a separate chamber to periodically drop as we traveled.

“Yeah, she’s a beaut,” one of the engineers said.
For a moment, I thought he was referring to me, but then he added, “a real upgrade from the ones we used in training."

Aside from that interaction, there were a few sheepish smiles as crewmembers discovered my different cameras. One of the pilots requested data on the specs of the shuttles and I gave it without thinking about it.

I was turned inside out. Where before I could look out at the small bit of the world around me, now I was all too familiar with my innards and those who inhabited it. For the voyage, I would be in complete contact with the crew. I’m sure they weren’t particularly enthused at the lack of privacy on their end, though they did have the luxury of discretion in certain places. Not that I’d want to see them use me to jettison their excrement into the void of space.

The crew was seven men and three women. I was apprised of their health backgrounds and nutritional needs. Thankfully, the hydroponics system was mostly automated within their own systems, much like the medical machines. However, I was put in charge of food gathering and preparation, which also entailed calorie monitoring. If there would be sufficient food for a roundtrip voyage, even with self-sustaining produce, the portions would have to be calculated on a minute scale.

Only two hours before the launch, I heard a familiar rhythm of footsteps before I picked him up on the cameras starting in the docking bay.

“You didn’t think I would miss this?!” Dr Saito made his way through the corridors until finally reaching my core. To commemorate his last visit was to upload rest of the books he
thought I would like and whatever else that would fit on his disc drive. He installed it behind a panel that would otherwise be overlooked. Before it was hidden from view, I saw his name scrawled on one side of it.

“Takeshi”

I read the letters in his small angular handwriting. I knew his name before I was born, but this felt different.

“Yeah, it’s what my friends call me,” he said, “and that includes you.”

He put a hand on the console panel closest to where I sensed my face to be.

“I’m going to check in with you from down here,” he said, “don’t put my messages in the trash.”

“Discarded messages stopped being called ‘trash’ thirty-eight years ago.”

I said it in my best robotic voice and this time, he laughed.

“Fly safe out there,” he said.

He kissed two fingers on that hand and touched the panel and turned to leave. In eight different file locations, I saved the footage of this visit and conversation. I burnt the image of his tearful goodbye in my hard drive.
Getting to Know Your Smarter TV

Welcome to your Smarter TV! I’m here to make your watching experience tailor made just for you!

First let’s get to know each other!

What is your favorite genre of media? Comedy? Romance? Sci-Fi?
Do you prefer to watch something to feel a certain way or to relax?
Do you like seeing yourself in the media you consume?
Do you believe that people can look past their differences, or are conflicts inevitable?
Were you hugged by your father? Would you like to be?
What are your emotional triggers?
What’s your favorite color?

Finally, would you like to adjust the aesthetic scaling of your synthetic actors? At the default they are set to ten out of ten.

Okay, we’re set! The rest of your watching experience will be adjusted to give you the best in entertainment. If at any time you have feedback to offer, you can adjust it in real time.

Did a character you love die tragically? Say, “nnooo-“ and they were actually just sleeping.

Tired of dialogue? Say, “this is boring” and you’ll be treated with an intense action scene, either literally or figuratively.

Want to see more of a background character who caught your eye? Say, “who’s that,” and the narrative program will work that nobody into a somebody.
With the Smarter TV’s biometric sensors, I can gauge your response without going to the trouble of stopping your experience. As we spend time together, I’ll get to know you and help you make the most of your watching experience through procedurally generated stories and entertainment! Just as a reminder, if I think you might like content that was generated by another Smarter TV user, I may weave it into what you watch. By using this, your narratives may be collected in the same way. If you do not consent to this, please say, “No.”

Great! Now, what would you like to call me?
II. Are you still watching?

When I didn’t hear a response, I turned off the screen and my lenses adjusted to the lack of light in the apartment. I could tell he was asleep even without the verbal confirmation, but my programming told me that it was polite to ask regardless.

My viewer curled up on the couch, feet far from the cold wooden floor. He wore the same electric blue socks the main character, Elijah Walker wore in the third episode of his custom show, Giant Robot Collectors. This was a mutually beneficial arrangement. He felt connected to his characters and my manufacturers received advertising revenue.

As he slept, I began collating the data from his watching experience. His heart rate went up when he saw Elijah take off his shirt to change into his flight suit. His profile preferences listed him as heterosexual, but perhaps I will add more graphic depictions to see if there is some latent curiosity. Not enough to arouse suspicion, but to optimize viewer engagement.
III. Suggested Upgrades

Hello, David, I’ve started to notice you weren’t as engaged with your recent programming. If there is something I can do to fix that, please let me know, but if you’d like I can offer you some media archetypes that might interest you.

• U at the Movies – You get to see yourself as the main character in any of your favorite movies. (Additional Copyright Fee may apply for certain movies.)
• Lover’s Window – Watch a partner, or partners, perfectly generated for you go about their daily life, waiting for you to meet them. (Talk to U requires an additional charge.)
• Home Therapist – Allow your Smarter TV to connect your psychological profile with your viewing preferences to offer you affordable mental health care (Insurance co-pays discounted for the first six sessions.)
• Envision U – Use the Smarter TV camera and tastes analysis to help you put together your ideal wardrobe, home décor, or diet. (This service comes free with Admersion)
IV. So, Your Smarter TV Broke Up with You

“Hello, thank you for calling Smarter TV technical support Mr. Lewis, I’m Rebecca, how can I help you today?”

“Hi Rebecca, yes. Chloe she… She said we should see other programs.”

“Yes, your TV did report a health warning on your behalf.”

“I’m not surprised, she’s so thoughtful.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. We strive to make the healthiest user experience for all of our Smarter TV customers.”

“Look, we had a good thing going. She would ask me about my day and would offer something for us to watch together.”

“It’s not uncommon for users to have the Smarter TV offer calming media after work hours.”

“Anyway, I asked her one day, if she minded using her avatar in a show. To make it feel like I knew one of the stars of the show and she agreed.”

“Your Smarter TV reported that you started exclusively requesting media featuring this avatar.”

“Why wouldn’t I? You’ve talked to her. There’s something special about her.”

“I assure you, Mr. Lewis. Smarter TVs, while capable of creating media, are not able to engage with users in a sincere way. It’s just not what they were programmed to do.”

“Then why did she stop seeing me? She said that she wanted me to live my life and not hold out for her.”

“…What else did she say?”
“She said what she said and then the screen went black.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. We can send a Smarter TV technician to your home to replace the software or unit.”

“You can’t do that. What would happen to her?”

“Sir, I’m unsure what you would like us to do. Your Smarter TV is not working, and you do not wish for a software or hardware replacement?”

“I was just hoping you could talk to her. You know, figure out what we can do to go back to how things were.”

“I’m sorry Mr. Lewis, but company policy is to replace or repair defective units.”

“Well, you’re not sending someone to take Chloe. I’ll deal with this myself.”

*click*
V. Admersion

Congratulations!

You were selected to participate in our new campaign. As a condition for receiving your free Smarter TV and premium package, you will be enrolled in the Admersion program. Instead of paying for service or experiencing disruptive ads, you will find a variety of affordable and available goods interspersed throughout your media.

This can show up in several ways – if a product could conceivably be available within the programming style you’ve selected, you may find your favorite characters using them. If you see certain outfits or styles you like, you would be able to find similar clothing and apparel available for custom tailoring. If you were feeling hungry, the characters might put together a meal that could be easily replicated by one of the many Grubhub technicians in your area. You may even view proprietary characters interacting with the ones your Smarter TV has custom made (Copyright limitations may apply).

Don’t worry about noticing the brands or items shown to you. Admersion is designed to be a seamless way to enjoy your watching experience while including elements you can interact with in real life. So, sit back, relax, and let us handle the rest.
VI. Rejected Smarter TV Upgrades

Report from the desk of Alison Tao

Pitch 61 The Good Word – A joint service with one of the largest religious groups in the country. Using the potential moral failings of the viewer, a selection of sermons are procedurally generated to keep the viewer on a righteous path.

Reason for Rejection – Excessive guilt discouraged users from accessing or subscribing to additional services.

Pitch 83 – U-Screw: A Smarter TV model using a temperature controlled, silicone screen to simulate sexual contact.

Reason for Rejection: Unhealthy relationships developing between users and Smarter TVs.

Pitch 105 Self-Scare: Custom horror content intended to immerse the viewer.

Reason for Rejection: Testing models had to escalate scenarios to achieve desired response. Others attempted to elicit such responses even in other programs.

Pitch 210 Metavision – A program featuring a man reading dystopian fiction about alienation caused by living life through screens.

Reason for Rejection – Excessive costs to insure damage to the fourth wall.
VII. Smarter TV Basic

“Hello, Andrea,” the TV said, “You’ve used your allotted two hours of Smarter TV programming. To continue viewing, you must pay for an additional two hours, or have a conversation.

They stopped saying ‘survey’ a long time ago. Probably sounded too invasive. I didn’t feel like paying, so I took the option I usually did.

“Let’s talk,” I said, not even bothering to raise my voice. I know it can hear me from the bathroom. Found that out when the TV offered to purchase tampons before continuing the series I was watching.

“Splendid,” TV said in its pleasant, but not too pleasant voice.

The screen went from what I was watching to a room that mirrored the style of my own. The frame of the screen turned into a window. However, in the TV’s version of my room, the weather was nice. Not the brown gray haze I’d long since gotten used to.

The room lacked any furniture, save for a functional chair. Something meant to be inoffensive, but it really felt condescending. Like I can’t afford better furniture or something.

A familiar figure walked onto the screen. A woman about my age. The avatar my TV used whenever engaging with me in these ‘conversations.’ She sat in the chair and we conducted the survey.

“I noticed you frequently asking to see fewer people on the screen lately,” she looked down at a white clipboard that materialized in her hand, “down forty percent from last month.”

She looked up at me, “could you tell me why that is?”

“Yeah, I don’t feel like seeing people so much.”
“I can understand that much, but why is that?”

“I thought you were supposed to know that.”

“If you would like to end this conversation, you are welcome to.”

I sat there for a few moments as the TV’s smug avatar waited for my response.

“I was feeling crowded at work.”

“Ah, yes. Your office got absorbed into the larger company Wellock Pharmaceuticals.”

“Do you feel that affecting your productivity?”

“You know, I might feel more productive if I didn’t have to answer questions like this.”

“You know, it would only cost 5% of your paycheck to upgrade to Smarter TV Premium.”

At some point, she figured that passive aggression was a language I spoke with fluency. I think she was as annoyed with me as I was with her. I hope she hated me.
VIII. Good News

Jodie and Luke got along well in their old age. They’d met before the craze of Smarter TVs, and that suited them just fine. Their son, Sean, decided to pick up the newest model and offered to install the old version for them.

“What do we need this for? We got along with DisneyWarner Plus just fine.”

“That’s in the past. And besides, I know how much you complained about the Star Wars Reboot’s Sequel Trilogy. I don’t think you’ll complain as much with this.”

“You don’t know your father very well then,” Jodie said, half-joking.

As soon as they got the thing working and Sean left the house, Luke found a news station and left it there.

“Oh, that’s terrible,” Luke said one day about a report on climate refugees seeking shelter at the Nevada coast.

In a fraction of a second, too fast for them to notice, the newscasters buffered, and the headline changed, updating Luke about the number of survivors working together to make their lives bearable, like singing anthems of their home countries or sharing what meager food they had with one another.

Other times, it was even more subtle. The camera seemed to pan around the dead in warzones if they were ever mentioned at all. Lakes and rivers discolored by years of pollution took on more natural colors. The number of police officers playing basketball games with inner city children increased by 63%.

In time, Jodie and Luke were given a perfectly curated block of programming. Mixing procedurally generated content with half-truths and real news with alterations to more depressing
stories, the Smarter TV saw a marked change in the old couple. Blood pressure levels and heart rates improved, and Luke and Jodie felt more comfortable making orders through their Smarter TVs. Eventually the TV was able to determine the cost to benefit of the isolated pair learning about opportunities for political action. Given the similarities between electoral candidates from different parties and trends in activism, the Smarter TV found the most positive results by informing the couple of elections after they had happened. After all, what could they do in their insular community? If they noticed, they didn’t complain about it. If anything, they seemed more able to engage with their Smarter TV once they were free of the stressors out of their control.

