

— The Fate of Morpheus —

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Prologue: The Familiar World

What's happening?

A semi-truck is headed right for her. Wait—she's going to get hit! For a moment, time is erased, and sounds fade until only my heartbeat remains. Then light, white, and endless.

When I open my eyes, they fight to adjust. A grey room greets me, as a wave of fear washes over, smothering the fire of life in my breath. I gasp for air. The incessant beeping of my alarm clock delivers its sentence. I stare through indifferent surroundings, my mind fixated on the inevitable. I shut my eyes, wishing for a few more moments of oblivion.

The clock's screaming crescendos. Ugh. I rub my eyes, clinging to the warmth of my blanket before tearing it off. The sting of cold, stale air hits me as I stumble out of bed. I meet my reflection in the circular bathroom mirror, perfect. It mocks me.

I see a husk of what once was potential, meaning, passion, now hollow. The rim of my sink wears ash and dust from the apartment I neglect to clean. Phone. Message. Yamazaki-san (山崎さん): Night shift, again. Double overtime, again. It isn't the first time I've let my job take precedence over everything else, and it's not like I do anything when I'm alone anyway. Can't I at least get some reprieve?

"..."

"When did I become so cynical?" The sound gets swallowed by the walls.

Squeak!

The conductor's voice screeches over the intercom. I shove through the crowd to catch the train. The commute compressed our bodies into one being as I watched the city scroll by like data, bright, definite, uninterpretable. There is a rhythm to it. I have always tried to match it.

There was a hollow lull in the air and a crisp nothing-quiet that killed any intention of breaking the silence. My eyes wander to the window, everything looks so beautiful, fast and far away. There is a stupefying comfort in that kind of speed. As my posture relaxes, I try to lower my walls to sleep, and do my best to take refuge inside the stillness, but the train rocks me awake right before my stop.

The radiant buzz of the fluorescent lights rings in my ear.

Deafening.

It's screaming at me to take action. *Wake up!*

I glance to my right to see a 30-something woman, my supervisor, calmly ask over the cubical wall.

"Hey, have you submitted the report yet? Also, I need you to stay for two more hours. You can do that, right? I believe in you."

She's smiling. I can see through it.

"..."

"Hello?" she chirps, her voice bright and sharp.

My jaw locks. My hands curl into fists. The words are there. They burn like acid. I can feel them crawling up my throat. They want out. I can't say them.

Not yet.

Glaring into her beady eyes, I muffle,

Through clenched teeth: "No."

The word is a scream trapped inside the bubble of hurt in my throat.

She tilts her head. "I'm sorry. I couldn't hear you. What did you say?"

The chair crashes backward as I stand, knuckles white.

"SHUT. THE FUCK. UP!"

"What—?"

My fists berate the monitor. The wheels from my chair zip across the floor. The office freezes. Silence.

I don't know what I'm doing. *What just happened?* My body is moving automatically, trembling with something I can't name. Warm heat oozes from my knuckles, lovingly caking my fingers in dark amber hate. I storm out without grabbing anything. The door crashes behind me. The hallway flickers with half-dead light.

Down the stairs, two at a time. Legs burning. Chest tight. I rip open the door at the end of the staircase and am blasted by autumn's cool breath. The air feels thin, alive. For the first time in what feels like years, sunlight kisses my skin. I absorb the light, a warm shield of faith. I breathe in hope and cure a vapid world around me with color. *If only I could have done that sooner, right?* The city hums. All these lives drift forward, each caught in an inescapable current.

I meander down a street alive with echoes of laughter from memories. Each step stirs the ghosts of my younger self, my daughter, both intertwined branches reaching for the sky in unwavering desire. Now cracked pavement and broken dreams. Hope sure is a cradle for unthinkable things.

Our modern lives glow without stars, only pillars of light that spike the streets. Gravity's callous hand pulls them down as I move beneath them. Head low. We used to draw lines on the night sky. Name the stars. Now, a void of enumerable distance stretches above us. I glance around. A man smokes. The smoke coils like a shadow of his soul. Inhale. Exhale.

