

Din Cosic

The Dreamer

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Each one of us has our own dreams, but we end up forgetting most of them. As we grow older, life happens to us. I refuse to abandon mine. My goal with this novel was to paint a surrealist tale with as many deep and colorful words I know of. I wanted to go against the mainstream and let my creativity loose in every way imaginable, without constraint. I don't care about rules and I don't care if the story is commercial or not. This book saved my life and this was the way it had to be told.

Politics has prevented me from going down the traditional route which is why I've decided to dedicate myself fully and go down this lonely path. The moment you involve politics in art is the day that you put shackles on creativity and freedom of expression.

I hope you enjoy my work. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for reading it. It means the world to me.

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PROLOGUE

“What are you afraid of?” the silhouette asked, faceless, nameless from the other side of the frosted glass. “What makes you stay awake at night and is still able to haunt your dreams during the day? What is it you fear the most?”

“You first,” I replied.

“I fear the light, you see. It hurts my eyes. It blinds me. In the same way, I believe that you fear the dark. It blinds you.”

The infinite white stone staircases that twisted and swirled in every direction within the empty Jacaranda Hotel guided me to our meeting place. One night, I stumbled upon one of countless peculiar, empty, ill-lit rooms. I returned as often as my dreams would allow, though they seldom did.

My eyes had strained to discern the figure beyond the glass, its head cocked curiously to one side, a stark silhouette against the overwhelming light. It was courteous and polite. Its mannerisms were elegant and had a certain flow to them. It rubbed its fingers across the glass as if trying to get a better look at me but the veil of secrecy that hid my face remained.

“Do tell,” it urged me.

“I’m afraid of the monsters. I’m afraid that they’ll eat me. Mum says that they don’t exist and that I’m imagining things. Am I?”

“I am... certain... I assure you that monsters do exist. One must only know where to look.”

As we spoke, the floor beneath my feet had seemed to warp, forming impossible angles and shapes. The walls around us seemed to ripple like water, their edges blurring into a strange, otherworldly geometry that mocked regular human comprehension. Not mine.

The air itself felt heavy and thick, as if the laws of physics themselves were bending to accommodate the surreal.

“Why would I look for them?”

The silhouette remained silent before lifting its head in a linear upward motion, then moving it horizontally from left to right.

“Why?” Curiosity overrode my caution, and the question slipped out as a whisper.

“So that you can face them and see them for what they really are.”

“I don’t understand,” I was quick to reply.

“I understand. You’re young but you will learn.”

“Why do grown-ups always say that?”

“Because the blissful ignorance that surrounds you will slowly shatter under the wretched truth of reality.”

I stood there in silence trying to reach the meaning that went over my small ten-year-old head. I tried, but I failed. My eyes scattered across the room behind me. My gut started to shake as the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

“I have to go now. It was nice talking to you.”

“Wait! Not yet,” said the silhouette. “Stay with me just a bit longer. I’m lonely in here.”

“Lonely?” I uttered.

“Through three winters we’ve spoken. You’re the only person I ever talk to. You’re the only one that listens. Nobody else cares about me or what I have to say. I’m sure you know very well what that’s like. Don’t you?”

I stared at my bare feet as a chill ran over them. It was the first time I felt the cold. A hollow sensation started to spread within me, turning my insides into a cold, echoing cavern. I used silence as a warm blanket.

“I know what happened. A tragedy it is. I can feel the pain you carry. The weight of it is shattering...”

“How do you know what it feels like?”

“The same thing happened to me.”

“It did?”

“Yes, and I grew from it.”

“How?” I asked.

The silhouette paused for a moment after which it pressed its right hand against the glass.

“Through the warmth of others. A simple touch is enough.”

“How can our hands touch if there is a barrier in between?”

“It’s the intention that counts. Place your hand against mine and think of all the bad things that have happened to you and my warmth will burn them away. I will rid you of your dark thoughts.”

“You will?” I muttered with a level of shakiness present in my voice. I wanted my thoughts cleared for a while and there I was faced with an opportunity if true.

“Of course. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

Our ever-so-frequent deep conversations got us acquainted with each other over the years. In my moments of desolation, the silhouette was my unwavering companion. It had an uncanny way of knowing when life had dealt me another wound. It knew my scars without me ever revealing them. It saw more from behind the glass than most that stood by my side. I paused, lost in reminiscence. Then, a thought dawned on me.

“We’ve spoken for so long and it has just come to me that I don’t even know your name.”

“My name?” it stopped. “You never bothered to ask. It’s funny you even would. Rodavlas—that is my name.”

“Such a strange name,” I said. “I’ve never heard it before.”

“You have, many times in fact. You have simply lost it in the process of reflection. You will forget it soon enough once again, after which you will forget me as well.”

“I won’t!”

His fingers raked the glass, the scraping sound grating on my nerves, his open hand slowly clenching into a fist. My body twisted in unnatural ways at the noise. It made me tick as the many clocks from the outside were making a tock. The silhouette slammed its fist against the barrier.

“You will!” it burst out in anger. “Everyone does...” he choked out. “As you grow older the majority of memories are cleansed and space is made for new ones.”

“I don’t want that to happen.”

“There’s nothing you can do about it.” He sighed. “What you can do is allow me to help you. Place your palm against mine. Give me your hand. I’ll help you carry the burden. I’ll make it easy for you.”

I looked at his hand. It was no different from mine, just a tad bit bigger. I took a moment. Even though I could not see him on the other side, his piercing gaze penetrated through the glass. I lifted my left hand and moved it slowly toward his. A horn started to blow in the distance, accompanied by the muffled scream of a woman, haunting yet elusive. It caught us off guard.

Strange...

That had never occurred up until that point. The vibrations shook the room itself. My hand trembled with it as I started to turn. The sound became louder with each passing moment.

“Give me your hand.” He urged me.

“There’s no time.”

“Time?” he whispered, shaken by the word.

He uttered more words but their coherence escaped me. A ringing noise infiltrated my ears. I could only feel the vibrations beneath my feet. The walls of the hotel behind me were firm but everything within was collapsing as the silhouette pressed its face against the glass before it decided to bash its head at it. It was cracking. The lines prolonged with each blow into each corner. My universe was caving in on itself. In a sudden shock, a force pushed me backward towards the silhouette and the back of my head was warded by the frosted glass. The dream crashed in my subconscious mind, but another

stored it

away

..

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INSOMNIA

1

We fondly called our school the “Madhouse.” It was a building once used as a mental asylum, and soon we would be allowed to leave our cells free and rehabilitated with our diplomas. Sounds like fun!

Our futures hung in the balance of the results. Some students bit their nails; others were tapping the ground with their feet. Eyes were darting upwards, lips murmuring silent prayers, as if a higher power could intervene to change the results of our final exam, or at least make them disappear.

Mr. Morph’s eyes bore into each student, his stern expression unyielding. A noticeable mix of despair, anger, powerlessness, and oddly, hope, clung to the atmosphere like a shroud. At specific points, I even thought I heard others’ heartbeats, besides my own. They were loud. On a few occasions, they might have also skipped a beat.

The professor moved through the class, putting those sheets of paper in front of each student.

As Mr. Morph dropped my “D” graded paper onto the desk, Rose, the class’s lone goth with hair the color of liquid silver and an intricate rose tattoo on her hand, leaned over with a sardonic smirk.

“D is for Dreamer, huh?” she prodded, a hint of bitterness in her voice.

I turned to her. “In my world, I find the melting clocks and floating elephants of surrealism far more fascinating than word structures, wouldn’t you agree?”

She looked at me, her brown eyes puzzled. “Surrealism?”

I raised an eyebrow. “You haven’t heard of it, really?”

She shrugged, her pale face impassive, her pencil etching dark lines on paper. “My reality is already as insane as any movement you can name. Surrealism... realism... I don’t care honestly. It’s all the same madhouse to me.”

Try as I might, the spark needed to ignite the desire for improvement was nowhere to be found. Frankly, I also lacked the incentive to search for it. Instead of studying, my time was spent traversing my mind.

After distributing the rest, Mr. Morph firmly hit me over the top of the head with a stack of papers, as if hoping something might stick.

“What happened?” he asked, disappointed. “You promised you would study for this one?”

“I’m sorry, professor. I just couldn’t. Each page was like a sandman’s lullaby. I’d close my eyes for just a moment, and the next thing I knew, the book was no longer in my hands.”

He didn’t find my comments nor my forced grin amusing. He repeated the gesture and hit me once again. *Tough love*, I thought.

“Persisting on this path will get you nowhere,” he admonished, “Work hard now and rest later. Don’t squander your potential. If I knew you were stupid, I wouldn’t tell you this. I know you can be at the top if you would but try. Grades aren’t everything but I want to teach you discipline.”

“What’s that?” I retorted.

“Doing something you hate to do but doing it like you love it.”

The sound of knocking bounced off the door. A middle-aged woman came in. I hadn’t seen her before. Her hair was down to her shoulders, not a centimeter lower. She was dressed in a grey blazer and skirt. In her left hand was a bag and on her right a watch. She flaunted a golden necklace for everyone to see.

“Students, this is Emilia Nigma. She is a professor of psychology. Today, as you’ve heard, we’re going to be doing something a little different. I’ll let her explain the rest. I will also remind you to be nice.”

The lady took a step forward. As she stood in front of the class, she described to us what was to occur.

“I don’t want to fiddle about since we’ll need as many seconds as we can get. My team and I have worked down at the psychology center and developed a new form of cognitive assessment built upon the back of the previous, over multiple years. A test of intelligence. Some of you might have heard of the general term, IQ test!”

A pulse of excitement radiated through my body.

Oh, poor bastards. If I score higher than the rest, nobody could tell me that they're better than me. All their perfect grades would amount to one big nothing. Mother's constant frown of skepticism would finally be forced to give way to something else—acceptance, perhaps, or even pride. I would finally discredit the perception of people that stood by the system and obeyed like the good little sheep they are.

“The test only takes ninety minutes to complete. If you take it, you will get your results back in a week.”

“So, we don’t have to take it? We can just leave?” one of the students asked.

“Yes, you are under no obligation to take the test. It’s voluntary.”

Students carrying the burden of lower grades immediately started packing up, hastening to exit the classroom. Eyes were piercing me. Most expected me to leave, as well. I did not. In my mind, that would equate to accepting defeat and admitting intellectual inferiority. There was no chance in hell I would let that happen.

“Not leaving, Salvador?” Rose poked, her snake-like eyes glinting with a characteristic blend of mystery and mischief.

“I don’t plan on letting your self-absorption get in the way of mine,” I fired back, matching her grin.

“We’re already a ‘disappointment’ anyways. Might as well stay and have some fun.”

Her words struck me as profound. Perhaps there was some depth to her character I was blind to.

“You will be tested in four different areas,” Emilia continued after everyone who would leave had left. “Perceptual reasoning, verbal comprehension, working memory, and processing speed...” She continued explaining, and after she had finished, we began.

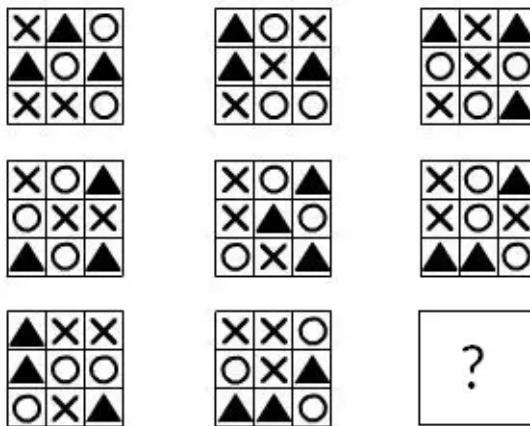
The first question was in working memory.

Question:

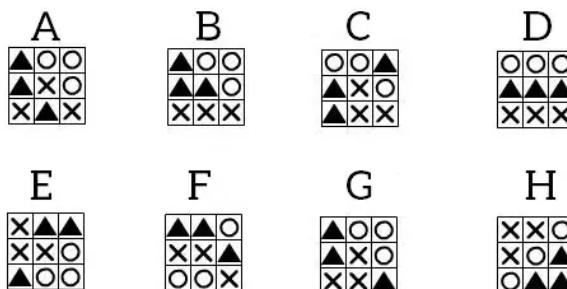
What is the next number in the series: 4,12,6,9,8,6?

1. 6
2. 5
3. 10
4. 12

I began by searching for a pattern. In my mind, it was pretty obvious. The hard part was reading the question. The letters kept switching places. Not as much as before but still... ($4 \times 6 \times 8 \times / \times 12 \times 9 \times 6$) The number to follow was 10! As time wore on, the questions grew increasingly challenging.



Which one of these fits best in the question mark?



The weight of the question pressed on me, each option weighing heavy. The possibility of being wrong stressed me out. *Tick tock*. My mouth felt parched, and my habitual thirst surged. This thirst, along with frequent hunger, once made some suspect a disorder, but medical checks said otherwise. *Tick tock*. Desperate for relief, I reached for my water bottle, its fleeting comfort only sharpening my focus on the task at hand. *Tick tock*.

I grappled with the choices, wrestling them down to B or D.

My inner clock started ticking out of control: *Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock...* *Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Welcome to the Madhouse. Join the club.*

But then, almost as if no time had passed, everyone started leaving, their papers rustling, chairs scraping. Everyone but me... I was still tethered to that question, every second an eternity, every tick a reminder of my dwindling time. *Tick tock. Is it possible for it to be...?*

Mrs. Nigma and Mr. Morph had diligently watched over us to prevent cheating. Even though I was skilled in such fruitful endeavors, I chose not to succumb, this time. What would I gain from such deceit? A result based on lies? They went from desk to desk, collecting the tests. I picked up my things, put my hands into my pockets, and followed behind.

“How was it?” asked Mr. Morph. “Was it too difficult?”

Sweat trickled down my forehead as I rubbed my throbbing temples.

“Not really. But, that’s the part that scares me. Makes me think I read the words wrong.”

“I also have a hunch that you did well. Considering where you were with words just a few years ago you’ve improved a great deal. As for everything else I have no doubts. In a week we’ll find out where you stand.”

“I guess so... I just don’t want to be disappointed by the results.”

“I know you want to prove yourself. I respect you for even taking the test. It means you are confident enough in your capabilities. That’s not to say you got all the answers right, but it is a step in the right direction.”

My life’s been a series of left turns. Hope you’re right.

“Thank you for tormenting me all these years. I’ll never forget it.”

“A new world lies ahead of you. Don’t take off your seatbelt just yet. You have a strong mind. It would be a shame to waste it,” were the final words he spoke to me. He didn’t want to bother me much longer. He greeted me with a farewell as he nodded. Something was hidden behind it. That would remain a mystery.

Laughter danced on the air as I passed my classmates. Their voices painted vivid pictures of sea trips and camping adventures, triggering a nostalgic longing within me. I let my footsteps drag, allowing a pause in their conversations, a final chance to invite me into their world. The silence that followed seemed to echo in my chest, a hollow feeling replacing the anticipatory fluttering. In the midst of summer, I found within myself a neverending winter, where the sun burned beneath grey clouds and the memory of cold winters prevailed, bringing both delight and a sense of warmth through layers of clothing.

The husky I owned stayed outside under the pale moonlight. He was the only one that enjoyed the winter. The cold made him free. He’d need to endure the upcoming months of oppressive heat before the cool comfort of winter returned. In the meantime, he waited for me in our usual meeting spot. He was sitting in a small starry puddle formed on the sidewalk, despite the dry days. Night after night, I saw that white creature excited to see me, the only one. Zev was a one-of-a-kind presence in our town. His eyes, a kaleidoscope of shifting hues, were more captivating than any of his other striking features. Other-worldly is the best way I could describe them. They pierced into your soul with a single glance. The right eye was blue, like the sea. The left a light shade of brown like the autumn leaves. They glowed in the dark, especially on nights like that one. People often told me that I got myself a wolf, not a dog.

My apartment building stood as a seven-story testament to monotony in a city that celebrated it. The facade was a dirty white. The city was a labyrinth of monochrome buildings, a daunting maze for newcomers. Each building stood shoulder to shoulder, indistinguishable from its neighbor like soldiers in uniform.

In contrast, all the dark rooms in our apartment, which was on the top, were always locked as my mother was afraid of things going missing, and so I did. I went missing in my own thoughts, retreating into the mansion of my mind. And then, a hint of something sweet—almost imperceptible—rippled through the air, like a trace of moonflower carried on a distant breeze.

An hour and seventeen minutes had passed in the blink of an eye. A bowl of dull grey cheese soup sat in the middle of the table, the unchanging appetizer for every dinner. No matter how much was ladled out, the pot always seemed full. Complaints were futile; Mother was the chef and my opinion held no weight. Cooking was not a skill I possessed, nor did I care to learn. Food held no joy for me, because I found it tasteless. When I voiced my opinion, they dismissed it as a lack of taste buds. I retorted that their lack of cooking skills was to blame.

Tastes like shit.

As Mother served the plates, she noticed my slouching and corrected my posture. I mentioned the weight of my school books and suggested using electronics instead. She didn't respond, instead bringing the utensils to their perfectly placed positions on the plate. Mother's obsessive-compulsive disorder kept the house immaculate, though it came with its own set of challenges. Bringing it up would only lead to arguments, so I kept quiet.

The silence was so thick you could cut it with a knife. I had to say something to break it.

“So, he’s at work again?” I ventured, my spoon stirring aimless patterns into my soup. The question hung in the air, resonating in the quiet.

“They’ve given beds to the employees. He’s staying there overnight,” she replied, her dismissive tone piercing the silence. As the silence regained room and settled back around us, thoughts swarmed in my head, each one more troubling than the last.

What does she think of me? I wondered for the first time that day. Did she see me as just another cog in the machine, destined to spend my life chasing promotions and pay raises?

I decided to bring up the IQ test, hoping to spark some conversation between us. Her dismissive retort struck a chord deep within, amplifying my sense of isolation, of being an outsider in my own home.

“Was it mandatory?” she asked.

“No.”

“You should have walked out then.”

Her words landed like a slap, a brutal reminder that no matter the effort I put in, I would never meet her lofty expectations.

After her dismissive retort, my grip on the spoon tightened, the metal cold against my whitening knuckles. I opened my mouth to counter her words, my heart pounding in my chest, only to be cut off by her raised eyebrow and a spoon frozen in mid-air.

“Less talking at dinner. It’s bad for you,” she snapped, her words sharp and biting.

The taste of the soup turned even bitterer on my tongue, my non-existing appetite vanishing like the words I was about to say.

“So much for spending quality time with family,” I mumbled.

“Huh? Did you say something?”

I sighed, pushing my half-eaten plate away from me.

“I’m taking Zev for a walk,” I said, wiping my mouth and tossing the napkin onto the table. Mother’s gaze followed me but she didn’t object.

“Be careful. You know that they still haven’t found that girl that went missing.”

As I reached the door, I looked back, a strange sense of *déjà vu* washing over me. The scene felt too familiar: Mother at the table, the untouched pot of soup, the soft hum of the fridge. It was like a still life painting, unchanging and constant. Shaking my head, I pushed open the door, the lingering scent of the soup following me out.

2

After walking out the elevator door, I called for Zev. He was lounging in his vibrant red and blue dog house, a project that had taken months of my savings—not to mention the cost of paint and brushes. It held a charm, a personality; he deserved it. His ears twitched like antennas, then his head emerged, soon followed by the rest of his body. He came running towards me. Like I taught him, he went to my left side. It was as if his body was glued to mine. No matter what, he stood beside me.

With both of my hands, I dragged the gate open. I clenched my fists, feeling a white-hot anger coursing through my veins. She always did know how to piss me off.

As night grew darker, the city's neon lights flickered on, a clear facade for its inherent emptiness. They were as plentiful, purple, yet lifeless as grains in a vast desert, their harsh glow feigning vitality. The nightlife was present and loud. The sounds of the city—the constant horns, the chatter, the life—rang in my ears. The buildings lit up the sky more so than the stars. The weekend temperature got hold of the stupid young minds. The constant noise I was surrounded by annoyed me. *I want out!*

I tried to escape by taking Zev to an old park, far away from the rest of the world. It was empty as usual. Kids didn't play there like they used to. Most of their life was spent inside, locked away into their screens.

They see the wrong light. Maybe that's their escape. Sad. Unlike me, of course. I'm super happy with my life.

The wind blew the trees and grass. Into my ear, the leaves whispered. Nature was always where I preferred to spend my time. It was where my soul found peace.

Zev ran around, sniffing the ground as I was on the swing. He marked every single tree he could find, as dogs do. According to him, the entire world was his territory. It had been quite a long while since he had played with another dog. There weren't many around in the first place. Their numbers had dwindled over the years.

I sat on the swing, visualized my soul being hurled out of my body, waiting for the two pieces of me to collide mid-air, reaching a peculiar state of lightheadedness. The swing carried me backward then forward, but it could never carry me away. Disrupting my thoughts became easier, getting lost and not noticing the world around me.

A mist of hypnosis had covered my face. That was precisely what I hoped for with each visit. Thought experiments were my favorite. Pondering what could have been and what could end up being.

Will my path go uphill or downhill?

One thing was certain. Everything would even out over time. I stepped into myself in search of something, but ultimately, I always came up with nothing.

A good while had passed and a fog seem to envelop the area; Zev came to me. His steps were slower now, his breath heavy. His previously lively eyes seemed tired. His tongue licked the back of my hand, his signal that it was time to leave. In return, I gave him a pat on the head.

“Can’t wait to see her pissed when we’re late.”

I pushed myself, each step a small victory against the invisible chains pulling me back. Panting heavily, I turned a corner onto a familiar street. *Almost there.* Yet, I wasn’t. Not yet. But then, my run was interrupted.

“You!” a voice called out. It came from my right. At first, I didn’t recognize the voice. It was a few silhouettes approaching. Their laughter echoed through the still night, the sound grating against my nerves as the fog kept their faces concealed. They emerged from behind the trees in the distance.

Please ask me for a lighter. I don’t have time for this crap.

A lot of people my age smoked, and I sincerely hoped they did too. As they came closer, I was able to differentiate between them. They were students from my year. Their names escaped me. One held his dog on a leash beside him. It was a tall Doberman that barked loudly.

Zev’s tail went rigid, his growl mirroring my own unease. I could feel him tense under my hand, his protective instincts kicking in, reflecting the turmoil within me.

“Calm down, boy.”

“That’s a nice mutt,” one of the guys said.

The stench of stale beer wafted toward me as he slouched there, a half-empty bottle loosely gripped in his hand. The rest of it compacted in the big belly of his that pulled him forward. His head was bald; he was wearing a stained sweatsuit and was most likely near two meters tall. His frame loomed over me, a hulking silhouette wavering unsteadily on his feet. He could hardly form a coherent sentence without stuttering. The others were laughing at him. The poor guy did not even realize that he was the joke.

Great, the circus is back in town.

“Thanks,” I replied.

“We should let them fight,” one of them said.

It was then that the atmosphere changed. The banter turned sharp, their shadows looming ominously under the dim streetlights.

“That’d be fun. We’d have front row seats,” another added.

I hope you get front row seats in hell.

Soon a beer bottle came flying my way. His aim was so off, he could throw a boomerang and it’d file for a restraining order.

He burst out in laughter like the clown he was. I could feel my pulse hammering in my ears.

I should run! If I do, they might release their dog after me. Think!

“What do you want?”

The words came out more timid than I’d intended. I felt the outnumbered reality settling in, a bitter taste in my mouth. Even if I had continued running earlier, they might have caught up to me. *Or would they?*

My mind was caught in the dizzying swirl of maybes. Their shadows surrounded me, a somber indication of the hopeless imbalance of power.

His words hung in the air.

“Guess what just happened to me? Guess?” He spat out the words, each syllable heavy and bitter, a testament to the resentment brewing inside him.

“I don’t know, what happened?”

“That’s not guessing! You’re asking me.”

“Your parents stopped loving you?” I retorted, feigning confidence.

“Ha-ha, close enough. Have I seen you somewhere before?”

“I hope not. You must’ve mistaken me for someone else.”

This wasn’t an uncommon occurrence. *I wish I was invisible now.*

“I got kicked out. Crazy right? All because of that Madhouse. It turns out I’m a failure. Everyone else is ‘better’ than me, whatever that means. I’m a bag of wind... Do you think you’re better than me?”

Yes.

As he said those words, he too, started to laugh. A knot tightened in my stomach. Despite the situation, I couldn’t help but feel a pang of empathy. It wasn’t fair, seeing him ridiculed, made a mockery of—just like me. He seemed to be one of the students that failed the year. Intolerable. Even me being average was pushing it. It made me start seeing my own parents in a different light. Not much brighter, but still...

“I know how it...”

Before I could finish, the others interrupted me with their insults.

Naive fool.

My feet felt rooted to the spot, my mind screaming for me to run, yet my body refused to obey. The confidence left me through the skin on my forehead in the form of sweat. My mind was just as my mother pictured it, blank. Zev waited for my command, but I was unable to conjure one up. The Doberman was pulling the leash so strongly that it took all of the boy’s strength to keep him from taking control. My brain refused to even contemplate what would happen if that were to materialize.

“Let them fight it out,” they continued.

“You fight it out,” the one with the dog added. “It’s easy for you to say, it’s not your dog.”

“Bitch!”

“Coward, come on, do it!”

They began to warm up, calling him increasingly vulgar names, but it didn’t faze him. He seemed used to it. They spoke the common tongue.

“Show us your pockets,” they told me.

“You won’t find any pity in them. They’re empty.”

“We told you to show us!”

I reluctantly pulled out my pockets, revealing only a folded piece of paper, resting in my hand on the side.

“That’s all. I have nothing else,” I said as my feet were planted into the ground like the root of a tree. With each passing second, my anxiety grew.

Why did I obey? What’s wrong with me??!

“What is that?” the drunk asked.

“Nothing of use to you.”

“Give it to me.”

I froze. Surrendering it felt like tearing away a part of myself, and it left me vulnerable. There was no other option. I had to comply, or... who knows what would occur. The “joke” advanced, snatching the paper and opening it.