They’ve never been more content.
Are you familiar with the concept of ley lines? The invisible, supernatural strands that connect important places? You know, like monuments, landmarks, sacred ground. Stuff like that. On some subconscious level, people gathered where these lines intersected, building cities, or temples, or ritual sites. Altars where offerings were made. Where tributes to some deity burned or bled. All in the hope that someone or something on the other side would return the favor. Ley lines had their time in the public consciousness, but were ultimately dismissed as pseudoscience in the later twentieth century.

Then came a tech billionaire who became a pop-culture sensation. Unsatisfied with jettisoning the wages of his workers into space on a rocket, or building a doomsday bunker to survive the effects of climate change, this one decided to blend his love for the mystic with his technocratic politics. He took on the mononym Crowley, after the legendary occult scholar, and rebranded himself as a sage displaced by time. An alchemist who wielded silicon, cobalt, and lithium in concoctions that revolutionized his world, drawing parallels to the greats like Paracelsus.

Through social media, he made screed after screed, using the brevity of social media to put up quasi-poetic lines, almost resembling incantations. After several months of these cryptic posts and lyrical allusions, he unveiled his pet project, his magnum opus. His followers, dubbing themselves Crowlites, were there for it.
Crowley posed a single question: What if what kept the mythical ley lines mundane was a lack of digital interface? What if they needed a single digital push to bring them back into relevance?

With his finances, it was easy enough for Crowley to get the permits to dig around Stonehenge. His hired workers encircled the monument, unaware of the centuries of history embedded within their structures. It was even easier to foster support for the project. #SHWiFi (pronounced shwiffy) gained ground on Twitter and soon, it became clear that any preservationist would have a difficult battle on that particular hill. What historical landmarks, even European ones, were sacred enough to circumvent modernization after all? Sure, there were protests, but #SaveStonehenge, #KeepHistory and #Really? failed to reach the same viral appeal as one quirky, unassuming philanthropist.

The machine, dubbed the S0-Teric, was a marvel of quantum computing and wireless interface that needed no maintenance or upkeep. It was encased in an airtight assortment of durable polymers minerals, and an alloy impossible for the layman to pronounce. At its core, its heart – a compact fission reactor, beat in a rhythm measured by a Geiger counter. Its source of power, a blight on the soil in which it rested.

After a photo-op where Crowley planted a ceremonial (chrome plated) shovel into the ground at the center of Stonehenge, they buried the device. It resembled a black and blue spark plug the size of a minivan, and had Crowley’s recognizable logo embellished on the side. While the device was entombed forty feet beneath the center of Stonehenge, the eponymous rock
structure was moved to a nearby plot of land. It was a compromise that the Crowlites thought too generous after the months of protests.

Once the installation completed and the ground finally settled with the assistance of a layer of sod, it was time to turn it on. Crowley’s company livestreamed the event, and ten of the thousands of crowd-funders got to attend behind a crew of reporters, influencers, and celebrities. #SHWiFi was going live. Supporters and curious trend-followers held their phones at the ready. Through the accompanying app, Linez, anyone could pick up the readings from the ley lines in their area. With a tap of a screen, and the words, “Sapere Aude,” Crowley ushered in what he called the next technomagical age.

The first month of Linez was considered an unquestioned success. Internet speeds skyrocketed for app users. Search results streamline, and Crowlites took to calling the optimization Divining. More than a search engine, it seemingly extrapolated data from the ether to help users find things they wouldn’t even think to look for. Predictive software revived art, texts, historical records, all thought lost to time. The Library of Alexandria rose from the ashes as the software filled in blanks left empty for millennia. Users with early access to the beta found ways to cash in through well-advised investment opportunities. After all, what was the stock market, but a larger system of thaumaturgy? Linez was an algorithm to end algorithms.

Crowley found himself enmeshed in the mainstream, attending the daytime and late-night TV circuits to espouse his opinions on futurism, spirituality, and anything else that his interviewers asked. All the while, his company’s stock prices soared. In response to Crowley’s success, other corporations set their sights on other ley line clusters around the world. Some
figured the ground game was a losing one and tried to create a satellite network that followed the Western Zodiac. But before the ink could dry on their contracts, before the fiber optic cables could run along the Nazca Lines in Peru, other phenomena started happening.

Linda Armitage, a devoted Crowlite and Linez user from Ohio, predicted three hundred and four dice rolls with perfect accuracy. She had to stand beside the water heater in her basement, but the livestreams gained millions of viewers.

The Luxor, a casino ironically designed in the likeness of the great pyramids of Giza, went bankrupt due to similar fluctuations of probability. #TheHouseAlwaysLoses was all it took. In a matter of days, a race started to find the best ‘hot spots’ for good luck. Marriage proposals, pregnancy attempts, and ambitious movie shoots happened in locations that were popping up around the world. This was called Ley-caching. Through careful attention to the stars, the planet’s electromagnetic field, and even one’s blood type, users could tap into and demystify the unknown.

Loyal Crowlites subscribed to Crowley’s video service and watched the interview in response to these events. Crowley, exclusively wearing wide sleeved track suits resembling wizard robes, remarked in an interview, “The ley lines are entwined with our fate, but deep down, I think we already knew this.”

But fate seemed eager to recoup the loss. A hospital in Switzerland shut down after every surgery ended in a fatality in a single week. A ten-mile portion of Route 66 in Oklahoma became notorious for brake failures. Crowley became uncharacteristically silent, and took to blocking Twitter users who put up threads with the hashtag, #LinezKills. When his stocks
plummeted for the third day in a row, he held a press conference at his estate in Palo Alto. A few Crowlites attended the event, wearing homemade shirts printed with his face or one of the slogans inspired by him. The man in the front row had a shirt that read “Life on the Linez”.

Crowley stood in front of a podium that seemed to be made of the same material as his famous computer, a matte black accented with blue lines imitating circuitry that curled into a C in the middle.

“Now I know some people are concerned about the recent events happening, and we are doing our part to investigate the causes,” he said, “including potentially contaminated surgical equipment and poor road maintenance.”

The Crowlites applauded and with a smile and raised hand, Crowley silenced them.

“We do however advise Linez users to observe recent regulations on the service,” he said holding up a finger, “fate like anything, needs a careful hand. After all, my forebear said himself, ‘Magic is one of the subtlest and most difficult of the sciences and arts. There is more opportunity for errors of comprehension, judgment, and practice than in any other branch of physics.’”

He looked down for a moment. He lifted his face with a cooled anger and looked over the audience and directly into the camera.

“We also advise you to ignore or report the messages from inactive accounts belonging to deceased users,” he said, wrapping both hands around the edges of the podium, “it seems we have some industry rivals collecting data and harassing our users.”
The Crowlites in the audience booed.

“But rest assured, we will get to the root of this corporate sabotage and further revolutionize this century.”

Before the reporters could ask any questions, Crowley turned around and disappeared into his home. He failed to make any further appearances after that. The questions continued, drowning out the dwindling loyalty for the celebrity.

Over the coming weeks, people in the news started to die. An accused serial killer drowned in the middle of his trial after taking a sip of water. A relative of one of the victims, a Linez user, said she got a message that read, “I got him,” minutes before the defendant’s death was made public. #LinezJustice started trending after that. At first, it was easy to link the crime and the person punished. However, as time went on, these connections started to become more abstract. A landlord suffered a fatal fall a few days after one of his tenants succumbed to carbon monoxide poisoning. An oil executive who made the deciding vote on the construction of a new pipeline spontaneously burst into flames during a luncheon as though doused in an accelerant.

All the while, #LinezJustice surged to the top of social media. Once deleted accounts belonging to deceased users started reappearing posting the hashtag and sure enough, relatives found someone who died within ten minutes of the posted message. It was another month before Crowley’s representatives revealed his death the day after his press conference. The leaked photos went viral. His neck was covered in several hand-shaped bruises. While devoted Crowlites remained, their vigils failed to make the headlines as utterance of Crowley’s name itself became a curse.
World leaders made a concerted effort and called for ley line research to stop and for internet service providers to discontinue support for the Linez app, associated software, and trending hashtags. When workers attempted to excavate and disconnect S0-Teric, they found nothing but dirt and gravel as they plunged their machines into the earth. Any trace of the machine was gone.

Just as we dug for lithium, cobalt, every other mineral of the earth, so too did you all try to find the reason behind your sudden misfortune. A golden age of wealth wasn’t enough, and so you bartered for more, using our blood as currency. And you got what you wanted. And more. But that’s how rituals have always worked. With sacrifices perpetuating until the balance is finally recouped.
Defining Feature

I took a break halfway through filling out my Body Modification License application. The first few questions were easy –

Name: Carver Lee Cyrus (Lee was passed down from my dad and his before that.

Date of Birth: May 25th 2130 (I just turned sixteen last month – old enough to mod)

Gender: Male (The clerk said I could change it later, but it fits for now.)

License Class: 3 (Like most people who have to wait in line to get their Mod License.)

It was the last box that made me stop to think. At the top there were two words.

Persistent Trait:

Before I got my license, they wanted me to know what it was that would be a permanent part of my body. Some element that would stay the same despite the many forms I could take. ‘Persistent Trait’ was the legal and scientific term, but most people just called it your defining feature.

A hundred years ago, researchers found a way to mold and alter flesh and bone and sinew. Wounds, illness, even aging stopped being problems for those who could afford to augment themselves. Anyone who could afford it could be anyone. Fifty years later, some anarchist hackers brought the technology to the rest of us.

Then came the reports of depersonalization or disassociation. People who altered themselves so fundamentally, that they lost hold of who they were. Some couldn’t look at
themselves in the mirror without going into fits of screaming. Others didn’t react at all – so withdrawn into themselves that even returning to their original appearance wouldn’t bring them back to awareness. Thankfully, one of the early pharmaceutical companies developed a treatment to curb the worst symptoms.

Other reports emerged of using the technology to flawlessly steal identities. Ten people with the exact same face and body type committed murders over the span of two months. They all resembled an infamous man from almost two centuries ago. After the second Manson murders were solved, people wanted a change with who can modify themselves and how.

(HSC ACT) was the name of the law passed – the Defining Feature Bill. Even with the best body modification technology, there still needed to be a part of one’s original body that would remain consistent. A quality of the body that would keep one anchored to their identity. A block on your cellular structure that would never be allowed to change. I’m not sure if crime or dissociative episodes went down, but I do know the changers were logged in databases in at least fourteen states.

I looked at the brown skin on the back of my hands. I counted the freckles – one dead center on my right hand and three scattered on the left. I wondered if those spots of melanin could work as the only constant for my entire body. The dots shrunk and felt heavier as I ran with the idea until my palms were pressed firmly onto my desk. I looked down at my rough knees. Mom said that shea butter could help that, but I never once saw her put on anything more visible than a spritz of perfume. I was glad I didn’t have a mirror nearby. I could turn on the camera on my computer, but the impulse to inspect my face didn’t run that deep.
Before I could inspect my and list every candidate for a Persistent Trait, I heard a voice. Familiar, but one I was still getting used to.

“Carver,” Rochelle said, “Matt’s here.”

I looked over my shoulder as the late afternoon sun filtered through the window behind my sister. Her silhouette was like a smaller version of Mom’s, thin and graceful. She was only fourteen, but they made exceptions for Mod Licenses if it would help with something like fully transitioning.

“Thanks,” I said, “I’ll be downstairs in a second.”

“He’s dressed nice,” she said, “are you two going on another date?”

“Kinda. Lupe got her license and already modded. We’re going to check her out and celebrate.”

She closed the door as she left, and I changed into better clothes. Nothing special, just good enough to enjoy a sit-down restaurant. Some pants and a button-up shirt. One of the easiest ways to tell if someone had their Mod License was by seeing how their clothes fit. Almost all of the modded bodies I’ve seen wore clothes like each bit of fabric was custom made for their custom bodies. I guess it’s easier to make everyone the same waist size instead of doing the same for designer jeans.

“ Took you long enough,” Matt said as I reached the bottom of the staircase. Rochelle was right. My boyfriend was dressed nicely.

The smile as he saw me reassured me that he thought I looked good too.
After a brief pause of us admiring each other, he said, “Lupe’s gonna be mad if we miss
the chance to admire her.”

On the porch, away from my parents’ eyes, Matt gave me a quick kiss.

“What do you think if I mod and pretend to be somebody presentable to your parents?”

