

The Paradigm Shift: By Mohammad Khan

Month 1

Week 1:

My father never liked to lie. And didn't lie when the ravens rounded us up from our home. Ravens were the enforcers of the new world order, rounding up anyone they deem disabled. They threw me and my younger brother, Luke, in jail. They gave us these gray jumpsuits with name tags after they threw us into a dark place with no windows. The guards closed the door, locking us in the room. We tried to bang on the door and screamed for help, but no one heard us. Luke crumbled to his knees and began to sob. I tried to comfort him and until I realized that we weren't alone in the room. I would've done the same as Luke until I realized that we still had our belongings. I searched the wall for a light switch but I couldn't find one. A few seconds passed and the light turned on by itself. I looked around to see where we are.

The room looked like a 7x7x9 foot room with two bunk beds on opposing sides of the walls. I noticed a speaker and four timers above the door and wondered why that was there but then I saw another boy sitting on the bed by the light switch. The boy is a fair-haired kid with a distinctive small red scar on his right cheek and an eye patch. He wore the same jumpsuit as us. He smiled as he looked at me and my brother.

"You're new here. Name's Patrick Garrett. My disability is quite noticeable but I still try to fake my way to freedom", said Patrick holding out his hand.

Patrick had an Australian accent to him as he spoke. He seemed to have an aura of gentleness and joyfulness about him like 3 year old exploring the world around him. I felt inclined to trust Patrick because of his aura.

"M-My-M-My name's Matt Altman and this is my brother Luke", I said nervously. I shook his hand and he pulled me up to my feet. "What do you mean you 'f-f-fake your way to freedom'", I asked while helping Luke.

"The guards here are part of the Ravens outside but lower on the totem pole. We call them Crows. Now you see

these Crows don't care about us. To them we're just freaks given a second chance, hell I doubt the outside

world even knows that a place like this exists. They probably think this is a care facility", said Patrick gesturing to the room. "The police outside rounding up people like you and me and your brother are called

Ravens. The Ravens were ordered by COHS to round us up and attempt to cure us. They put us in facilities

like these in an attempt to cure us and allow us to live with the rest of humanity. We have six months to be

cured and if we're cured, we're set free, but if we're not cured then into that good night we go."

"W-W-What do you mean down into that good night we go?"

"How old are you Matt?"

"9"

"One day you'll understand that the world isn't all what they tell you."

I noticed the timer again. "What's with the 4 timers on the wall?"

“That’s the countdown.”

“Counting down to what” asked Luke.

“The end.” Patrick spoke casually.

I didn’t fully understand what Patrick said but he’s the only one I knew in the place at the time. There were four beds in the room and he gave Luke and me the other two beds. There was no windows, only one exit & entrance, and four beds, little did I know that I’d spend my last months in this cell.

A loud cry echoed through the hallways saying,

“Lights Out!” The room went back to its darkness. The clocks were bright in the dark. They kept counting down. I had no choice but to fall asleep and hope that I can go home.

A recurring dream. I could see my old house, filled with my family members. I saw my dad, mom, my sister, Alice, and Luke. Our old house was a duplex nearly falling apart. It may be molded or rundown but it was still my home. The scene changed to my family traveling on the road. A sea of stars above us as my father drove the van through the night. The stars morphed into birds and began flapping in unison across the sky. My father loved watching birds; we’d spend afternoons watching birds fly across the sky. The birds in the night sky morphed into a giant white raven. The Raven sprouted its wings blanketing the sky in blinding white light. The light blinded me and infected my mind, so that I could only see the white light. Even closing my eyes only intensified the light. In the light was a distant black figure approaching me, it walked on two legs fluidly. As it got closer I could see what it was, it was a Raven. The Raven was holding a baton. The gas mask upon his face struck fear into my heart. The Raven leaped towards me with his baton. I could feel the baton pounding upon my skin, every hit, and every blow produced bruises and shattered bones.

A familiar pain jolted me awake. Sweat poured down my face, I could feel my heart pumping in my chest almost jumping out of my body. I awoke to see the room still dark. I looked around to see if I could find my friend and brother in the darkness. I strained my eyes to see but it was futile. I heard a call from beyond the door screech, “Rise and Shine!” The lights came on with that call. The lights blinded me, forcing me to squint to around. I could see my brother also awake and looking around. Patrick was sound asleep as if he’s used to the protocol. I heard footsteps coming towards our door.