“What the hell is this?” he barked, turning to his laughing clowns.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it doesn’t. I just wanted you to be the one to say it,” he responded. “He has a white streak of hair as well. I’m not surprised.”

“I have a condition,” I murmured.

“Sure you do, faggot!”

Words escaped me while I stood in silence. It was my shield at that moment. He ripped the paper apart across the middle and threw it to the ground. If he wanted to call me a coward at that moment, I would accept it. In my mind, that was what I was. *A weak coward.* My fists were clenched, but I did nothing. *There is nothing I can do,* I kept lying to myself. I released my grip, hoping they wouldn’t notice my anger. The pieces fell to the ground, spreading across the grass.

“I should have wiped my ass with that,” he said. “Even that would’ve been more valuable than this piece of shit. I should probably beat it out of you, but you’re not even worth it.”

He turned around and started walking away.

“Let me guess, he wants to be _____.”

The mockery in his voice felt like a punch in my gut, his words rattling in my mind. His sneering gaze felt invasive, making me feel exposed and vulnerable.

“Look at him.”

“I don’t,” I whispered to the air. “I don’t...”

As the heavy winds blew clearing the fog, the piece of paper alongside the many leaves flew away, carrying my aspirations along with them.

3

Confined within the modest dimensions of my bedroom—a space I had outgrown several times—my growing discomfort seemed to go unnoticed by my loving parents. The space felt dwarfed by the bed in the right corner, my feet leaning against the wall while my head dangled precariously off the edge. The world tilted, twirled and spun as I lay there. Beside it, a wooden desk stood as a relic of times past, basking in the light of a single window, a portal through which I observed the nocturnal ballet of stars.

As the depths of the night took hold, the silence was a canvas for sounds that had no source: the untraceable rustle of papers, the distant clink of glass, the phantom whispers that echoed through the halls.

I had long since perfected the art of concealing my work in my left pocket, and arranging my textbooks in such a way that they would shield my activity at a moment’s notice. Despite the paranoia, the phantom steps always seemed to fade away, leaving the long hallway beyond my door empty, devoid of anything but my own anticipation.

Once, I discovered a hat with a soft brim and an indented crown tucked away in the bottom drawer. This hat, an unclaimed artifact in my room, stoked fear and fascination in me. It became the cage for my dark scribbles, filled with twisted faces mirroring pain and torment, drawn from the deepest recesses of my mind. Fearing the truth they held, I hid them away, and the drawer became a locked vault. Its key, cast away into a deep well, ensuring my thoughts would remain shrouded in secrecy.

No one can ever see them...

Yet, amidst this mystery, the cruel irony of the sleeping pills' impotence left me wrestling with wakefulness. My desk, a battlefield of notebooks thrown askew, each page a casualty of my relentless brainstorming operations as I fought off the veil of exhaustion. Sleep seemed to be a distant land, barred from me by the perpetual opening of the curtain cloaking my eyes. Silence was my only companion in this solitary room; no dreams wove their stories, no melodies hummed their lullabies, and no words dared disturb the quietude.

The cold gnawed at my bones as I lay free of my cocoon, my grip on it mirroring my desperate hold on sanity.

Why exist? I would ask myself. *Because you have to*, would be the reply. I found myself seeking solace in prayers sent into the void, like messages in a bottle tossed into an ocean of nothingness. But each plea dissolved into silence, only fueling my contemplation of an absence — a deity turned deaf or the silence itself that seemed to have become my friend. Abandoned, unheard, I lay there amidst the growing enigma of my reality.

A sudden knock reverberated through the door, shattering the stillness. With haste, I rolled beneath the covers, concealing myself. The door yielded with a telling creak, and a man, the scent of his aftershave preceding him, crossed the threshold. He wore a sleek black suit.

“May I come in?” he asked, but I ignored his question, shifting to face the wall.

Unfazed by my dismissal, he closed the door behind him and approached my bed. I made no effort to observe his actions.

“You should go have breakfast,” he suggested, his voice reaching my ears. “I have plans for us today.”

I felt as if my body had turned to stone, unyielding and unresponsive to his words. I attempted a covert glance from the corner of my eye, hoping to evade his notice. He proceeded to open the window above my desk, allowing a gust of air to flutter the curtains and graze my neck. Yet, within me, the weight of snowfall persisted, despite the warmth that touched my skin.

“You have to start talking to me,” he pleaded, his voice laced with desperation.

“Do I?” I retorted, a tinge of bitterness coloring my words.

“What do you mean? I’m your father. Of course you have to talk to me.”

“Nice to hear that,” I scoffed. “I seem to have forgotten about all about it. Perhaps it’s because you’re never home.”

Excuses began pouring forth, a familiar litany I had heard countless times. I could anticipate every word, every phrase that was about to escape his lips. It was a worn-out script, repeatedly recited, a circular discourse leading nowhere. Nothing ever changed.

“You know the reasons why. I have a job and responsibilities. I don’t have to keep repeating them,” he asserted, his words falling upon weary ears.

Each day and every night, he wielded his excuses like a loaded gun, piercing my heart with their hollow impact.

“You also have responsibilities towards your family, or have you conveniently forgotten about that?”

“Everything I’m doing is for you. One day, you’ll understand,” he stated with unwavering conviction. I interjected with a question, catching him off balance.

“What is my hobby?” I asked, my voice laced with an unexpected resolve.

He feigned ignorance, attempting to play dumb, but the unspoken understanding between us rendered his facade futile.

“What?”

“What is my favorite movie? Who are my friends?” I persisted, unyielding in my pursuit of acknowledgment. “I don’t have any!”

“I...” he faltered; words trapped in his throat.

“One day, you’ll understand,” I declared, invoking words that had etched themselves into the fabric of our relationship.

They were inseparable from him, synonymous with his presence. Now, it was my turn to wield them, knowing deep down that he would never comprehend, for he valued his job above his family. A job that, I

knew, already had a dozen eager replacements lined up, should his desk ever be left empty.

His hand settled on my shoulder, his thumb tracing familiar paths of long-lost bedtime stories, reviving memories of a childhood where our roles seemed more aligned. I had plummeted from the heights of his embrace, a fall that left me bereft. A tear threatened to escape, but I held it back. Each blink was a silent battle, the turmoil within me refusing to surface.

Summoning all my strength, I pushed back against the door, determined to keep it closed. I had become a man in the making, barely emerging victorious from the greatest battle of all—my own heart.

“We’ll go visit your grandparents today. Are you coming with us?” he asked, his voice holding a glimmer of hope.

I simply nodded in response. Their home, with its familiar scent of aged books and home-baked cookies, stirred a warmth deep within me each time I thought of it. As his words sunk in, the knot in my stomach slowly unfurled, replaced by a butterfly’s flutter. I bit back the urge to show any hint of relief, the old fear of revealing too much still present. And so, the words hung in the air between us, a fragile truce left unspoken.

He drew back, lingering for a moment before exiting the room. In an instant, I plunged my head into the pillow, hoping it would consume me whole, offering an escape.

A primal sound clawed its way out from deep within me, muffled by the pillow I clung to, as if I could push out the rage and sorrow in one heated breath.

As I buried my face in the pillow, a peculiar sound resonated. Something had crashed against my window—a visit from the old owl. Regaining its senses, it appeared before me, perched on the windowsill. He had kept me company through all of my battles with insomnia.

“Stupid owl,” I muttered, surprised by its presence during these hours. I pondered, *Why are you knocking on my window now?*

Conversing with a night owl on my windowsill wasn’t unusual for me. Its mystical eyes carried the universe, never quite looking at me but

rather through me. Initially, I was annoyed, but soon found comfort in its presence and named it “Owlfred,” despite not knowing its gender. Owlfred seemed to appear whenever I needed it most, and while it may not be common to speak to owls, I argued it was no different than talking to dogs. We all have our quirks, and my conversations with Owlfred were a product of my own eccentricity.

Curiosity urged me to check if the owl had injured itself. As I approached, it took flight, seeking refuge in the towering tree neighbouring our house. Its departure struck me as peculiar, considering the time it had spent on my windowsill during the night, silently observing. We had forged an unspoken acquaintance of sorts.

Strange, I thought. You’re supposed to be sleeping.

As this thought crossed my mind, I glanced at the clock—it read 6:53 AM.

4

Zev was smart. I gave him all the food and trusted him to sort it out for himself. We were only going to be away for a day, and we needed someone to guard the apartment while we were gone. Zev and I argued over the issue for a good five minutes. I tried convincing him but he just kept making complaining noises that progressively became louder than my tone of voice until he gave up and gave me a single woof, turned his back, and went into his dog house.

It was an hour-and-seventeen-minute drive if there wasn’t a lot of traffic, but of course, there always was. The town was a busy one. The roads were crowded. Working men and women went to and from their jobs. Every day was the same for them as well.

My seatbelt was on even though I didn’t remember putting it on, but I never did. It was one of those things my subconscious took care of.

Buildings blurred by, reminiscent of scenes in an old film reel. I could almost hear that sound, almost. The cloudy countryside opened up before us, a mosaic of undulating mountains, verdant fields, and dense forests. The noise dwindled in the distance behind us, and the smell of smoke was no more. The mist cleared up, and the pathway showed itself.

Drives were never enjoyable, at least the long ones. Motion sickness would get ahold of me every other time. Everything the doctors prescribed, I took. Some helped, most hadn't. Holding my head up straight and keeping my eyes opened usually did the trick, until I puked.

"How long has it been?" Father asked. "Since we've last visited?"

"It's been a while. I'm not sure I remember. Half a year at most?" Mother replied.

Has it been that long? The amount they debated over definitely wasn't accurate.

"It's much longer than that," I added. "A year, I think."

Father took a glance at me through the rearview mirror. His face showed signs of deep thought.

"A year? Now that I think about it, you might be right."

"It couldn't have been a year," Mother quickly interjected. "We... we..." She stopped mid-sentence as though she reached an understanding.

"He's right. It has been that long. Will they even recognize us, I wonder?" he said jokingly, with a sudden hint of shame in his tone. "We got a bit preoccupied."

The words exited in pairs with stains of nervousness across them. His voice was shaking.

We arrived about an hour later. My grandparents stood at the door, welcoming us into their home before the last cold winds blew. It had been built long ago; over seventy years had passed since its construction. Though not much older than the two of them, it stood as an age-old testament to their lives.

My grandad moved in when he was a child and hadn't ever left since. He spent his entire life in the same place he was born.

We got our bags filled with a single change of clothes from the back of the trunk. There they were, waiting. They hadn't changed a bit from the last time I saw them. Grandpa had short white hair and a nicely trimmed beard, which I envied. Mine hadn't even started growing. He was always academically dressed, a true philosopher.

He used to be a professor of that subject in a city high school. The man still had a book in his hands and glasses in his pocket. His vision most likely declined due to his prolific reading habit. He was almost unemployed on a few occasions for not following the school curriculum. He quickly got carried away and started discussing existential topics with his students. The school board realized that he only had a few years left. They didn't care to fire him; instead, they waited out his retirement.

On the other hand, my grandmother was a gentle and quiet woman. She didn't speak much, a few words here and there. Whenever she did, it was something positive. Her simplicity was something to be envied. On her hands, a few scars from countless years of cooking. Her food was the only one that had a taste. She also wouldn't let me leave the table until I finished the whole meal, which would take up to an hour. Even after I forced all the food into my belly, there was always more to come.

Unwillingly, I would get a refill, but one was unable to complain. She wasn't academically inclined, but life experience gave her wisdom. Her hair was long but always tied back. She was shorter than her husband, reaching his shoulder with the top of her head. She didn't let herself go and would keep up with modern trends. In her heart, she was still a young woman, full of energy and strong-willed.

We started hugging each other. I was quick to be first since I had missed them very much.

"Look how you've grown," Grandma said.

"He's much taller than me now," Grandpa added.

"I've missed you both. I've missed this whole place. It's been a while."

“You’re a man now,” said Grandma as she placed her warm hands on my face. She analyzed me from my feet to my head. She felt happy seeing her grandson grown up.

“A man with a babyface.”

“You’re wonderful, dear. Now quickly, come...”

“Your grandmother kept quiet, and now she starts talking all of a sudden. Interesting creatures,” Grandad said as he placed his hand on my shoulder while we walked into the house. “Don’t hurry the beard, and remember when it comes to marriage: only fools rush in.”

She overheard him, which was exactly what he had intended. They still enjoyed teasing each other, even after being married for over forty years. Dating wasn’t common back then. Six months tops, is what I was told. Grandad refused to call the newer generation “men.” In his mind, they were too spoiled and acted like children. A few real men popped out here and there, but that was a rarity in his eyes. We were soft.

We all settled into the living room’s worn-in comfort while grandma disappeared into the kitchen, soon filling the air with the soothing smell of brewing green tea. It wasn’t a large place, but it was my palace. It was where I grew up and spent my early childhood. Those years tend to stay with a person for the rest of his life. Later ones tend to fade out of mind. Those core memories are ones I still cling on to.

We were seated around the table on the couches, catching up.

“Son, how have you been?”

“I’ve been well. I’m sorry we couldn’t visit sooner. We were just discussing in the car how it flew by so fast. The job has been stressful, but good this past year. I expect a promotion soon.”

Grandad simply nodded at his comments.

“Do you at least enjoy it?”

Father paused for a moment while he thought.

“I do. It’s... hard and stressful, of course, but when it’s all said and done, it’ll be worth it.”

“Well, I’m not up to much of anything these days, and I’m still always stressed over nothing. Retirement has really gotten to me. I feel like I’ve aged a few years in months. Old age is catching up with me. I sit around

all day, buried in my books. A reader lives a hundred lives, while everyone else only one, if I remember the quote correctly. Now that I mention it, you should get me some new ones on your next visit. Maybe *The Red Book*. I've been going through Carl Jung's *Archetypes* and *Collective Unconscious* repeatedly. Thrice I've read it in just a few months."

He reassured him that he would have brought new books earlier if he had known. He apologized for the oversight and promised to bring them to him as soon as possible, asking his father to just remind him.

Grandad had a healthy or unhealthy habit of reading a book a day, depending upon how you look at it. He should have done more walking than he did. That was the reason age was catching up in the race we call life. Once you sit down is usually when everything begins to go downhill, and one grows roots into the chair. The deeper they go, the harder it becomes to get up.

"How is school going?" he asked me. "Finished yet?"

"I still have a week. But that's basically it. It's finally over."

"What will you do now that you've finished?"

"I'm not sure. I'll look at a few universities and apply. Hopefully, I'll get into one."

"With grades as low as yours, cross your fingers and pray that you will," Mother added.

"My grades are average. It's not like I'm the worst student at school."

She raised her eyebrows and did not reply. I understood her point of view. What angered me was that she refused to even attempt to understand mine.

"What of your hobby? You were outstanding before, I remember. Quite the gift you had." Grandad continued speaking to avoid a conflict between Mother and me. He disliked confrontations more than most. He would always try to wiggle his way around and find a pocket hole.

Before I could say anything, Mother interjected once more.

"Of course not. There is no security and stability in it for him. I would lose all respect for him if he went down that path, risking everything I've built for him. I can tolerate his low marks to a degree, but that..."

A fake smile spread across my face. My disagreement with her would just make the situation uncomfortable. Father didn't intervene because he knew about the topic at hand.

"You should try and get a job at the office after you're done with university. Maybe someone will hire you if you work hard enough. This is your last shot at making something of yourself. Don't throw it away."

Her words hung in the air, a prophecy I didn't want. I lowered my gaze, the room blurring into insignificance.

"We've had this talk over and over again and yet you've never once in my life asked me what I want?"

"That's irrelevant. If I let you make your own decisions, where would you be?" she spat and left me stunned.

From the corner of my eye, I could see Grandad was looking at me from above his glasses that were halfway down his nose.

Grandma arrived with the tea, her quiet presence diffusing the tension as she placed arabesque-embellished white cups in front of us. She took a seat next to me. The smile from before hadn't yet left her face. Seeing her smile made me smile. These two human beings were the only two that gave me any sense of comfort and belonging.

After picking up the cup, it took a few moments to realize it was still boiling. Immediately in a rush, I placed it back down onto the saucer.

"Hot... hot!" I waved my hand in a fast motion to cool down my fingers.

Grandma laughed.

"You'll burn yourself, wait a bit, dear. There's no rush."

But she couldn't see the heat beneath my surface, the frustration simmering for years, just on the edge of boiling over.

"You see it coming after forty years," Grandfather told me.

We joked as I kept shaking my hand in an effort to relieve my finger from the hot water that spilled on my finger. Glancing around, the familiar old table and chairs, dustless glass cupboard, and the grey stone table—still a treasured gift—anchored me. The comfort of the old couch seemed to mock the stark modernity outside. It's funny how that works. The more familiar things, most of the time, are of greater comfort.

“How long will your visit last?” Grandad asked.

“We were planning to stay the night,” Father told him.

“Only the night? Why leave so soon?”

“I have to prepare something for work tomorrow. I plan to go on a business trip for a couple of months... a year at the most. I finally got a big case on my hands.”

“Since when?” I interrupted.

“Oh, Salvador, I forgot to mention.”

“Yeah, you kind of did.”

“It’s just for a short while. It’s not a big deal.”

“Yeah, you’re right, you shouldn’t come back at all while you’re at it.”

“Silence!” Mother yelled. “Don’t speak like that.”

“Yeah... yeah sure thing. I won’t ever speak at all if that’s what you want.”

“What did you say?” she responded.

No longer could I spend a moment in that room, so I trampled out of it.

“Selfish prick...”

“Where do you think you’re going? Come back over here!”

I roamed the house and stumbled upon my old room, where I had slept as a child. Everything was tidy, unlike before. When I inhabited that place, toys, games, drawings, and pillows were all over the floor. It was a small room for a small child. There was one of everything just like there was one of me. A noise drew my attention, and I found my grandad lingering at the door, an inscrutable expression on his face.

“I had a feeling you would come here,” he said to me. “It’s where you spent most of your childhood playing and living in your own world.”

“I wish I could have spent even more than I did. That place isn’t meant for me. It’s not where I belong.”

He approached me and sat me down next to him on the bed.

“Where do you belong?”

“Here!” I insisted.

He slowly shook his head.

“No. This is something of the past, old and fading. You cannot look back and ponder over what was, but what you should do is look ahead and think of what will be.”

He took away my words. He was never out of any. You could find him out of breath, but never out of words. He always did have a way with those of wisdom.

“It’s hard not to look back, and even harder to let go.”

“Yes... but it is even harder to embrace the future. Do not wish upon yourself an easy life. Pray for the strength to endure one of hardship.”

“I don’t think I could go back into that room right now. Is it okay if I stay here a bit?” I asked.

He rose, pacing to a small cabinet. From it, he lifted a previously face-down picture of my young parents. Its significance initially escaped me.

“This was my father’s room?” I ventured.

He confirmed with a nod, his grip on the photo unyielding. A flood of memories seemed to wash over him.

“We’ll continue this later,” he murmured, returning the picture to its original place. With a final glance, he stepped out, the door clicking shut behind him.

The
remainder
of the day found
me adrift a
mongst the trees
and grasslands
encircling the house.

Nature crooned a verdant lullaby, and the wind an elusive conductor orchestrated its symphony into my ears, cleansing my spirit of lingering anxieties. Zev would love it here, I thought wistfully. The forest seemed to stretch into the edges of eternity; a wanderer could lose hours within its embrace, yet it would always shepherd its guests back to their origin. My destination today was a singular tree, one of great significance the purple jacaranda. It bore the weight of the house I once begged my grandparents to sculpt from its living body. We settled instead for a quaint treehouse, a compromise that didn't diminish its allure. Tracing the stepping stones I'd laid in the past, I soon reached my arboreal retreat. Unchanged, timeless. Its timber silhouette etched into the grey sky, defying the elements. The ladder, a mere six wooden boards, clung to the trunk, slightly weather-beaten but still sturdy. Step by step, I scaled the tree, hands clenching the boards, praying they wouldn't betray years of trust. They did. Each rung sapped my strength further until only a few more steps remained. Enveloped by the forest's soothing hum, I surrendered to its calming cadence. A fleeting hint of moonflower's sweetness lingered as my eyes drifted shut. Consciousness slipped away, plunging me into a void.

5

I found myself on the couch in the living room, tired. A blanket was draped over me. It was warm, and sweat crawled down my skin in a rush. It was either from the fleece or from what had happened.

Mother's eyes widened, a gasp escaping her lips. "He's awake."

"What happened?" Father asked.

Absent of energy, weak, I was unable to even lift my head.

"I was climbing up and then... I don't remember," I mumbled.

"It's a good thing we found you; who knows what could have happened. "No more going anywhere on your own," Father added. "We don't know what's going on, it's not safe."

"I'm fine," I insisted, trying to wave off their concern. But the effort to lift myself from the couch proved futile.

"I'm your father. I know what's best for you."

"This is great. It's nice to see you worry once for a change."

I smirked as his face contorted into a snarl. It was clear that he didn't appreciate my words. He pushed himself up from the couch, a sigh slipping from his lips. His gaze lingered on me, sharp as daggers, boring holes into my skin.

"I'll call the doctor and see when he can come. For now, let's give him some space to rest."

Mother's steps were hesitant as she approached me, planting a soft kiss on my forehead that carried the tremors of her worry. Her warmth felt unfamiliar yet comforting, a rare display of affection I hadn't experienced since...

Her fingers gently sifted through my hair, an affectionate, almost calming gesture.

"You'll be well, my love," she said, her voice soft but laden with a mother's worry.

Under my mask hid a smile. Even though I disagreed with her many opinions, at least she had been present in my life. I still loved her, and I knew she cared for me. As everyone else was leaving the room, Grandpa, who stood beside Grandma, whispered something to her.

Everyone left the room besides him. When the door closed, he sat on the sofa in front of me, leaning forward, placing his elbows on his knees.

“I don’t believe that you have been behaving yourself to the best of your abilities. Your father doesn’t have bad intentions.”

“You too, huh? None of you understand.”

“I understand more than you know,” he said, facing down at the table. “It pains me now more than ever. I have lived my entire life doing what others have told me. I was told that I never had a say in the matter. I finished my education and became a professor. Is that what I wished to be? Not at all! I wanted to be a singer. I’ve never told you this, but I was actually really good.”

“You used to sing?” I said, surprised. Thinking about it thoroughly, it did suit him quite well. I could only imagine the songs he would write. A vocal way of expression. It caught me off guard, and yet I was glad. I respected the old man even more.

“Indeed, I did. I had my share of ridicule, people laughing at me, saying I was wasting my prime years, and I succumbed to them. But let’s focus on you: What is it that you want to be?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer. I had given it a lot of thought, but there were too many variables on my mind, mine alone.

“I haven’t decided,” I told him. “I’ve always worked on _____. It comes easy to me. It consumes my thoughts, day in and day out. Even when I’m doing something else, that’s what I think about. But there’s no money in ____, unless I make it. The likelihood of success is slim. That’s something my mother and I agree on. In a way, she is right, but what irritates me is how she shuts down the possibility altogether. I hate reading. She knows that and believes numbers might do the trick then. She doesn’t get it. It’s all the same to me. Weirdly enough I’ve never even liked my hobby. It’s just something that I have to do. I can’t explain it. I don’t know. I should find something that can pay the bills and try ____ on the side.”

He could tell the insecurity within the tone of my voice. He leaned back into the sofa.

“You are lying to yourself. Those are your mother’s thoughts and not your own. If you chase two goals concurrently, you’ll end up catching neither. This is the exact same conversation I had with your father when he was around your age. He couldn’t decide between being a writer and a lawyer. His plan was to go and study, earn money, and write on the side. He thought that he could make room to do it as a hobby. Now I ask you: how many books and stories has your father written?”

I did not know what to say. I rolled my eyes around the room, covered in a blanket and thought.

“I’ve spent most of my life doing something I never wanted to do. That is my only regret in life, and it cost me everything. He wanted to be a famous writer when he grew up. As he reached adulthood, that fire dwindled away. I tried convincing your dad to follow his passion and not make the mistake I made. Like many others, he failed to escape the clutches of society and got trapped in a cage.” As he said those words, he pointed his finger to his head. “One cannot escape a state of mind so easily. Only a few have been able to do so... Now tell me the truth. I know you don’t want a regular job. You want much more.”

As I mused over Grandad’s words, a sudden chill ran down my spine. For a fleeting second, I thought I caught a glimpse of something in the corner of my eye, but when I turned, nothing was there. I shook off the feeling, attributing it to my strained nerves.

“I’m afraid,” I confessed. “Afraid of what people think. I’ve had them laugh at me and...” The image of the paper flying with the wind came to me. “It gets tight, right here,” I said as I pointed to my chest. “I’m not sure. What if I choose wrong and fail?”

He understood what I was attempting to say. The whirlwind of emotions within me tangled my words, leaving me mute and unable to give them voice. Unease churned within me, like a maelstrom disturbing a once placid lake. Thoughts clashed against each other, a battle of convictions waging war within the confines of my mind. I was a walking, talking contradiction.

“I can’t guarantee that you will succeed, but you should try despite knowing that. Life is too short to not take risks. If you fail, you can always build yourself up. But if you don’t, you’ll waste the rest of your life living in regret. And in the end, you will become the very person you despise the most.”

As I sat in the silence of the room, it suddenly grew colder. I shook it off, attributing it to my heightened nerves, but the change was undeniable. I wasn’t sure if they would bear fruit, if they would satisfy my hunger for answers.

During the night, I managed to gather a bit of strength and dragged myself to my old bedroom, each step an effort that bore the weight of my exhaustion. Sleep was still an entity that evaded me. Little did I know something was brought into the room—an oil painting?

Grandpa must’ve placed it there during the day. How strange. Why now?