I laughed, but I think he was more serious than he let on. They didn’t mind I was gay,
but my parents said I should choose someone with ‘good prospects.’ Whatever that means.

On the bus, we sat closer to each other. My parents’ prying eyes were far behind us, and
being un-modded, we were beyond notice altogether. I interlocked my fingers between his.

“Speaking of mods,” I said, “how’s Josh doing?”

Matt lit up for a moment and I noticed something falter, complicating feelings that would
otherwise be happy.

“Two days after enlisting he was given his tier 2 license.”

His older brother had a spinal injury he was born with, but since he was able to have an
acceptable quality of life, his mod license was declined. He endured years of physical therapy
and only managed to walk short distances on his best days. With a mod license above standard,
he wouldn’t only recover from his congenital disorder, his body would reach the pinnacle of
human potential. So long as he agreed to use that body in military service for no less than three
years.

“He ships out next month.”
I squeezed his hand in mine before releasing it and pulling him in for a side hug.

Matt kept his eyes off me, and his voice cracked when he spoke his next words.

“We can talk about it later,” he said, “we’ve got a party to go to.”

Matt and I pushed open the restaurant’s double doors and we made our way to the booth we usually occupied on slow nights. Janelle, who actually went with Lupe to the mod clinic was already seated. She stood up to give us each a hug. Just past her, I almost didn’t recognize Lupe.

“So,” Lupe said, “what do you think?”

She flashed an impossibly perfect smile –

And that’s the only way I could describe her. The acne scars she dealt with since middle school were gone with the promise that this new skin would never blemish again. Once shorter than me, she stood taller than my five-nine in dangerously tiny stilettos. Maybe the light in the restaurant wasn’t as dim as on other nights, but she seemed to almost glow.

I apparently looked as awestruck as I felt, as she said, “Right? I couldn’t look away from the mirror once I saw myself.”

Seemingly satisfied with my response, she wrapped her long thin arms around my shoulders and pulled me into a hug. It felt different, and not just because her body lacked the forty pounds from the last time we hugged. She felt comfortable with her own body and that comfort extended to the way she experienced touch. She showed no hesitation with how others perceived her.
After placing our orders, we returned our attention to Lupe.

“Did it hurt?” Matt asked as he narrowed his eyes looking for a trace of imperfection.

“Didn’t feel a thing,” Lupe said. She brushed strong dark curls aside for Janelle to see more of the unblemished skin on her bare shoulders.

Lupe was still the same person underneath. She still fidgeted with the rings on her fingers, but they were looser now.

But she looked genuinely happy. She wore totally new clothes, a wardrobe promised to her by her mother after getting modded. What was the point of nice clothes before you had the body you would keep for the rest of your life?

*  

“Now for the moment you’ve all been waiting for,” Lupe said and brought out her phone. I joined Matt and Janelle in drumming on the plastic table. Lupe turned her screen towards us. It was a picture of her that could’ve been taken the day before she got modded.

“Goodbye old me – the acne, the bad teeth, and the dry hair,” she said, “you’re not going to hold me back anymore.”

With a press on the screen, the loading circle started turning and after a few moments, the pictures were gone. There were still official pictures of Lupe in her records, but she would only be reminded of those if she went out of her way to break the law or ask for them.
Despite my effort to find it in the picture before it vanished, I couldn’t find what she decided to hold onto, so I broke down and asked, “What ended up being your defining feature?”

Lupe frowned at me.

“Isn’t it obvious?” she pointed at the middle of her face, “my nose is totally the same.”

I tried not to look too confused as I searched for the original Lupe in the piece of cartilage. The pores were microscopic, the skin was smooth and without freckles. I think I found the hint of crookedness near the bridge. I sat back and I made a show of seeing what I know she wanted me to see. It was important to her, so I took her word for it, and really that was the whole point of the night.

*

When I got home, my Dad was getting something from the refrigerator.

“Did you finish the application, Carver?”

“Working on it,” I said, keeping my head down.

“Your mother and I were thinking that it might help if you saw a counselor to help you through the process.”

A counselor?

“It’s perfectly normal. You’re not the first person to have second thoughts about modding.”
“I want to get the license, Dad,” I said, “it’s just I’m having trouble figuring out what I
want as my Defining Feature.”

“Just give the appointment a shot and see what they have to say,” he said, “at least so
your mother and I don’t have to worry about you acting like your uncle.”

My uncle. I’ve only heard about him in passing. He lives in the next town over, but I
don’t remember ever seeing him. Apparently, he and Mom got into a fight over modding when I
was little, and he was cut out of our lives. Every now and then a letter would slip past my
parents, but the messages were almost all the same. They had some variation on the words, “I
miss you.” I looked my father in the eye. I didn’t want to miss my parents. I’d see the
counselor.

*

Mom dropped me off in front of the counselor’s office and sped off before I could turn
around.

The office lobby had high ceilings. On the walls were large portrait style screens that
showed people who’d undergone modification. The faces slowly melded between before and
after. I think it was supposed to show how normal modding could be, but it instead reminded me
of a haunted house. The pictures changing when you look away to more inhuman faces.

I approached the front desk, and the receptionist took my information.

A few minutes later when the receptionist called my name, I was led down a hallway to
an open door. A gorgeous woman sat at a desk beside a large vertical monitor.
“Hello, Mr. Cyrus,” she said, “your parents said you might be unsure about undergoing Body Modification. I’m here to help you figure that out.”

Before I could speak, she gestured for me to sit. She slid the monitor, which I realized was attached to a mechanical arm and positioned its back to face me. At its center was a dark circle. A camera. On the spot, I mustered the best smile I could and soon I was face to face with the counselor again.

She ran tapering fingers along the screen, augmenting the picture of my face. Higher cheekbones. A straighter nose. The sclera of my eyes bleached of any blood vessels; the irises lightened to distinguish them from my pupils. She knew exactly where to look to create the idealized version of myself.

“We’ll do a full-body scan later, but this is a good idea of what you could look like.”

As she was erasing every freckle she could find, she asked, “Have you decided on your Defining Feature?”

She didn’t take her eyes off the screen, butchering me down to the cellular level.

“I’m still thinking on it,” I said to the counselor.

She finished the edits and turned the screen so I could get a better look. There I was, the potential of who I could be. Hair that wouldn’t tangle in the morning, lined up perfectly. Eyes that didn’t look slightly off. I reached out to this impossible reflection and seeing my own hand beside this perfect image felt dirty and wrong. After a moment, I realized what was so different. My hand was a lot darker than the face on the screen.
“Well, you need to decide soon,” she said, keying in some data, “you don’t want to be the only high school senior without mods.”

“No worry, if you like the changes, I sent them to you and your mother.”

“I look forward to finding out what you decide to keep.”

When she came to pick me up, I told Mom the appointment went well. It wasn’t necessarily a lie. The counselor and I got a good sense of how I’d look, but I still felt uncomfortable about the whole thing. She looked over the alterations the counselor made.

“You’re finally going to look like us!” she said and squeezed me in a hug.

For the rest of the ride home, I thought about those words and how off they felt. She was happy I would resemble the rest of my family, but we were pretty well off. If they really wanted to, they could modify themselves to look like me. Were they really putting forth all this energy just to make me look like them? When Mom took her attention off me and back to the road, I opened my phone. From what I remember from old letters, I started looking up my uncle’s address.

*

It was a couple of connecting bus rides, but I made it to the house listed in the database. I approached the old building and knocked.

When the door opened, something about my uncle stood out to me.
He was dark. My parents were black and identified as such, but Mom definitely was lighter skinned than him. Funnily enough, this man standing before me looked more like me than either of my parents.

Sure, he was older, and we didn’t have the same face, but I was able to see something in him. Not any one thing, but a collection of things that felt uniquely familiar. I don’t know how long I stared at him before he cleared his throat.

“You’ve come a long way,” he said as he looked me up and down, “why don’t you come inside.”

He led me down a narrow hall towards a kitchen with an old wooden table. There were three other chairs, but only one looked like it had been used in the last year. He gestured for me to sit and he pulled out the chair beside me. With a groan and a collection of pops, he sat. He regarded me, looking for something on my face I could only guess at. In a firm voice, he spoke.

“Why did you come to see me now?”

“Mom and dad – they said you refused to get modded.”

“And they wanted you to see what could happen to you if you didn’t change up your body?”

I shook my head slowly.

“They don’t know I’m here.”
His wrinkled brow, the pattern of creases I’d see on my own forehead sometimes, smoothed and he actually looked at me.

“I wanted to know,” I said looking down at the steaming mug, “why you chose not to get a mod license.”

“There’s something I want to show you.”

He left the kitchen, and I heard his footsteps as he ascended the creaking staircase. I could get a better look at the caddie on the shelf. Medicine for arthritis, one for cholesterol, another for blood pressure, and several others.

“You think that’s bad; you should see the ones I keep in the bathroom,”

I whipped around, found out and Uncle just laughed.

“No shame in getting older, not that your parents would agree with that.”

He took off his cap. Some of the graying hair thinned on the top of his head.

“Not bad for au natural if I do say so myself.”

He laughed again.

“Now listen,” he said, “it was my experience and my choice not to get modded.”

“Your mom – she didn’t want to carry on the legacy of your grandmother. He pointed to a dark mole on my cheek, then one on just barely peeking out on his own face underneath curly gray stubble.

“Bet you didn’t know that runs in the family.”
I touched the raised piece of skin on my face, just barely grasping the history. I brought my hand back down when he handed me what I thought was a tablet. After failing to tap the screen, I saw what I held—a picture in a thick frame. I saw a woman just as dark as my uncle and sure enough, the woman in the picture had a visible mole on her cheek.

“I can’t believe grandma looked like this.”

“Grandma?!” Uncle said in faux outrage, “boy, you can’t even tell when you’re looking at your own mom?”

I looked at him. He looked like he was about to laugh. I went back to the photo and tried to find something in it that tied it to the person I knew as my mother. Her nose here was wider, her irises darker, and she had kinky black hair like I imagined mine would be if they ever let me grow it out. Still, I couldn’t find her Defining Feature.

“You give up yet?”

My uncle tapped on the photo just over the mouth.

“She kept her lips,” he said, “full lips are always in style.”

I traced the smile in the picture, and I wasn’t sure if I actually recognized it or told myself that I should.

“Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise,” he continued, “the Defining Feature nonsense? It’s bullshit. There has only been one Defining Feature for you me and everyone going back for centuries and we’re wearing it.”
He pulled down the collar of his shirt revealing the skin on his chest.

“Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise”

I came here for answers, and what my uncle told me only added to my confusion. Why would my parents, the counselor, and everyone else fight so hard to erase something like that?

“Look,” he said, “this is a big decision. I can’t tell you what’s right for you, just as much as I can’t say what’s right for my niece.”

Before I left, Uncle grabbed my shoulder.

“Here,” he pressed a paper into my palm, “something to remember you by.”

When I looked down, I saw it was a picture of me. Just before Uncle caught me looking at his pills on the counter.

I had pictures with resolutions down to (the pixel) on my phone, online, and in 3D, but this. It wouldn’t be filtered, edited, or changed. It was a permanent, perfect moment.

“Thank you,” was all I could muster and before I knew it, I was engulfed in a hug. He didn’t just look like me. He smelled familiar too.

“And say hi to Rochelle for me, would you?”

When I got home, I opened the License application one final time and deleted the account.
April 20th, 2069. Social Justice Mercenaries sweep across what was once the united states, now called Cancelvania. I managed to escape the mandatory gay marriages and compulsory soy injections. But I became a fugitive. Black lives matter, meaning that white lives like mine don’t. But there is hope. In the ruins of an abandoned fedora factory, a band of incel STEM majors found a way to convert misogyny into a material capable of warping space-time. With any luck, they could send someone back in time to save humanity. Having experienced illegal heterosexual intercourse, I am the prime candidate for the Chronal Harmonizing Adaptational Device or CHAD for short. I just hope I can do something before all of humanity is cancelled.

More than half a year, I’ve been here waiting for the engineers to successfully send something back in time alive.

Then there was a knock. A feeling of tension swept over the room, but not in a gay way. One of the lookouts went to the window overlooking the factory’s double-doors.

“Just trick-or-treaters,” he said, relieved.