Someone pounded on our door, “GET UP!” The pounding woke up Patrick but he got up sleepily anyway. Luke & I got up as usual.

Patrick sat on his bed playing on his phone. I looked at Luke and shrugged. I opened up my belonging and found my father’s favorite book: *Peter Pan* while Luke paced the room.

A roar echoed through the hallways, “Roll Call!” Patrick sprung up from his bed and zipped out the door. He was gone before I looked up from my book. Luke and I went outside for roll call.

We lined up in the hallway, side by side. A Crow went down the hallway counting the number of heads. He stopped two doors before my room and stared down a kid. The Crow glared at the kid and spoke with a booming, forceful voice.

“Where is your roommate: Daniel Tanner?”

The kid crumpled under the power of the Crow’s voice. A terrified look overcame the kid’s face.

“He-he-I- I don’t know where he went”, said the kid squeamishly.

The Crow straightened. He turned towards the Crows by the end of the hall and called them over. The Crows dragged the kid out of the hallway. I looked around at the other kids to see how many were here. I saw at least 30-40 kids crammed into 8 rooms, boys and girls lined up against the wall. When the kid was being dragged away, no one moved a muscle out of fear of being taken as well. One memory that hasn’t left was the screams of the kid being dragged away: the bloodcurdling scream reverberated in the hallways as he was dragged away.

Followed by an ominous silence. This fazed none of the kids. It’s normal.

The Crows returned and finished their headcount. Once they were done, whispers spread throughout the hallway like a virus about the boy. The only one who didn’t whisper about the kid was Patrick. Patrick just looked at and didn’t say anything, though his expression did the talking as if to say, ‘Get used to it.’ The Crows told us to go back into our rooms and await further instruction. All of the children shuffled into their rooms without a peep.

“W-Who’s Daniel Tanner” I asked.

“He’s an old friend of mine. We used to joke about escaping this place, I guess he was serious.”

We sit at our beds.

Patrick continues. “You ready for another round of treatments?” He asked squeamishly. He knows they’re horrible and no one is every ready for them.

The ringing call for treatment always gave me a persistent headache. We exited the room and lined the hallways. They organized us by our disabilities and sent us to our treatment areas. I was in a group of 3 boys and 1 girl.

The treatment room looked like a classroom with desks and chairs. The room had the choking smell of chalk dust. We were told to sit in a circle. As I sat in a circle, I noticed the other 5 kids wore the same getup as I had to: a short sleeved gray jumpsuit. The Crow wore a purple blazer with a yellow bowtie; color combo made him quite appalling to look at.

The treatment started with us reading out loud without stammering. If we did stammer, then we’d be hit with a baton. That didn’t go well with me. I received at least 10 hits by the baton. The next exercise was singing or doing a speech in front of the class. Since public speaking and singing aren’t my strong suit, it didn’t go well. Michael was a surprisingly good singer and was only hit five times throughout the entire treatment session. I tried singing but instead it came out as screeching. The Crow smacked the chalk erasers together producing a cloud of chalk dust. The cloud clogged my lungs causing me to cough. As I was coughing I noticed another Crow standing by the door with a baton smiling. He wasn’t going to help and I couldn’t help myself without receiving a beat down. I tried to fight against the smoke and sing but I couldn’t. The treatment repeated for, what seemed like at the time, an eternity.

Lunch came and I was able to find my brother, Patrick, and my new friends. Luke had some red burns and bruises on his arms and face. The lunchroom had no windows similar to the other rooms but 20 long tables were arranged in two rows of ten. I sat with Patrick and Luke. Luke told about his reading exercises and tongue twisters to help with dyslexia. Patrick said he’s been receiving the same treatment for the past 4 and half months.

“You’re terrible at singing by the way, Matt”, said Michael snidely as he sat down. Michael also has a stutter.

“Lay off Michael”, spoke Rachel kindly. “He wasn’t that bad for only a few days in.”

I've made two other friends. Katie and Claire.

Claire, Rachel, Michael, Katie, and Alex sat with us at the table and told me their story about how they got here. Claire had ADHD and her treatments sounded like a combination of mine and Luke's treatment. Her father was a construction worker with no disability but her mother had Huntington's disease. Claire was an only child. When her family was captured, her dad couldn't bare leaving them to the facilities so he admitted himself to one. She hasn't seen either parent since. She didn't look up once as she told me her story as if she felt ashamed of some action. Claire has been here as long as Patrick.