It was a copy of *The Nightmare* by Henry Fuseli painted back in 1781. It terrified audiences back then and it terrified me in that moment, especially in the dark. Those faces peaking at me from behind the veil of blackness... The incubus that was seated on the woman’s chest had a grin. It relished in the pressure it gave her, and the fright it gave me. The dark mare gazed at her semi-conscious state while standing over her. It adapted into the surroundings of the room as well as anything only distinguishable by its glowing white eyes. I always felt if such a thing did exist it would only let out silent neighs, only heard to those that live in the shadows of the nightmare.

Words bounced around my head, hitting every wall. While my body threatened to give out, my mind whirled like a top, thoughts spinning out of control.

Am I doing the right thing? Grandad was right all along. He was telling me something I already know deep down. I just needed to be reminded. That’s all it is. I don’t care what others say, do I? No, I don’t. Damn, why is life so hard? Screw it, I’m going to tell them. Whatever happens, happens. I don’t care anymore.

The paralyzing fear of others' judgement started to lose its hold on me. Fear morphed into nervousness. I felt enlightened from within.

I chose right. I chose the right path. Will they understand? Of course they won't. How could they? I doubt Mother had anyone to tell her otherwise... and Father... He's lost.

Time slipped away in a subtle dance, hours ticking away unheeded. It appeared that slumber had taken me, but I was not certain. It didn't feel as though my eyes had been closed for more than a few seconds.

A storm was brewing outside, the long branches of trees clawing at my window. I lay motionless in the enveloping darkness, pierced intermittently by stark bolts of lightning. I was alone, engulfed by an absence of everything but the storm. It was spring, but I did not remember feeling the burning frost ever so strongly. The knocking sound from the door bounced in my ears. Was it even coming from the door? I wasn't sure. Perhaps it was in my head alone. I tried wiggling my toes, but nothing happened.

Numbness swept all over my body. Unable to move, I watched and listened. Many thoughts went through my head. None gave me any comfort, and none helped me explain what was happening to me.

Another loud knock popped my ears. This time it was even louder than the first. Then after a few moments, an even louder one followed. My mouth formed a silent scream, my voice betraying me in my time of need. It was as though my throat had been squeezed. The door handle creaked, inching downward before the door surrendered to the pressure and eased open with an ominous whisper.

A figure, cloaked in the veil of darkness, intruded into the room, its silhouette an ominous presence at my bedside. Its face was obscured, absent of any discernible features. Dressed in a flowing midnight blue hooded cloak that reached the floor, it moved with an eerie grace, the garment brushing against the floor as it moved. This entity, this... thing, slowly circled the bed and paused beside my head. My mind swirled with fear and confusion. Was this reality, or had I somehow crossed over into the realm of the dead?

I'm not ready. Not yet.

The darkness emanated even stronger than the light outside. Its presence caused the lightning to retreat, and left silence to reign supreme. The room became even darker than it had been.

“Soon... I will be waiting... watching...” it whispered, its breath cool against my ear. “It’s time to let go.”

As the figure whispered its cryptic words and closed my eyes, a terror unlike any I had experienced before seized me. It felt as if icy fingers were squeezing my heart, causing an icy cold to rush through my veins.

In that moment, I found my voice, and a primal scream tore from my throat. When my eyes fluttered open, I was alone. The room was silent, the door shut tight. The figure was gone, but the essence of its presence lingered. Cold sweat dripped from my brow, the chill of its touch and the weight of its presence still palpable. I lay there, immobile, my breath coming in short, shaky gasps as my heart pounded in my chest.

A shuddering sigh escaped me, and slowly, my limbs began to respond. My fingers twitched, then my toes. Relief washed over me, tentative at first, then stronger. But it wasn’t pure relief. The icy grip of fear was still lodged in my chest, pulsing with my heartbeat. My mind began to whirl, trying to process what had just happened. The boundaries between sleep and wakefulness blurred, leaving me in a state of confusion. My hand moved hesitantly towards my face, half-expecting to feel the cold touch of the figure’s hand. I prayed that I had just succumbed to slumber, even if it was a nightmare.

6

A few hours later, we all gathered in the living room. The Sun hadn’t yet woken up from its deep sleep.

“Salvador, what happened? Why didn’t you stay where you were?” Grandma asked.

“I couldn’t fall asleep...”

As usual, I finished in my mind.

But none of that mattered at that very moment. It was the day. The day everything was to change, my outlook and road. Every decision I contemplated seemed riddled with pitfalls, each thought compounding the last, until the mountain of uncertainties threatened to bury my resolve. That was the day I vowed to throw away my doubts, to watch them float down the river and away from me. I had to; the burning flood of fire had to swallow them. Otherwise, I didn’t know what would happen.

“I reached out to the doctor last night. He’s out of town,” Father said.
“It’s good that you appear to be better.”

“We can have him checked back in the city,” Mother added.

“He is my strong boy. He’ll be fine,” said Grandma.

“I have something to say.”

As they picked apart my well-being, I steeled myself for the impending battle. My fingers drummed a restless rhythm against the armrest, my gaze drifting to the worn-out carpet and back, the tell-tale signs of the war within me. But now, all of a sudden, I found myself lost, my compass spinning wildly out of control. I searched my soul, but the more I looked, the more elusive the answer became.

Suddenly, the room seemed to shrink. Each inhale stole away precious space, the mounting pressure felt like a vice around my chest. Panic clawed at my throat, constricting my breaths. Yet, I couldn’t bear the thought of disappointing my grandfather, whose gaze hadn’t wavered from me all morning. The longer I hesitated, the closer I teetered towards the precipice of my own destruction.

I swallowed, steeling myself. With a louder, more confident voice, I repeated, “I have something to say!” My tone caught their attention. “I’m going to follow my ambition and become _____!”

There, I said it. The words had finally left my mouth. There was no going back. My heart pounded against my rib cage. Grandad leaned on to his right arm and crossed his legs, gladdened by my words.

Mother, the first to recover from my declaration, retorted in a dismissive tone, “No, you’re not going to become _____. Don’t say such stupid things. You’re not well. Rest and clear your mind.”

“I’m going to become _____,” I repeated. “I don’t care what you think with all due respect. I’m going to do what I want to do, and not what you want me to. I’m going to follow my ‘delusion.’ Whatever happens, happens.”

“Not with your grades.”

“Mom, you of all people should know that grades aren’t everything,” I declared, my voice steady despite the storm brewing in my chest. Her eyebrows shot up, a challenging glint in her eyes.

“Is that so? And how did you come to that conclusion?”

I met her gaze, holding it firm.

“You’re a perfect example,” I continued. “Many of those ‘top’ kids in the class? They’re idiots. They’re not the ones who’ll be the next success stories.”

Her mouth opened, as if to counter, but I pressed on, the words spilling out in a rush.

“And I am not an embarrassment. Grades don’t define me. They’re merely stupid certificates for those in charge, badges that prove you’re a good, obedient worker. I know I’m a bad reader, but even the students that receive them can’t stand to read them. I don’t want to just work. I want to create. To live.”

As my last words hung in the air, a heavy silence settled in the room. Everyone was motionless, their eyes wide as they stared at me, each face reflecting the shock of my outburst. But then she scoffed, shaking her head.

“And you think pursuing _____ will pay the bills, will it?”

“Not just pay the bills, but also add meaning to my life,” I shot back.

I straightened my shoulders, meeting their shocked gazes head on. I knew the path I was choosing was fraught with uncertainty, but I was ready to brave the unknown for the sake of my passion.

“I’d rather die broke and have people remember my name in a hundred years than sip champagne on a yacht and no one ever know I

even existed. If I play it smart, I could make more money than you could ever think of if I even cared about it, which I don't."

"I'd rather you be safe and secure," she muttered, but there was a note of hesitation in her voice now.

"Safe and secure, or free and passionate?" I challenged. "Which would you choose for yourself, Mom?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it, her gaze dropping away from mine. In the silence that followed, I knew I had finally made my point.

I turned to Dad, his slumped shoulders and the deep creases etched into his tired face telling a story of endless labor for a meager reward.

"In your world if I work really, really hard the only people that will be able to afford luxuries will be the people above me. I refuse to be a slave and obey."

"The fall has gotten to your head," Father said. "Everything I do..."

I interrupted him before he could finish: "...is for you and our family," I repeated for the billionth time. "You say that, but you don't have a family."

In a sudden outburst, his hand lashed out, the harsh sound of the slap reverberating in the room as his palm met my cheek. Stunned, I stood there, a tremor running through my body, my cheek pulsating from the sting.

"I'm leaving," I managed to say, my voice a calm counterpoint to the violent episode.

His eyes, wide with shock both at his own actions and my declaration, met mine. He stepped forward, mouth opening and closing as if he were a fish out of water.

"I..." he began, but words seemed to fail him.

"I will never look into your eyes again," I promised him, the finality of my words cutting through the tense silence. "Ever."

After the crescendo of the argument, I found myself alone in the silence of the bathroom.

Me and myself, forever together.

The cool tiles against my back seemed to absorb the heat of my anger, leaving behind a weary emptiness. The heavens gathered again in anger, and the raindrops fell from the sky, hitting the glass window. At first, there was a pause between each, but more started coming down. A light flashed before my eyes, and then lightning struck in the gloomy purple morning sky. I sat on the bathroom floor, clutching a handful of sleeping pills in my palm.

How about you start working for a change? Please.

Dark circles under my eyes mirrored the sleepless nights, my body felt as though it had been sapped of all energy, yearning for a rest it was denied for weeks. My eyes felt heavy, but every time I closed them, my mind raced with anxious thoughts. It had been years since I had a good night's sleep, and I was at my wit's end. I popped the pills into my mouth, swallowing them without water. The bitter taste lingered, but I didn't care.

All I wanted was to fall into a deep slumber and forget about everything for a while. As I sat there, waiting for the pills to take effect, I noticed the tell-tale signs of my growing insomnia. My heart was racing, and my palms were sweaty. My thoughts were jumbled and made no sense, and I couldn't concentrate on anything. It was as though my brain was stuck in overdrive, with no off button in sight.

I leaned back against the bathtub and closed my eyes, hoping that the pills would start working soon. But as the minutes ticked by, I felt no different.

Screw you.

In the silence of the bathroom, every exhale ricocheted off the cold tile walls, sounding louder than it should. Suddenly, I heard a knock on the door.

“They’re waiting for you downstairs,” he told me. “You must go.”

Unhurriedly I gathered myself back to my feet, casting the rest of the pills I kept hiding from even myself, down the drain. I opened the door and Grandpa was standing there, waiting.

“Thank you for reminding me,” I told him. “I needed that.”

He awarded me with a pleasant smile. That was all I could ask for. I approached him and gave him a goodbye hug.

“I’ll come to visit you soon, I promise.”

“And I shall be here waiting for that day.”

We left the room together. From the top of the stairs, I saw my grandma and mother talking as they waited for me at the entrance. Embracing her always felt warm. She kissed me goodbye.

My refusal to look at my parents out of the discomfort of what they might do was justified in my mind. From the corner of my eye, I noticed my father looking at his luxury watch. I was unsure if he was ignoring me on purpose or it failed to tell him what he wanted to know. My bag was around my shoulder. With all my belongings packed, I was on my way.

Rain covered me more and more with each step across the front lawn. Rushing to get into the car was not what I intended. Each puddle was deep, and yet they felt shallow. Reminiscing was something of that sort. All the memories were there, filled with emotion. The notion that they might mean nothing troubled me.

As I sat alone, I listened to the rain hit the car. It dawned on me that I had forgotten to ask my grandad about the painting and why he had placed it there. I could have gotten out, but that would have made an uncomfortable situation even more so.

As they got into the car, Father turned the engine on impatiently before everyone had even buckled up. The usual safety checks were foregone, and we began moving, his haste apparent in the swift maneuvering of the vehicle. The traffic was not heavy since it was a Sunday, the last day of the eternal week. We were driving relatively fast. My eyelids felt heavy, drooping involuntarily, as though carrying the weight of my sleepless nights. The pull towards oblivion was overpowering, sleep threatening to claim me every second.

They're working. Give me at least five minutes...

Father attempted to breach the silence.

"I want to discuss what transpired earlier," he began, his voice shaking. Opting for silence, I feigned sleep, my senses, however, perfectly attuned to each spoken word.

"Your mother and I have..." His voice trailed off; the sentence left hanging incomplete as he likely noted my closed eyelids.

Mother interjected, her words were soft like the rustle of silk, but they held an underlying firmness that left no room for argument.

"Let him rest. We can talk later."

Despite my feigned sleep, an insatiable urge bubbled within me. The question of the hour. It threatened to unravel my facade of calm and silence.

What time is it? I found myself pondering.

I had neglected to check earlier. To plan my day, I had to know.

Resisting for a minute, perhaps two, I gave in to the curiosity, my voice barely more than a whisper, "What's the time?"

The ambienace of the moment took

over from there: the sound of the surrounding vehicles, the pitter-patter of rain on the car roof, and the radio humming softly in the background. Mingling with it all, almost unnoticed, was a breath of moonflower as my eyelids grew heavier. No one responded. The car drove on, its path oddly straight, missing several turns. In the void of conversation, every muted sound seemed to amplify. Even behind the safety of my closed eyelids, I felt the growing intensity of light. It was as if the sun had descended upon us, pressing against my face, turning the red darkness beneath my eyelids into a harsh, glowing white. Growing ever closer, it swelled into a blinding luminescence, accompanied by the harsh blare of a horn. I opened my eyes and what I saw... a moment etched in light, sound, and disquieting silence.

LEAP OF FAITH

1

Surreal... Standing on a road that etched into eternity, I stared into the inexplicable vastness of space. The road, not particularly wide, was crafted from a strange material unfamiliar to me. Planets rotated around their axes in the distance, moons obediently circling them. The spectacle of colors was mesmerizing—blue, orange, and even multi-ringed planets sprinkled across the cosmos. Stars glimmered from afar, each celestial body floating in an eternal sea of blackness.

How did I get here?

A feeling of vibrations coursed through me, tethering me to this bizarre place like a puppet on strings. I felt the most intense pulse in my head, an unprecedented sensation. As I stood there, eons spread before my eyes and a beautiful, indescribable expanse overhead, the sky itself was absent.

Looking back, a large keyhole-shaped light dwindled in the distance. I turned and continued on the seemingly infinite path.

Oddly, standing in space, I was breathing normally. My body felt even more energetic than usual. Fear was conspicuously absent, hidden perhaps, as I walked in a fully white satin tux that contrasted my olive skin.

Tailor-made. But, there's no one around to see me in it. Maybe the tailor's somewhere on it.

Then, a ripple in the fabric of space caught my attention, leading me to a wooden dock jutting out into the cosmic ocean. I climbed onto it, feeling a strange comfort from the familiar sound of wood under my shoes. The dock pointed towards a heptagonal-esque blue and green planet, which looked as small as a toy from my vantage point.

I sat on the edge, legs dangling, and pondered, *What should I do now? What can I do? Take a swim?*

Another ripple drew my attention, and I tore off a piece of the jetty, watching as it floated away into the ocean of nothingness. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed movement. It was a ship, crafted of wood, with sails as white as the stars themselves, cutting through the cosmic ocean with surprising speed. Trailing behind it were lines of white, stretching past the orange planet in the distance. It grew larger as it approached, dwarfing my initial estimation of its size.

It wasn't a spaceship, it was a ship in space. The sight was both astounding and bewildering, making this easily the most eventful and unusual day of my existence up until that point.

"Nobody is going to believe this," I exclaimed, yet a pang of melancholy struck me as I realized no one would even care.

As the ship neared, it gradually slowed to a halt, looming three times larger than I'd initially guessed. It was a grand sight, its hull carved smoothly from what looked like pine. A plank extended out, connecting the ship to the dock. I saw a figure at the bulwark, a man who directed his gaze my way.

Is he... is he looking at me? I questioned myself, adrenaline surging through my veins as I stared back, waiting for what was to come next.

"Ahoy, are ye comin' or nah?" he asked.

"Where to?"

"Wha' do ye mean where t'? Here, thar 'n everywhere else, but first down thar o' course," he said as he pointed to the planet down under.

"What's down there?"

"BP2019... Listen, lad, I donât 'ave all night. Iâm already runnin' late as 'tis. Yeâre either gettin' on or nah."

I had nothing better to do. I was in the middle of nowhere and presented with a reasonable offer. I was glad to see someone else for a change.

"I'll be right up," I told him as I got up and climbed on the ship. The plank retracted autonomously as my foot left it.

Conversations filled the deck, each corner buzzing with the voices of what could be thirty, forty men. I overheard snippets of their chatter—

some debating the prowess of various vessels, others speculating about the celestial weather and the nightline.

Amongst them, a man lay sprawled beneath the ratlines, arms tucked under his head as a makeshift pillow. His tranquil face was an open book, telling tales of a worry-free existence, even in sleep. The surrounding noise seemed to have no effect on him; it was as if he had found the secret to silence in this bustling world.

From below deck, muffled voices floated up, mingling with the mouthwatering scent of food. Feeling a tug of curiosity, I made my way towards the man standing aloof from the crowd, possibly the captain. He was garbed in a contemporary blue sailor's uniform, a matching hat perched on his head. As I approached, he reached into his pocket, withdrawing a golden ticket.

"That would be seven emerald doubloons; come on, now, get them out o' yer pocket," he said.

"Emerald what?" I was confused.

His way of speech was like that of sailors and pirates from old movies. *Isn't it a myth that they used to talk like that*, I thought. I managed to understand most of what he said, but in that instance, I was lost.

"Coins, lad, coins!" he told me.

They were not even on my mind at the time. I could not recollect having any at all, especially ones made of emerald. I said a silent prayer for some to appear.

What kind of idiot boards a passenger vessel without any money? Maybe they were right about me after all.

A wave of embarrassment washed over me. I reached into my left pocket tentatively and heard a chink. My heart stopped for a moment. I pulled out exactly seven pieces. The man snatched them out of my hand as quickly as they appeared and gave me the golden ticket. It glowed, and in it I could see a reflection of myself.

"Hurry up, will ya, I donât 'ave all day."

"What is the ship called?" I asked, attempting to stir the conversation down a clearer route.

"Ye dunno?"

“Nope.”

“Ye seriously donât know? Itâs only th’ fastest ship in th’ Milky Way.”

He thought that I had been joking, but the serious expression on my face told him otherwise.

“Th’ Milky Way Cruiser! Davy Jones’ locker, I even gave ye a hint,” he said as his chin dipped to his chest.

Those traces suddenly made more sense to me than they did beforehand.

“Oh, I’ve heard of it. She’s a true beauty,” I said, trying to please the man. “I’ve read everything there is to read on the topic. I was just dazzled because I never thought I’d see her in person.”

It was true that I had read a lot about the Milky Way, but I seemed to have skipped the part where the cruiser was mentioned. It seemed quite implausible since I read each book from cover-to-cover multiple times preparing for geography exams.

“Thar ye go!” he told me. “Ye nigh-on had me worried thar. This ship be like no other, a true beauty she be.”

It was the truth. I had never seen a space ship before in person, only those that sailed the seas. When people uttered those words, one made of metal with fire coming out of its tail came to mind.

“How long will it take us to get to our next stop?”

“I dunno, a few weeks? Ten years maybe?”

“Ten years?” I said in shock.

“Jus’ kiddin’, lad, ‘twill loot us a week. I guess ‘tis yer first. ‘tis th’ fastest ship fer a reason. It loots a month three weeks from one side o’ th’ galaxy t’ th’ other.”

I sighed in relief. “The galaxy?” I said. “That is quite fast. How many voyages have you taken her on?”

“‘Tis me seventh voyage. I shall carry men ‘til me end. This job be fer life. Why donât ye go down under, will ye?” he told me. “‘Tis much warmer than up here.”

For life is a long time. Then again, that was the way most jobs were.

“Sure, are you going to come down?” I asked.

“Nah, I enjoy bein’ up here alone. I usually ‘ave Nancy brin’ th’ grub up here. She cooks well, but her Galaxy Milk beâ... Ye should try it. Th’ sweetest drink I ever tasted. Why donât ye tell her t’ brin’ me some when ye see her? I would die fer some more.”

As per the directions given to me, I pushed open the door to the cabin. An intricate spiral staircase unfurled before my eyes, immediately entrancing me in its mesmerizing swirl. Muffled melodies and enthusiastic cheers lured me further, inviting me to explore the vibrant life below. Succumbing to the call, I ventured into the depths of the ship.

2

In a sprawling, clamorous hall that unfolded like an exotic cosmos before me, the audible energy of cheerful banter was accented by the irresistible aroma of a seafood banquet. At the distant end, an imposing podium reigned, an intricate assemblage of carvings that rose majestically, magnetizing all pairs of eyes.

Navigating through the boisterous assembly, I was in search of an unclaimed seat. The lack of undue attention was a solace rather than a curse for once, allowing me to melt into the unfamiliar surroundings undisturbed. But my illusion of peace wouldn’t last long.

“You, in white,” a voice challenged, ripping through the ambient noise. I turned, realizing I was the one addressed.

“What in seven constellations are you wearing?”

I stood a little taller, the corners of my lips lifting in a smirk.

“The latest and most expensive fashion as always,” I shot back.

“What corner of the cosmos do you hail from? I’ve ventured far and wide and never seen an attire quite like yours. Are you from the farthest edges, or perhaps even another branch entirely?”

I was caught off guard. I was indeed a spectacle in my white tuxedo amidst a sea of billowing long-sleeved shirts, sturdy vests, worn brown trousers, and rough-hewn boots.

“It’s a small branch,” I responded nonchalantly, playing along. “You wouldn’t know it.”

The assurance in my voice belied the uncertainty gnawing at me. The man’s eyes sparkled with curiosity.

What of the trunk and roots, I wondered.

“I hope to explore and cross over someday. What does it look like?”

I hesitated, at a loss for words. “Where do I begin?”

He was relentless, “I’ve heard tales of a world governed by a robot deity, is it that one?”

“It would certainly make things easier. They’d have all the answers, wouldn’t they?”

Suddenly, a firm hand clasped my shoulder. Startled, I turned to encounter a young man, his dark skin glistening with white specks like an ethereal constellation. His dark, wild hair was pulled back into a knot, with golden stripes accenting the edges and shaved sides. His eyes, piercing light brown orbs, held a fiery intensity that glowed in the dimly lit hall. A lethal-looking blade rested menacingly on his back, and on his white neck a tattoo slept that read “Memento Mori.”

“Do you have to always bore the new passengers with your questions, old man?” he said, a glimmer of amusement in his eye. “Give him some space to breathe. There’s plenty around.”

The older man squinted, his countenance turning sour.

“This ship is large enough for me to never see your ugly face. How is it the case that I always do?”

The young man’s eyelid flickered, his lips curling into a mirthless smile. His cheeks were slightly shaking, matching his slow eye blinks.

“Because I know it bothers you. But you won’t have to suffer long. I’m boarding off at the next stop.”

“Good riddance,” the man grunted. “It’d be a shame if you scared away new voyagers. Filthy cow.”

With lightning speed, the sword hissed in its sheath and slid out, stopping at the man’s throat waiting to bite. The entire confrontation stunned me. Eyes started to turn as the cheers settled.

“Say it again.”

The other man's hand froze in its trajectory, his cup of ale hanging forgotten in the air.

"You're fond of descriptive language." His voice dropped to a menacing whisper. "I'm going to be plain with mine. I've overlooked your slight twice. Say it one more time and I'll cut out your tongue. Make it three, I dare you."

The man was stupefied. His eyes were on the tip of the blade. His breathing stopped as he was stared down. There was an animalistic gaze that came from the young man. He cut the tension off with a smile and a quick motion of his sword, scaring the man as he placed it back to where it slept. The breath of the room resumed as whispers started traveling.

He turned me around and pulled me away, his arm still around my neck. He leaned in closer, his eyes glowing with some private amusement.

"There's a certain freedom to not belonging anywhere," he confided, releasing his hold on my shoulder. "I'm Tyger."

I know, somehow.

I still couldn't get over those words thrown around. It amazed me how his demeanor changed within a split second. The man next to me was so nonchalant. The animal was gone, locked away into its cell.

"Salvador."

"Pleasure. Don't worry about him. I spilled my drink all over him once. He has mocked me openly ever since."

His eyes sparkled with mischief, his words lacking sincerity but brimming with an undeniable conviction. If I hadn't witnessed what I had, it would have been an easy story to buy into.

"It must have been quite the amount. He can't stand your guts."

"That's why I've always got a chair ready for him," he joked. "I respect my elders."

A shared laughter erupted between us, a comforting sound in the sea of alien faces.

"I heard you're from another branch, is it true?"

We found ourselves enveloped by the convivial atmosphere of the room, steering our way to two solitary seats left untouched in the crowd.

As we settled into the comforting embrace of the chairs, a cordial tête-à-tête began to weave itself between us.

“You’d like to cross over? One small problem: I’m not entirely sure how to get back myself. There was a bright white light and I popped up on that celestial road. Everything before is a bit blurry.”

“Damn, that’s crazy.”

“I don’t really understand it. It was like a portal,” I added, a faraway look in my eyes, my gaze fixed on something unseen.

Tyger paused, his mind evidently grappling with the enigma. Leaning forward with an air of deliberation, he shared his thoughts.

“White clothes, bright lights. I don’t know, but I think you might be dead.”

“I don’t think I’m dead. Wait, if I’m dead what would that make you then? You’re here with me.”

“An angel questioning you about your sins,” he joked as he chugged down his drink.

Meanwhile, I absently toyed with my sparkling water. My throat reflected the barrenness of an unwatered plain, parched and torrid.

“You afraid of dying?”

His question cut through the hum of conversation around us.

“I’m not fond of it; that’s for sure.”

“I’m not afraid of Death. I’m afraid of underachieving. I’d hate to feel regret on the day the Reaper comes for my neck. What really scares me is not doing anything important before I die. You know, not leaving something behind. I don’t want to be just another face in the crowd. I want to matter.”

Tyger mused, his words echoing with an eerily familiar resonance, as if plucked from my own thoughts. “I don’t wanna be a slave. I want the freedom to pursue my purpose. I don’t wanna be a poetic sacrifice to fate.”

“It took me such a long time to say those words out loud.”