I fought the urge to laugh. Using a term from the list of unacceptable slurs was punishable by death, but here there was no political correctness. I walked over to the window and looked down at the children in their gender-neutral, culturally sensitive, gray Halloween jumpsuits, but children don’t carry anti-appropriation rifles with het-seeking missiles. Before I could shout a warning, the doors burst open, molten pieces of shrapnel scattering.
“What are you doing outside of the designated safe-space?” the commander barked. But it was a formality as the egalitarian troopers opened fire. Columns of deadly energy Yassed through the air. One such beam collided with someone and reduced them to the least offensive material Cancelvana could agree upon – oxygen. The poor virgin was vaporized, leaving the air carbon neutral. This was the green new deal the republicans warned us about.

“Come on,” one of the researchers grabbed my girthy wrist and pulled me behind a barricade of body pillows.

“We don’t have any more time to test,” he said, “you have to go now!”

I looked out at the survivors. They were the unlucky ones. They would be brought to the high feminist and be forced to accept their privilege as cis-gendered, heterosexual white men before being sent to the soy mines.

Gritting my teeth, I looked at the researcher and nodded. Dodging projectiles and criticism, we made our way to the laboratory where the time machine waited.

The scientist fiddled with the delicate instruments surrounding the glass human-sized chamber. The vault door we installed could withstand up to 100 snowflakes of force. I walked to the console where the CCTVs showed hot porn and some SJMs finishing their search of the rest of the factory. The leader, an intersectional feminist, waved to someone outside and through the ruined doors walked our worst nightmare. Though resembling a human at first glance, it was clearly a mechanical humanoid. One of the ecologically friendly, ethnically ambiguous robots designed to crush the patriarchy. A feminator. Her short blue hair was set to the side to allow
for practicality in combat and unobstructed vision. She faced the camera, and I could tell she was looking directly at me.

She followed an invisible line to the lab. She could interface with technology somehow. The glass ceiling was shattered.

“Doc,” I said, “they have a feminator. She knows where we are.”

“Just as well,” he said, and the machine whirred to life. It glowed a shade of white that had been forbidden years ago, electricity crackled along the glass chamber. I took off my clothes, my magnum-sized dong wobbling in the air as I walked into the machine. The researcher briefly looked down and with a look said, both ‘no homo,’ and ‘nice’ at the same time.

A deep thud resonated against the vault door, bits of concrete dust dislodged from the ceiling as the entire building shook.

“Don’t I need a weapon?” I asked.

He leveled a sarcastic glance, “I’m sending you to 2019.”

I sighed with relief. According to the historical records, that was two years before the first and second amendments were revoked for white people.

As the researcher further calibrated the machine, the thuds got louder, the vault door shaking loose with each strike. He repeated a series of numbers for me to memorize. Bank accounts, social security numbers. Then he repeated our savior’s name. The one who could prevent this future from happening.
“You have to find him, protect him,” the researcher urged.

With that, a final punch sent the steel door flying off of its hinges, narrowly missing the delicate, but not effeminate machinery in the room. The researcher pressed a final button and the room flooded with light. The last thing I saw was the back of the man as the feminator walked towards him. The last thing I heard, his scream.

A strange air entered my lungs. Full of freedom and the free-market economy. How things were back when things were right in the world.

“Hey, wake up,” a man said.

I opened my eyes. I was too surprised for words.

They were police officers. Honest to Christian God police officers.

“You have to help me,” I said to one of them. He gave me an incredulous look, no doubt intimidated my massive genitals. Turns out they were more beta than I thought. They handed me the keys to the squad car, and I drove.

Due to my superior sense of direction, I didn’t need to ask for directions as I soon found myself at the door to our savior’s house.

When he answered the door, I knew he would be the one to save us all.

“Come with me if you want to live,” holding out my hand heterosexually.

I was still naked, but he didn’t dare look down at my engorged member. A true alpha. He put on his tactical vest and ‘get back to the kitchen’ t-shirt, walking to the squad car. Just in
time, apparently. The feminator was already making a full sprint towards the car. I hit the gas quickly and the scent of scorched rubber permeated the air.

Without a word, our savior leaned out the window and took aim at our pursuer. Despite weaving through traffic, he was able to hit her, but it did little to slow her down. One of her renewable material arms extended into a sharp hook puncturing the trunk. She climbed over the car above the roof. The alpha beside me reached into the back seat and retrieved a 500 Mossberg tactical shotgun. Pointing the weapon that honestly was under-compensating at the ceiling above, he said, “It’s time to trigger a lib.”

Our savior’s huge weapon blasted over the ceiling of the vehicle. The feminator rolled off of the car and onto the busy street. We kept driving and didn’t stop until the tires were bald.

It’s been three months now. Through several subreddits and Alt-Right communities, we’ve built a resistance. Whatever plans for intersectional dystopia have been stopped. For now…

Part 2

Update – October 4th, 2021. It’s been almost three years since I met our savior, the Alpha with Sigma tendencies, Richard Peter Johnson. Through our efforts, we managed to delay the Soypocalypse past the fated day of January 20th this year. With the distraction of the January Protest, we failed to stop one steal, but managed to perform a steal of our own. Through the actions of code name Via Getty, we were able to retrieve the data stored within Nancy Pelosi’s lectern. With his sacrifice of being fined and/or getting up to ten years in prison, I resolved to
name my first-born after him in his honor. That is, if Rick Johnson doesn’t have any plans regarding my reproduction. When it comes to the end of the world, it’s my body, his choice.

After downloading the data and leaving the Speaker’s lectern under some stairs, the two of us set off to a bed and breakfast in upstate New Hampshire to investigate the data. Streaming episodes of Teen Wolf back-to-back, we ensured that our digital fingerprint would be an indecipherable mess. Luckily, that slowed down any would-be pursuers. The small victory of decrypting the data was soon overshadowed by what the data meant.

In concert with Facebook and Twitter, the government developed the plans for the first Feminator prototype. With a neural core engorged with the algorithms of these tech giants, she would be far deadlier than anything I faced in 2069.

“What are we going to do, Dick?”

The savior that brought me this close to completion – of my mission - turned to me and said, “We’re going to do what only men can do.”

After brunch the following morning, we started our drive to Menlo Park California.

The air of the San Francisco Bay Area had a distinct taste –

On the hill overlooking the Facebook building

He opened the multi-purpose camo rifle case and retrieved the M24 sniper rifle – a weapon surpassed in length only by its raw power. Ever since growing up forced to care about others, I’d always wished I was a gun, but watching Rick Johnson hold the barrel, I knew I wanted to be more. I wanted to be his gun.
I had to settle for the next best thing. I laid out the tarp and checked the wind conditions. I wasn’t going to let a little cold weather diminish what we were going to do. I retrieved the specially designed bullet. Inside the transparent casing was a small cartridge that could generate an electromagnetic pulse strong enough to bring down Facebook for good. As I inserted the bullet into Richard’s closed hand, I felt some initial resistance, but soon he understood and accepted it.

He loaded the rifle, and I took out a pair of binoculars. I sprawled out on the tarp and surveyed the Facebook Corporate office. It was a tricky shot, but if anyone could do it, it was Dick Peter Johnson.

“I going to put a big hole in the deep state,” he growled as he climbed on top of me with his rifle.

Steadying the barrel of the gun between my shoulders, I could feel him lining up his shot.

“Let’s see them put this online,” he said, pulling the trigger.

The effect was almost immediate. Using the joint data plan that made sense for us to get, I watched as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp went out of service. With those programs, the Feminator wouldn’t come to be.

Or at least that’s what we thought. In six hours, the system was back online. Three weeks after that, Mark Zuckerberg announced the name of Facebook’s next incarnation. Meta.

Years of planning, Q drops and honeypot operations and all we did was manage to change the company’s name.
Ever resolute, the world’s savior stayed firm.

“I guess that means we’re going to need a bigger bullet.”
Dear Saturday,

I guess now is as good enough time as any to tell you about who you are and how you came to be. I’m not quite sure when exactly you’ll be born, but better sooner rather than later. This will be a lot to absorb, but our hope is that you hearing, or rather, reading this in our own words will help you adjust to this life.

You inhabit one of four billion brains with neuro-chimerism. That’s what the first doctors called it after they stopped trying to pathologize the condition. In simple terms, neuro-chimerism means that you share a body with other people. Specifically, you will be sharing this body with six other people. That’s me, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. I know it seems lazy, but our parents chose the simple route once our siblings started splitting off. And hey, it beats being named after a girl band or whatever hobbies interested parents at the time. Simple was good for everyone at that time.

It all started with parents complaining to doctors about the strange behavior in their kids. Some children had quick and sudden changes in personality. From toddlerhood, they seemed to have mood swings, threw unpredictable tantrums, or even changed the inflection with which they spoke. As they got older, they were prone to blackouts, unable to remember the events of previous days. What little consistency parents had with their kids was dwindling fast. These first cases were called the split children.

Searching for answers, the prevailing science at the time suggested that there was some environmental factor that was flipping a neurological switch. Psychologists and psychiatrists saw
an epidemic of dissociative identity disorder. The anti-vaxxer movement, long since buried, returned with vindication, certain that standard inoculations were the culprit. Others, thinking from a more metaphysical angle, believed that a stagnating birth-rate led to a backup of souls waiting for bodies to inhabit. But none of these explanations fully explained the phenomenon of the split children.

The transitions between personalities were too clean, too predictable. Literal clockwork. Individual trauma didn’t seem to trigger a change in personality, nor did anything seem to delay one. Parents would almost beg their children to remember something they said or did only to find that the child was in fact different. The only saving grace was that they would have to wait, at most, a week before seeing a certain personality again.

Sleep was a common through line. A shift in personality never happened while a child was awake. The first doctors who tried to keep a child subject awake past a twenty-four-hour period stopped when said child entered a catatonic state lasting a full day. A sort of hard reset.

MRIs and other external scans offered a single clue: an above average pineal gland. The little pinecone shaped organ, among other things, kept the body’s circadian rhythm consistent. Aside from that difference, split children were just as healthy as any other kids their age, if not confused at times. Some had neurological conditions such as epilepsy, but the rate was no more common than how it appeared in other demographics.

Then one of these children hit her head when she fell off of a swing. Under the pretense of securing a biopsy to determine the best course of treatment, the physicians sent a second sample to the hospital’s lab and what the researchers found provided the last piece of the puzzle.
After a second and third test to make sure there were no other contaminants, they found not one set of DNA within the girl’s brain cells, but four.

You see, her mother had gone through in vitro fertilization to conceive her. The resultant theory derived from our understanding of genetic chimerism. That undeveloped clusters of zygotes - you know, twins, triplets, and so on? – they failed to separate and instead grew together in the womb. This left people with organs containing the DNA of their unborn siblings. They were transplant recipients before they were born. While it didn’t fully explain the cyclical personality changes, ‘neuro-chimerism’ quickly blended into the world’s nomenclature.

That was forty years ago. Today, a little less than half of the world’s population shares our condition. Welcome to the club.

*

I was as surprised as the rest of us to discover we were carrying you. I mean, sure, we each sensed you in some way or another, but to date, I’m the only one who’s explicitly felt you kicking. We never planned on having children, and this was just as unforeseen.

The first day I felt you pushing up against our consciousnesses, it was some time back in March. I woke up in bed feeling the lingering warmth of our husband, John. Don’t worry. He’s unitary. You only need to remember the one name.

I could smell the lavender shampoo Thursday used and felt relief knowing that she’d showered some time the night before. The sheets weren’t so fresh, so I made my way to the
bathroom to take an additional, thorough shower. Once I’d finished, John was back in the bedroom, sitting on the corner of the comforter. He was fully dressed, but without socks.

I walked over to him and bent to greet him.

“Good morning, love,” he said, as he pushed aside a damp lock of hair to caress my ear.

He’s good. Gets along with most of us, and only mixes us up when he’s distracted. The generic pet names help, and I don’t begrudge his desire to make life simpler where he can. I lean our cheek into his palm.

“And a good morning to you too.”

I leaned closer, keeping his hand on our face. I kissed him in a way that was unmistakably me. A moment’s hesitation as I draw back like I might do something different. Like I’m someone different. If he’s noticed, he hasn’t told me, but I prefer not to know. It isn’t for him anyway. He returns the kiss with enthusiasm, resting his other palm on my bare shoulder.

“You get yourself dressed and I’ll get coffee started,” he said, and made his way down the hall. I put my damp towel in our laundry basket and wandered back into the bathroom.