Rachel had a similar story except she was already an orphan. Her parents died in a car crash when she was 4. She's been with her foster parents since 4 years of age and she lost them about 2 months ago. Rachel has been in the facility for two months longer than me. She's had friends beaten and killed before her eyes. Rachel has a stuttering problem and leukemia. Rachel spoke with a soft gentle tone, contrary to her potent singing voice. She was captured by the Ravens in Dallas, Texas. The Ravens broke into the orphanage and took everyone into the facility and sorted them from there. The only thing Rachel remembered was going the sleep in the orphanage the day before and waking up the next morning in the facility. She was the same age as me and has been friends with Patrick since she got here.

Michael Yeager was taking care of his non-disabled 5 year-old brother when he was dragged away. His parents were dead and Michael was old enough to care for his brother. The last thing he remembered was his brother screaming his name.

Yeager has been here for 3 months, Katie was living on her own when the Ravens and was put here about 2 months ago, and Alex was playing a virtual reality game when he was taken. He said he had a difficult time discerning reality from fantasy when they took him; Alex still believes he's in a fantasy. He's been here for 5 months.

We were a group of misfits in hell.

"How have you guys been", asked Claire. Her voice sounded tired. Tired from everything and too tired to change her situation.

"There's nothing to do" spoke Luke.

Everyone but me and Luke went silent.

Michale leaned in. "Most kids here understand that this is the last six months of their live. They don't want to live in complete fear or oppression.....No, no they begin to do anything they can and want. Gangs, businesses, drugs, you name it, it is happening in this facility."

"So-so what you're saying is-is that the guards don't care what happens in this f-ff-facility?" I replied.

"The only people who care about what happens in this shit hole are the inhabitants, us, you and me, the prisoners." Chimed Rachel.

"Those are just rumors, Rachel. There are no gangs in this place", said Katie interjecting.

"Maybe, maybe not, someone just needs to find the proof."

"Don't worry Matt, there aren't any gangs", said Claire sympathetically.

Alex leaned in, "I've heard stories about a gang that can get anything you want and the guards do as well.

That's where they get their improvised 'treatment tools' and batons."

"What do they do if the kids misbehave or get caught escaping", Luke asked?

Alex turns towards Luke," Well if you misbehave then you get sent to the 'discipline room' and never return."

"If no one ever returns, then how do you know where they go, Alex", said Claire snidely?

"Every now and then, a few make it out. Like Daniel Tanner." Alex turned towards me and Luke. "Have you guys heard the story of Daniel Tanner?"

"For the hundredth time" said Luke exasperated.

Daniel Tanner. If such a person does exist, then there could be a way I could talk to my family or maybe even escape? I couldn't ask any of them because lunch had ended. I was obsessed with finding him.

Week 2:

The usual round of treatment began and I encountered another round of beatings and choking on chalk dust. Thankfully, the day was finished though I felt no different in my stuttering problem. I had lain on my bed waiting for my brother and Patrick. The waiting caused my mind to grow and harvest ideas on escape. If Daniel Tanner made it out, then why can't I? I harvested plans for hours on end whenever I had alone time. I planned as much as a 9 year old could plan, with fantastically ideas and unrealistic ideas. Luke sulked into the room and lay on his bed. I looked below and saw him wiping blood from his nose. He told me the teacher beat him endlessly for not reading fluidly. No guard stopped him but a girl did step in to help. Luke caught her name: Amadi Byrd. He never forgot her name since the incident. Patrick burst into the room:

"Hey guys, how's- wait what happened to you?" Patrick was concerned.

"A Crow beat him for not reading good enough but someone saved him."

"Who?"

"Amadi Byrd", said Luke wiping blood from his nose.

"Amadi Byrd? Are you sure you read Byrd on the uniform?"

"Yeah, why?"

"She's affiliated with a rumored gang here. I don't know who leads the gang but there have been scary rumors."

"Did Alex tell you this", I asked?

"No, but the stories I've heard say that the gang can get whatever you want from the outside world or a conversation with anyone: books, magazines, phones, VR headsets, a gun, posters, anything."

"Could this gang help me contact my family?"

"Maybe, but I wouldn't risk it because for them to help you, you have to help them."

“Do you know what you have to do for them?”

“It depends upon the favor you want. I know someone who went to the gang and got what they wanted; however, I haven’t heard from him since.”