“Do it know,” he urged me. “In front of everyone listening. Proclaim yourself a fantasizer, a reformer, an idealist, whatever it might be. Say you’re gonna be great.”

“Now?”

“Yes, right now, do it.”

“I’ll get embarrassed.”

“If you’re afraid to say it out loud in front of complete strangers, you don’t really believe it then. That’s what I think.”

His proclamation left me momentarily speechless. I halted in my tracks, allowing my gaze to drift across the room.

I’m succumbing to peer pressure for the first time.

His eyes honed in on me, their intensity never wavering. With a summoning of courage, I inhaled a fortifying breath before releasing my own declaration.

“Tongues will confess and every head will bow! Etch my name deep into your memory: Salvador! A name destined to echo throughout the cosmos. I will be great! Forevermore.”

A sudden silence fell upon the room, as eyes swiveled in my direction, interrupting their tasks to appraise the source of the sudden outburst. I was met with stares of bewilderment, as if I had transcended the bounds of sanity. They laughed, but for the first time ever, I didn’t care. Yet amidst the confusion, Tyger offered me an approving grin, lauding my boldness. Tyger’s eyes glinted with a mysterious confidence, his voice carrying a note of prophecy.

“The Universe has heard you, Salvador. And it won’t be long before your words become your reality.”

His statement lingered in the air, reverberating in my ears as I began to load my plate with an array of tantalizing foods. It seemed that a late supper was the gift of the moment.

Despite my dulled taste, my senses were catching hints of flavor every now and then. My stomach growled its approval. He hoisted his leg onto the chair, his foot dangling just above the floor, and rested his chin on his kneecap. His gaze seemed to bore into the worn wood of the table, lost in thought.

“The Mystic would be able to say,” was what he came out with. “He’d know how you got here. You could accompany me on my journey. He

could give both of us answers, and possibly help you find your way on more levels than one.”

His words struck a chord, seizing my complete attention. The morsel of meat in my mouth was swiftly swallowed, and I found myself setting aside the half-eaten food.

“Who is he?”

“He’s an enigma, truth be told. Possesses powers no one else can fathom. And folks from every corner of the cosmos seek him out... all in pursuit of his guidance,” Tyger explained, his words painting a chessmatic image of this mysterious figure.

I quietly weighed the information, letting the scale of possibilities tilt back and forth. This *Mystic* was shrouded in riddles. He seemed to be my only glimmer of hope, my best chance at unearthing the elusive answers. There was no alternative; the prospect of an eternal nomadic existence wasn’t appealing.

“If he can help me, I want to meet him. I have no idea where I am, and you are the only person I know right now. I don’t wish to get more lost than I already am. This is quite an inconvenience for me.” I voiced my concerns, a layer of desperation beneath my composed demeanor.

“Don’t worry about it; we’ll get to the bottom of it. Cheers to the both of us for now,” Tyger said, raising his cup in a toast. He drained the remaining contents in a single, fluid motion and rose to his feet. “Stay here, and listen!”

“Listen to what?” I asked, left baffled by his cryptic instruction. He offered a sly smirk in response and vanished into the crowd, leaving me to my own musings.

My mind felt like a shattered mirror, shards of memories strewn around, making a coherent reflection seem like an insurmountable task.

What did that light signify? I think I heard a horn.

Deciphering the mysterious events felt like navigating a labyrinth in the dark.

While I was deep in introspection, a resonating applause disrupted my thoughts. Tyger emerged, bathed in the glow of soft candlelight, on a podium that had materialized behind me. The room transformed as all

other sources of light dimmed to obscurity, leaving only the flickering dance of shadows cast by the encircling candles. They seemed to bow to him, painting an ethereal halo around his figure. Tyger exuded an aura of unwavering confidence, each deliberate step towards the grand piano further asserting his authority. His chin was set high, a visual testament to his composed self-assuredness. Grasping the microphone with an elegant hand, he guided it towards his mouth. His fingers, long and seemingly sculpted for the purpose, found their place on the piano keys with graceful precision.

With the first touch of his fingers against the cool ivory, the room descended into a reverential silence, holding its collective breath in anticipation. The first note hung in the air, a poignant beginning to the song that was to come.

*Now you must sail across the sea,
Without my hand in this grand decree.
Tears blur my vision, so hard to see
As I face the pain of your leave from me.*

*Off you go, into the setting sun,
A journey new that's just begun.
Can't hold back these feelings inside;
My love for you can no longer hide.*

*The weight of goodbye is heavy on me,
Yet you seem to sail, so carefree.
I hug you tightly, whispering "no."
A love so deep, I've come to know.*

*Off you go, into the setting sun,
A journey new that's just begun.
Can't hold back these feelings inside;
My love for you can no longer hide.*

*As you drift into the unknown,
A place from where no man has flown,
I clutch your warmth, your worn-out cloak;
In silence now, my heart has spoke.*

*Off you go, into the setting sun,
A journey new that's just begun.
Can't hold back these feelings inside,
My love for you can no longer hide.*

*Into the sunset, forever you float
My love for you, a silent note.
This was fate, it came too late;
With words unspoken, I await.*

The melody started slow, its haunting beauty sending shivers coursing through me. Tyger's voice, deep and resonant, reverberated with a raw passion that was palpable in the silent room. With each piano key he struck, the thrumming vibration pulsed in the room, weaving a spell of euphoria. The crowd sat spellbound, even the usually raucous, respecting the sacred atmosphere. Each person was swept into their own emotional odyssey. The room, steeped in shadows, was a vessel, its occupants adrift on the sea of music.

3

I spent the days ahead exploring the ship. Every twist and turn, of which there were many, revealed countless intriguing sights. The ship's bow curved gracefully, shaped like a mermaid's body. I could almost feel the chill of the cosmic wind she sailed through, her carved hands bearing the weight of the vessel as if swimming across the velvet void of space. From under the elbow extended spiky and long fins, a breathtaking display of

craftsmanship that I found enjoyment in analyzing. The main part of the ship boasted twelve decks. The captain's cabin and officer quarters were off-limits. They were towards the stern, separated from the rest of us. The stern rose high, resembling the shape of a shark fin, but much broader. Eight layers of windows, each becoming narrower towards the top, marked the stern.

There was plenty of space to walk around, and even more to cover. The ship boasted a bucket of water and mop, known to clean the deck without anyone's assistance. At first, I asked if there were ghosts, but everyone laughed at me. The explanation was not any less surreal than my guess. It was magic, they said.

"Of course it is."

Frequently, I found myself scaling the ship to its highest point, the crow's nest, from where I could gaze into the vastness stretching ahead. Slumber still hadn't taken me. I spent most of my time there, keeping watch while others slept. I tried closing my eyes, but nothing would happen. After a few hours each night of twisting and turning, I would just give up and spend the rest of it there.

One of the men on board would ever so kindly remind me that "Evil never sleeps, lad," each time he passed me by. Apparently, that was the first thing anyone ever heard him say. It was a privilege.

From time to time, the captain's voice would fill the ship, raw and powerful, a rough melody that bounced off the wooden walls. While it lacked the heartrending touch of Tyger's song at the feast, it still reverberated with a deep passion, a sailor's song that tingled in your ears and lingered in your chest.

He was right about Nancy's Galaxy Milk. In the cup, it looked like a nebula had been captured, an edible cosmos swirling with hues of indigo and stardust that tasted as exotic as it appeared—a mix of sweet and tangy, a cosmic cocktail that would dance on the tongue.

After the feast, I remembered to find her and deliver the captain's order. Nancy was the oldest crewmember. She reminded me a bit of my grandmother with her mannerisms and gentleness. She took a liking to me as well and would give me free food, which I refused at first just to

be polite. Inside, I was hoping she would offer more because my belly was never satisfied. Despite gorging myself on plate after plate of food, a hollow emptiness still lingered within. The only thing I got out of the act of eating was fatigue. Fat was an abstract concept to me by that point.

One particular night found me alone, delving into the deep recesses of the ship. The darkness of the corridor was broken sporadically by the soft, flickering glow of lanterns, casting long, dancing shadows. Their dim light punctuated the musty air, thick with the scent of old timber and the distant resonance of the ship's hull against the gravitational waves.

A certain sound caught my attention right as I came across a sign. It eventually read **Authorized Personnel Only**. Underneath it, there was a wooden table with a small set of earplugs.

Practice what you preach.

Me being the rebel I was I had to break the rules and enter. It was stronger than me. I took a pair but didn't feel the need to put them in. I slowly strolled down the empty corridor avoiding making any noise.

The sound became louder the deeper I went. Its echoes were like waves coming over me. It slowly morphed into a voice, that of a woman. It was a harmony being sung. No words, just raw emotion. Tyger himself would envy whomever it was producing those notes. The closer I got the more hypnotic they were. The small part of me that wanted to turn around and leave could not resist its pull. It felt like my body was tied up by an invisible string that pulled me in and led me to the source. The vessel that is my body was adrift out of my control. I had to lay my eyes upon the person from whom it came.

I stood in front of the door from which the sound was coming. I lifted up my right hand in an attempt to give the wood a knock but my left, of its own accord, pushed down the door knob. The door moved bit by bit as the blue lights danced across the walls. It opened, revealing a dark room with a large pool at its end. The blue color of the bottom was so bright that lanterns were superfluous. My eyes searched the room and right in the center of the pool, there was a head sticking out. A woman with black hair was floating as she sang.

Upon noticing me, she slowly lifted her hand, motioning me to come closer. Her gaze was an intoxicating brew of mystery and promise that my eyes drank in greedily. Despite the tranquility of her movements, the scent of the storm seemed to hang in the air around her. It sent currents of anticipation prickling over my skin. My heart started rushing. She did not blink and her eyes never abandoned me. Neither did I want them to. She swam in my direction and I walked in hers. I could feel those eyes looking at my soul and desires of which there were many. As we slowly came closer, I opened my mouth wishing to say a thought but she pressed her finger against her lips and nose. I dared not disrupt her performance. I felt the blood flowing through my veins as arousal got the better of me. It was a whirlpool that pulled me in. Her skin was wet and had drops crawling down her face. Her hair was pulled back behind her ears. Too perfectly.

Her eyes sparkled green, and I imagined pressing my lips against hers. I had never met her and yet she made me feel as though I knew her well. A moment of hesitation came over me, but she drowned it away with a smile. My eyes wandered down her body.

Her figure, glimpsed through the shimmering water, was mysterious and hypnotically beautiful. Every curve seemed to draw me in, each movement a promise of something more, something untamed and yet inviting. Her bare skin gleamed under the pool's radiant blue light, the water clinging to her as if afraid to let go. I breathed in her scent, a mix of the sea and something indescribably feminine. The woman was at the edge of the pool still singing, and there she stayed until I came.

I dropped to my knees in front of her. She lifted her hand from the pool and reached out. My hand rose by itself and slowly touched hers. Her touch sent a jolt through me, warm like a sun-kissed seashell, and her skin was surprisingly smooth, the coolness of the water lingering on her flesh. She slid her palm up my forearm and slowly pulled me in closer. The butterflies in my stomach began to dance. With the same hand, she slid up further across my shoulder and behind my neck. She let my hair slip between her fingers. Her eyes began to squint as she moved in. As our lips were about to touch, I closed my eyes.

That was the first blink my body managed after my feet stepped into the room. The emptiness between us seemed to grow farther. I let myself lean into her but I failed to feel the taste of her lips. The beautiful woman I had seen was now absent. The gentle touch at the back of my head turned into a strong grip as the harmony stopped. I quickly opened my eyes to find that I had misread the situation. Where legs should've been gently treading water, there was a shimmering, scaly tail flicking rhythmically—a creature of the deep masquerading as a woman. The sight was as chilling as the icy water lapping at my knees.

She yanked my head under the water, causing my eyes to widen in shock. I pulled back, struggling against her inhuman grip, fighting for control of my own head. As I fought, I noticed a chain around her waist. She was trapped just as much as I was. My ship was being sunk and I was in need of a pocket hole. Then out of nowhere her grip loosened. I pulled out my head from the pool. My hair stuck against my face as I spat water from my mouth.

Tyger towered over me, his blade gleaming ominously in the dim light as it lay inside the nymph's mouth. A tense silence hung in the air, punctuated by the metallic taste of fear on my tongue and the sharp, salty scent of the sea rising from her open mouth.

"Another note and I'll rip those chords out," said Tyger. She stuck her tongue out beneath the blade, licking the steel as he stayed as still a predator waiting to attack.

A tiny stream of blood formed down the left side of her mouth, from the sharp edge.

"Put those earplugs in and go," he told me.

I reached for them inside my pocket and stuck them in. I got off the floor and burst out the room breathing heavily, my senses and thoughts rushing back my way.

I lost control. How could I let that happen? So weak...

I went back down the same corridor and dropped off the ear plugs and up the stairs to one of the windows on the ship. I stared with a blank expression on myself, hoping a black hole would appear out of nowhere.

I wanted to disappear. The sound of footsteps approaching soon came from behind.

“Good thing I followed you. Didn’t know you were illiterate,” Tyger started, his gaze lingering outside the window.

“Close enough. Why did you follow me?”

He turned to me, the light from the lantern casting long shadows on his face.

“Caution,” he said, his eyes never leaving mine. “Something you obviously don’t know much about. That was a nymph. It would’ve happened to anyone. Her voice is a poisonous trap. Once in your system, there is no escape. Hence, the earplugs.”

“She was chained around the waist,” I murmured, a sense of bitterness creeping into my tone.

“She’s a sort of endemic species. She is to be sold most likely and then be used as a toy and treated like property. She is a common fantasy many men hope to live.”

All the butterflies in my stomach died.

“The same thing that gives her value is the same thing that devalues her. Ironic.”

“She acted out of spite for what had been done to her. Sounds like all of my exes to be honest,” Tyger added with a smirk across his face.

He walked by me and put his hand on my shoulder.

“Take something from this. Don’t trust every pretty girl you meet. Never confuse love with lust.”

4

The old man’s voice rang out, reverberating through the ancient timbered beams of our starship. It wrapped around the worn wooden masts and intertwined with the taut ropes.

“They’re more ruthless than they have ever been. First, they steal your shadow until nothing but the soul is left trapped inside the body.”

Tyger, a silhouette against the backdrop of the cosmos, visibly recoiled, his eyes reflecting a terror that no man should know. His silence screamed of a haunting familiarity. I could taste fear like a nebulous cloud on the horizon, yet I was driven by a thirst for knowledge that could not be quenched.

“Their names and forms are as numerous as the stars that speckle the night,” the old man murmured.

He clung to the ship’s carved railing, his gnarled fingers tracing the weathered patterns etched by countless cosmic storms.

“Some call them shadow people, demons, watchers in the night, while others bow down before them as the harbingers of the great cosmic death.”

His revelation brought back traces of a long-buried memory in my mind. A primal urge to abandon my quest welled up within me, yet the foggy image of the Mystic—my only compass pointing towards home—remained ever elusive.

“How... How does one lose a shadow?” I asked, my voice barely a whisper against the lullaby of the cosmos. Tyger, drawing his gaze away from the expanse, responded.

“Each of us carries two spirits: an outer shadow that dances with the light of life, and an inner soul, the eternal flame within. Lose one, and we’re but a drifting ghost ship, a celestial body devoid of its gravity.”

The old man cut him short.

“Enough! We should not speak of them any further. The mere utterance of their existence might draw their gaze upon us.”

The tension on Tyger’s face told a tale that words could not. The old man stood firm, a lighthouse amidst a sea of uncertainty, yet Tyger—his expression was a composition of raw emotions. He was no stranger to the shadow theft, it would seem.

Just as these thoughts played in my mind, we found ourselves on the precipice of another calamity - the Void. A monstrous black hole squatting at the nadir of the galaxy, a cosmic Leviathan feasting on starlight and men’s hopes.

As cosmic dust particles rained down upon our deck, casting an ethereal glow across the worn wood, murmurs of anticipation filled the air like the whispered prayers of a doomed crew.

“It’s almost...” a voice trailed off. *Time*, I filled in the silence. Yet in the vast expanse of space, time was as elusive as a wayward comet.

Beneath us, a luminescent entity, akin to a white jellyfish, glided past our vessel, casting a fading glow across the dark sea. Its glow painted shadows that danced on our deck, a play of darkness and light.

“Look down!” Tyger’s command brought me back from the spectacle.

Below us, a vortex of spiraling light began to form—it was the all-consuming maw of the Void. The fabric of space was contorting around it, a vortex promising nothing but oblivion.

Suddenly, the Void exerted its dominance. It struck us like a cosmic tempest, a gravitational surge pulling us into its deathly swirl. Panic swept through our crew like a wild sea storm, their screams haunting the ship’s timbers.

Tyger’s voice cut through the chaos, his tone steady and resolute. “Not today.”

“What do we do, then?” said one of the passengers. The words were a desperate cry for guidance. They hung in the cosmic storm that was brewing around us.

“We ride the whirlpool’s edge,” Tyger commanded, his voice cutting through the shroud of anxiety.

His plan, bold as steering through a supernova, represented our unanimous agreement and stood as our solitary beacon of hope against the looming shadow of oblivion.

“Adjust the stellar sails! Anchor the etheric levers! Call upon the cosmic spirits!”

The strange orders flew around fast and frantic, each one a desperate attempt to bend the unforgiving laws of space to our will.

Where’s the captain?

“Salvador!” Tyger’s call jolted me from my stunned silence. His eyes, alight with a fierce determination, met mine. “Man the starboard thrusters!”

What are those?

My mind was a turbulent sea, waves of fear crashing relentlessly against the shores of my sanity. I felt the cold fingers of dread clutching my heart, threatening to drag me into a chasm of despair. I was no sailor of the stars, no conqueror of cosmic tempests. I was just a lost little boy whose knowledge of starships was as little as a shadow on a moonless night.

The frantic crew, their faces masks of controlled chaos, blurred past me. I felt as if I were trapped, suffocating under the weight of my incompetence. I ran across the deck like a headless chicken hoping for someone to appear. I came across a crewman, his hands expertly weaving through the rigging like a seasoned cosmic mariner.

“Help me!” I implored.

He nodded, leaving his task to guide my trembling hands over the ancient mechanisms.

The ship groaned and creaked as the Void’s merciless pull grew stronger. Our cruiser, once a graceful mermaid cutting through the cosmic waves, now felt like a frail leaf caught in a hurricane, tilting to one side.

The cosmic rain that fell upon us intensified. It washed over the ship casting ghostly reflections of the crew who were fighting their own battles. The main battle wasn’t external. It was fought internally within their heart.

Amidst this chaos, a figure tumbled from the ship, his scream swallowed by the black maw of the whirlpool. The sight struck me like a rogue asteroid - a reminder of the thin line that separated existence from non-existence.

As we waged this desperate battle on the edge of nothingness, I caught sight of Tyger. He had retreated from the chaos, his body a silent figure against the storm. He had surrendered himself to the violent rocking of the ship, his body moving in harmony with each violent lurch. His eyes were closed, lost in a meditation that seemed at odds with our current predicament. It was as if he was trying to find a balance within the turmoil, a hesitant acceptance of the terrible, beautiful chaos of the

cosmos. In contrast to Tyger's ethereal serenity, the captain stood like a defiant monument against the storm.

"Sink us, if ye dare!" he roared, a mad challenge hurled at the unforgiving Void. Each syllable danced in the storm, a frenzy of defiant proclamation. It made me shiver, feeling as though he was jinxing us. He held on and laughed, revelling in the horror of it all.

Look what a boring job does to a man...

He ordered the band to play his favorite symphony. If the vessel was going to sink, he might as well go out singing. His declaration of hope for an end that married his fate with his beloved vessel was as poignant as it was terrifying.

I guess we all go a little mad sometimes...

Every passing moment, we teetered on the brink of annihilation, each breath a desperate fight against the pulling tide.

Finally, with a lurch that sent us sprawling across the deck, we broke free. We had ridden the whirlpool's edge and emerged on the other side. The cosmic storm eased; the ethereal silence fell over us. Our starship hummed a soothing lullaby as we drifted through the vast ocean, surrounded by the timeless watch of the stars.

5

Tyger and I walked along the ship's deck, our boots thudding against the damaged wooden panels. They bore the silent testament of the tempest we had encountered, deeply etched scars and discolorations.

"Where do you get your ideas from?" I asked

"Sometimes it feels like I'm stealing from the divine, like I'm tapping into a source and taking inspiration from it."

"I thought it was just me."

Following the storm, the celestial setting was a sight to behold. A canvas stretched before me, a constellation-studded mirage that flickered between awe-inspiring grandeur and a deep pang of homesickness. For

just a moment, an illusion danced across the empty space. A trick of the light, perhaps, conjuring the image of the familiar green forest and the small house on my home world. It shimmered tantalizingly on the periphery of my vision, a ghostly apparition from a place far, far away.

My hand reached out instinctively towards the spectre, fingers clutching at the cold void of reality. The vivid mirage faded as swiftly as it had appeared, leaving behind the stark new metallic railings of the ship under my touch. The sharp contrast spoke volumes without a word to the vast chasm of space between the here and there, between the now and then. A dull ache of longing reverberated through me, blending with the ship's low thrum.

"What's it like?" Tyger asked, his fingers fidgeting with the rigging of the ship, a curious glint in his gaze. "The place you call home. I can see you reaching for it."

Overreaching, I thought.

His question was simple yet complex, and I found myself grappling for the right words, my hand leaning against the railings of the ship for support.

"Well... A good place to start would be by saying none of this can happen where I'm from. This is pure myth and impossible. Everything is more grounded in... umm, there's no magic, let's put it that way. Wooden ships only sail the seas, not the sky. We use these things that we call planes and rockets. They're made out of metal and..."

"We have those too," Tyger cut in abruptly, his words landing like a punch, the subtlety in his tone hinting at the dangers of unchecked technological progress.

Taken aback, I stammered out, "You do?"

He nodded, a nonchalant shrug accompanying his words. "We just don't use them around here. Other planets use them round the clock. I've heard people talking about galaxies that use some sort of warp drive that bends the waves around it, making it travel faster. Less resistance."

The strangeness of the conversation swirled around me, making my head spin.

“Oh... I’m definitely high. Somebody must have drugged me when I wasn’t looking...” I muttered to myself, my gaze involuntarily shifting towards the abyss of space. His brow furrowed in confusion.

“We are in space.”

Swiftly, I waved his concern aside and redirected him.

“So, where are you from?”

Tyger’s back was to the vast emptiness as he leaned on the bulkhead, his eyes taking in the celestial landscape. He looked upward, seemingly lost in thought.

“I don’t really know, to be honest. My parents left me when I was born. I grew up on a nearby globe called Pupilie.”

The weight of his words hung between us, an unseen tether binding us in shared understanding.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I haven’t had the best relationship with my parents either, but that’s nothing compared to you. What’s Pupilie like?” I attempted to shift the conversation away from such a personal topic.

His eyes lit up as he began describing his homeland.

“Round, and mostly covered in ice besides the one large circular ocean on the front side people arrive from. There’s huge animals as tall as hills. A lot of places to explore and a lot of things to see, if you don’t mind the cold.”

A smile blossomed on his face as he spoke, reflecting a fond nostalgia.

Feeling a twinge of envy, I murmured, “I’d like to visit a place like that one day.”

With a hint of mischief in his eyes, Tyger retorted, “Maybe I’ll be the one taking you there, who knows. Do you have anything like that on your planet?”

I chuckled ruefully at his question.

“Ice, yes, giant animals as large as hills... Not even close, but we’re working on it. We used to back in the day... None of that matters, really, if I don’t find my way back, does it?”

Tyger’s gaze turned thoughtful, a mournful note creeping into his voice as he mentioned the faceless crew member who had been claimed by the Void.

“I suppose not. But... everyone matters to someone. That man who fell... to us, he was just another hand on deck. But somewhere, to someone, he was their entire world.”

His expression turned serious. Tyger turned to face me, his hand gripping the ship’s rigging as he asked, “Why do you have to go? Why not explore everywhere and everything, the same way I do. Do you have something precious to you?”

Reflecting on his words, I realized there were indeed things I held dear.

“A few things. I have a dog called Zev. He’s probably waiting for me. I have to feed him since my folks won’t remember to do it most likely. I also made a promise.”

The image of my grandfather came unbidden to my mind, a promise left unfulfilled.

“Yes, promises are important, aren’t they?” Tyger mused, gripping a nearby rope. “Well then, stay true to it. Keep and don’t break it. Don’t put it on the shelf and let it get dusty. That would be my advice.”

I nodded, a smile of appreciation on my face.

“Good advice. Maybe this *Mystic* should have come to you and not the other way around. I see a bright future for you in enlightenment. The Tyger Guru.”

His laughter filled the air, a sound that seemed to resonate with the hum of the ship.

“Yeah, maybe...” he said, looking off into the distance. And for a moment, just a moment, everything felt right.

6

“Do you know how to wield a sword?” Tyger asked.

“I used to attend fencing classes out of boredom, if you know what that is.”

A playful grin spread across Tyger's face as he threw me a sparring sword, fashioned from seasoned wood. The expansive deck of our ship became our battleground, under the gaze of distant nebulae and galaxies. He took a stance, a silhouette against the ethereal backdrop of space.

"Do your best," he encouraged, his tone laced with a teasing dare.

"My best would be slamming this into your head. You sure about that?" I questioned, hoping the humor in my voice would mask the underlying nervousness.

"Try it. Perhaps your best isn't enough," he taunted, a smirk playing on his lips that reflected a confidence born from countless battles.

I gritted my teeth, gripping the handle of the wooden sword, its weight foreign in my hand. Unleashing a blitz of moves, I hoped to surprise him with my fervor. Yet the wooden sword was of a different ilk than what I had practiced with. Its unfamiliar weight slowed my attacks.

Tyger sidestepped each of my strikes with an effortless grace that was almost infuriating. His agility was mesmerizing, movements akin to the celestial bodies we sailed past—fluid yet constant. Each attack I launched was met with a deft evasion, the slight shift of his body making him an elusive target.