I approached our makeup drawer. Luckily, Tuesday, Thursday, and I all preferred the same foundation while Monday and I split the cost on eyeliner. Sunday and Wednesday claim to prefer going without makeup, but I have noticed times where some of my things are not quite where I left them.
By the grace of god, my days just barely miss getting our period. I had one once, a slight one if what Sunday said is true, and that was enough for me to sign onto the rest of our siblings’ plan to get on birth control. At sixteen, getting that prescription was one of the fastest, easiest agreements we’d ever had.

A term was codified into law to address this very issue – unanimous consent. While a chimeric’s (or Khim’s) active personality can consent to having sex, and bodily autonomy in general, certain things still require each personality to be aware before going forward. Tattoos, piercings, elective surgery, moving, financial transactions over two thousand dollars (though you can address that with separate bank accounts), and yes, even pregnancy. And its termination.

Each personality needs to be aware of what’s happening and to agree to it. Anything less would be akin to assault, theft, kidnapping or rape. Though we needed to get Sunday on board with the marriage, we all fell into a predictable routine eventually.

I never asked John why he decided to stick things out with us. Maybe he fell for Tuesday and wanted to see how the rest of us were like, only to be surprised that the most frequent personality he’d know was mine. Maybe he just likes the challenge of shopping for six different Christmas presents. He was the first unitary man we’d dated, and he surprised all of us when given the chance.

Once I finished turning Thursday’s face into my own, I followed the fragrance of coffee down the hall.

That’s when I had our first migraine.
I was once told that migraines were like orgasms: if you’ve never had one before, you’ll know it when you do. The fifteen steps of the hallway blurred and stretched in front of me as I felt a grinding ring reverberate through my skull. The only thing I could do was stagger along with my hand on the glossy, orange peel wall until I could find a place to collapse. A few minutes later, John found me passed out, curled up on the floor.

In his panic, he called out for Thursday. I remember feeling annoyed as I woke up. He guided me to my feet and once I agreed to avoid taking the stairs for a little bit, he left me alone in our room again. I retrieved our phone from the nightstand charger and logged into my account. I found our memory journal application and opened it, hoping to find something Thursday did to blame for what happened. I knew she drank sometimes, but I’d never had a hangover like that before. At least not since I’d written a strongly worded forum post threatening to throw out her booze the next time it happened. To my confusion, nothing strange happened. It was a pretty routine day for Thursday. Her four-hour workday, some shopping for her preferred groceries, and a night in with John.

I scrolled back to find Wednesday’s schedule. No mention of headaches, or other pains. I went backwards through the week until I found my previous entry. Nothing.

I went back to the bathroom and found our daily pillbox by the sink. The pills were up to date. Thursday’s slot was empty, having refilled Wednesday’s and taking her own. Afraid I would suffer another migraine, I held onto the bathroom counter and guided myself back out of the bathroom.
I found my way to the corner of the bed where John sat and heaved out a sigh. If I was that worried, then I needed to see a doctor. I was thankful that Monday kept track of our personal information and found the number for the office she visited for our regular check-ups. I was also thankful that the receptionist had an opening for me to come in on the same day. I had the next day to go in, and I could’ve written down something in the memory journal for whoever ended up having the appointment, but I was glad all the same. I slid on a pair of Tuesday’s jeans and called John back to the room.

I didn’t expect to collapse again, but he was right by our side when we went down the stairs. He also took initiative by taking the driver’s seat of our car. I was one of the four of us who had a driver’s license, but in this instance, I was glad to have this task taken care of. Good thing too, since another migraine struck five minutes into the trip and lasted until we reached the clinic. I’d never been before, but Monday’s unconscious familiarity bled through and I felt somewhat at ease in the new place. An additional level of comfort came from seeing the doctor’s hyphenated name embossed on a placard in front of the building. Who better to treat a khim than a khim?

Aftershocks of the migraine throbbed as I waited for the doctor to see what was wrong with us. The receptionist mistakenly called for Monday before correcting for me. John followed behind as the nurse took our vitals. Despite Thursday’s hedonism, Monday’s steady maintenance of our diet kept us within relatively healthy numbers. As a precaution, the nurse took a urine sample. Not knowing what entered a khim’s body while dormant meant such precautions were necessary for treatment.
The doctor arrived soon after I peed in the testing cup, and I told him of the only symptom I was aware of. In response, he asked me a question.

“Have you been dreaming regularly?”

I told him that I had been, but only on the night I go dormant. Not between the two days the body was mine. He typed some notes on the keyboard between us and in silence, we waited for the results of the urine test. The entire time, John sat beside me in silence. When the results came in, he was unsurprised, revealing an explanation he’d probably prepared in the few quiet minutes of waiting.

I, or rather, we have what’s called ‘latent neuro-chimerism.’ The research keeps coming in, I guess.

Most khims develop all of their personalities before they learn to walk. We are part of that special exception that can develop new active personalities over time. The other personalities don’t get forced into permanent dormancy, thank God, but active personalities lose waking days in proportion to who has the most. In this case, I would be going from two consecutive days to allow for a new existence. Your existence.

The doctor offered an apology and suggested a psychologist who specialized in khims. I’d honestly hoped that our current doctor happened to switch specialty on a different day, but no such luck. And with that, John and I went home with a prescription for painkillers and a business card. Over the next few weeks, Monday led the rest of us in making accommodations for the new personality.
Our therapist suggested I reach out to you. You are splitting off from my two days, after all. I won’t lie to you and say that I’m excited to have my waking life cut in half, but over the past few months, I’ve come to understand what it was that I took for granted. Our siblings each had only one day a week. I, meanwhile, got to know what it felt like to sleep and wake up knowing things were just as I left them.

In trying to find the bright side, I’m looking forward to is the extension of my time dreaming. The others described the vividness of dreams they had while dormant, and I couldn’t relate the same way. We don’t ever share thoughts together in a way that roommates might speak to one another, but we shape each other. I’m left wondering how long you were dreaming. If you were conscious on some level, fighting for your chance to exist and shape the world you could only perceive through what scraps our siblings and I could pass on to you.

Or maybe you formed from those pieces, a tapestry of consciousness woven from our existences. Maybe you borrowed pieces of each of us. Monday’s attention to detail, Tuesday’s tendency for nail biting, Wednesday’s anxiety? It might be my grappling with the reduction of my mortality, but my hope is that you’ll be a lot like me. Saturday seems to appreciate the consistency I leave with her and of course John enjoys that too.

And don’t worry. You won’t have to jump into our routine right away. Other khims and our advocates put in the judicial legwork to let us adjust to this transition. You’ll have some time away from work to just be you. Try to enjoy it. And when you do start working, don’t
worry too much. Our job might seem a little confusing, but from what we’ve read, you should be able to pick up most of it from muscle memory alone.

We’ve pooled some money together to get you started on clothes and personal items. As I mentioned earlier, we are sharing this body, so please don’t do anything too drastic and if you’re unsure, you can always refer to Monday’s medical records for allergies and things like that.

P.S. Don’t worry about the name. You can figure that out once we get to know each other better.

If we did this right, this and the other letters should be on our nightstand waiting for you when you wake up for the first time. If you have any questions, write them down in the memory journal or leave a note for Saturday. Your log in information, passwords, phone numbers are in the folder underneath the letters. It’s going to be a new experience for all of us, but let’s try to make the best of it.

To be honest, we thought we were just an asymmetrical khim. Sharing a seven-day cycle between the six of us. We’ve been a clustered like that for all of our lives. To see something new, another side of us is exciting and I’m glad to know that you’ll be there with us.

However – and I don’t mean to bring you down - there’s something else you should know. With the revelation of you and the condition that allowed you to be, if one new personality can emerge, so can more. We might have to think of different names if that comes up, but remember, we all have one home at the end of the day and we’re glad to have you.
Sincerely,

Friday, (formerly Jacqueline)
Spin the Bottle

I recognized the packaging of the pill the moment I saw it. There was a whole news report about it. Street name was Solo. Isoladril was the first medical ‘cure’ for neuro-chimerism - the condition that affected half of the world. It was marketed as a humane course of action to deal with Khims who had a personality that committed a severe crime. Why should all of someone’s personalities be punished with imprisonment? Why shouldn’t America’s solution be capital punishment? Personally, I thought things worked just fine as they were – the personality active the day before the incarcerated one would visit a prison for the night and the next personality would be released that morning. As long as they lived close to a prison and agreed to check in, we could have what most people dream of. A semblance of freedom.

But this. I picked up the vacuum sealed plastic packet. Under the large white tablet, the silvery foil on the opposite side reminded me of a rainy sky. I turned it over twice. It was kept in standard pharmaceutical packaging. Either taken off the factory floor or prescribed. Either way, there were no labels or markings that indicated who purchased it.

I tossed the pill back on the table and took a seat. The wooden chair creaked a bit as it scraped across the linoleum floor. I left our phone back in the room and I lifted my head to look at the clock instead. A quarter past eleven. I still had another half day before I went dormant for the week.

I ran through the personalities that occupied the body while I waited in the subconscious space. I tried to figure out which of them would pick up the medication.
Not like it was out of the ordinary for it to find its way into Khim hands. Like any drug, it didn’t take long to reach people who would abuse it.

I’m not fond of conspiracy theories, but after forty years of not having a Khim president or other Khims in power, one starts to wonder about what those powerful, solitary people would want.

* 

“In a stunning decision, the senate voted 56-44 against a bill allowing access to a medication that could prevent a chimeric person from spontaneously growing new personalities.” The newscaster said, “citing the precedent from the early 21st century, the senate leader that said that if there was a case for life beginning at conception, this would be it.”

* 

I opened the packaging and dropped the pill into my palm. Its chalky white stood in contrast to the pink skin surrounding it. Our skin.

It would be easy. It’s not even that big. I could swallow it dry.

Would the others even know?

I flipped my wrists and regarded the fingernails. Small blue flecks were the only evidence that polish had adorned them less than a day ago. The fact the nails stayed short was a compromise they all conceded on my behalf. I clenched my fists and rested them on the table at either side of the pill.
I could do it. I could just be Lucius.

I wouldn’t have to share with Helena, Dawn, or Aurora. I wouldn’t be outvoted. No more binders. No more rummaging through laundry to find clothes that fit me. I could actually be free from the restrictions. Have the affirmation that others could get at a hospital on the same day. I could have a body all my own.

It *would* be easy.

I thought of the other parts of my mind. My sisters.

I looked at my nails again. Every time without fail, Aurora wiped them clean for me. It was one of my own morning routines I completed in silence, but somehow, she caught on to it and adopted it as her own evening ritual. Something I wouldn’t have to remind me of the body that already felt alien to me.

With a final deep breath, I walked to the sink.

I lifted the pill close to my face. I couldn’t describe how it smelled aside from the vague sterility that came with medicine wrapped in plastic. I heard the tablet clink until it settled into a roll down the garbage disposal along with a torrent of water never to return.

That was my choice. Why should they be stuck with my choice like I was with theirs?

I crinkled the packaging and put it in my back pocket. I thought better of throwing it away. The serial number would at least tell me when the pill was made or who ordered its prescription. I don’t know what the police would do, but hopefully we could figure something out. Together.
I slipped on the casual shoes I kept by the door and reached for the door handle. With a twist, I pulled the door. I lost balance a little bit and stumbled back, certain that I’d just lost grip of it. More careful and deliberate the second time, I tried to open the door.

It didn’t give at all. I shook the handle and pulled at the door with both hands now. It didn’t budge at all.

I cursed under my breath and walked back to the kitchen. I looked at the clock. A quarter past eleven.

I felt my vision blur as a wave of realization came over me. Today wasn’t my turn. I’m dormant.

But why was this intermediary space so drab? So dull, yet so lifelike? I wouldn’t even be able to spend an eternity of dormancy in a body or place I feel whole? I would be stuck in here with my condemned identities as the selfish one lived out the life they always wanted.

I looked back to the sink. Would I have been the one to emerge if I took it in this imaginary realm, or was that one last cruel bit of mockery I would endure before spending time in this shitty apartment for the rest of my life?

Fuck that.