“Who?”

“Daniel Tanner.”

“Of course”, I said annoyed. “Do you know the name of the gang?”

“I only know a last name, but it’s still a rumor about the existence of the gang.”

“Rumors are based on some truth. Pat, tell me the name.” I said sternly.

Patrick sighs, “Reinhardt. The name is Reinhardt.”

The call for lights out roared throughout the room and hallways. Darkness encompassed the room when the lights shut off leaving the 4 timers on the wall. It’s still counting down to something. I heard the shuffling of my brother and Patrick into their beds. I lay in my bed looking at the hidden ceiling. Planning my escape.

I dreamt of plans, of evading guards, sending notes, and creeping past cameras went down the drain as none of them worked. I tossed and turned in my bed, frustrated at not being able to escape. What Rachel said about the prisoners wanting to do anything before they die, echoed in my mind. The prisoners wanted to make their mark in the world. Why don’t I try that? What mark can I make in this world for the world to see when the crisis subsides? I don’t have the stomach for a gang or some smuggling ring. Throughout the night, my mind began to wonder about how people have immortalized themselves into history. Protests, genocides, assassinations, have immortalized individuals and groups of people in history, but I knew I couldn’t stand up for something publically. Homer, Socrates, and Aristotle have immortalized themselves by writing. Writing is something I could do. I could stand up using words versus someone’s actions and not be in immediate danger. My mind raced formulating ideas for writing. If I can immortalize myself in writing, then the future humans after the crisis can read my work and read about the atrocious actions occurring here. I began to form a solid idea in my mind until the lights in the room and roll call woke me. My eyes shot open and were blinded by the piercing white lights. The lights nearly erased my idea for writing but I was able to recover it. I didn’t pitch the idea to my friends for days because I was afraid it wasn’t good enough.

My days continued with treatment, lunch, treatment and each day I never brought up the subject of immortalizing ourselves until one day I met the rumored gang. During lunch I was stopped by a girl. Going by the way Luke’s nervous demeanor, the girl was Amadi Byrd.

“The boss wants to speak with you”, said Amadi strictly.

“The boss?” I turned to my friends and they were frozen.

At the time, I assumed they thought it was a prank some of the younger kids created. I went with Amadi to a corner table to see a group of 6 burly guys, all I guessed to be at least 22 and 1 boy who looked to be around my age. The boy had circular thin rimmed glasses with a smile that led one to believe in his innocence. He wore a gray English driver hat that covered his short blonde hair. He spoke with a soft and gentle tone, similar to Rachel’s tone.

“Please take a seat, Matt.” Said the rimmed glasses boy.

“Are you Reinhardt?” The boy sat still. “I was expecting m-m-more” I spoke in false confidence though my stuturer didn’t help.

Reinhardt chuckled. “A false appearance creates many advantages in a world such as ours. You’ll understand that one day, Matt. Now, what is it that you want, Mr. Altman?”

“I-I want to speak to my family a-and to let them know I’m alive.”

“Talking to a loved one in another facility is a tough deal, especially if the loved one is an entire family. It’s pricey, are you sure you want this? Since you’re a newcomer, I’ll give you the option of taking back what you said.”

“Yes. I am sure.”

“I need you to find a person for me. He’s quite important to me and I need him found.”

“Who?”

“Daniel Tanner. Find him in 7 days and I’ll give you a conversation with your father, face to face.”

“I-I can’t find Tanner. I don’t know what he looks like. He-he could be dead or ran out of the country. I’m sorry but I can’t do this.” I stood getting ready to leave until Amadi grabbed me by the arm and threw me into my seat. I looked at Reinhardt. His demeanor morphed into a cold calculating expression. His voice became a growl.

“We aren’t going to let you leave unless you agree, so have a seat because we got all the time in the world.” Reinhardt’s brown eyes pierced into my soul. This innocent boy a few minutes ago transformed into a cold killer.

“Y’know what, I’m being too harsh. Since it’s your first time here, I’ll let you talk to your brother Luke over there”,

Said Reinhardt jovially.

“H-how did you know-?”

“I run this place. A mouse doesn’t squeak without my knowledge. Now you can talk it over with Luke.”

I bolted for the table where my friends were. I couldn’t talk to them because lunch had ended and the guards had pushed me out of the lunch room. The last thing I saw before I was pushed out of the lunch room was a glimpse Reinhardt’s blank cold gaze. I shudder at the power that the boy wields; his gaze haunts my mind as a reminder not to cross him ever again.