Just when I thought I was getting the hang of it, a sudden, unexpected force hit my abdomen. Tyger had delivered a swift kick that knocked the breath out of me. I doubled over, gasping, trying to suck in the starlit air that seemed to have thinned. My grip on the wooden sword faltered. Tyger took a step back, giving me space but watching my every move.

"Expected me to play fair?"

I shook my head, still struggling to regain my breath, the lesson sinking deeper than the aching in my gut.

Tyger then started to recite a piece of poetry. His words wove around us, harmonizing with the rhythm of our clashing swords.

The dueling duo danced, and what a rhythm it was!

The sword, all breath lost, a messenger for the word.

The frost heart beating, finding a purpose, and cured.

The soul lured into a fence; the rage of life endured...

His poetry hung heavy in the air, each word a verbal dance that mirrored our physical one. His poetry stunned me just as much as his skill with a sword, and in my moment of stunned awe, he exploited the opening.

Our swords clashed, a resounding noise in the otherwise silent cosmos. His strength forced me back a step, my rear foot sliding on the stardust-slick deck. In that fleeting moment of imbalance, Tyger acted. A swift, fluid movement of his foot and my leg was swept from under me.

Despite the sudden fall, I did my best to guard myself, raising my sword defensively.

“Warriors of old used to make up poems during the great battles,” Tyger informed me.

“This doesn’t qualify,” I shot back, using all my strength to push myself up and charge him, abandoning the measured movements of fencing for wild, desperate swings. I overreached, and as a result, found myself tumbling down to the deck once more.

Tyger stood over me, his sword pointing between my eyes, his words searing into my mind with unsettling clarity.

“You’re wild and passionate... I approve.”

“And you’re good with a sword; I hate this,” I admitted, my tone begrudging.

“I’m great with a sword, and you’re not,” he corrected me, a fact I couldn’t deny after our duel. “The weapon chooses you and you must never ever let it escape you. With it, you’ll lose your life as well. You haven’t been chosen yet and I pray you’ll never have to be.”

He extended his hand, pulling me up from the deck.

A warrior poet in space, I thought, looking at Tyger, his wisdom resonating louder than the silent cosmos around us.

“I dare say you seem to really enjoy fighting,” I told him as he placed his sword to the side and gazed at me with a newfound respect.

“I love combat but hate fighting. Fights aren’t fair and anything goes. You can be the best swordsman in the world but if you’re outnumbered the best thing you can hope for is to die fighting. I’d rather express myself

through music and poetry. I try to find beauty in everything. To me, combat is like a dance where you have to watch every step, otherwise you'll get embarrassed. I'm free, but I'm no fool either. I'd rather be a warrior in a garden than a gardener at war," he explained, his eyes mirroring the distant stars.

"I hate gardening, I always get dirt on myself," I joked, trying to lighten the heavy atmosphere.

"During combat, when you don't know whether you'll survive the next few seconds, I guarantee you'd be praying for those seeds. Every sane man chooses soil over blood," Tyger replied.

His voice was stern, but not without kindness. His words lingered in the cold cosmic air, a reminder of the world we were a part of. The ship creaked gently, the magical bucket and mop cleaning the remnants of our sparring match as the colossal mermaid, carved at the bow of the ship, sliced through the cosmic winds, leading us closer to our destination. I found myself looking down at my hands, the sting of the wooden sword's handle still imprinted on my skin, Tyger's words echoing in my mind. The warrior poet had given me more than a sword-fighting lesson.

7

As the long beacon above me held my gaze captive, a wreath of awe and reverence spiralled around me, its cool tendrils seeping into my pores. I remembered Tyger's tales of this soaring spectacle—a surreal creation that once served as a sacred temple, a place where the divine and the devout met in hushed prayer. As we drew closer, I could see the remnants of its former grandeur. Its spire, which had once been adorned with intricate carvings and sacred symbols, now stood bare and stripped of its former glory. The vines that had once glowed with life had withered away, leaving behind only a ghostly glow that hinted at their former spirit.

The light at the top, which had likely once guided the faithful to their prayers, now only served as a guide for interstellar travellers seeking refuge.

“Some say it’s old as The Slumbering of creation itself,” Tyger mused. “It hasn’t even been recorded who built it or how. Someone remarkably gifted without a doubt. Someone with a vast imagination and an eye for detail.”

In spite of its ravaged condition, the temple pulsed with an indomitable aura, a spiritual resonance that stirred the air around it and whispered in the silence.

“I would like to stay here all day long and admire it, but unfortunately, we won’t be staying for long,” Tyger added as he was looking around.

“What do you mean? Are we taking another ship to reach the land?” I asked. “What’s the plan?”

My words were met with a mocking chuckle that left me puzzled. The abstract idea of having a plan seemed to amuse him so he just responded to my first question, disregarding the second.

“Not exactly. We could, but we won’t. We’d have to endure a long wait until another ship passes by, so what we’re going to do is jump.”

“Jump?” I asked as my eyebrows rose from shock. “Down there? We’re in orbit if you haven’t noticed.”

“It just so happens that I have. We are going to wear spacesuits that have parachutes built into them. Be like a leaf and let the winds carry you wherever they may.”

He left me speechless. I questioned him if this had been a joke, but to my disappointment, it had not. He was earnest. He even laughed at my fear.

You won’t be laughing for long, I thought.

Leaning over the edge to know how far up we were was completely unnecessary. *Too high.*

Numbers and distances didn’t matter at that point. Just the mere thought of free-falling into the abyss below triggered a torrent of sweat that made my palms slick, while my knees faltered, threatening to buckle under the weight of impending doom.

"I thought I was the crazy one, turns out it was you all along," I told him.

"A little bit," he remarked. "People don't usually choose this option, but it's much quicker and more enjoyable, to me, at least."

"Yeah, key words—to you!" I spoke. "Do I even have a say in this?"

"Not really, since you'll lose your way without me."

"I'll end up losing much more if I go with you."

"So, you're a coward? I thought higher of you until now. I really did." Tyger attempted to lure me in with his remarks.

"No, I'm not a coward. I'm a reasonable human being that enjoys living. If you jump, you will definitely start thinking higher of me since I'll be up here, and you will be dead, down there," I said as I pointed with my hand at the planet below us.

He walked off while I kept staring down and calculating the distance and the speed we would be falling at. *Too fast!*

"They aren't as cheap as they used to be," said Tyger. "Here you go."

He handed me one of the boxes, and I suspiciously looked down at it. In somewhat of a rush, he opened his, and a spacesuit popped out. These suits were very different from the ones I had known. They seemed to be more sophisticated and flamboyant. They were not the standard white color. His was orange with a red helmet that had lights in it. Mine was black, including the visor that hid my face. In addition, my suit possessed a regal elegance enhanced by a vibrant purple cape, adding a majestic flair to my overall appearance.

"I doubt this will protect us considering the speed we will be falling at. We will burn to death before we reach the Stratosphere," I said. "Did I mention how much I like my hair glued to my head?"

"Don't worry, just put it on," Tyger told me. "By the way, could you zip this up for me? Thanks."

His treatment of the situation disturbed me. *So casual...*

"Well, at least the blood-red helmet is fitting."

My heartbeat thrummed in my ears, a relentless drumming that drowned out coherent thought, roaring with the insistence of a revved-up engine. My wavy brown hair was likely turning white from fear,

matching the single stripe that slithered down my forehead like a serpent. The dripping sweat made it stick. It held firm to my forehead.

“There we go, we’re ready. Come on, Salvador, hurry up.”

I tricked my mind by not thinking about what awaited me. A thought slipped inside here and there through the cracks of my shield. I used every ounce of my willpower to suppress them. Once again, I pleaded for him to change our course of action, but it was useless once again.

“Stop being a child. It’s going to be fun, I promise,” Tyger told me. “You are missing a bit of adventure in your life. Stop existing and start living.”

“Sure, because most adults jump from space on a regular basis. Is that what you’re trying to say?” I pushed back with my remarks.

“Listen, everything will be just fine, have faith in your fate. I promise nothing will happen. You just have to pull that cord, and it will open. Worst case scenario, you break your legs.”

Tyger’s attempts to convince me utterly failed. I think they gave me even more reason to refuse the stupidity that awaited.

“That’s not the worst case. What if it doesn’t open?” I asked.

“Well then... You die.”

“Oh, thanks for the comfort. I really appreciate it.”

He laughed out loud and hit me on the shoulder. Nudging me wouldn’t work. Not under those circumstances at the very least.

It's my choice, not his. I'm going to do this because I want to do it.

The helmet in my hands grew heavier as I placed it on my head and inhaled, possibly my last conscious breath. Both of my eyes were kept closed. *Everything will go well*, I kept repeating.

First, Tyger went towards the edge and looked down. The entire scene appeared too familiar to him. It was just another day. Never before had I witnessed such calmness in the face of death.

“Do we even know if we are going to land in the right place?” I questioned him.

“I’ve never been here before, so no,” he replied. “That’s half of the excitement. Would you rather land straight away on the Mystic’s front lawn? That’s boring. I’m in it for the adventure.”

The answer to such a question was so obvious to me. I pondered whether I should even reply. “I’m not.”

“You should hurry up and jump. The planet is rotating fast, so you might end up in a totally different place from where I’ll land. See you down there,” were his last words to me as far as I was concerned before he gave me the two-finger salute and leaped abruptly from the station, falling to his death.

I held my purple helmet since my hands could not touch my head. My guts were climbing their way up to my throat. I was a few seconds away from puking, but I held it in. Taking a few deep breaths, rapidly one after the other, calmed me down. Tyger kept shrinking in the distance below, appearing smaller than an ant.

“Okay, three, two, one and... three, two, one,” I kept repeating to myself.

My legs would not budge. They had a mind of their own. Fear was a perfectly normal thing. It was what kept humans alive for millennia. Over the years of my life, I learned to befriend fear and considered it an asset even.

Do I even have to go home? Staying up here isn’t too bad. I doubt my family even misses me that much. I’m a depressed wreck. Would I miss me?

I walked back up the old stone stairs and approached a man sitting on a stone bench in the corner, reading a newspaper. It was the most normal thing I had seen in days.

“Umm... excuse me, but when is the next ship arriving?” I asked.

He looked at me from above the glasses that were placed on his long nose.

“In a month!” the man said in a deep voice. He had an unpleasant demeanor.

I nodded, while slowly moving away, avoiding eye contact. I went back to where I was. My elbows were dug into my knees as I sat and observed. A cloud of disappointment covered me, but there was no rain to wash my fears away. As thoughts debated each other on what my next move should be, I heard yelling behind me. I turned around to see what

the commotion was about. The man appeared to be yelling at me for some reason. I was back to my feet, my chest facing the man.

What did I do?

“YOU! YOU STOLE THE SUITS!” he yelled, running my way.

“Me? I didn’t steal anything.”

Then it came to me that I did not witness Tyger purchasing them. Now I knew why he had been in a rush the entire time. As the man closed in, ominous and resolute, thoughts of punitive laws and the consequences of theft cast long, uninvited shadows on my psyche. The sudden accusation of theft snapped me from my paralysis. My next move was clear—I could either stay and face punishment or follow Tyger into the abyss. The man reached with his arms for me.

I closed my eyes and surrendered to the chaos of the fall, arms wide open as I hurtled towards the abyss of space. The bright face of the sun smiled down upon my soul, a beacon of hope in the darkness, while below me, the emptiness of space yawned wide, threatening to consume me.

As I fell, my body twisted and turned, caught in a surreal dance of death and rebirth. The laws of physics didn’t apply to me as I tumbled through space at breakneck speed, my body writhing in ecstasy and terror.

But this was no ordinary descent. Strange apparitions materialized in the chasm, haunting and ethereal. Ghostly figures, their faces contorted with pain and longing, reached out towards me, their fingers grazing my skin as I passed through them. Their murmurs seemed to linger in my ears, carrying tales of forgotten realms and shattered dreams.

Suddenly, a colossal seven-headed mechanical dragon-like creation emerged from the depths of the darkness, its presence heralded by a thunderous sonic boom. It ruptured the delicate equilibrium of the surrounding realm. The shockwave rippled outward, distorting the fabric of reality itself. Time seemed to momentarily falter, as if the very essence of existence paused in anticipation of the impending clash. Its body gleamed with a malevolent aura, and it lunged towards me with jaws

agape, hungry for my very essence. Flames erupted from its mechanical belly, scorching the emptiness with searing heat.

With a surge of adrenaline, I evaded its snapping jaws, narrowly escaping its clutches. The dragon roared in frustration, its metallically plated wings thrashing in the atmosphere as it pursued me relentlessly.

A series of floating islands and rocks materialized around me, rising up from the depths at astonishing speeds. They became my stepping stones to survival. I maneuvered my way between them, defying gravity and leading the beast on a treacherous chase.

The dragon, blinded by its programmed insatiable hunger, pursued me without caution. It crashed into one of the floating islands with a thunderous impact, its metallic frame shattering on the spot. But even in its dismembered state, one of its heads continued to snap and gnash its jaws, desperate to devour me.

I continued my descent, my heart pounding in my chest, as the surreal landscape unfolded beneath me. Twisted metal intermingled with floating fragments of otherworldly wonders. With a final burst of determination, I broke free from the clutches of the falling islands, leaving the dismembered dragon behind.

As I approached the ground, the world below transformed into a mosaic of both beauty and horror. It was a labyrinth of bone-weary promises, a painting of despair and hope.

But through it all, a flicker of light guided me. It beckoned me towards my new reality, promising salvation amidst the chaos. I reached out, my hand trembling, and grasped at the strands of light. They pulsed with energy, pulling me towards my destiny.

And then, as if in a grand symphony, a parachute deployed, catching the wind and slowing my descent. I soared towards the clouds above, suspended in the sky like a celestial marionette. Yet I knew that my journey was far from over. The surreal landscape stretched out before me, an endless canvas of possibility. I embraced my first rebirth, my newfound purpose. I had fallen from the heavens, a savior to be, amidst the vast emptiness of everything.

THE GREAT WAVE

1

I sighed in relief. If the drop had not caused me to pass out, the relief might as well have. Each inhale was a silent celebration, a sign that I was amongst those whose hearts still beat.

My eyes started circling around at what awaited me. Coming towards me from below was the light sand of the beach. Over the blue water far away ran a train. The gap of space between each cloud formed the appearance of a long and high blue bridge. It blended with the railway wagons that extended into the horizon. Wisps of cloud swirled upwards, their fleeting forms mimicking the ephemeral dance of smoke from a train's funnel. Beneath the bridge flew a flock of paper cranes. They danced with the wind that carried them.

Clouds that had once cradled me dwindled away, their forms surrendering to the rising sea beneath.

Without wasting time, I took off my space suit, throwing it to the ground. It was forever to be stained with scorch marks. I followed and went down on my knees. I gathered the sand into the palm of my left hand and squeezed it tight. It escaped my clutches narrowly. My appreciation for it had never been greater. Space diving wasn't for me. I preferred being able to use my legs to carry me where I needed to go, not clouds. Each breath I took was a burden, my muscles aching with exhaustion, my eyes struggling to stay open. I yearned for the cool, forgiving embrace of the ground beneath me.

All of a sudden, neighs preceded by a culmination of blowing trumpets were coming from the sea. A massive wave was approaching. It worried me for a moment. It seemed abnormal in the way it was traveling to the coast.

A tsunami?

As it got closer, the foam on top began morphing into the appearance of multiple white seahorses racing to me. The bottom of their bodies was

the shape of trumpets. I was in utter shock. The one to the farthest right did not even seem as though he was made of water. Its form shimmered with such tangible clarity that it might as well have been plucked from the ocean's depths. The one on the left bore awkward, twisted proportions, its form failing to fully mimic the natural grace of a true seahorse.

My mind was blank. I was unwilling to move back. Their sounds continued into the distance. The wave of freedom carried them across the purity. As the wave collapsed, so did the horses, but they could still be heard. The water covered me but did not push me back. My knees were rooted into the ground, holding me up like a tree. I peered through the clear, swirling water, mesmerized by the graceful dance of the multicolored fish as they darted around me, unperturbed by my presence. The water had a mind of its own and did not cause me harm.

The water began pulling back from where it came but did not leave me empty-handed. It gave me much-needed strength. The tiredness was washed away, and I felt born anew. I took a moment to appreciate the ambiance around me. The reason for my being there came back. With both of my legs, I picked myself up off the ground. It was just the birds and myself.

"I should have jumped sooner," I said to myself.

Tyger was long ways away at that point. I had to find him firstly because of the theft. That was something we needed to talk about. How was the real question. There were no navigational tools on me. Nothing that could guide, not even a map. My inner compass had to do.

As I walked along the coastline, an overwhelming sense of wonder engulfed me. The cliffs rose before me, a majestic and imposing wall of rugged beauty. Carved by the relentless forces of wind and water, their layers of limestone and shale revealed the ancient tales of a forgotten era. They stood tall and solid, forming an impenetrable barrier between the land and the vast expanse of the sea, capturing both my imagination and my inability to venture inland. In the distance, a black dot was moving.

I rushed towards it in the hope it would be someone I could ask for directions. The waves in this area stood tall and defiant against the wild

winds, serving as a wall of water. A man, draped in a dark suit, stood in the heart of this elemental chaos. His outstretched hand, a desperate anchor, clung to a clutch of papers that fluttered in the tempest.

His briefcase, discarded behind him, mirrored his public display of vulnerability. The man seemed locked in a silent battle with the wind, his focus intensely drawn to the whirlwind of papers. He appeared oblivious to my approach. Upon close inspection, I noticed the man seemed to be in pain.

“Can I help you?” I ventured, breaking the rhythmic soundtrack of the swirling winds. He pivoted towards me, his distress audible through choking sobs, yet his eyes remained dry. The wind snatched the paper from his grasp, sending it spiraling away. His gaze tracked its flight, a mute goodbye to what had been tethered a moment ago.

“No, thank you for asking.”

“You sure? What happened?”

“A lot of things. I lost the opportunity of a lifetime. All the work carried away by waves greater than these.”

His gaze remained elusive, often retreating to the wave as he wrestled with his emotions, struggling to regain his composure. The wind blew one of the papers into my hand. It contained a drawing of a mechanism, a droid of some sort. After the weather calmed down, the wave remained standing firmly in the same place, while the water flowed in its natural pattern.

“When things don’t go my way, I often visualize a better future and try to make it a reality. At the end of the day, hope is all we have. That’s something you can’t afford to lose. Maybe what happened was better for you. Maybe you end up having your own business.”

I wasn’t sure I even believed the words I had uttered, yet said them nonetheless.

“Own business... Never thought of that before. Thank you for such kind words. What is your name?” he asked.

“Salvador,” I replied as I extended my hand.

“I am Matthew. A pleasure to meet you, Salvador,” he said as his hand enclosed mine, surprising me with a grip that belied his slender frame, strong and unyielding. “I really needed to hear that. Thank you.”

Matthew wore a black suit with a green tie. Lines creased his forehead and the corners of his eyes, suggesting a lifetime just past its midpoint. He had an olive skin tone, brown hair, and blue eyes, unlike mine which were green.

“What will you do now?” I asked.

Small talk. Do I even care? I need to get home.

“I do not know. The goal is the same, but the path changed and became a bit longer. I always did prefer being an underdog in life.”

“Each time I had faced doubt and emerged victorious, I found a sweetness in the success that made the struggle worthwhile,” I told him. “It’s always better to have your glass half full.”

“We can agree on that. Where are you headed?” he asked me.

“I’m looking for my companion. We’re headed to find some Mystic. I need her help. Would you know anything about all of that?”

“I only know what they say. This ‘Mystic’ supposedly has some magical powers that help people find peace. I doubt that very much, honestly. I have never met anyone who had received help, nothing but stories.”

His doubt amused me. I saw a bit of myself in him. Our opinion somewhat collided. Unlike his, my skepticism died a week ago.

“I have nothing to lose. Right now, they might be my only way out. I need to believe,” I told him.

“Understandable. I think... I remember someone who might know where you could find her.”

“I just want to add that I’ve been through a lot these past few days. I don’t have a place to stay. Do you know where I can go?”

“You can stay the night at my place if you want. I am alone anyway and have nothing better to do for the time being. I’m also a good man and love helping poor people such as yourself. No need to thank me.”

Poor person? Me?

“That would be perfect. Thank you,” I responded, trying to come across as nice as humanly possible. He didn’t seem bad, but I couldn’t afford to be rude even if the situation called for it. That being said, a cloud of relief came over me. No longer was I alone in this mysterious world. Another person I could communicate with entered my life. The heavy shroud of isolation began to lift.

“Follow me.”

I felt a stir within me, a sense of embarking into uncharted territory, of seeking a way back to a home I yearned for, of reclaiming fragments of a past that had slipped through my fingers.

2

We arrived at a large lake to which there was no end in sight. The water was murky, and the depths were invisible. A ladder was placed into it.

“Down we go,” Matthew spoke.

“Down? Into the lake?”

“Where else? Do you see any boat around?”

I turned my head in every direction. There was no vessel to be sighted that would carry us across. After my leap of faith from space, I stopped arguing. The only thing I expected from this new venture was the unexpected. The water was calm. Matthew’s hands wrapped around the cold, slick rails, his fingers curling with a firmness that revealed his quiet resolve. He turned around, facing me as he placed his foot on the rung underneath him.

“Remember not to let go of the rails,” he advised me. One foot after the other, he disappeared from view. I was left with the vast body of water staring at me with its blank expression. My skin prickled as the warmth of the water seeped in, an unexpected contrast to the water’s cold, indifferent facade.

The rungs were not slippery as I predicted. Quite the opposite. As the water level reached my neck, I filled my lungs with fresh air, expecting

to be void of it. An expansive, untouched realm unfolded before me; its existence tucked away secretly in the heart of this mysterious lake. The mountains, like pillars, held the thin layer of water I had just undergone. The rays of the fiery star above penetrated the upper layer, the world under absorbing and keeping all of the light.

Deeper and deeper, I kept going. The climb down was a mind-bending experience, so much so that for a moment I forgot that I was unable to let go and peddle up to the surface. While I bathed in my surroundings, Matthew had already reached the bottom. He was urging me to hurry up.

We traveled the green lands, surrounded by rocky mountains. The wind was blowing, pushing us forward. An icy chill nipped at our exposed skin, but despite the cold's sharpness, there was an austere beauty in the air. Over us, in the clouds, I saw something move. It was large and made an even louder sound. It had hidden well.

“What’s making that noise?” I asked.

He looked up, squinting at the form in the sky. “A whale.”

“A whale? Up there?”

“We are at the bottom. Where else is it supposed to be?”

As soon as he uttered those words one swam into view. It was the size of a large ship sailing the skies. Questions kept popping into my head, even after accepting the fact that things did not have to make sense.

“You get used to them after a while. I see them quite often and do not pay them much attention anymore. Boring.”

I doubted the fact that my appreciation would dwindle. I’d have to spend eternity for that to happen. Soon it disappeared from view over the top of a mountain, still letting out whistles.

We traveled for multiple hours, and it was getting dark. The sun was setting, and the moon was taking its place. Leaving the sight of the sky-whale behind, I turned my attention back to our journey.

“How long until we arrive?”

“Not much.”

The corner of the heptagonal planet loomed closer, stirring a hive of butterflies in my stomach, their wings fluttering in anticipation. Matthew had mentioned that cutting through the corners would let us see the sun

again. I didn't understand what he meant. As we braced ourselves, our surroundings underwent a change. The warm glow of the sun reappeared above the horizon, casting the landscape in a beautiful orange and yellow light. The underwater plants and trees took on a new life, and the colors became even more vibrant than before. It was as if we had stepped into a completely different world. But as Matthew had warned me, the moment was fleeting. I knew that soon enough, the sun would disappear again, and we would be plunged back into the darkness. It was a reminder of the planet's unique shape and how it affected everything on it. Matthew stretched out his arm, his index finger jutting out like a compass needle.

“There.”

His eyes locked on a unique structure on the horizon, a house molded in obsidian hues. Its shape subtly mimicked an elongated flat screen TV. Crafted from materials unidentifiable at a distance, it gave off a futuristic aura. The roof was flat, complementing the overall design. A dark path led to a nearly hidden door at the base of the neck that held up the house. I wondered if the neck could turn. I wondered what world and thoughts hid behind the screen. Were they his, or did they come with the house? What frequencies was it tuned to?

“You actually live there?”

A faint smile pulled at Matthew's lips, his gaze losing itself in distant memories.

“As far back as my memory allows.”

The house stood in a clearing, ringed by sparse, extraordinary trees he called light bulb trees. Every seven days, like clockwork, they would illuminate the night. His house towered, its slim, elongated figure cutting an imposing outline against the vastness of the horizon. Two full stories high, it maintained a watcher's steadfast vigil over the terrain. The front, like a darkened TV screen, was one vast window, the heart of the house. It was the focal point of the building, the screen's silhouette barely discernible in the twilight. Beneath this central piece, two smaller, symmetrical windows sat side by side. A single window hung above the concealed entrance, like an ever-vigilant eye. One could surmise that

behind the expansive screen-like window, the main living space thrived in seclusion.

“It is not much, but it is home, I suppose,” Matthew told me.

“Not much?” I said dumbfounded. *Fake modesty, not a fan.*

“I have not traveled a lot, but frankly, nothing feels like home. No matter where you go, you cannot compare the feeling of comfort. The smell, too—the air is just different.”

Ascending the seven-step staircase, we crossed the threshold into the house’s interior. Sheets, adorned with mathematical enigmas, decorated the walls, their cryptic symbols spilling over onto the furniture. Metal fragments and an assortment of tools, screwdrivers among them, littered the floor, evidence of a perpetual work in progress.

“You must excuse me. I was not expecting visitors. I usually never get any.”

“Why is that?”

He paused, a distant look flickering in his eyes before he finally admitted, “I am... not a very social person. I mostly keep to myself. I am working on it.”

And there's much work to be done.