Then, she appears, a little girl, humming, skipping, dancing around the black tiles. Joy pulses from her small frame. Tender. Fragile. Infinite potential packed into a single motion. I watch. My chest tightens. My breath catches. The world buzzes around me. Tires on asphalt. Neon buzzing. Conversations, distant, broken. Her laughter cuts through it, a knife of sound, sharp and bright. For a moment, everything slows. Her light lingers in my eyes. I feel it. Small. Unstoppable.

I take a step. Another. The city stretches, endless, apathetic. Yet she skips forward. I follow. My feet press against the uneven ground. Shadows bend with each step. I can almost feel her spirit crawling beneath my skin. Then, without reason, without pause, the girl. Innocent. Full of life. How nostalgic. Out of nowhere, she just ran into the street. *What's happening?* A semi-truck is headed right for her. *Wait, hold on.* She is going to get hit. The sound is soft. A *whumpf*. Her body was lifted into the air, a ragdoll, flown across the intersection.

The world outside moved on without me. I could hear it breathing, but it didn't need me. I took one hard step forward, and stared through the girl who just died. Maybe she was lucky. Maybe the rest of us are just slow to realize the same thing. The weather shifts, taciturn. I am almost at my apartment, only a bit longer.

Marching toward the gaping maw of the staircase, I conquer each step. My footsteps reverberate through the air. What allows this machine to keep running? I breathe in the memories of forgotten days. A crash sends me straight into the stairs, and my legs almost break. The air is thick with the metallic scent of blood, an affirming pulse of life. I begin crawling up the mountain before me, headed straight into the night sky.

I stand before the precipice. The stars lead me to the door. One final time, I raise my hand, and the lock disengages with a pyrrhic click. The wind whispers secrets in my ear as I step out onto the landing. The city stretches out before me like an endless canvas, painted with hues of desperation.

I am a comet, a fleeting moment of beauty streaking across the canvas of eternity. Standing on the ledge, the wind pushes against my chest. My heart beats like it is trying to break my ribs. I catch a glimpse of a sky ablaze with stars, the threads of forgotten dreams. The taste of salt and rain lingers on my lips as I gaze out at the horizon. The flakes of rust on my fingers follow the drops of the god's tears.

Chapter 1: Who Am I?

A piercing static lights up my body, a searing wave of agony that makes me gasp in shock. What's happening? In an instant, arcs of electricity cover my vision, and I'm engulfed by excruciating pain, as if every molecule of my body is being rearranged. AHHHH! As the sensation begins to fade, I struggle to open my eyes. My vision blurs for a second, then comes into focus on a dimly lit cavern that stretches through to the horizon. A dull ache remains on my forehead. The air reeks of sweat and the foul stench of death.

I don't seem to be alone; rows upon rows of children, no more than eight years old, each bound by chains, tar and black. Their eyes are vacant of any soul, their bodies gaunt, each branded with what appears to be a glowing rune on their forehead. The weight of my body finally registers after the shock. As my eyes rest on myself, I gasp.

My hands are small and raw, burning from some chemical in the atmosphere, my skin mottled with scars. I'm dressed in tattered rags around my waist that hang off my frame, barely enough to cover anything, removing any semblance of privacy. A sudden jolt of fear courses through me as realization dawns. I've been transported into the body of one of these children. How did this even happen?

I take stock of my surroundings, trying to regain my bearings. The air is a thick heat from the open flames, pits of burning corpses, used and forgotten. For what purpose, I wonder. This is a makeshift prison yard, the walls rough-hewn from cobblestone, while in the center lies the main building of finer concrete. Sandwiching the structure, there are two, for lack of a better word, 'housing' units that slaves are squeezed into. Where am I going? I ultimately look directly in front of me to see a man, no, something that once resembled a man, robes billowing in the

faint breeze. Irredeemable. His eyes' searing golden hue empowers him to gaze through my soul. He speaks without meaning, soliloquies uttered to the masses without consequence.

The untouchables around me stir, their chains clanking softly. He shoots out his palm. My eyes widened. No, please. There is a rune in the center of his hand, the same one on the heads of slaves around me. Then black.