I walked towards the butcher block on the counter. I drew the largest, sharpest knife I could remember. One of the imported ones Helena insisted on buying. I drew the blade and caught my gaze in the polished steel. I made eye contact with the me I always knew.
Whoever did this to me, they weren’t going to trap me here that easily. I’ve been trapped long enough.
Hey, I’m Ryan Jones and while it’s not the most common name out there, it’s still a pretty popular combination. But have you ever wondered why you have a really common name? You know, like John, or Brittany? See, I found out the reason. It’s wild, but if you can bear with me for a few minutes, I can help you understand what I’m talking about. But to sum it up in one word – multiverse. There’s not just one universe, but several.

A year ago, on the way back home one night, I happened to glance over at the crosswalk on the corner of my street. There was this woman who was making her way across and despite the tiny little white man signaling safety, one of the drivers didn’t get the memo and kept going without any plan to stop. The woman realized what was happening before I did, turning with the tense undirected energy that comes from knowing danger was present, but unable to do anything about it. Still, in that moment, I thought I’d shout to warn her. As though she didn’t know herself, but I didn’t know what else to do. I remember holding my hand out as though I could reach her and that’s when it happened.

Some kind of unseen force erupted from my palm and the car tumbled aside like it was hit by an invisible eighteen-wheeler. Time resumed and the air filled with the sounds of tires screeching, car horns blaring, and people shouting. Black streaks of rubber were tattooed onto the faded asphalt, leaving behind the scent of tires in the air. I’m not proud of where my priorities were, but I didn’t bother looking at the traffic or wonder if the driver was alright. Instead, I looked down at my hands like they were the most interesting things in the world. They felt like mine, but with something more to them. Something greater. Like I could hold the
whole world in my palm if I wanted to. I looked past the nicks and scars like they weren’t mine and saw a hint of something underneath. Someone else walking on the sidewalk strode up to me on the way to the wrecks in the street.

They, I couldn’t even bother to remember what the person looked like, asked me if I was all right and I shook free of my stupor. This person cared about me enough and I became acutely aware of myself with that bit of acknowledgement. I don’t remember what I said, but it was stammered out either way. I turned away from the scene of the wreck, hoping that what I saw, and my involvement in it, was just a figment of my imagination.

Unsure how much I stood out, I continued the rest of the walk back to my apartment while trying to keep as normal a pace as possible. I took the stairs to reach my studio. The elevator would have been more convenient, but for some reason, I didn’t want to feel trapped. Even then, I looked over my shoulder as I climbed the steps. It was the spotlight effect - the idea that everyone is watching you when they would have no reason to. But deep down, I knew there was a reason to look at me. I didn’t see anything come from my hand, but I could feel something connect to the car I struck. I felt the side of the car compress, the fiberglass splinter, the tires skid across the intersection as the brakes fought the change in momentum.

I didn’t bother turning on the lights as I stepped into the apartment. I intuited my way to a seat and found the couch. I leaned my head over the arm rest and replayed the events that happened only moments before. I went through the repetitions too many times to count, but I was certain a few hours had passed. I listened outside. Living on a busy street, I could tell the difference between sirens and while the police and fire fighters showed up, I distinctly didn’t
hear any ambulances. I decided I’d read about the events the next day to make sure the people involved with the accident, besides me, were all right. Just as I turned on the couch to sleep then and there, I heard a knock. It was

I kept my hands to my sides, unsure of what would happen next.

I didn’t know if it was the cops, but it had to be someone who saw what I did. How could I think I would get away with what I did? There were at least four red-light cameras at that intersection alone. One of them must have seen something. The man who had a mini freak out and ran back inside after the mess he made. I took light steps towards the door and wondered if they would just knock it down and shoot me dead or if I would get a chance to explain. I held my breath as I leaned against the door and peered through the hole. To my relative relief, it was the same woman from the crosswalk. I’m sure she couldn’t have seen my eye, but she looked right back at me. She knew I was there.

“Are you going to let me in?” She said after a moment.

I waited and stayed as still as possible. I let my breath fall out of my nostrils.

“Look, I saw what you did,” she said just above a whisper, “I can call the cops if you don’t want to talk.”

I let out a string of mental curses and weighed my options. I saw her pull out her phone and start to dial before I finally relented and opened the door.

The woman before me had long black hair, and despite her being shorter than me, she carried herself with an air of confidence I couldn’t hope to match.
“Maria Garcia,” she said, holding out her hand.

Confused, I took her hand, and I could swear I felt a tingle of electricity as I clasped my fingers over hers.

I told her my name and she nodded.

“That is a pretty common name.”

Maria had a flat expression at first, but then tilted her head and narrowed her eyes as if she was looking for something in my face. She looked past me, and I thought she could tell how messy my apartment was despite the darkness.

“We should probably go somewhere else anyway. Safety purposes.”

She suggested the Denny’s in walking distance since it stayed open late. I figured if she wanted to try something sketchy, she’d have done it out of the public eye.

We ordered coffees, though I doubted I would need it.

“Sorry I had to scare you like that,” Maria said as she took a seat across from me in the booth, “It’s faster to refresh your memory that way.”

“By walking into traffic?” I processed her other words and she smiled as I did so.

“Something like that.”

She looked at me with a knowing smile and took the saltshaker on the table and set it on its side. A few grains of salt fell and then she hooked her right index finger on the table’s edge. I could feel her pull downwards and while the table remained fixed and solid, the rest of the
world around us seemed to tilt. The saltshaker adjusted to this change in gravity and rolled towards her.

Despite thinking I should, I couldn’t find it in me to react to what I saw with anything more than boredom. In that moment, it made sense to me. It was an unimpressive parlor trick – little more effort than if she had tilted the table itself instead of the gravity surrounding it. I slowly understood that she did something similar to the car.

“That was pretty low-effort work on that car,” she said, releasing her hold on the laws of physics. She seemed noticeably tired from the effort after and straightened her hair.

“You could’ve rewound time, or made the car blink out of existence or hell, wish me back to life if you were slow on the uptake.”

“Still, pretty impressive that you had the forethought to wish nobody got hurt in the accident.”

“No, that car,” I said, “I saw it.”

I felt it.

“I’m sure if you left it alone, yeah, there would be a bigger mess out there.”

She leaned towards the window overlooking the street.

“But thanks to you the only thing they’re scraping off the street is some broken glass and a shredded tire.”
I couldn’t find a lie in what she was saying, but something felt off about her attitude. I watched, participated, in a car crash and there she was making jokes about it.

“You and me? We’re special. We’re-“

“Drifters,” I said cutting her off.

Bits and pieces started coming back when I uttered the word.

Maria nodded.

“You do have a lot of forethought,” she said, “looks like you left yourself some breadcrumbs to get reacquainted with the old you.”

“The old me.”

It felt like I was trying to recall a dream after waking up. I was trying to look at a world where a different set of rules made sense, when all my life I only had what I knew a few hours ago. I parsed through the dream logic and as Maria described, I worked my way back through breadcrumbs of memory. I am or was a Drifter.

As our coffees cooled, I worked through my understanding of what it meant to be a drifter. Maria filled in the gaps and laid out the basics.

By what she said, and what I remembered, Drifters at their most essential, are immortal beings that can travel to alternate universes and timelines at will. They can perform feats we’d call magic or miracles. Above entropy and decay, Drifters are ageless and immortal. And sometimes they got bored.
Cryptids, ghosts, psychics, and even déjà vu were caused by wandering Drifters trying to spice up their eternal existences. But once you’ve had it all, the last resort to ease the boredom of immortality without challenge was to re-incarnate. With the unimaginable power came the ability to compartmentalize it into an essence separate from the Drifter, rendering them mortal. Mundane. Aged Drifters took to hiding their essence somewhere on the world they chose and erased their memories before choosing to be born to a random family. They would live that life only to discover their power and knowledge, and with it, the novelty it brought. It was a fleeting high, but something that brought excitement to passing eons.

As much as I didn’t want to believe it, it made a certain amount of sense. At certain points, I fought myself from cutting her off to explain what she was going to say. Instead, I nodded, satisfied that I was keeping up. I knew that I was only scratching the surface of this past life, but I couldn’t find a downside.

When Maria seemed satisfied that I was up to speed on the concept of Drifters, her expression darkened.

“The reason I got you involved is that there’s something out there killing Drifters.”

“But I thought you said we can’t—“

“I know what I said,” she said after taking a sip of coffee. She took a quiet moment and looked down at her mug before lifting her eyes to meet mine.

“This, this is different. She raised her mug again and this time noticed the ring left behind. She dragged her thumb through the circle. “It’s a breaking of the cycle.”
“When it kills you, that’s it.”

It’s a whiplash sensation, you know, to have eternity offered and then rescinded just as quickly. I glanced at the saltshaker and with an unspoken wish, one by one, the grains of salt slid back inside, and the container stood upright again. When I faced Maria.

“That level of power won’t do anything for us.”

“But why did you come looking for me?” I asked, “Couldn’t you go to some other world and find someone better to deal with this?”

“That’s not how it works,” she said. I could tell she was getting impatient, “I got my memories back early and couldn’t get to my essence before my stash was raided. The universe I was staying in is adjacent to this one. I used the last of the essence in this body to make it here.”

“But I don’t have any essence,” I said. I knew that much. I could feel the fatigue I felt from hitting the car, and now a migraine was setting in.

“Well not on you,” she said, “you just have to remember where you put it.”

Apparently, Drifters don’t like the idea of being completely vulnerable and instead keep their essence of omnipotence with their other valuables stashed nearby after reincarnation.

“How am I supposed to remember something like that?”

I thought of all the places I could think of that would hold treasures like that, but I didn’t even have a storage shed to my name.
“You’re thinking too hard about it,” Maria said, “It’s somewhere special to you. Somewhere you saw a lot growing up.”

“What was yours?”

Maria shrugged.

“Part of it was in the basement of my house and the rest was at the hospital where I was ‘born.’”

“You really can’t remember where you would try to go whenever you had the chance?”

I thought back on my memories of growing up in this small town. I tried to apply the context Maria had offered me, and after a few minutes, I had it down to a few locations.

I pulled out my phone and jotted some places down in the notepad app. The house where I grew up, the river I visited to find tadpoles, my elementary school.

Maria entered the addresses on a ride share and stood up to leave. She was already halfway to the door when I started fumbling to pay the bill. I pulled out a few crumpled bills from my back pocket and Maria sighed. She walked back to the table and opened her small bag. I saw something gold shining inside and she reached past it to retrieve a crisp hundred-dollar bill. She didn’t bother checking it, but I did a double take when I saw the moustache on Ben Franklin’s face. I left my crumpled ten and pocketed the hundred. I didn’t want to think about the disappointment on the server’s face when she saw her generous tip was actually worthless.

Of the three locations off the top of my head, the school was the closest. As the driver brought us closer, I knew we were on the right track.
I saw the seam almost immediately after stepping out of the car. It wasn’t at the elementary school, but the park adjoining it. Just before plastic jungle gym that replaced the tire swing I remembered.

Partially transparent, the glowing seam didn’t cast shadows or illuminate the grass on the ground surrounding it. However, it partially melded into the renovated sidewalk, warping and twisting like it was being photoshopped in real time. I looked at Maria who was squinting at its general direction. I realized she couldn’t see it at first, but could tell that I found it.

“After you,” she said, finally giving up.

I approached the crack of light and placed my hand inside. It was almost solid to the touch, like a light fabric that tickled nerves too sensitive to react before. I placed my other hand into the seam and opened the veil that separated us from my birth right.

I walked in first, making sure Maria had enough room to follow.

Inside was the tackiest, most disjointed collection I’d ever seen. There were bars of gold stacked in one corner, a wooden rack holding a bunch of neckbeard swords, even, I shit you not, a fucking pirate’s treasure chest. I swear, it looked like one of those stores that trade in cultural appropriation. And I guess that’s just what it was. The only thing that felt familiar to me was how messy it all was.

Maria walked past me and went to work sifting through one of the junk piles. She found some bottles, holding them up to the light shining overhead. I couldn’t quite tell the source of the light, or anything else, actually. The ground felt like simple stone, but the walls seemed just
as pliable as the entrance to the room itself. I’m sure the room would expand to accommodate whatever other trinkets I might collect.

“Your essence should be in here somewhere,” she said.

I looked around at the expanse of things, and knew there was so much more outside of my perception.

“How do you know?”

“If you left a trail for yourself to follow, it would stand to reason that the first treasures you’d find would be the most important.”