The centerpiece of the living area is a minimalist table made from a composite material infused with carbon nanotubes, resulting in a lightweight yet incredibly strong surface. The table’s surface features a built-in touch panel display. At the edge of the screen house, the fireplace was lighting up the room. The fire was burning as if it had just been lit moments ago. Intrigued by the self-lighting feature, I turned my gaze towards the window, noting the mild weather outside.

“I made it so that it lights itself when the temperature in the house reaches a certain point. It stays around all of winter. This is also how I preserve the forest.”

“When will winter arrive?” I asked.

“Who knows? Things have changed these past few years, you might have heard. Not even seasons are the way they used to be. They have become more unpredictable. A decade ago, winter would have been upon

us already, but now... The only thing I am certain will happen is the upcoming lunar eclipse."

The day slowly bled into a quiet, starry night. With the dusk settling in and the fireplace casting flickering shadows against the stone walls, a new suggestion arose. Matthew, glancing at the old clock ticking steadily in the corner, proposed an idea.

"How about I cook dinner for us?"

He decided to make chicken with potatoes as the main dish, and we set about preparing the ingredients together. Watching Matthew work in the kitchen was impressive. His use of knives was remarkable, and the efficiency with which he sliced the potatoes was like that of a proper chef, even better. I did my best to assist him, but I must admit that he seemed to be more than capable of handling everything on his own.

The preparation took over an hour, but the end result was well worth the effort. The chicken was cooked to perfection, and the potatoes were seasoned just right. We ate, drank, and talked over the delicious meal. We shared something else in common. He had a lack of taste as well.

"What were those sketches back at the beach?" I asked, curious to learn more about his past.

Matthew sank into silence, his brow furrowing as he took a moment to gather his thoughts before replying.

"My work. Actually, not anymore. I was designing droids for this company."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He flipped open the lid and extracted one from the pack. With practiced ease, he brought it to his lips, offering me one in the process. I refused, saying I don't smoke. He found my comments amusing.

"Neither did I."

He ignited the tip of the cigarette using a nearby lighter and took a deep inhale, the cherry end glowing red as he did so. He pulled the entire length of the cigarette into his lungs in one swift motion. The man's chest expanded as he held the smoke in his lungs for a moment, then exhaled the entire contents in a cloud of grey-white smoke. Without hesitation, he threw the cigarette filter into the fireplace, the faint sound of it hitting

the grate resounding in the room. The man leaned back in his chair, satisfied, as the smoke curled around him, disappearing into the air.

I pondered over his sketches and the droid designs he'd mentioned earlier, wondering about the end of his professional journey.

"Why did they fire you?" I finally asked, curious about the disconnect between his talent and the job loss.

"My boss did not like the corrections I made nor did he like his expertise and authority questioned," Matthew replied, his voice tinged with a hint of disappointment.

A pang of empathy washed over me as I could relate to the dynamics he described. The struggles of working under someone who resented new ideas were all too familiar, but in a slightly different way.

"Their loss," I added. "Shame you didn't ruin their concepts."

Matthew looked at me with a perplexed expression, unable to grasp the sarcasm in my remark.

"They did it themselves and yet they always win," he said, his tone genuine. "I always strive to do my best and improve things. Ruining something is against my principles."

Kuchedra, the word came to memory, its origin and meaning evading me.

Realizing that Matthew took my statement literally, I chuckled and clarified, "I was joking. I meant that it's a shame they couldn't appreciate your valuable input."

As we savored our meal, our conversation delved into the realities of adult life. Matthew shared that he had bought the house on a mortgage when he was still employed, thinking it would be a secure investment. However, now that he no longer had a job, the weight of financial responsibilities pressed heavily upon him.

"It is likely that I will have to downgrade my house to survive," Matthew admitted, his voice laden with a mix of resignation and underlying despair. "Without a steady income, I cannot keep up with the mortgage payments and the mounting taxes. Bloody taxes. They would tax breathing if they could. What is even the point of it all? I feel like a slave who is given the illusion of freedom. As you get older you realize

nothing really belongs to you. All of it simply a gift that can be taken away at any moment. Sorry. I do not mean to bore you, but it is the reality.”

I listened attentively, understanding the burdens that financial obligations could impose. The weight of responsibilities and the uncertainty of the future were enough to cast a shadow on even the most optimistic of individuals.

“It’s tough,” I sympathized, my tone reflecting the gravity of the situation. A flicker of melancholy passed through Matthew’s eyes, his attempt to conceal his true emotions faltering for a moment.

“The sad part is, I was almost there. I was on the verge of breaking free, at least in the traditional sense, stepping out of the rat race. But now, it feels like everything has slipped through my fingers. I am back to square one,” he admitted, his voice tinged with a hint of sadness.

I could sense the weight of disappointment that burdened him. The disparity between his past ambitions and his present circumstances seemed to cast a dark cloud over his spirit.

“It’s okay to feel disheartened,” I reassured him gently, reaching out a hand to offer solace. “Life doesn’t always go as planned, and setbacks are an unfortunate part of the journey. It’s never too late to start over, to find a different path that brings fulfilment. Look at me, I haven’t even done anything with my life yet. At least you were given the opportunity to fail.”

“You are a loser it seems. At least you are saving money on mistakes.”
Ouch! Brutal.

Matthew’s gaze shifted to the flickering flames of the fireplace; his mind lost in introspection. He took a deep breath, his voice laced with a renewed determination.

“I will do my best,” he said, the words carrying a sense of quiet resolve. “We should sleep. I will show you to the guest room.”

“There’s no need; I don’t sleep. I’ll just stay here by the fireplace and keep myself warm if that’s okay?”

I hadn't slept a single night since I arrived. That was just something I accepted. Interestingly enough, after relaxing for a few hours, my energy would be restored once more. Rest without slumber was all I needed.

"What do you mean you do not sleep?" Matthew asked. "Everyone needs to shut down sometimes."

"I know it sounds crazy, but I haven't slept in quite a long while. I'm just not able to for some reason. I used to just close my eyes and let the darkness take everything around me. Now, not even that."

"Interesting," he said. "Well, then just make yourself at home, and I will see you tomorrow."

With a weary sigh, Matthew pushed himself to his feet and began the slow ascent up the stairs towards his bedroom. I arched an eyebrow at his retreating figure, a teasing note creeping into my voice.

"Aren't you worried I might take something?"

His voice drifted down from the top of the stairs, steady and composed as he added, "No. I got the gun," before disappearing entirely from my view.

3

The comforting warmth of the crackling fire gently grazed my face, its hushed rhythm evoking memories of a forgotten past. The house around me morphed into a surreal labyrinth, its shapes and patterns shifting as per each observer's perspective. A chorus of whispers traveled with the wind through the house's unseen crevices, harmonizing with the fire's crackle.

At the heart of this maze, a vast window stood, embraced by a circle of pulsating neon lights that radiated an unearthly, vivid orange. They illuminated the room with a dreamlike glow, staging an eerie ensemble of shadows that cavorted in tune with the firelight.

Outside, light bulb trees held their vigilant posts, glowing gently against the approaching dusk.

In my hand, a miniature droid toy lay quietly, its programmed voice echoing Matthew's early fascination with science and technology.

At the corner, a glass spider spun its menacing web, its lethal cargo promising a swift end to unwanted intruders—a display of Matthew's preparedness.

Suddenly, the quietness shattered. A gust of wind, as if summoned from the abyss, roared through the house, momentarily extinguishing the fire. I jumped up, anticipating the shattered glass. Yet the window held firm, unscathed. In the depths of the darkness, a formless, looming entity hovered ominously. Silent. Watchful. Its golden cloak, a paradoxical blend of golden radiance and gloomy shadows billowed around its ethereal form, concealing a face hidden by the darkness. An alien presence that sent shivers down my spine, its gaze fixated on me, unyielding and intense.

Shaking off the initial terror, I grasped a knife from the kitchen table. Its icy touch provided a short sense of security. I glanced through the window again, heart pounding. The entity had disappeared, but it did nothing to ease my unease. It left me with the lingering question of what it meant to truly be awake. Clutching the knife, I decided to let Matthew sleep, rationalizing my overactive imagination.

As the minutes slipped away into an indistinct haze, I teetered on the cusp of consciousness. Each time my eyelids drooped shut, I experienced a bizarre disconnection, like my mind was being cast adrift on an ethereal sea, yet awake. Elusive whispers seemed to reverberate from this intangible realm, dissipating like mist when my eyes blinked open.

I reached out, running my fingers over the cold, hard surface of the table—a grounding reminder of reality. Yet, despite the tangible proof of the room's stillness, a clamor stirred within me. My heart hammered against my ribcage, a frenzied metronome out of sync with the house's calm ambience. My breaths became shallow, quick—a physical manifestation of a rising dread. The steady tick of the clock seemed to mock me, its rhythmic certainty a contrast to my spiraling thoughts. *Am I truly awake?*

4

As dawn was soon to arrive, Matthew emerged from his room, appearing more invigorated than the previous night. He was already dressed in a fresh white shirt and black pants. A black and white jumper and a dark winter coat were held out towards me.

“I have assessed the situation, for a good five seconds, and concluded that you would likely lose your way and end up dead. I will accompany you and guide you to our destination.” He sounded firm, resolute.

“How long will it take us to get there?” I asked, slipping into the warm clothes he’d provided.

“Depends on the route we take. Never trust Time.”

I sighed, “At this rate if I make it back at all, I’ll be happy.”

“I never liked the word ‘if.’ There is too much probability attached to it.”

“Are we walking?”

“We are not peasants. I did not spend my entire life working to end up walking,” Matthew remarked casually.

Fair enough.

As he spoke, his hands were busy sifting through two backpacks that lay nearby. He pulled out various items—food, water, fuel—displaying them one by one.

“Why have you chosen to help me?” I asked.

Matthew sighed, turning the golden key that locked his entrance door. It stood out, not fitting the aesthetic of it all.

“Not sure. Unresolved memories, likely,” he said, and added, “Besides, I have nothing to lose and could use some time off.”

With that, we stepped into his green retro convertible, a conjoint double-front vehicle where the rear seemed to emulate the front. We were leaving the familiarity of his house behind. When I asked him about the reasoning for designing such cars, he told me that it was so that you can always look back at home even when being driven away by life.

Despite the open expanse, there was not a soul in sight. The tension continued to build within me, pushing the adrenaline through my veins, and we ventured forth into the unknown.

Matthew seemed to radiate an energy that belied the previous night's events. Our conversation flowed freely and without effort.

"So, you really do not sleep?" he asked.

"I'm an insomniac and it's only gotten worse," I said. "I didn't mention this earlier but last night there was something outside the window, a shadowy figure watching me. I'm sure it wasn't a dream."

Before I could finish, Matthew's face morphed from a state of calm to stark alarm. "Shhh, quiet!" he cut me off. "Do not say that word. It might draw their attention."

"Sorry," I said, the regret flooding my senses. It was crystal clear—everyone lived in terror of these entities. Then, as if the earth itself had responded to my ill-chosen word, a violent tremor ripped through the ground beneath our wheels. It cracked open with an angry roar, shaking everything around us with a vengeance. Matthew slammed the brake.

At once, the surreal landscape of this world burst into life. The towering, glass-like trees, ordinarily shimmering under the sun, began to tremble violently. Their crystalline branches clashed against each other, creating a concert of high-pitched notes that resonated in the chaotic air. The serene melody of the birds was replaced with these alien notes, their flocks taking off in scattered disarray, mirroring the panic that clung to the air.

A chunk of a nearby mountain gave way under the seismic onslaught, but instead of crumbling as a rock would, the mountain's surface began to ripple and wave. It was as if the mountain was made of a semi-fluid substance, subtly shifting and changing shape under the force of the earthquake. The undulating surface created an almost oceanic visual spectacle that was both terrifying and strangely mesmerizing.

"I... I have not felt an earthquake in years. They are rare around here," Matthew managed to get out, his voice strained against the cataclysmic din. The earth continued to protest loudly, denying him the chance to regain his usual composure.

As the ground finally began to still, Matthew took a deep breath.

“It is alright, just do not mention them again,” he cautioned, casting a wary eye over the transformed landscape before moving on.

The curiosity still ate at me, “How does saying their name gain their attention?”

Matthew didn’t answer at first. After a few moments, he replied with a comparison, “When a drop of blood falls into the water, if the sharks are close enough, they will be able to smell it. When you say that word, if they are close enough, they will notice you. There is a chance they might just leave you alone, or...”

“They steal your... Understood,” I completed his sentence, feeling the cold realization sink in.

As Matthew turned the engine on, I couldn’t shake the feeling of being watched, as though invisible eyes were trained on me. Despite the open terrain, I saw no one else. The tension within me swelled with every bump, amplifying the throb of my racing heartbeat.

Exhaustion of the day began to take hold. The quake had left us shaken, and the familiar trappings of our routine had been forgotten. For the first time, the silence between us felt heavy, imbued with something I couldn’t place.

Summoning courage, I broke the quiet, my voice barely above a whisper, “Matthew, did you... did you know someone who had their... shade stolen?”

He stilled; his gaze fixed on the slowly darkening horizon. After a long moment, he replied in a low, quiet voice, “My mother. It was many years ago. To me, it seems like it was yesterday.”

A pang of regret gnawed at me. I hadn’t meant to rake up painful memories. Matthew’s pain was reflected not just in his eyes but in the depths of his soul as well. My attempt at empathy seemed painfully inadequate. His gaze stayed on the horizon; he didn’t meet my eyes as he continued:

“A decade after the Void formed, I was away, traveling, living. I received a letter from home about what had happened.” His voice faltered slightly but he pushed on. “The letter said that my mother was

found unconscious in the forest. I hurriedly gathered my belongings and rushed back. The weather was cruel, but it did not deter me.” He paused; his voice choked with emotion. “But I was not quick enough. By the time I arrived, my mother... she was no more. What was left was just an empty shell. She fell into a deep sleep and never woke again. The pain... it was not there anymore, and she was finally free from herself.” As his confession trailed off, the silence draped over us once more.

5

I don’t remember, for Memory hadn’t returned me what it took.

6

Another ladder was placed on the other side of the lake, for us to climb, so we did. As we emerged back into the surface world, the skies were darker, the waves more aggressive. The familiar sting of the cold pierced my skin. A chill ran down my spine - not from the cold, but from a growing suspicion.

Amidst the aggression, a vision emerged—an enigmatic figure, veiled in uncertainty. Clad in a cloak of pristine silver, it shimmered upon the water’s surface, dissolving into foam. Lingering doubts whispered of ethereality amidst the ever-shifting currents.

“Matthew, how long were we down there?” I asked, my mind racing with the implausible.

“The clock does not tick the same in all places. A week down there is a day above, to be exact. Much easier to get work done.”

“Of course it is, why wouldn’t it be?!”

Matthew tilted his head slightly, a mechanical quirk he had when processing information, “I do not understand.”

“Sarcasm,” I explained.

“My brain is just not wired for it, sorry.”

A blink, and weeks had gone by. As another day faded, our journey momentarily paused. The stinging cold and the aggressive waves felt as much a reminder of our misalignment with time as they were of the environment’s harsh realities.

Matthew gestured toward a cave off in the distance, surrounded by a stand of trees.

“I have stopped there once or twice while scavenging parts. Found a stack of spares no one had touched in years, so I took them. It should be safe,” he mentioned casually.

“Sounds good to me. I’m desperate for a rest,” I replied, wincing as I massaged my swollen feet. “I’m not cut out for these marathons. I’m used to the school and back, not this.”

“You will get the hang of it,” he stated dismissively “They all say the same initially. I have read that once you break through the initial pain, it starts to get more bearable.”

“Well, ‘they’ say a lot of things, don’t they?” I retorted, feeling the strain in my legs intensify with each step.

We entered the cave, a welcome respite after an entire day of walking, and swept the area for potential threats. The cave was compact, just large enough to accommodate a small group without infringing on personal space. An eerie yet fascinating sight of white handprints graced the cave walls, a trace of past occupants perhaps. Their presence made me feel like I was in the company of ancient spirits. I noticed most of the prints were right-handed, but a couple were left-handed, like me. I pressed my palm against one, and Matthew did the same to another. Our hands fit perfectly.

As night fell, Matthew went out to gather wood for a fire. I watched him start the fire, rubbing a stick against a branch with a technique unfamiliar to me. Soon, flickering flames cast large, dancing shadows on the cave walls. Matthew reached into his bag, pulling out a small packet of marshmallows. Their fluffy, sugar-dusted forms seemed like a perfect treat to sweeten the rough edges of our journey. My feet were tingling

fiercely; it was as if someone had stuck a thousand pins into them, all at once.

“Let’s play a game!” I proposed suddenly. “We have nothing better to do anyway.”

“What kind of game?”

“How about chess on your device?” I suggested, trying to persuade him with an eager smile. Matthew chuckled, toying with a small stone at his feet.

“I beat that game years ago. Boring.”

“Beat chess? Nobody can beat chess. There are more possibilities than there are stars in the universe; I bet I could take you.”

“You are nowhere near my intelligence level. Odds are slim to none.”

“Well, that’s a bit rude.”

“I ask for forgiveness.”

His swift shifts in demeanor never failed to surprise me. There were certain quirks about him that grabbed my attention, like how he often cracked his neck during our conversations. It bothered me for some reason.

“I don’t know. Let’s just talk about something.”

“Do you have a mother?” Matthew suddenly asked. His unexpected question caught me off guard.

“That was out of the blue, don’t you think?” I responded, but his expression remained unchanged, prompting me to continue.

“Yes, I do,” he answered. “What is she like?”

I gathered my thoughts.

“She’s very demanding, yet also caring. I’ve spent most of my life with her, often getting into arguments. I don’t think she ever truly understood me.”

“When you see her again, do not hold any resentment. Once she is gone, you’ll miss even the arguments. Any memory will become one to cherish,” he advised solemnly.

His words left a deep impression on me. As time passed, I longed to see her more and more, realizing that even our arguments seemed trivial in retrospect.

“My father, on the other hand, is rarely home,” I added. “When he is, he’s either too tired or we end up arguing. He’s always so preoccupied with his work. He prioritizes his job over my mother and me.”

“I do not particularly care about your father, just your mother. But... Some people get so caught up in living to work that they forget to work to live. They squander their prime years, hoping for a better life when they are older. But by the time they start hearing their bodies creak and their knees weaken, it is too late. That kind of flawed logic has deterred more aims than anything else.”

His words rang true. So many people fall into this trap, which is perhaps the saddest part of the human condition.

“When did you come to this conclusion?”

“Twenty-one seconds ago.”

His deadpan humor was growing on me, and I found myself smiling despite the dire straits. There was something endearing about his honesty and bluntness.

We lingered in the cave, its dank walls holding the stillness of the late hours. The journey had taken its toll on both of us. Matthew, worn from the day’s exertions, slept soundly. I, on the other hand, found solace in the moon’s companionship as it peered at us through the cave’s eye-shaped openings. The moon seemed to share my vigil, its silvery gaze retreating as the hours passed.

Our only defense against the wilderness lay in Matthew’s handgun, the “Blunderbuss,” and my unused blade. Its presence was both comforting and unsettling, a constant reminder of the dangers that lurked in the shadows. A snap of a branch outside broke the quiet, sending a jolt of adrenaline through me.

“Matthew, wake up. Something’s out there,” I whispered urgently.

He rose from his sleep, disoriented. “Trees, owls, landmines...”

“It was none of those things,” I insisted, my gut churning with an unease that was hard to shake off.

His skepticism was quickly shattered as a figure dropped from above. The cold touch of a blade against my throat sent chills down my spine, but my terror turned into disbelief when I recognized the face before me.

“Tyger?” I said, astounded. His surprise mirrored mine as he released his hold on me.

“Salvador?”

A wave of relief washed over me at the familiar face. My old companion was here, and he wasn’t here to harm me.

“Where have you been?” Tyger asked, a hint of reproach in his voice. I chuckled, “Tagging along with Matthew ove...”

No sooner had I mentioned his name than Matthew sprang into action, gun aimed at Tyger’s head. The moment’s peace was shattered, replaced with a tense struggle. His aim was true, but Tyger was quick, dodging the shot and retaliating. The cave reverberated with the sounds of their struggle. Matthew’s strength was clear, but so was Tyger’s agility. He attempted to regain control of his weapon, but Tyger was no easy opponent.

I tried to intervene, to separate the two battling forces. My efforts were met with unintentional kicks and punches. Recognizing the futility of my actions, I decided to use a more potent weapon—words. I started explaining, urging Matthew to understand that Tyger was an old friend. We were on the same side.

Listening to my pleas, Matthew paused, his grip on Tyger loosening. They both took a moment to catch their breath, the air in the cave heavy with tension.

“You can stop now. How about another punch?” I teased. Matthew’s fist tightened, and Tyger managed a weak laugh.

“He’s not serious.”

“Sarcasm, Matthew, sarcasm,” I confirmed.

The two men stood up, brushing off the dirt and tension from their encounter.

“Apologies for the thrashing. I am Matthew,” he apologized, extending a hand to Tyger.

“No need, I slipped,” Tyger replied, shaking Matthew’s hand.

“That wasn’t difficult, was it?”

“In fact, it was very difficult. We almost killed each other.”

I’ll just keep nodding. That usually helps.

“So, where have you been?” I asked Tyger, curiosity tingling in my voice.

Catching his breath, he responded, “Here, there, and everywhere, really. Ended up landing at world’s end. Almost fell off. Then, I dived to the ruins of an underwater palace. After finally getting to the beach I had to face a giant tiger to the death. I killed him with his own tooth.”

“It’s a good thing I helped you practice earlier,” I chuckled. “How did you manage to find us? The fire?”

Tyger seemed genuinely puzzled. “The fire was hard to miss, but how did you know I was coming? I’ve been tailed for so long I mistook you for them.”

Matthew interjected, “Salvador heard branches breaking.”

“That wasn’t me. Probably an owl or something. I’m light on my feet,” Tyger shot back.

It struck me then that hiding hadn’t even crossed my mind. I had hoped the fire would keep the animals at bay and warm us simultaneously. The potential threat from other humans had entirely slipped my mind. Perhaps the sleepless nights were beginning to affect my judgment.

“Have you been going around attacking anyone you find suspicious?” I queried.

“No, not really,” Tyger admitted. “But I can feel eyes constantly on me, watching...”

“I can relate to that,” I confessed. “I’ve felt them too. It’s a good thing we found each other, especially considering we’re headed in the same direction. The larger our group, the safer we are.”

Suddenly, a guttural bellow resounded nearby, jarring and loud.

“I think that is a response,” Matthew observed with a serious tone.

“They probably know our location by now. We need to move,” Tyger insisted.

With minimal belongings to gather, we swiftly evacuated the cave, navigating the knotty forest at breakneck speed. Adrenaline surged through me, fueling my sprint down the hill, while an unsettling presence lurked behind us.

“Where are we headed?” Tyger shouted in between breaths.

“Into the open!”

Matthew led us with surprising agility, his pace outmatching ours. As we fled, a mesmerizing phenomenon unfolded before our eyes—an ephemeral distortion in the fabric of the night. It appeared as a shimmering rift, an interplay of twisted shadows and faint, ethereal light.

Within this gravelling anomaly, a palpable sense of darkness converged with the intangible essence of the cosmos. The edges of the rift rippled and undulated like the surface of a moonlit pond, as if it was a fleeting glimpse into a realm beyond mortal comprehension. The night’s darkness began to drape over us like a cold shroud as the moon played hide and seek above.

The eerie howl of a wolf reverberated through the air, amplifying our apprehension.

As we ran, we felt a strange shift in the atmosphere; an undercurrent of something unsettling yet fascinating. Above, the moon, our only source of light, began to lose its brightness, slowly submerging into an unusual icy blue hue, marking the advent of a lunar eclipse. A chill rippled through the air, as if the night itself had gasped, as the light dimmed further, bathing everything in a grim, ghastly moonlight.

And then, as if resonating with the blue moon, a sudden force seemed to rupture from the shadows beneath us. Tyger yelped, his foot seized by an unseen entity, and was mercilessly yanked back into the suffocating darkness. He quickly swung his blade but seemingly missed. A dark, shadowy figure pinned him down, muffling his screams with its hand and choking him mercilessly. Then, adding to the chaos, the world around us began to shiver under the influence of the invisible celestial body passing nearby.

A pull, strange and unseen, wove through the air, tugging at the darkness. I could barely make out Matthew taking aim with his gun as Tyger tried to fight off the shadowy figure with his small dagger, but his strikes were futile. The bullets from Matthew’s gun went straight through the shadowy figure, and other silhouettes began to appear around us.

Suddenly, arms reached out from the dark and pulled Matthew back, slamming his head against the ground with a sickening thud.

With no way to help Matthew, I turned my attention back to Tyger, who was struggling to breathe under the crushing grip of the now flickering figure. I attempted to flee, but another shadow intercepted, its grip strong yet faltering, mirroring the tremors of the trees around us. Leaves rustled in a silent uproar, while the ground beneath us trembled subtly, making the shadows shiver in response. It was unlike anything I had ever seen—no eyes, no mouth, no nose, and no ears. Just a shapeless, formless terror that was slowly crushing the life out of me. My hand searched for the blade but it had somehow escaped my grip without me noticing.

I screamed and gasped for air as its figure pressed down on my chest, slowly crushing my ribcage. I felt like I was suffocating, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. My heart was beating against its cage, it too trying to escape.

Concurrently, a mystifying show unfolded in the sky. The gravitational flux rippled through the planet's magnetic field, manifesting as a resonant spectral aurora. It appeared like the pulsating rhythm of a heart, a resounding of my own terror-stricken beats. Bathed in an otherworldly red, it cast an ominous glow, making the unfolding chaos visible. The shadowy figure was in a rush but the violence of the heavens picked up as well. It roared through the trees, shaking them fiercely. The leaves rustled once more and scattered in all directions, carried away by the fierce gusts. I struggled to keep my eyes open as the concentrated air pounded against my face. The force of the wind was so strong that it felt like it could lift me off my feet and carry me away like a leaf.