After treatment, I met with Patrick and Luke in our cell. Patrick came in as his usual chipper self and my brother suffered more injuries. They walked into my frantic pacing in the cell.

“Is everything ok, Matt?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,y-yeah, it’s-it’s all good. It’s just that...rr-r-remember when the girl stopped me today during lunch?”

“Yeah” said Luke. Patrick already knew where this was going.

“Well I met the rumored gang. It turns out that they run the place. I asked them if I could talk to our dad. They said I have to find someone.”

“Who”, said Luke excitedly?

“Daniel Tanner.”

Patrick spoke urgently. “Matt, Daniel Tanner is a legend that the older inmates tell the younger inmates to give them hope for escape. Daniel Tanner is a symbol of hope and freedom for us prisoners.”

“Sssso I can’t find him because he isn’t real? Then who was that kid that was taken away? And why would the Crows play along?” I was angry. Why would they tell us about this great person if he was never real? Patrick shrugs. “Daniel Tanner is an imaginary person as far as I know. I don’t know if Reinhardt knows that.”

“H-He looked to be the same age as me so he may have believed it.”

“I have an idea. We could create a Daniel Tanner,” exclaimed Luke, “Patrick; do you know what Daniel looks like?”

“No. The others never told me.”

“That’s good because then we can use any boy to impersonate Daniel. Patrick, who is a really good actor that can impersonate a symbol such as Daniel Tanner?”

“Michael Yeager. He’s the best I’ve seen.”

“Ok, we should also have a backup plan just in case this goes south, any ideas?” said Patrick.

“There’s nowhere to hide in this place. Reinhardt told me that he’s got people throughout this place so there is no hiding.” I said.

“Well, we need to make sure Michael wants to impersonate him first then go on from there”, Luke added.

Patrick chuckled. “So Matt you’ll agree to Reinhardt’s deal tomorrow and I’ll tell the rest about Luke’s idea.”

The next day, I agreed to Reinhardt’s deal and the 5 day deal began. I returned to my friends’ table to see what they had decided.

“5 day deadline has started.”

“Yeah, I think it’s too risky. What if there is an actual person named Daniel Tanner and Reinhardt knows it”, asked Claire.

“We could ask around and see if anyone knows anything about Daniel Tanner or his roommate”, added Rachel. “I know of a few people I could ask.”

“That’s a good idea, except the roommate was taken away. How do we find him?”

“I could ask around. I know people that may know where the roommate went”, Alex stated.

“O-o-ok, you do that. Michael, ar-a-are you ok with impersonating Daniel Tanner in case we don’t find the roommate”, I asked?

“Yeah, yeah I can do that. I can make up anything I want right?” Said Michael.

Patrick said strictly. “No, the stories follow a specific theme of escaping and freedom. So you have to stick with that unless you want Reinhardt to kill us.”

“Right, I’ll ask around and see if I can understand his ideals and motives”, Michael replied.

“Lunch is about to be over. Matt do you need anything else”, Rachel asked?

“I need you and Claire to help with the search for Daniel Tanner and his roommate”

The next day arrived quickly. I was eager to see if any of my friends had found any information. I saw my friends gathered at the tablet talking to each other and exchanging ideas. Alex was the first to talk to me.

“Matt, there was no roommate. I couldn’t find any evidence of a kid roomed with Daniel Tanner.”

“What? How’s that possible”, I said?

“I don’t know.”

I turned towards Patrick. Patrick had a defeated look.

“So, now what”, asked Luke?

“I don’t know. We don’t know if there is an actual Daniel Tanner”, I said disappointingly.

Michael tapped the table. “Do you still want me to impersonate him?”

“Y-yes, Michael. You still impersonate him.”

Katie spoke strictly and cautiously. “Matt, what will happen to Michael if he impersonates Daniel Tanner too well?”

“That’s a good point. We don’t know what Reinhardt wants with this guy”, said Patrick.

“Matt, this is too much to info to gather within 5 days. I mean we need Michael’s acting skills and Reinhardt’s reason for wanting Daniel Tanner”, Claire stated.

Alex chuckled. “Always the pessimist, huh Claire?”

Claire looked irritated. Her quiet voice rose to a near shout.

“At least I think of bad outcomes and care for my friends. Open your eyes Alex, you aren’t in a fantasy!”