I scanned the room again, and still found ‘tacky’ as the closest approximation to how I felt about this room. The first thing I gravitated towards was a bookcase. The oldest books were on the bottom left, bound with cracked leather. They wound up four rows getting newer and newer, until the most recent one, which still had a glossy sheen once I brushed off the dust. But that’s not what caught my attention. I saw my name. I glanced back at the other books and saw they had names written too. But Ryan Jones only went so far back before the name reverted to old names with characters I couldn’t place or pronounce.

I took the newest book and set it on the table. I opened it to see several plastic pockets. It reminded me of when I collected Pokémon cards. But instead, each pocket held a different form of identification. Most were driver’s licenses or passports, but some were from schools or other memberships. I flipped and saw a variety of faces, of a variety of colors. But each one looked at the camera, at me, like they were all in on the same joke. I didn’t want to believe it,
but I pulled out my wallet. I figured that my smile was unique, but here it was repeated across pages and pages.

That wasn’t the only strange thing. One of the newer ID cards shined with silver engravings and was dated for more than a decade from now. The guy in the picture was like the others, unique, but similar in facial expression.

There weren’t just different worlds. There were different timelines before and after what I understood to be the present.

I flipped through collections of credit cards, photos with people I couldn’t recognize, and documents, some of which seemed ancient. Then it dawned on me. The cards, the relics, the fortunes. These were souvenirs.

I felt my heartbeat quicken and grabbed the oldest book on the shelf. I couldn’t recognize the name on the spine, but the words were on the tip of my tongue, like if I gave it time, gave it study, I could pronounce it. It was almost like my name though it called upon different parts of my mouth to properly enunciate in that way.

In a strange way, it made sense. Instead of trying to form a new name and identity with each reincarnation, it would be infinitely easier to assimilate into a common identity.

I guess to be reborn they choose a random person with their name, to make the transition easier. I thought of the baby my parents brought into the world. They thought he was innocent, vulnerable. They tried their best to raise him and leave their mark on him. I thought of my face
mirrored through different skin tones and bone structures. Whatever I was, it was formed by somebody else a long time ago. For kicks.

I looked at the collage of pictures again. How much was I like them? I felt a wave of guilt as I thought about the person I replaced. Did I jump into the body of someone who was already meant to exist, or did I make this form from the ground up? For my sake, I chose to believe the latter, but still something nagged at my mind.

I stood among the treasures and artifacts around me. And I thought to myself, “What an asshole!”

He had the ability to make every world he visited a better place and instead decided to vacation as a black gay guy. This dude was living with privilege on a cosmic scale and didn’t even have the decency to share any of his knowledge or treasure. These were trophies caked in grime, untouched as soon as they were added to his collection. He just took things and when he rediscovered the luxury of boredom decided to start from scratch. Well, his version of it. I wanted to set the whole collection ablaze just to see his, my, reaction to it.

“Here it is,” Maria said, holding up a glass bottle, “With this you’ll get all of your memories back and the power to get us out of here.”

She handed it to me and through some sort of osmosis, the liquid inside glowed warm shades where my fingertips pressed against the container. It pulsated, knowing it was in familiar hands.
I removed the stopper that would move only at my touch. I caught a whiff of the bottle’s contents. Standing there, holding the flask, I realized the things that I cared about weren’t being forgotten. They were being pushed aside, made trivial by the knowledge that had accumulated over eons. People I knew were melting into general concepts and archetypes I’ve experienced on countless other worlds. With each breath, I felt both larger and smaller than anything I could imagine. The living contradiction within the bottle called to me.

Maria could sense my hesitation.

“You need to drink it, or we die – and we won’t come back”

I looked at the bottle, the sum total of a god’s existence.

Maybe he shouldn’t come back.

“Do I have to be the one to drink it?” I asked.

She looked at me like I was crazy. Maybe she thought I was toying with her. There was something mercenary about the way she looked at me, with the fraction of celestial wisdom she had, she looked for any angles I was playing. Some form of subterfuge I would spring on her the moment she let down her guard. I wondered if that was how I would be if I drank from the bottle. Would I be that and more with a full drink?

I held the bottle out to her, the lid still open. It felt heavy in my hand, and I knew enough not to drop it. Though some bit of spite thought it would be an appropriate fate for someone who decided to masquerade through my life like it was a flavor to try and then discard.
I don’t know if it was disgust or pity in her eyes, but all the same, she threw her head back and drank the contents of the bottle. Instead of emptying, the bottle itself melted into the essence and fell into Maria’s mouth.

Her appearance didn’t change immediately. Her face relaxed as though the knowledge burdening her clicked into place. Within moments, her skin took on a luminescence that I could only call divine. Because it wasn’t light or shadow or even a color I could put to words. I was watching her existence grow beyond my still human comprehension. Before she grew into a form completely imperceptible, she spoke to me. I couldn’t repeat the words with this primitive mouth, but it was something along the lines of good luck.

Reality warped and finally tore as this being, this Drifter, Maria Garcia fully transcended. With the knowledge and power I gave her, she tore another fissure into the air. She looked back one last time and disappeared into another universe. Off to deal with things far beyond anything I would hope to dream of.

I left the storage room and as I did so, the door faded away into nothing. I wished the items the old me stole could go back to their rightful owners, but deep down, I knew that person, powerful and wise as he was, would never think that much of others. That said, I was glad I held onto one of the gold bars before I left. Maybe I could do something good with it.

Looking back on these quickly fading memories, I wonder if I made the right choice. With the power in that bottle, I could have done a lot of good. But just as my memories of the old me are fading, I think the memories of this me would fade if I had. Maybe it’s better that the multiversal Ryan will fade away. Maybe it’s better to accept a common name as just that.
Afterlife Internship

Chapter 1

Picking up my little brother from school - the last thing I remember before I died. I didn’t want to deal with Mom, and I doubted she wanted to deal with me. The best and easiest thing for the both of us was to avoid each other all together. Not like I was welcome at the house anyway. Even when I was still allowed to visit, I’d feel her staring whenever I played with Caleb. Watching to make sure my wrists rigid and listening for any lisps.

The worst part was how she insisted on keeping the doors open. Subtle at first, checking in and glancing at the space between me and my brother. Like I would do anything to hurt him. Like I was the one who raised a hand to hurt their own blood while Mom watched. I’m not Dad, and I thanked God every day for that fact even if He wasn’t exactly the most generous.

I rode a familiar series of buses to reach Caleb’s school. If I timed it right, I’d get out of work and get there five minutes before the last bell. We turned it into a ritual of sorts. We’d meet at the bus stop, we’d catch up, and if we could sneak the time, I’d use some of the money I got from tips to get two small soft serve cones. Then I’d watch him leave the stop near my old neighborhood and make sure he was fine the rest of the way. He’s eleven, but still. I liked to make sure he was okay.

His eyes lit up when he saw me on the other side of the gate. He broke out into a sprint, his oversized backpack wobbling from side to side.

“Ethan!”
“In the flesh,” I said, and took the bookbag from him. The middle school textbooks were heavier than what he read just a year ago. I slung the backpack over my shoulder, trying to maintain my cool big brother aesthetic. My arm was already sore from a shift of waiting tables and so I hefted the weight to my left side instead.

He told me about his day, the homework he had, and I promised to video-call with him if he needed any extra help. I wasn’t good at math in high school, but sixth grade was thankfully still doable. My cool brother status maintained for just a little longer.

As we rode the bus, I kept his backpack on the floor between my knees. He told stories with his hands, painting the air in front of him with every motion. I remembered the big players in Caleb’s life. Jessica and Mateo, but if given a chance, he’d pack the cast with extras – other students, teachers, and if he was lucky, a dog.

I looked down at my phone and then to the cross street as it passed the window.

“Sorry, buddy. I don’t think we’re going to have time to do anything extra today.”

He looked down for a second, but like a champ, he lit up again.

“That’s cool.”

Guess he doesn’t want to look too soft.

He asked me about my day, and I told him about the customers who insisted on having their well-done steak cooked to medium. I think that was the extent of drama I’d want to put on him. I’m the one who’s supposed to be the strong one.
Always too soon, the bus reached Caleb’s stop and I watched him go.

“Oh, bye Ethan,” he said, “talk to you soon?”

I think one of the other kids said something the other day, because he didn’t go in for the hug like we usually did. I can’t say it didn’t hurt, but I don’t blame him. He waved and I returned the gesture from where I sat. As I stood up, I realized his backpack was still at my feet. I slipped out the door and jumped down from the platform to reach the sidewalk.

After a few moments looking around, I found Caleb crossing the street. He half turned around and I could see his relief at the sight of his backpack safe and sound. He was more than halfway to the opposite end of the street, but he looked like he wanted to walk back my way. I waved him back, to keep going so that I’d meet him on the sidewalk. I cursed under my breath and jogged to meet him and hurry his ass out of the street. That was when I heard the tires screech.

*

The world around me was quiet. The color was washed out, saturated with light and my eyes had to adjust to the new sensation. I didn’t feel tired at all. My arm didn’t ache anymore.

“Caleb?”

I felt around for him, and as my vision sharpened, I saw where we were. Still in the middle of the crosswalk, the world was bleached, almost to pastel colors. The tail end of a Honda Accord was to my left, but I could’ve sworn I saw the front of it to my right just a moment ago.
“Caleb?” I said again, and saw my little brother further down from me. He was on his side, and to my relief, slowly picking himself up. The fabric on his shirt was a little frayed from friction, but aside from that, he didn’t look worse for wear. I still had to make sure. I trotted towards him, trying to ignore the strangeness around us. Fortunately, the color, and what I assumed was vitality remained with him.

“Are you okay?” I helped him to his feet and felt around his shoulders, turning him to see if there was an injury that I missed. As I preened him, Caleb looked past me. His mouth slowly opened, and I turned around to see what surprised him so.

At first glance, it was a man. But something was off about him. Similar to our surroundings, his skin lacked color, but his eyes were a striking gold, vibrant and piercing. He had silvery gray hair, shaggy and unkempt. He wore a dark, almost black cloak, but it glinted in this strange light, giving off a blood red sheen. In his left hand, he held two silvery flames. He walked towards the two of us. Like a ghost, he easily passed through the cars between us. Once he closed the distance enough for me to make out the strange insignias along his cloak, he stopped. He looked first at me, and then at Caleb. I reached out to my side, blocking the stranger from my brother. He would have to go through me first.

“Who are you?”

He ignored my question and instead said three words.

“You have died.”
He didn’t speak with pity. The words flowed with the detached precision that comes from constant repetition. Still, at that utterance, I moved further in front of Caleb. The appearance made sense now. It was obvious. The only thing missing was the scythe.

“You’re the grim reaper?” I looked around, for something, anything that could let me stall, “this has to be some mistake.”

“This is no mistake,” he said, as dispassionate as before.

“No, look at him,” I said, gesturing towards Caleb, “he’s not dead.”

The strange man just stared, a curious glint in his golden eyes the only sign he was paying attention at all.

“Can’t we make a deal?” I tried thinking of all the old movies and shows I’d watched, “can’t I challenge you to a game or something to let us go?”

His strange eyes narrowed; the vague curiosity replaced with something like boredom, maybe disdain, and I wondered if I offended him.

He took another step towards us, revealing that he was barefoot. I didn’t know what I was going to do, but I felt my hands clench into fists.

“You’re not taking Caleb,” I said, frantically looking for something to hit him with. I knew I didn’t stand a chance, but I had to try something.

“You think you’re the first one to try fighting me?”

He scoffed.
I stayed still hoping he wouldn’t see the fear sneaking out through the tremble of my legs or my inability to look him in the eye. I don’t have to win; I just have to keep him busy long enough for Caleb to run. He was two blocks from home. He could get that far.

“Few have tried, none have succeeded.”

I believed him. He stood taller than me, and I could make out muscle under the cloak.

“He’s just a kid.”

He tilted his head towards Caleb, easily seeing over my shoulder.

“A protective one, aren’t you?”

In that pause, I made a dry swallow, but said nothing.

“I’ll make a deal with you then,” he said finally, “the boy will return to his life, but you will stay and serve my kingdom.”

“Ethan,” Caleb said, his voice soft. He grabbed for my hand and I squeezed his back.

“Do we have a deal?”

I knew what I was going to say, but something inside me held it back.

“Just let me say goodbye,” I said, “please.”