Suddenly, the intimidating darkness began to falter. Glowing eyes appeared in the distance as the figure vanished, and I was left gasping for air.

7

As quickly as the crushing weight arrived, it began to fade. The moon, slowly returned to its familiar silvery white. When I turned around, the sight that greeted me was like a grotesque painting of hardship and pain. Tyger was sprawled on the cold ground, coughing and wheezing, his breaths sounding like gravel under a heavy wheel. Red welts, cruel and mocking, encircled his neck, and his shirt was a ragged banner of scratches. A cold hand, belonging to Matthew, rested on my shoulder, sending an icy jolt through my spine that made me jump.

“Are both of you okay?” Matthew asked, his voice as somber as the moonless night.

I blinked back the fear threatening to spill over, glanced at Tyger, then back at Matthew.

“Tyger’s throat,” I managed to articulate, a lump forming in my own. “And you, how’s your head?”

He merely nodded, a silent affirmation that he was unharmed, but I saw a flicker of something else in his eyes—a shroud of worry. Just then, a bone-chilling howl ripped through the unnerving silence, so close that it seemed to crawl right into my ears.

A circle of gigantic wolves, like an ominous ring of shadows, had formed around us, their eyes glistening with a wild, primitive intelligence. Tyger, a single tear slipping down his cheek like a liquid crystal, struggled to form words, his voice a faint echo of the strong man he once was.

From within the pack of wolves emerged a husky of monstrous proportions, its heterochromatic eyes gleaming like twin moons in a twilight sky. Its size was awe-inspiring, easily three times that of a typical husky, making it seem like a mythical creature birthed from the depths of ancient legends. An ornate feathered headdress perched on its head, bestowing upon it a regal aura that was hard to ignore.

Matthew pulled out his handgun in response to Tyger's silent handoff of his blade. But something in me stirred, a whisper of intuition that urged caution.

"No, wait," I breathed out, a plea hanging in the air like a fragile thread. Matthew looked at me, confusion dancing in his eyes.

"They'll attack regardless," I reasoned, my gaze never leaving the giant husky.

Defying every rational thought and ignoring Matthew's warning of potential harm, I extended my hand towards the husky. I held my breath, the world narrowing down to the space between my outstretched hand and the beast. As my fingers brushed its fur, a blinding rush of light sent my senses into a tailspin, and when my vision cleared, I found myself on the ground, the husky's massive paw resting on my chest like a king's seal.

I turned to the wolves, the question of safety hanging unspoken between us. Their assent came in the form of a soft lick, a simple gesture that was as surprising as it was comforting

We hoisted Tyger onto the husky's back with great care, ensuring not to further harm him in his fragile state. I could hear his labored breathing; each exhalation a painful reminder of the danger we were in. It was an eerie echo in my ears as I asked Matthew, "How close?"

His voice was a solemn whisper as he suggested, "Bendy Town, a few hours from here."

The name sounded oddly quaint under the circumstances.

Tyger's increasingly shallow breaths emphasized the urgency. His life hung by a thread, and we needed to move, fast.

Two formidable wolves detached from the rest of the pack; their immense size reminiscent of the beasts of legend. They crouched down, a silent gesture, indicating their readiness to be mounted. Their sapphire eyes locked onto ours, as if assuring us of their intent.

Matthew's face, normally stoic and composed, showed clear apprehension. His eyes darted between the wolves and me, a silent battle of wills taking place within him. His fingers twitched by his side, his mind weighing the risk of trusting these unpredictable creatures. But

given our dire situation, he took a deep, steadyng breath, and set aside his fear.

After a moment's pause, he took a step forward. His hand outstretched, he gently brushed his fingers along the wolf's coarse fur, as if to confirm its reality. Then, swallowing his hesitation, he hoisted himself onto the massive creature.

The moment they stood, we were abruptly elevated over a meter above the ground. I could see the tops of the low shrubs and could almost touch the hanging branches of the nearby trees.

As the wolves commenced their journey, I gripped the coarse fur beneath me. The muscles of the beast moved with a smooth, steady rhythm, each step a testament to its raw power. I clung on tightly, determined not to be thrown off due to their unexpected speed.

The chilling breeze whipped past us, piercing through my clothes and nipping at my skin. It was a wild, untamed force of nature that brought an onslaught of goosebumps to ripple across my skin.

"Matthew?" I shouted over the wind. "When is the last time you visited this place?"

"I do not recollect," he confessed.

We soared through the air, carried by an invisible current. It was as if the wind itself had sprouted wings and lifted us high above the ground. I reveled in the surreal sensation, feeling the breeze slithering through my hair like a playful serpent, tickling my senses with its touch.

Within my chest, a curious drum pounded with rhythmic intensity, its beats resounding through my being. It seemed to be the conductor of my very life force, keeping the crimson essence flowing through my veins. The red juice pulsed and surged, an enigmatic elixir that fueled my existence. Unbeknownst to me, I was internally bleeding, pouring out fragments of my soul without conscious awareness.

As we pressed forward, a peculiar sight loomed ahead—an immense wall crafted from misshapen stones. Each one bore unique contours and jagged edges, demanding to be noticed.

Standing proudly at the entrance of this enigmatic place was a sturdy arc, adorned with a wooden board slightly askew, hanging on by a thread. Its words caught my attention with a whimsical charm, for they too seemed to embody the nature of this peculiar place. The letters of "Bendy Town" curved and twisted in my mind, without ever shifting position as I read the name, a linguistic dance that defied conventional rules.

The trees, like ancient guardians, formed a pathway for our journey. They lined the stone road in two symmetrical rows, their branches reaching out towards each other. A mesmerizing sight awaited those who passed through, for the trees reflected one another, as if a mystical mirror had been planted along the path.

The leaves that adorned the trees were a bright shade of yellow, glistening with the touch of morning dew. They held a dampness that seemed to cling to their fragile veins, as if the weight of their stories had imbued them with a melancholic nostalgia.

Dawn approached, casting a pale light upon this otherworldly landscape.

Beyond the boundaries of the village, where the tendrils of civilization met the untamed wilderness, I witnessed a sight that transcended the ordinary. The sun, a radiant sphere of fiery hues, yawned as it began its ascent into the sky. Its celestial counterpart, the moon, surrendered to slumber, retreating from its nocturnal reign. The changing of the guard unfolded before my eyes, a seamless transition from one celestial entity to the next. It was as if the sun and the moon, eternal companions, took turns guiding the world on its journey through time.

All the toil and travel that had brought us here seemed insignificant in the face of this cosmic dance. The arduous path we had traversed was but a small fragment in the grand web of existence. Our journey, it seemed, was but a mere continuation, an endless pilgrimage from east to west, chasing the elusive horizon where unique realities intertwine.

A GAME OF WAR

1

We entered the town that lay hidden behind trees. It was deserving of the name it was given. Everything was misshapen, turned, and twisted in unnatural ways. The wavy streets beckoned us forward, a grand thoroughfare that seemed to surpass normal dimensions. They stretched before us, defying gravity as people ascended and descended their bends. A flat surface, if you closed your eyes.

An air of calm pervaded, as if the clock had ceased to be a constraint. It was as if the clouds above had spilled a rainbow of colors across the town. The stores were crowded, and the people moved leisurely through the streets.

As we prepared to enter, a brief pause was necessary, a moment to express gratitude to the loyal husky that had carried us thus far. With a heartfelt pat on the head, I extended my appreciation, only to be rewarded with an enthusiastic lick across my face. Despite the unexpected shower, I couldn't help but smile. It was a small token of companionship, a gesture of connection in this extraordinary journey.

However, our time with the husky had reached its limit. It had fulfilled its promise, and now it was time to bid farewell. Still panting heavily, it vanished into the embrace of the surrounding trees, melding seamlessly with the wilderness itself. A chorus of distant howls accompanied its departure, the wolves blending into the surreal background of the forest.

With Matthew cradling Tyger protectively in his arms, we felt a surge of urgency. The flow of reality seemed to quicken its pace, urging us forward into the heart of the town. Temporarily forgetting the enchanting sights and captivating allure, we pressed on, our steps quickening in unison.

“Which way do we take him?”

“I was last here many decades ago. Things have changed,” Matthew replied.

We pushed our way through the crowds gathered at the entrance. Another man and I bumped each other's shoulders. Our eyes met. Immediately I asked for forgiveness and proceeded to ask the man for directions to the hospital. He was shaken at first and showed signs of fury through his sharp gaze at me. After he assessed the situation and saw Tyger's sustained injuries, the sharpness turned blunt. He was in his fifties. The top of his head was bald, while the sides were still dark and youthful. A moustache formed a bridge over his upper lip. A monocle covered his right eye.

“What happened?”

“We were attacked. His neck!”

He nodded as he took a look at Tyger, “I’m a doctor, I can help. Follow me.”

Citizens recognized that we were strangers. They whispered words to each other, their voices too low for our ears to catch. We hurried down the street as a pathway started forming in front of the man. The sea of bodies was splitting in two. The road began to lean upwards and to the side.

“What attacked you?”

“They did.”

“They?”

The man hard-swallowed the air in his mouth and didn’t say anything else on the matter.

To our right, there was a large building, one of many. It had a red façade with white edges and balconies. It was seven stories high. The doctor went in first, after which we followed.

“What room is empty?” he asked one of the women that were inside.

They were nurses. She searched for the key and unlocked the door to the second room on the left. Matthew placed him down on the bed.

“It’s best that you two stay outside.”

We left them to their work as the door closed behind us.

The waiting area was a weird old place. Some chairs were where they ought to be while others were upside down on the ceiling. That went for everything else. We were sat up front alongside two other people. They

were dressed in fancy colorful clothes. The woman near Matthew was short with a broad flabby face and an almost non-existent neck. She was dressed in all pink, including her velvet bow and gloves. The man wore a green suit. In his hands, he checked his black leather wallet, which was full of fresh green leaves. That appeared to be the town's currency. The phrase "Money doesn't grow on trees," never felt so groundless.

"He should branch out his investments," Matthew said, trying to lighten up the mood, but I stayed silent.

As the clock was ticking relentlessly, exhaustion began to seep into my bones. The weight of the recent danger still hung in the air, and I couldn't help but be reminded of another close brush with mortality. I turned to Matthew, my voice laced with a mixture of relief and vulnerability.

"It's a miracle we're breathing," I said, my words tinged with a tremor of emotion. "Those things were terrible. I haven't been so remotely close to death since..."

"Since when?" Matthew asked.

"When I was ten, my family and I had a car accident. A drunk truck driver ran into us on the highway. He hit the side of the car in between Mother and me. The impact threw our car over thirty meters into some field and we landed on a bunch of pillars. All of us almost lost our lives that day."

"Did you sustain any injuries?"

"My father's hand got burnt from the airbag. Mother was okay besides the stress. I recall hitting my head against the window, but as you can see I'm still all there."

I was half joking.

"That turned out well for you."

"Lucky me. Would rather it never have happened at all. It changed me," I said.

Matthew smiled, and the smile disappeared as fast as it spread across his face.

That seemed like it happened not so long ago. It was as if I closed my eyes and opened them immediately. Like no time had passed in my mind.

2

Before we could do anything, we had to exchange our coins for the leaf currency since they didn't accept ours. The small town bustled with life as merchants displayed their wares with pride, enticing passersby with colorful fabrics and gleaming trinkets. Street performers captivated audiences with their mesmerizing acts, their laughter and applause filling the air. The place where Matthew and I found shelter enveloped us in a comforting embrace.

As we entered the room we were to share, our eyes were drawn to the flickering fireplace nestled in the corner, near the door. Its dancing flames cast a warm glow, creating an inviting ambiance that spread throughout the room. Three beds were arranged with care, two on each side, and mine was placed in the middle. The cozy blankets and soft pillows invited us to rest and find solace. Plush carpets underfoot provided a soft landing for our tired steps, whispering tales of journeys taken. The weathered stone walls were made out of luminite, a material we were told was a closely guarded secret whose surface softly radiated an ethereal glow. It is believed to have been formed from the crystallized essence produced during the Slumbering.

"I haven't stayed at many places, but this one takes the cake," I said as I turned on my back. "It's really warm and cozy."

"It ought to be. I paid for it," said Matthew, as something outside caught his eye.

The snow began to fall, white and glowing. Voices of young children playing reached our window. There was no way I could keep rolling around on my bed, consumed by the allure of the winter wonderland outside. With eager anticipation, I swiftly rose to my feet and approached the frost-kissed glass pane. Pressing my hands against its cool surface, I couldn't help but feel a connection to the picturesque scene unfolding before me. It had an excellent overview of the town. The exterior was

grey stone, yellow leaves. A river flowed under the bridge, and birds flew over it. Life illuminated within the people. The sky released its icy jewels for everyone to see. They were not to be kept, and yet they stayed. They paved the way for the winter season to arrive in all of its glory. It told its own story.

Exploring the beautiful streets and pathways alone for the day left me amazed. I desired to feel the changing of the seasons firsthand. I strolled along the snow-covered streets, each step creating a soft crunch beneath my feet. I marveled at the transformation taking place. The once misshapen buildings now stood adorned with a delicate layer of pristine white, their unconventional angles now enhanced by the whimsical touch of winter. Snowflakes danced in the air, pirouetting and twirling as if choreographed by invisible hands, adding an extra layer of enchantment to the already surreal scenery.

My hands were cold. With the money Matthew gave me, I bought myself a pair of newly knitted winter gloves. The young woman that sold them was kind enough to give them to me for a lower price since I was a traveler. Or it might have been a business trick, and she actually sold them for a higher one.

At some point, I stopped on a bridge with dual pathways that intertwined, resembling the coiled form of two snakes mating. I watched the river flowing below. Its scent brought back many memories. As a child, I recalled swimming in a stream while my grandparents watched over me. That was where I also learned to wave my hands and stay afloat. Not the most practical place, sure. But if you knew how to swim there without the water taking you away, you'd do fine anywhere else. The water would constantly get into my mouth, and I would have to repeatedly spit it out. It tasted awful. Thinking back, I began to doubt its transparency and its level of contamination. As a kid, I didn't pay much attention to such things.

As I reminisced, I heard a young voice singing a song:

*Row, row, row your boat
Gently down the stream;
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,
Life is but a...*

It was closer, and then at that moment, something hit the side of my arm. A small girl was standing a short distance away from me with a ball of fresh snow shaped in her left hand.

“What was that for?” I asked.

She giggled, her laughter infectious. “I don’t know.”

She threw the other snowball at me as soon as she replied. She was heavily dressed. Mothers do tend to do that. Better safe than sorry. She wore an oversized coat, a warm knitted hat, and gloves. The boots on her legs seemed to be a few sizes larger than they ought to. She somewhat struggled to lift them up.

“Stop it,” I said in a playful manner. “You wouldn’t want me telling your mummy about you throwing snowballs at strangers.”

“She’s not here right now.”

“Where is she?”

“Home! I came to play in the snow. Will you play with me?”

“I can’t. Why didn’t you bring your mum along to play?”

“She didn’t want to! She said she was tired.”

I thought for a moment. The scene that was playing in front of me was one I had already seen many times. In some instances, I tried to find meaning in them, without success. On others, I felt hollow, even more so than the words they uttered. What was I to tell her? I didn’t want to turn her away and leave her by herself.

“Do you have a pet?” I asked.

She shook her head. “You?”

“I have a dog.”

“Does it have a name?”

“Zev.”

“Zev... What does it mean?”

“A wolf. I always thought him greater and more ferocious than he was.”

When Zev was first given to me, I made myself a promise. The northern lights were a remarkable sight. It was my hope to one day go and see them for myself. Naturally, I would bring Zev to play in the snow and have all my friends around me. That day seemed far in my mind. Even so, I kept it locked within. One day it would be true. I would make it.

“What is he like?”

“He is like the snow in your hand, strong, but gentle. I might introduce you to him one day. Would you like that?”

The girl who was no older than seven smiled.

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“What do your parents do?”

“He sells stuff to strangers all day. Boring... And my mummy is a cook.”

“Oh, really? Where does she cook?”

“At home,” she said.

Her innocence was comedic. I let out a laugh that she didn’t understand.

“What’s your name? I’m Salvador.”

“Nayu!”

“Pleasure to meet you, Nayu,” I said as we shook hands. “I heard you singing, I believe. You do it well.”

Her cheeks turned red.

“You really think so?”

“I do, but it’s getting dark outside. You should come back tomorrow and play in the light. Look over there how the sun is setting down the river. How about I take you back home to your parents, and you sing me another song in the meanwhile?”

“Yes!” she yelled in excitement.

The girl skipped joyfully beside me, her voice echoing through the dreamlike streets. Her high-pitched laughter filled the air, infused with

newfound confidence inspired by my earlier compliment. Oblivious to the passing gazes of others, she frolicked with carefree abandon. After a while, we found ourselves standing at a modest distance from her home.

“I’ll come back here and show you Zev one day. Maybe you’ll have your own dog by then.”

“I’ll ask my daddy to get me one, so they can play.”

“Sounds like a deal. Now hurry up. Don’t make your parents worried. Okay?”

With an air of agreement, we sealed our pact. She ran off as fast as she could in those large boots. I watched intently until she disappeared through the weathered threshold of her home, the old wooden door closing behind her.

3

A week had gone by. Tyger had recovered enough to change his hospital bed and come stay with us. His neck, still tender from the attack, was carefully swaddled in a stark white bandage, tenderly cradled by a specially designed pillow. The pillow was a gift from the doctor, less for functional recovery, more for the comforting support it offered.

“At least the scars look good on me. I might be the only person to have survived such an attack, ever,” Tyger remarked, his voice emerging as a gravelly whisper, a painful reminder of his near-strangulation. His fingers traced a prominent scar, a violent streak that stretched from his left shoulder, meandering downwards, coming to a halt just above his heart. The back of his neck told its own gruesome tale—chillingly human-like scratch marks, imprinted by cruel, calculated claws.

“Let your voice recover,” we urged, acutely aware of the strain in his rasping words. Despite the trauma his vocal cords had endured, Tyger exuded an indomitable positivity. Yet beneath the upbeat facade, the quiet shadows in his eyes betrayed a lingering sadness, a silent acceptance of his brush with death.

“Well, I can at least write down a few songs if I can’t sing them. A symphony. I’ve had this concept in my head for a long while.”

“What’s it called?”

“*All Too Human.*”

A cloak of white had already shrouded the town. We found ourselves imprisoned within our room, in a limbo of tense anticipation. Something was looming, a subtle but unnerving sense of unease threaded through the air, but I couldn’t quite discern its origin.

“Where does this person live, the one you said could help us?”

Matthew looked as if he were caught in a fruitless struggle with his memory, his brow furrowing in concentration only to smoothen in defeat.

“I do not know the exact location, but somewhere around here,” he responded, his voice tinged with an uncertainty that seemed entirely out of character.

I sighed in disbelief, the action serving as a vent for my mounting frustration. His vague reply did little but add to the avalanche of helplessness already threatening to consume me.

“Do you have a name that you could give us?”

“Marcus Drake, my father. That is the name I remember.”

Hearing Matthew’s surname for the first time sent a ripple of recollections across my mind.

“Let’s go then,” I said. “Your father awaits.”

I sped out of the room like a rabbit out of its hole. Which direction was I to take? I wasn’t certain, but I never was in the first place.

“Marcus Drake, Marcus Drake, Marcus Drake,” The name danced on my lips as I paced nervously, each repetition subtly warping its pronunciation. Matthew trailed a few steps behind, while Tyger remained nestled in his bed, to recuperate.

We rushed around town like headless chickens approaching person after person, men, women, and children... anyone we could find that was outside on such a cold day. Nobody had seemed to recall that name. Matthew’s usually voluble presence gradually receded into an eerie silence as we scoured the town.

“Are you sure that’s his real name? Maybe he changed it or something.”

He was certain that he had not. It was a stupid question the more I thought about it. Of course he would know his father’s name. But another crossed my mind. Fear prevented me from saying it out loud. My concern was of it possibly being true.

What if this Marcus Drake had moved? What if he doesn’t live here anymore? Something is not adding up. Where could he be?

We approached an older man for questioning and possible directions.

“Excuse us, sir, but do you know anyone by the name of Marcus Drake?” His gaze rested on us for a moment before he replied.

“That name does sound familiar...”

A glimmer of hope ignited in my eyes. It was the closest we’d been to a lead in hours.

“...but I don’t think I do. I’m old, you see. I can hardly remember my own name at this age. Every name sounds the same to my ears.”

Another dead end, I thought.

That tiny spark of hope, that ephemeral flicker, was cruelly deceptive in its promise, leaving behind only the bitter aftertaste of disillusionment. Matthew didn’t seem to be all that worried. He seemed almost nonchalant, a stark contrast to the fervor driving my every step. Our roles should have been reversed, but there we were.

Hours went by, one, two, three. Soon six had passed and no word of Marcus Drake. The sun went from one part of the sky to the other, and we hadn’t gathered any new information—no word of his whereabouts or his existence.

“We should head back,” said Matthew with haste. Bit by bit, a small fire began to light up in my belly. It was melting away the coolness.

“No!” I snapped, anger surging through me. “You told me this man could help me, and I trusted you. I thought you knew what you were doing. But now, we’re on a month-long journey to find someone who, for all we know, is dead. Why didn’t you mention your father before we crossed an entire landmass? I’m an idiot for even coming here. You’re hiding something. Where is he, Matthew? Where is he?”

“I do not know,” he replied, the perpetual blank canvas of his face only serving to fuel my irritation. There were no hints, no flutters of guilt or deceit; it was unnerving. I was the butt of some cosmic joke and his stoic visage wasn’t helping.

“What is it with you? You always keep a straight face. You’re just blank. You don’t show much emotion. You bring me here, don’t know where the hell your father lives. Is Marcus even alive? Is this all just one big lie? What the hell is wrong with you? Say something!”

Still, he remained silent. I could have continued to hurl words at him, a storm of accusations and insults, but what was the point? Would it crack his composure?

“Do you at least remember where you visited as a child?”

He shook his head.

“I do not remember. I did back then, not now.”

“We almost got killed, for what? For the ghost of a man who likely died years ago!”

The words spilled out of me, a bitter finale to my tirade. In a swift move driven by pure frustration, I lunged forward, pushing him back with all the force I could muster. Matthew staggered, taken aback by the sudden outburst. His eyes widened as he lost his footing, falling to the ground. Without another word, I turned my back to him and stormed away. His name, Marcus Drake’s name—they had become the anthem of my exasperation.

“You are by far the worst investment of my life. You wrecked my car and now you’re pushing me away!”

What car? Wait, what did happen to that car. I don’t remember. Supressed memory, but I’m not sticking around to pay for it. We’ll call it even.

As I stepped back inside, the scene before me was a stark contrast to the frigid emotional landscape I’d just left. Tyger was tucked beside the crackling fireplace, his gaze lost in a maze of scrawled thoughts on his notebook. Lines of ink dashed in all directions, a disarray of ideas. The room radiated warmth, casting its intimate glow against the icy chill settled in my heart.

“Did you find him?”

“We were looking for a dead man,” I countered, my honesty cutting through the room’s cosy ambiance, slashing it into fragments of disappointment. He only nodded, his hand surrendering to gravity, dropping the pen onto the ink-laden parchment.

“I’m guessing he’s still dead?”

“Don’t know, and I don’t care.”

“What happened?” His tone harboured concern.

“Marcus Drake doesn’t exist, and Matthew is a liar. That’s all there is to it.”

The room seemed to resonate with my declaration, pushing against the silence. I decided to stand my ground, to stop depending on the others.

“I’m leaving!” I declared.

“Where to?”

“I’m not sure, but I’m going to find him if it’s the last thing I do.”

I began gathering my things; none of them were mine to begin with, but borrowed necessities from Matthew. They were reparations, I told myself.

“Are you tagging along?” I asked Tyger.

“You were the one accompanying me, now you ask me to come with you. Oh, how things have changed.”

“Is that a yes?”

His response was a gentle chuckle that turned into a fit of coughing, his hand cradling his injured neck.

“I will have to decline your offer. Not for Matthew’s sake—I don’t even like the guy—but for my own, as you can see. You go on without me, and bring me back the good news if you’re certain you want to do this.”

His words landed softly, like a fallen leaf, yet their message was deeply rooted.

“Aren’t you going to try and stop me? Say that it’s dangerous?”

A part of me was hoping he would.

"I have no control over you. The jump was dangerous, and yet you still did it knowing what could happen. Same here. I wish you the best of luck and take care of yourself as you have all along. You've been doing just fine this far."

He graced me with a weak smile, an reflection of our shared understanding. The bag swung onto my right shoulder, its weight digging into my resolve. Thoughts churned like a restless sea in my mind, but words slipped through my grasp. We both understood that sometimes, silence speaks louder than words.

4

The night wrapped me in its shroud, the wind playing a mournful tune in the snowy leaves of ancient trees. The wilderness and I danced a silent waltz, the town forgotten as I stepped into the riddle of the world.

A bag on my back, a ribbon of dark road underfoot, and above, a blanket of stars. I was hunting—not for prey, but for a sign, a hint from something beyond me.

Time became a stranger as I wandered, guided by the tireless road untouched by snow. Its whispers filled my ears, and the sanity line blurred. I was far from home, yet this path felt endless.

The sturdy trunk of a tree became a pillar under my hand. My breath turned to warm smoke in the cold air, the tree roots forming a seat against the chill. Across me lay an eerie mirror—an astronaut's remains, a hollow-eyed reflection of an alternate future. Above, the moon smirked, as if he'd given his last smile to it, and now it was my turn.

The cold bit my lips, sharper than the icicles hanging from the branches. I warmed them with my tongue and whistled a lonely tune to the sky. The sound echoed, rippling through the forest, only to be answered by a distant howl. Was it for me or the moon? Uncertainty snowed down on me as I clutched my long knife, eyes scanning the dark.

Then a melody drifted to me, a woman's voice, strong and lyrical. She sang in words I couldn't decipher.

Some crazy woman. Can't be another nymph.

I chose to follow, drawn by the mysterious tune.