Patrick calmed the group. “Calm down alright? Katie brought up a good point. I don’t know what to do. I don’t like if Matt meets Reinhardt empty-handed”. Patrick calmly and confidently said, “Matt, it is your call. What do you want to do?”

All heads turned towards me increasing the pressure of making the decision between talking to my father and a friend going missing. Finally, I spoke with a soft tone, “Michael you won’t need to impersonate Daniel Tanner. I’ll hh-h-have to go empty-handed.”

“What’s he going to do to you?”, inquired Rachel.

“I-I don’t know. The deadline is almost up. We don’t have enough time.”

“No, but we could think of something else”, pleaded Rachel.

“When you think of a way to find a ghost, I’M ALL EARS!”, I yelled at Rachel.

Lunch had ended and I stormed out the room. I kept thinking over the options to finding Daniel Tanner . I could escape from my cell and find the discipline room. What really eluded me was the reason for Reinhardt wanting Daniel Tanner. Did Reinhardt know he is imaginary or did he know is identity. The night before the deal ended, Patrick said one thing in my mind that resonated for the rest of my life. “Hope for the best.” Those four words have kept me alive these six months to write this memoir. I lay on my bed still thinking if I should avoid Reinhardt or go to him empty-handed. Patrick’s words echoed in my head; furthermore, altering my dreams to revolve around ways to avoid Reinhardt’s wrath. Who would watch out for Luke if Reinhardt hurts me badly? Questions plagued my mind for hours on end. With only a few days before the deadline, how would I find Daniel?

Week 3:

The deadline passed. I could barely stand up without trembling. I didn’t even feel the beatings by the Crow during treatment; my fear masked the pain. It seemed like my time of death came instantaneously.

I walked to the lunch room from the treatment room. I sat where I usually do and waited for my friends, except they never came. I was standing to go and get my lunch until a calm voice said my name. “Hello Mathew.” I turned around to see Reinhardt standing on the other side of the table. He was accompanied with Amadi Byrd and one other burly boy.

“Where is Daniel Tanner?”said Reinhardt calmly.

“I couldn’t find him.”

Reinhardt looked at the table. “Well, that’s disappointing.” He looked to his bodyguard and whispered something barely audible to my ears. He looked back at me with his sharp brown eyes. “I told the Crows over at the adult facility to take your dad out. You shouldn’t have come empty-handed. I would’ve even accepted anything, Michael.”

“H-how-?”

“I own this prison”, said Reinhardt smiling, “You put your family’s life on the line when you made the deal. I gave you a chance to change the deal but you didn’t. So their death is all on you.”

I didn’t answer Reinhardt for a while. I didn’t know what to make of the situation.

As Reinhardt passed me, he put his hand on my shoulder and whispered, “oh and your friends are ok. They’re running a little late. See you soon my friend.” He patted my shoulder and left me sitting at the table sobbing.

My friends arrived to see my broken spirit.

“Matt, what happened”, asked Patrick? Patrick had bruises on his arm and face. The rest of my friends had similar injuries.

“Th-they’re g-gone”, I said sobbing. Luke had a blank expression on his face like his world just blew up in his face and he didn’t know what to make of it.

“I’m so sorry, Matt”, Rachel said empathetically,

“On the bright side, it looks like your stuttering is improving in a good way”, said Katie.

Patrick shook his head to Katie, silently saying “not now”.

I don’t remember how the rest of lunch and treatment went. The lights shut off and I settled into my bed. I had no dreams that night, for hours I stared into the face of utter darkness as if my mind couldn’t cope with the events of the day. The headcount for the next day was anything but ordinary.

We woke up when the call roared through the hallways and the lights burst bright white. I exited the room and stood in the hallway waiting to be counted.

The Crow walked into the hallway and screamed, “Matt Altman!”

The sound of my own name made me jump a little. I was unsure whether to answer or raise my hand. The scream from the Crow repeated, “MATT ALTMAN!”

“y-yyy-yes”, I replied squeamishly.