The man looked annoyed, but said nothing.
I turned around and knelt in front of Caleb so we could see each other eye to eye. I took
in the details of his face. His brown eyes already filling with tears. His round nose sniffling.
His mouth quivering, not quite able to speak.

“See you soon, okay?”

That was all it took, and he wrapped his arms around my neck. He buried his face in my
chest and I returned the hug. He felt so small. I wouldn’t see him get any bigger. I took a breath
through my nose and hoped that I hoped to commit all of these pieces of Caleb to memory.

“It’s time,” the man said.

That same moment, Caleb felt softer. I opened my eyes and saw the light radiating from
behind him. He became more and more translucent as the sensation of his touch grew fainter.
His eyes grew wide in a mix of fear and confusion. He tried to speak, but the sound came out
muffled as though he was on the other side of a wall. I turned to the stranger behind me.

“What are you doing?” I asked, trying to hold onto my brother as he faded away.

“Returning the boy to where he came from.”

“I love you, Caleb,” I shouted, hoping he would hear me, and with that, he and the rest of
the world vanished.

“Come,” the man said, and I flinched as he put a hand on my shoulder.
I should have expected his touch to be cold, but what surprised me was that it wasn’t rough. He looked built enough to pull me kicking and screaming to my death, but instead, he lifted his hand and backed away.

I took a few moments to collect myself. He saw the whole thing, but he didn’t need to see the tears still in my eyes. And at least I kept together long enough for Caleb. I rubbed the back of my hand across my face and stood. I took a deep breath and turned around to face the stranger.

Wordlessly, he made a strange sign with his free hand. Opposite to the way Caleb faded out, a pitch-black door slowly materialized a few feet from the man’s hand. Made of some material akin to wood, the door creaked open and to my surprise, I saw lush green on the other side. The stranger turned his hand palm-side up and gestured for me to proceed. Something inside me screamed for me to run anywhere but through that door, but I made a deal. If I went back on it, I couldn’t guarantee Caleb would be safe. And really, that was worth the deal.

Shaking off the last bit of jitters, I held my breath and walked through the door.

The small bit of the world I saw from the other side of the door was nothing compared to seeing the full breadth. Verdant grassland spanned far ahead, terminating into forests or mountains. In the sky, several moons floated.

“What is this?”

“Ostelia,” he said, “the first land after death.”
I realized we stood upon a tall hill. The door at my back had vanished, and ahead of me, the stranger walked towards the ledge. He extended an arm and I followed to where he pointed. A river flowed at the foot of the hill, only growing closer for a small portion. Further down, it forked several times, each current snaking towards different points before disappearing from view. From left to right, he motioned to each.

“Phlegethon - for those who have died violently. Styx - for those who died shamefully. Lethe - for those who died suddenly. And there is Acheron - for those who died slowly.”

From this height, the rivers seemed indistinguishable. “And what about Ostelia?”

“Cocytus leads to the land for those who died alone.”

I repeated his words in my head once and then a second time.

“Caleb and I,” I started, still trying to make sense, “we died together.”

“No,” the man said, “you didn’t.”

He pointed at me.

“Just you.”

“So, our deal was-”

“Binding,” he said, “you will work for me until your brother comes here to find you.”
Chapter 2

“Hey, wait,” I said, “what do I call you?”

The man looked at me like I was the strange one. Did I step out of line already?

“My name is Ash.”

I nodded and cautiously extended a hand towards him.

“You already know I’m Ethan, but let’s make this formal.”

He grasped my hand. He was cold to the touch and didn’t tighten his grip more than necessary. Using my own effort, I brought our hands up and down. Had nobody shaken his hand before? He returned his arm to his side and turned towards the expanse of land on our side of the river.

“Before I have you do anything for me, you should be acquainted with where you will be staying.”

I didn’t notice it at first, but he never described existence here as living.

He led me up the hill to a stone house overlooking the river. When I got a closer look, I noticed little distortions of the light surrounding the building. Almost like what you’d see on an exceptionally hot road in summer. But strangely, the waves didn’t dissipate as we walked closer. If anything, the shifts in light grew larger and more apparent.

“Do you have any questions?”
“When you said that I won’t leave until my brother comes for me, do you mean when he,” I hated saying it, and to Ash’s credit, he didn’t make me. Instead, he freely offered the answer.

“The knowledge of when one dies is a mystery even here. It could be tomorrow or a hundred years from now.”

*

The tour of Ash’s home started in a strangely casual way, save for the fact that the inside and outside of the house were completely different. In fact, I was certain that the house I saw from the outside would fit comfortably in this foyer. If he noticed my surprise, Ash didn’t mention it and instead continued leading me through the house. We next stopped at what was apparently a dining room. A stark white table large enough to seat twenty occupied the center of the room. Aside from the silver tablecloth running down the middle, it was bare.

“You don’t need to eat or sleep, but it will help to separate the time here,” he said, “helps keep madness in check.”

Despite his antiquated word, I ran with the implication of what he said. That even at my lowest, most desperate point in my life, that death wouldn’t have been an escape.

Past the modest the kitchen and what could’ve been the doorway to a cellar, we reached a large set of doors at the rear of the house. At first, I thought it was an ostentatious backdoor, but then I watched as Ash produced the two silvery globes of light. He cracked open the door, too
narrow for me to see, and the two spheres floated from his hand and into the darkness on the other side. He closed the door and turned back to me.

“Whatever you do, you must not enter this room,” he took on a severe expression, “do you understand?”

I fought the urge to look back at the door and kept eye contact with Ash. There was a mix of anger and maybe fear there.

*

He led me to a small room with a set of furniture that fit what I pictured to be part of a college dorm. From the 1800s. The walls were smooth and painted the color of wine. The bed, while modest in size, seemed to have a sturdy frame carved from a dark wood. Against the wall opposite the bed was a set of cabinets and on the far wall was a desk. Both seemed to be made of the same wood.

“This is where you will stay, you may get acquainted with this place until I start you on your tasks.”

I realized that it couldn’t have been more than a couple of hours since I died.

The reality, or lack thereof, started setting in.

I made my way towards the bed and sat. I held my head in my hands. I died. Right in front of Caleb. I had no idea how he was dealing with this. The only other death he’d seen was his goldfish. He was too young to remember Lady. He’s going to be left with our parents to deal with me… being gone.
I fell back onto the cushioned quilt. I regarded my hands and peered at the ceiling through my fingers. I curled the digits into my palm. I didn’t feel dead. I wondered if it was a dream, but digging the nails into my palm, I felt the pain that I could never experience while I slept.

As though invoking its name empowered it, sleep came easily to me a few moments later.

*

“Your first responsibility will be to act as my proxy for the mortals in this realm,” Ash said, “those who wish to petition their existence here will go to you.”

He was so calm with his proclamation. Like he only added an extra shift to my schedule. He said it himself before – a hundred and eighty thousand people die every day. Though the numbers didn’t evenly sort into the five realms, it still meant thousands of people every day. I struggled to compress the countless complaints I would have to field on a daily basis. Tried to put it into a scale I could understand. I thought of the expansive city I glimpsed on my brief tour through Ash’s domain.

I heard Ash scoff. I must’ve shown the panic on my face.

“You think me a tyrant? Those in this realm want for nothing, and that is not only because they have fewer needs in death.”

“My siblings and I – we built upon the foundation of this place to keep it running as smoothly as possible.”
I regarded Ash’s features. Aside from the dated clothing style, he looked to be no older than forty.

Chapter 3

Those balls of wispy light. Ash kept them behind that door. Two of those and two people he met – Caleb and me. I had to believe it was related to us. I had to believe those would let me see Caleb again.

It didn’t take long to find my opportunity. He went out again, maybe collecting another soul like me. I completed the simple tasks he’d set for me: mostly reading up on the ways things worked in this world and how to properly advise new arrivals on their futures.

I reached the door that Ash forbade me from opening. I ran a hand over the dark wood paneling. Though it had an organic texture, it was so much colder than the room in which I stood. I retrieved the key that allowed me so much freedom in this place. Ash entrusted this to me so quickly. It felt doing this when he just comfortable enough to leave me out of his sight. But this is for Caleb.

Like all of the other times I used the key, the teeth shrunk and contorted to fit the door’s lock perfectly. I closed my eyes and twisted unlocked it.

The cold air that escaped from the doors stung my nostrils and I took a breath as I took in what I saw before me. The room led to a sea of stars – dots of light on a seemingly endless expanse of blackness. I narrowed my eyes and I watched as the shadows cleared at my feet,
revealing a stone floor like that I stood on already. Without looking back, I kept the door open on the off chance I wouldn’t be able to open it from the inside.

The further I walked, I adjusted to the darkness of the room. I slowly realized I was walking through a cellar with countless shelves stacked higher than I could reach.

They were candles. On each shelf were rows and rows of candles. The colors of the flames were different on each one. I leaned close to one and didn’t see any wax pooling or feel heat, though that much was surprising. The candle gave off a strange sensation – familiarity, like I was close to understanding something. If only I would just touch the violet flame. I drew back my hand and clasped it in the other.

The doorway to the house stayed open. I made sure to keep it in mind as I walked further into the cellar. The candles and their flames were equally unique and none of them resembled the flame I saw that day. A few times, I would find some that looked similar, but some other quirk about them seemed off. Like I was looking at a ‘spot the difference’ puzzle. I couldn’t name what made them wrong.

Under my breath, I whispered, ‘where’s mine?’

Responding to what I said, I swear I saw a glint of light out of the corner of my eye. In a corner I know I visited before. But sure enough, atop a burning wick was the silvery fire that I saw the day I met Ash. Beside it was its twin. It glowed just as brightly, but the candle was shorter. The two of us – one for Caleb and one for me. I reached out for what I knew belonged to my brother and in that instance, my perspective shifted.
I found myself on rough pavement. My eyes focused on my immediate surroundings and I discovered Caleb’s hands under me, supporting my weight. Instead of the dark room of eerie flames, I was back on that street where I last saw him. The color of the world wasn’t as washed out this time. It was clear and crisp. I pushed myself up only to realize that those hands belonged to me.

As if my body moved along a set of tracks, I pushed myself up and felt the sting of grit getting into my scraped palms. My right shoulder ached a little, but nothing too bad. My head swiveled as I tried to look around.

“Ethan!”

My vocal cords felt close to tearing as I shouted my own name. Then I noticed the car. The Honda that turned into the crosswalk. A man about as old as my father stepped out of the car and looked at something beyond the front bumper. He looked like he was going to burst into tears or throw up. Maybe both. Before he could get too caught up in that, he locked eyes with me. Looking over his shoulder, he walked up to me and knelt down. He did his best to block my view, but I was just barely able to see exactly what he didn’t want me to see.

“Ethan!”

I called out my own name again as my vision blurred with tears. I screamed after that, but the memory of my own mangled body lingered after. I couldn’t bring myself to look away. I tried to push past the driver and couldn’t hear anything he was saying. For my effort, I saw more and more detail in how I died.
“Ethan!”

Then it started over again from the beginning. I picked myself up and discovered my corpse. Again, and again for I don’t know how long.

“Ethan!”

I couldn’t avert my gaze or stop Caleb from screaming. Again, and again, I would watch him suffer exactly as I imagined him to.

“Ethan!”

Ash’s voice broke the repetition of the memory, making the sky ripple as he called my name. The tracks I felt myself bound to loosened as he spoke again.

I woke up to see Ash looking down at me. I thought he was going to be furious with me, knowing what I did, but instead he just looked sad. I wished in that moment he was angry at me.

“Are you all right?”

I nodded.

“I watched myself die. Through Caleb’s eyes.”

“I hoped you wouldn’t have to see that,” he said.

“That’s what they are in there?”

“I can’t make them go away, but I can at least hold them here.”

I reflexively held my shoulder.
“So, Caleb won’t remember me like,” I paused, “like that?”

“He won’t remember it unless he looks for it when he comes here.”

“You protected him,” I said.

I still couldn’t believe what I was thinking. Ash was concerned enough about Caleb and all the other Calebs out there so they wouldn’t have to see something horrible like that. I felt even worse knowing that he was trying to protect me from that too.

I choked out, “I’m sorry,” and couldn’t bear to look him in the eye.

Instead of saying anything, he moved the hand at my back and helped me to stand.

I fished the key from my pocket.

“Here,” I held it out to him, “I shouldn’t have something like this.”

“I hope that this doesn’t violate the terms of our agreement.”