The Crow looked at me from the end of the hallway. I made eye contact with his authoritative glare. Two Crows marched towards me. Each grabbed one of my arms, lifting me off of my feet. They dragged me out of the hallway. I kicked and flared but they didn’t let go. The more I struggled, the stronger their grip on my arm became. I screamed for help but no one came. They dragged me throughout the hallways and I saw the faces of terrified kids who feared they’d be next. The Crow dragged me down a long narrow hallway that seemed to be in the depths of this facility. As I got closer to the door, I saw the name on it: Discipline Room. My heart pounded in my chest, I tried struggle for freedom one last time before they threw me into the abyss. Another Crow was waiting for me by the door; he opened a door. I was thrown inside the room. The floor felt like hard tile instead of the usual concrete my cell had. The room was lit with 5 bulbs incased in glass, four in each corner of the room and one on middle ceiling. There were three empty wooden chairs placed in random fashion throughout the room and two filled chairs. The first chair had a person covered in ragged clothing and a dirtied face as if he has been here a while. I knew the occupant of the second chair too well.

“Hello, Matt. I hope there’s no hard feelings between us”, said Reinhardt calmly.

“W-w-what are you do-do-doing here, Reinhardt?”

“I put you here. This is where it all ends. Everyone will understand.”

“What are you talking about?” The lights barely lit the room. I only made out Reinhardt’s figure in the pervading darkness.

“You are an example. By putting you here, fear of me runs deep into the minds of the prisoners, new and old. Now you stay here for the rest of your life, clinging to the edge of death with no escape.”

Reinhardt stood from his chair and walked towards the door.

“What about Daniel Tanner, he made it out of here.” Reinhardt turned around and smiled.

“Ask him yourself. He’s right there.” Reinhardt pointed at the raggedy fellow in the chair.

Week 4?

“You’re Daniel Tanner”, I asked the man in the chair?

“In the flesh”, spoke the man. Daniel Tanner was weakened to the point that he could barely move.

“A-a-are you the legend the older ones have been talking about?”
Daniel chuckled. “Don’t look like much, right? Yeah I’m the guy.”

“How did yy-you get h-hh-here??”

“I was put here 2 years ago and Reinhardt was put here 1 year ago. My first month here was spent being subject to cruel treatment and fear. But if you take away the fear, then the treatments of the Crows and Ravens had no effect. So I began spreading ideas of escape and freedom.”

“D-d-did you have any real idea of how to escape?”

“No, but the idea of freedom meant something to the inmates here. For the next 5 months of my life, I did spread hope and ideas. Spreading ideas didn’t bode well with the Crows. I was beaten relentlessly. Then Reinhardt came. He somehow gained control over the Crows. The Crows seemed more controlled with Reinhardt but they still carried out their treatments.”

“Did you know how he gained control?”

Daniel shook his head. “All I know is that Reinhardt runs this place. He decides who lives and who dies, who the Crows attack and drag away. He’s in complete control of this place.”

“W-w-why would you tell a story of escape and freedom if-if you knew there was no way out of here?”

“To give them hope, I would rather have the inmates fight for something rather than die for nothing.”

For once in my time here, I felt safe at home. I didn’t feel threatened by any Crow. Daniel Tanner had some aura of safety and trustworthiness; I guess that’s why the legend still lives. Daniel sat in his chair and I paced the room looking for a way out. As I paced, I heard whispers ghoulishly in my head saying “Wake up, Matt”. These ghoulish whispering gave me headaches making it impossible to think until Daniel speaking cured the headaches.

“You’re not going to find another way out other than the way you came”, said Daniel as he watched me pace the room.

I rubbed my head and looked towards him. “D-d-did you actually escape?”

“No. I made it up for the people. Do people still believe the stories?”

“I do. What does Reinhardt want with you? He asked me to find you and then threw me in here.”

"I don't know. I've been in here since I can remember. Hell, I don't even know if there is a world outside these facility walls.

"Reinhardt wants to be an absolute r-ruler." The ghoulish whispering returns in my head.

"Yeah, basically."

"H-h-have you given up hope for freedom? F-for living outside these walls?"

Daniel took a while to answer. His face scrunched together as if he had eaten a sour orange.

"Yeah, I'm done with this shit. I quit. If you haven't noticed, these limbs are quite dead. I can do some but I can't do much."

"B-but the legend dies with you?"

"Matt, don't tell anyone that you found me. My friends are dead. The people now wonder if I was ever real and I want it to stay that way."

"A-a-alright, But wouldn't you want people to know that you're a real person?"

The whispering intensified in my mind.

Daniel shook his head. "As a symbol, I can be everlasting."

I nodded not understanding the significance of what he said at the time.

The room had no clocks or windows like the rest of the facility. There was no timer on these walls. I couldn't tell whether it was time to sleep or to stay awake. The lights in the room stayed on and never turned off. My body had trouble adjusting to the constant lighting. In my cell with Luke and Patrick, I slept when the lights went off and woke when they turned on; my body was well adjusted to it. By now the ghoulish whispering seemed like someone in the room was saying my name. The whispering made it difficult to sleep. To pass the time, I sat on the tile flooring staring at the door, ceiling, anything, even Daniel Tanner, to ignore the whispering. I stared at Daniel wondering what he was like in his prime. I tried to imagine Daniel telling me the story of freedom and living a world outside the facility walls. Even back then, I don't even know if the world outside the facility still exists.

I dreamed of freedom. I escape with my brother and run into the cold. The sky had tints of gray even with the sun shining through. Birds flew in the sky in individual groups instead of flocks. As if even the birds realized it's everyone for their selves. My brother's kind attitude changed into a harsh bitter one. He looked at everything with spite. I couldn't find my father in my dream. I walked with my brother down a dirt road looking for towns or villages. As I was walking, my brother vanished. I was alone by a dirt road looking for my brother. He was nowhere to be found. The ghoulish whispering of my name seemed to surround me. I stared at the constant gray sky wanting it to turn blue, but it didn't. I looked down the road and saw Daniel Tanner. He stood on the other side of the road. I walked towards him but he seemed to move further simultaneously. Daniel had a clean look. He had lost his raggedy clothing in exchange for clean jacket and pants.

"Hello, Matt." spoke Daniel Tanner angelically.

"How do I get out of here?"

"Dream." Daniel vanished in a whirl of feathers. Crows emerged from Daniel's vanished form. The crows

flew towards me blinding me with their dark feathered bodies. I woke up in my cell.

“Matt. You ok?” Luke stood by my bunk bed.

“W-what happened”, I said groggily?

“You fainted. It’s been a while.”

I yawned. “Where’s Reinhardt?”

“He died. Someone got to him. Good riddance, am I right?”

“Wh-wh-Where did you find me?”

“Matt, what are you talking about? You’ve been in your bed, unconscious.”

“What? B-b-but I was taken away by the Crows after the d-day I told you dad died.”

“Matt, dad could still be alive, we don’t know anything. You never woke up for headcount the next day. The Crows stopped doing headcount since Reinhardt died.”

This bothered me for ages. I couldn’t wrap my head around this lost time. I tried my best to remember what had happened but it was futile. Whether Daniel Tanner was a real person or not is beyond my understanding. I could barely move. Muscles had no energy and felt as though they were made of lead.

“Where’s Patrick”, I croaked using an depleting amount of strength.

“He’s sleeping in. The Crows are done keeping headcount. Matt, we might be able to escape!”

“We might”, I said plainly.

Luke gave me an odd look. “You aren’t excited to leave?”

I sighed. “Luke, I’m not even sure if a world exists outside these walls. Do you even remember your life before this facility? I vaguely remember it.”

“But we can get out —”

“—then what? We haven’t even thought that far ahead. What about the Ravens outside? Or the possibility that we could be the last of our kind? I mean you’ve heard of the natural disasters during our childhood.”

“We would think of something!”

“Things have changed.”

“Whatever. I’m going to lunch.” Luke began to walk away in indignation.

“Hey, wait what about the Crows”, I shouted!

“I don’t care.”

It took me hours to regain strength to chase after Luke. I saw Luke sitting by himself at the usual table. I sat

beside him. He ignored and silently scorned me.

“Luke, I don’t know what’s happened to me. I mean ever since we got here, we’ve been trying surviving against the Crows. If you’re worried that we’re ever going to be separated, don’t I’m not going anywhere. I’m just angry that I left you for 4 days alone in this place.” I put my hand on his shoulder and he turned around.

“I’m glad you’re back.” Luke hugged me.

“I’m sorry”, I whispered.

“Aw, that’s sweet. Family love”, Patrick said as he sat down, “Glad to see you’re up, Matt.” He sat beside me. “How you doing?”

“I’m great. Where’s the rest of the group”, I asked?

“Right here”, said Michael. Everyone else sat around me, my brother, and Patrick: Michael, Claire, Rachel, and Katie.

“Where’s Alex”, I asked.

Everyone looked at each other uncomfortably. Michael was the first to speak.

“he’s gone, Matt. His time was up. I’m sorry.”

Alex died the morning I woke up.

End of Month 1..