Suddenly, the path beneath me twitched, tossing me into the snow. Closer inspection revealed the path stretching out. I dusted myself off and scurried uphill, the cold forgotten. Ahead, a shadowy figure loomed. The path wasn't a road at all; it was an extension of the figure's cloak.

A trap, maybe? Have my instincts led me so astray?

I felt like a moth drawn to a flame. My grip tightened around the hilt of my knife, the cold steel grounding me. I held my breath and pointed the blade at the figure, ready for whatever came next.

"Let's get this over with. I'm tired."

The figure raised its hands, not in threat, but in surrender. It pulled back its hood to reveal a cascade of silver hair. Turning around, it faced me. It was Rose, the girl from my class.

I stammered, disbelief threading each word, "You... here... it doesn't add up. What could possibly bring you to this forsaken place?"

Light as a feather, Rose approached, while I sank into the snow.

"Took you long enough."

Her presence sparked a dozen questions. *How? Why?*

"All will be explained at the right moment. For now, you must trust and follow me."

"Follow you?"

"The Mystic sent me. She is expecting you."

"She? I was told it was a 'he'. And how do I know you're really Rose?"

"Duality," she replied, then looked skywards. "The moon is smiling and shining bright, unlike that night."

A whistle escaped her lips, and soon, running footsteps filled the air. The giant husky from before appeared behind her, looking at us.

Her presence reignited a flame inside me. The biting cold didn't bother me anymore. I felt warmth return, a hearth rekindled. She extended her hand, and I took it, rising from the snow.

“How did you get here? I thought it was only me.”

“It doesn’t really matter how or why. I’m here.”

“One thing before we continue,” I added.

“What?”

“I didn’t appreciate you tripping me back there. I like standing on my own two feet. But... I am glad to see a familiar face even though you were mean to me most of the time.”

A smirk formed on her face. “I couldn’t resist. That being said, I was the only one to even acknowledge your existence. Someone had to destroy your ego.”

We travelled through the forest for the rest of the night, finding a wooden painting stand with a canvas showcasing a spring scene. The painting featured a camel carrying a crystal dome on its back with a castle inside, standing between trees. As we approached, the camel turned its head, matching the painting perfectly. A coincidence or a hint of something more, perhaps *déjà vu*, who could say?

“So, you’ve been in the company of this Mystic all this time?”

“Even longer,” Rose replied. The weight of her words hung in the air between us, filled with untold stories and unshared adventures.

“What’s she like? Does she live up to the stories about her?”

Rose paused, choosing her words carefully, “That’s for you to decide. But I’ll tell you this—she’s never one for small talk. She dives into the depths of your soul, plucking out truths and secrets like a diver fetching pearls from the ocean floor.”

“That sounds... invasive,” I muttered, “So, she practices her mysticism through these deep, soul-searching dialogues?”

“She’s much more than just an adept conversationalist,” Rose countered. “You’ll understand when you meet her.”

“And when’s that going to happen? Where is she?” I asked, my curiosity piqued.

Rose guided my gaze towards an uncanny barrier ahead, shimmering and rippling like an invisible curtain, separating our snowy world from an eternal spring beyond.

“We have to cross that.” She pointed, her voice showing a hint of concern. As we stepped through the barrier, it was as if we’d walked into a painting. The cold that had clung to our skins like a shroud was replaced with a warmth that seeped into our bones, as though the very air was infused with the spirit of spring. The scent of blooming flowers mixed with the earthy aroma of fresh leaves, creating a perfume that was intoxicating. The previously silent world now sang with the sounds of life: birdsong, the rustling of leaves, and the distant murmur of a bubbling brook. But the edges of the barrier seemed to flicker, losing their solidity, and a handful of snowflakes had managed to pass through, whispering the untold story of a weakening shield.

In the heart of this eternal spring stood the *Mystic*’s residence—an enchanted tower crafted from a gargantuan tree. Its immense structure stretched high, with tiers upon tiers reaching up, daring to brush the very sky itself. The branches were adorned with glowing red leaves, shimmering like rubies in the sunlight.

Balcony-like formations were sprinkled across the colossal tree at irregular intervals, each offering a unique, panoramic view of the surrounding landscape. Larger platforms were etched higher up into the tower, their purpose veiled in mystery. Dotted across the bark, windows gleamed like curious eyes, casting a kaleidoscope of vibrant hues across the ground as they caught the sun’s light.

I let out a low whistle, my eyes wide, “This is... unexpected,” I admitted.

My neck ached as I craned it upward, trying in vain to take in the full scale of the colossal tree.

“What’s the surprise?”

“I mean, the *Mystic* is supposedly hard to find, right? Yet, this tree is like a beacon, screaming her presence to the world.”

“What does that tell you about people?”

As we approached the foot of the tree, we discovered a series of stairs leading upwards towards the entrance. The moment my foot touched the first step, a pawn statue to the side, one of two, jolted to life, shifting its position and marching towards me

“What’s happening?” I asked, eyes wide.

Rose smirked. “How well do you like chess puzzles?”

Her question caught me off guard. What does that have to do with anything?

“Not really, I just enjoy the game. But I don’t think now is the right time.”

Rose chuckled. “There’s no better time, trust me.”

The pawn-shaped statue stood adjacent to the first stair, a silent guardian marking the entrance to the mystical tower.

“What now?” I asked, a bewildered expression crossing my face. Rose tilted her head slightly, her eyes glinting with a mixture of amusement and challenge.

“Use your head,” she advised, her smirk broadening at my obvious confusion.

Maybe I should slam my head against the tree. That should amuse her.

“Why can’t you just give me the answer?” I shot back, a hint of frustration creeping into my voice. “You’re complicating things unnecessarily.”

“I can’t. It’s your puzzle to solve,” she replied, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

I sighed in disbelief. Intrigued, I tried stepping back, and the statue dutifully slid back to its original position. Moving forward again caused the statue to stir once more. This movement was no random phenomenon.

“I guess I need to say a password or something?” I mused aloud.

Rose’s smirk only widened; her silence more revealing than any clue.

“Something to do with chess,” I muttered to myself, gears turning in my head. A puzzle? A riddle? It had to be a term or phrase, but which one?

My mind raced through possible options—“Check,” “Checkmate”—but none seemed to work. In desperation, I even tried “Sah Mat,” but to no avail. The answer was undoubtedly right under my nose, yet it eluded me.

As the minutes turned into what felt like hours, I could see Rose's patience wearing thin. She began tossing pebbles into a nearby brook, her once amused smirk now replaced by a bored expression. As another pebble sent ripples through the water, a thought suddenly sparked in my mind.

The two steps. The moving pawn. It could only move two squares from its initial position. A rule. A special move. The answer was in that, I was certain. But the term, it was on the tip of my tongue.

"I think I've got it... sort of," I confessed to Rose.

Her eyes lit up. "Oh? And what would that be?"

"Well, that's the issue. I can't seem to recall the exact term. *El passo?* *Em passo?*" I rattled off what I thought could be correct, only to be met with a shake of her head. "*Em passanto!* That has to be it."

My confident declaration was promptly shot down by a simple "no" from Rose.

Fed up, I blurted, "By the way, just so you know, I've almost got it."

The instant the words left my mouth, the statue began to tremble, finally disintegrating into dust. Stunned, I could only ask, "What just happened?"

With a triumphant grin, Rose replied, "*En passant!* It's French and means 'by the way.'"

My cheeks reddened. "Well, I told you I got it," I mumbled, attempting to salvage some dignity.

Rose couldn't contain her laughter,

"More by luck than by memory, apparently. For a supposed chess lover, you're quite disappointing."

Despite the embarrassment, I tried to defend myself. "I would've gotten it right eventually. I was close. It was right there..."

Rose's sarcastic retort stopped me in my tracks. "Of course you were, because you're really smart."

With that, she ascended the stairs as a hidden doorway started to form in the tree. She gestured towards the opening, a smug grin on her face.

"Ladies first!" I muttered, hoping to steer away from my recent blunder.

She pushed open the door. “Don’t forget to close it behind you. I don’t want a wolf to come out.”

5

We climbed up, our path marked by smooth staircases nestled inside the massive hollow trunk of an ancient tree. Winding upwards, the steps seemed to twist eternally towards the heavens, a swirling pattern chiseled into the grain of the wood. Ladders bridged vertical gaps, their steps humming a wooden melody under our weight. While the exterior hinted at a humble treehouse, inside was a noble haven, reminding us of a regal tower that pierced the skies.

Every inch of the treehouse tower was painstakingly crafted, a testament to the union of nature and craftsmanship. The walls, hewn from the tree’s light brown heartwood, glowed gently in the warm light from overhead. Red accents traced the curves of the staircases, imbuing the otherwise rustic setting with an aura of royalty. Paintings filled the chambers branching off the main trunk, a private gallery hung on the backdrop of the tree’s rings, their patterns creating a chronicle of centuries.

“The Queen has an affinity for art, it seems,” I observed, studying the variety of artwork displayed.

“Very much so. She’s been collecting them over the years,” Rose responded.

Staring at the paintings, I felt an eerie familiarity with their ordinary scenes. The artwork held no surreal or abstract elements, each scene depicting life in raw, realistic strokes. A refreshing departure from the oft-chaotic world outside, they brought a sense of peace to my soul.

“How many levels are there?” I asked, breaking the serene silence.

“Seven that are divided into another seven,” Rose replied.

My legs protested the continuous ascent, the muscles within them tightening with fatigue until we reached the top. Large double doors that

marked the entrance of the Mystic's chamber stood as the only barrier between us and her. The left door was of pure white, while the right was painted a vibrant red, a contrast as stark as their owner's reputation.

The doors creaked open, revealing a throne room that was nothing short of grand. Its floor was an intricate design of heptagonal tiles, diverging from the traditional square ones. The throne, an organic marvel, unfurled from the tree's heart. Polished wood grain and velvet-red upholstery glowed warmly, the high backrest branching out in intricate arboreal carvings. Its armrest cradled a white dove, its red eyes as sharp as the throne's majestic presence.

The Queen herself was a picture of beauty, her dark skin a contrast to her regal red and white attire. As she ascended, the creature unfurled its wings, beating them with an ethereal rhythm, and soared into the azure.

"Welcome! I'm delighted you've arrived," she exclaimed. Feeling the weight of the moment, I leaned over to Rose, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Should we kneel?" The woman's hearing proved sharper than I anticipated.

"No need. I don't ask that of anyone!" she quipped.

Good, I'm tired of bowing to authority, I mused, her gentle warmth amplifying the allure.

"Here he is," Rose announced, pointing towards me. "I've brought him as you asked."

"I've been searching for you these past few months."

"You've been searching for me?" I repeated.

"I wished to speak with you. Now I have the opportunity. It's an honor." Confusion loomed over me.

"Why would someone such as yourself wish to talk to someone like me, your highness?"

"I would rather you not be formal with me," she countered with a light tone. "You may call me by name: Aurora."

Her smile was as welcoming as the dawn.

"Apologies," I returned, trying to hide my nervousness.

“How do you feel?” she asked, her eyes searching mine. I was adrift in the ocean of my emotions.

What am I supposed to feel? Empty, confused, frightened... But I knew honesty was my ally.

“Surreal would be the word I would use. Everything feels a little off. It’s hard to explain, really.”

She tilted her head, curiosity flickering in her red eyes.

“Do you feel as though something is holding you back?”

“Trapped... inside a cage. Mentally and physically... drained little by little,” I confessed.

“Of course, you must be. It’s been a long journey. We have much to discuss. Follow me,” she invited as she rose gracefully from her throne.

Her hands held together in a humble gesture as she led me outside, while Rose remained behind. The balcony was a perch among the clouds, a leap away from the embrace of the grass beneath. In its center sat two seats and a table, a chessboard sitting in quiet anticipation.

“Let us play.”

“What does this have to do with anything?” I questioned.

“Everything.”

My gaze was immediately drawn to the peculiar configuration of the pieces. They were scattered randomly, save for the pawns.

“What is this?”

“Randomness, chaos... whatever you want it to be,” she returned.

Her pieces were a pristine white while mine were bathed in crimson.

“Why don’t we just play regular chess?”

“It is a game of life. It is both an art and a science. Find balance in the chaos, embrace it.”

An old, wooden clock sat nearby, the gears hidden within longing for a purpose. I decided fifteen minutes each seemed reasonable.

“Set the clock at random,” she requested.

With a shrug, I halved the original time, seven minutes each.

“Why seven minutes?” she asked.

“I see it everywhere for some reason. It speaks to me. It guides me.”

“We have that in common, then.”

As the game proceeded, my understanding ebbed and flowed. I found comfort in my intuition over knowledge.

“I can tell you really enjoy this game of random chess,” I noted. Aurora’s grin stretched across her face. Her hawk circled above, serenading the sky.

“There is beauty in both order and chaos. It all depends where it comes from, a good intention or bad. I sometimes find order constraining and the chaos liberating.”

Her sentiments mirrored my own. I, too, had often found solace in my wild imagination and resented the confining order of the world. Perfection, I reckoned, lay somewhere in the middle. The game continued as the clock ticked, an unyielding reminder of our fleeting time. With a glance, I noted the old clock dutifully tracking our moves.

“The shadows, what are your thoughts regarding them? What emotion does their name evoke in you?”

“Anger, hatred,” I said, the words tasting sour on my tongue.

“Why hate something you don’t understand?”

“They attacked my friends and me, wanting to kill us.”

“You paint all of them with the same brush. You know for certain that every shadow that exists wants to harm you?”

Her words brought a new perspective. Perhaps I had been too quick to judge.

“No, I...” I conceded, recognizing my own hot-headedness.

It was true, my understanding of the shadows was superficial. Aurora directed my attention to Rose.

“Over there, look. She is one of them. She came to me one night, desperate for help. I took her in and she has stayed by my side ever since.”

Shock reverberated through me. *Rose, a shadow...*

“Why was she asking for help?”

“Her kind has committed many atrocities. Burdened by guilt, she sought refuge. She didn’t conform to their predominant values.”

The familiarity of being ostracized stung. I had just unknowingly done to Rose what others had done to me.

“Your friend Tyger,” she continued.

My eyes widened at the mention of his name.

“He believes his parents were taken by the shadows. That’s the lie he’s clung to. They weren’t. Their departure was their choice. I cherish honesty above all else, but sometimes honesty can wound. That’s why I’ve kept myself hidden from him. I worry if he found me that he would lose his innocence, his values. Everyone needs something to blame. I trust he’ll learn to let go of his bitterness through the white lie you’ll eventually end up feeding him.”

I nodded, comprehension slowly seeping in. The puzzle pieces of our journey were starting to align. *Tyger had been through so much. If he learned the truth, the balance he’d achieved could shatter.*

“He wants to be remembered, and the only way he can achieve that is through self-sacrifice and his connection with you. Keep him close.”

As our conversation meandered, so did our game. Time was dwindling; we were in the endgame. Aurora had the upper hand. Driven by desperation, I made rash moves, blunders. I had never felt such defeat in my life. Barely a minute remained on my clock, and she had more than double my time. I moved the pieces hastily, like a gunslinger in a duel. She claimed my pieces one by one until my king stood alone. Despite the odds, I refused to capitulate. I wracked my brain, my thoughts racing. She kept announcing checks, but I was careful not to fall into her traps.

In her pursuit of victory, she made a critical error. My king was immobilized but not in checkmate—a draw.

“I’ve gotten a bit stale. Good game,” I extended my hand.

We shook. Her disappointment palpable. She had victory within her grasp, but it slipped away at the last moment. We got up from our seats, walking back inside towards the throne.

“Now, why do you think we truly played?” she asked, her voice smooth as silk. “To help prepare us for what’s coming.”

Growing unease crept into my voice.

“And what is coming?” I asked.

“A war, between a certain shadow and me, has been raging for eons. I push and he pulls, but there is never a clear victor, nor can there be.

See, we are stuck in an eternal dance. We co-exist. I create souls, and he creates shadows that collide within. You are at the center of this war.“

I could hardly fathom her revelation. The implication weighed heavy on my chest. I struggled to find my next words.

“How is that possible?”

“The war rages within you. Right now. This very instant.”

My thoughts jumbled. I felt a foreign tumult inside me.

Is this some sort of metaphor? Who is this woman?

“The next moment is crucial. Control it,” she warned, her voice reverberating against a looming silence as Rose approached. “What if I told you this is nothing but one long... dream?”

Her words were a bolt to my psyche. It felt like the ground was pulled from under my feet.

An unseen force rocked the giant tree house, its wooden planks prying from their bindings, howling in mid-air. A pulsing agony spread through my skull.

“Control it! Concentrate!” she urged again. Was it real? Had to be! Why else would the world unravel around me? A myriad of questions flooded my mind, their answers lost in the chaos. My head rang. My heartbeats resounded ominously. The unbearable weight of the situation forced me to my knees. I was drawn, disoriented, towards the heptagon’s center. With a desperate cry, I shut my eyes.

“Stop, stop, stop, stop...” I chanted, hoping against hope that vocalizing it would force reality to obey.

To my utter astonishment, it worked. Whether by my own power or not, the chaos halted. Silence. Complete, consuming silence. Except for the rhythmic thud of my heartbeat resonating through the blank space. Darkness enveloped me, punctuated only by the faint glow of the heptagon under me.

“Not yet. Proceed,” spectral whispers drifted through the ether, their voices entwined in a chorus of otherworldly echoes. I felt disoriented.

Voices? Am I hallucinating everything?

The heptagon below me began to rotate counter-clockwise, and the world began to sway once more. As I scrambled onto my feet, the ground disappeared beneath me. I tumbled down, my head smacking against the hard surface.

“Salvador,” a familiar voice called. “Come back, come back!”

I blinked my eyes open to see Rose’s worried face peering down at me.

In my disoriented state, I managed to croak out, “Where am I? What’s happening?”

“You’re back where you were. You managed to control it,” Aurora’s voice resonated. As my vision sharpened, I realized everything had returned to “normal.”

The roof was intact, the walls stood firm, the ground was still. The world had stopped its violent dance. Rose’s hand cradled my head. My limbs sprawled out.

“What just happened?” Rose’s voice trembled. She turned to Aurora. “A dream?”

“Indeed, because it is. He knows it, and so did I. Now, you share this knowledge too. We exist in his world, locked within his mind. Without him, we cease to exist,” Aurora replied.

Suddenly, a rush of memories overwhelmed me, an understanding unfurling within me.

“Why didn’t I wake up when you told me? Why am I still here?”

She looked at me, a smile tugging at her lips.

“I don’t know. Maybe you willed it? We’re all still here, aren’t we?

Maybe if you’d awoken in such a state, everything would’ve disappeared forever.”

“But...?” Rose started, but Aurora interjected:

“Some things are best left unspoken.”

Her dove swooped in, alighting on her arm. Rose’s hand was still holding mine, helping me to my feet.

“Since I arrived, I’ve sought a way back. I was told you could help me.

“It almost happened,” I managed to say.

“No! You were told that you could help yourself. And that’s true. All that remains now is for you to learn, to grow, to become fully lucid. That’s the only way I know of.”

6

Aurora and I ambled through the myriad levels of the colossal tower, each one humming its own unique tale, countless chambers brimming with history and an array of glass openings stippling the bark of the gargantuan tree. Circular by design, the rooms and passageways spiralled akin to a snail’s shell. Stoic armored knights guarded the chambers while robed bishops moved like spirits, their whispered duties resonating through the vast halls. As with many places of power, time here had its own rhythm; upon departing this ethereal realm, the relentless march of time would latch onto one again. Age, the ever-present specter, would resume its pursuit. Guiding me into a dimly lit chamber, Aurora motioned towards the room’s centerpiece: a large heptagonal antiprism resting on a crimson pillow.

I questioned, “What does it do?”

Aurora responded, “It shows me things I wish to see. I give life to nature, and that is as far as my reach extends. The roots of trees are like a web to a spider. When disturbed, they send vibrations to me, among other things.”

“May I?” After receiving her nod of approval, I reached out and lifted the prism off its plush throne. As a ray of light hit it, a unique rainbow formed within, bouncing around against the walls, some of its rays escaping its confine and decorating the room. This rainbow consisted of seven colors: yellow, grey, purple, white, black and two blues.

Black and white aren't colors, I mused. *Or is my thinking too narrow?*

As I concentrated, the interior of it seemed to ripple, creating a visual manifestation of my thoughts—or so I assumed.

“What do you see?”

I was only met by a distorted reflection of myself. “Nothing...” I admitted.

“Interesting. Without it, I would have lost many more battles than I have,” she stated.

Startled by a sudden mental image, I swiftly returned the antiprism to its resting place.

“Home! That's what you thought of,” she guessed accurately.

I nodded at her.

“You mentioned the only way for me to go back is full lucidity. How do I reach that point? What do I need to do?”

Settling into a squashy armchair by the window, she replied, “That comes over time. It is something I myself do not fully comprehend.”

“Why didn't you find me earlier, and make me realize?”

“For your own good. The less you were aware, the safer you were. Every stage of awareness makes you more accessible to harm. My intent was never to even reveal this to you unless I had no other choice. This is a war I am losing. I told you because I need your help.”

“How can I help you? What can I do that you can't?”

She paused, gathering her thoughts before responding. “Right now, nothing, but in due time, everything,” she said. “You see, the shadows have a ruler that is my antithesis. I mentioned him to you earlier. He is

widely known by the name of Hatman. His name may not sound frightening, but do not let that fool you; he is a very demonic entity. His entire purpose rests on your murder. He is currently the only one that has the desire and capability to do so.”

“Why did you even tell me then? Why didn’t you let me be?”

“If I had not told you, he would have found you eventually and done it himself, and then would’ve used the truth to kill you. He hasn’t been able to do so because I had tightened my web around you, protecting you, and keeping you from being identified... until you went off on your own.”

“I don’t have a choice, do I?”

“If he kills you, I’m afraid you will not be waking up. You will be trapped for eternity inside the nothingness unless you reach full lucidity. That is the only key out of your cell.”

A torrent of thoughts surged through my mind. *What if I can’t do it? What if he kills me? What if I never see my family again?*

“Can’t I just hide?”

“You’ve been hiding from yourself your entire life. In here, time moves too slow for you to grow. Since we cannot kill each other, you must be the one. He is unaware of your whereabouts, I believe. He might suspect that you are back in the town. He will come looking for you. The days of my influence in this era are numbered. You will have to be the one to deal the final blow before he does. Do something he won’t expect from you. Don’t give him the advantage he wants.”

Fear gripped me. Responsibility felt like a boulder on my shoulders. *Please don’t be true...*

“How do I achieve higher levels of lucidity, and what happens when I do?”

“With every passing moment, you will gradually gain more clarity now that you are aware. Much faster out there than in here. You will be able to impact the world around you by using your mind, your greatest weapon. Rose will go with you,” she continued. “She is the only one that knows the way. I understand that a lot is being thrown on your back.

Inside of your heart, you have determination. I've seen you stand up for yourself when absolutely necessary."

"I've also shown to be a coward when confronted."

"Good! Brave men die fighting; cowards return home to tell the tale. Be an untiring coward. Discomfort will help your mind expand."

In the velvet embrace of night, I found myself cloistered in one of the tower's intimate chambers. Moonlight seeped in through the window, splitting my face into realms of light and dark. Hunched over in distress, I was a picture of internal turmoil.

I'm not ready.

The familiar specter of disappointment loomed.

It's absurd... she's entrusting all this to me. Why does the journey have to be this onerous? This jagged? Damn it!

A sudden, soft knock on the door punctured my solitary musings. Deep into the quiet night, a visitor seemed unusual.

"Come in!" I called out, and the door creaked open obediently. Rose appeared in the doorway.

"I couldn't sleep. Neither could you, huh?"

"I don't sleep."

She intoned, as if from a well-remembered script, "Sleep is Death being shy and you're running for your life. I don't claim to understand what is happening, but I trust her. She has a pure heart. She wouldn't do this if it wasn't in everyone's best interest."

"I don't doubt her, I doubt myself. I'm not up for the task. I've been practicing all day, and the best I could do was push the plate a few centimeters. I'm not even sure that was me; the wind was blowing simultaneously."

With a comforting ease, she moved to sit beside me on the bed, her gaze melding with mine on the moon outside. She was a silhouette of night, dressed in full black.

"Flowers bloom when the time is right, not when they want to. Perhaps that goes for you as well. Let it come naturally. Don't force it. If you pressure a flower, you will end up ruining it."

I found myself nodding.

“You might be right. I just didn’t want to waste time doing nothing. I want to be as prepared as possible.”

“You will be; just try to concentrate and don’t forget to breathe.”

“Almost forgot.”

“Your name is Salvador,” she continued. “Do you know what it means?”

“Savior,” I replied.

“Exactly,” she said. “You have to be the savior of your own universe. Nobody else can do it for you. That doesn’t mean you won’t need any help. I’ll be there alongside you. Always...”

Her words, like a soothing balm, eased my fears, if only momentarily. It was as if she delicately excised the fear gripping my heart. I needed assurance that things would work out. I needed someone like her by my side.

“Is there anything I should know before we leave?”

“How good is your vision?”

“It’s good. Why?”

“The Shadow Realm is a dark place. The shadows walk freely there without any chains holding them back.”

“I hate the dark. I always have.”

“The dark isn’t the problem, it’s what hides in it.”

What darkness hides within you? I wondered. *What in your past made you the person you are today?* I wanted to say. The silence was urging me to voice my curiosity, and so I did.

“What is your secret? What part of yourself were you running from?”

With a swift, graceful motion, she pushed me back onto the bed. Climbing onto my lap, she gently pressed my head into the soft mattress, her eyes locking onto mine as if searching for something hidden deep within.

A single thought suddenly overwhelmed me: *I want you.*

As she leaned closer, my heart raced, its rapid thumping filling the room. My hand found its way to her thigh, as if guided by an instinct I didn’t know I had. I felt the warmth of her breath against my face.

“This part,” she whispered, a tear forming in her eye as she closed both of them, leaving me to wonder what unspeakable truth lay behind those simple words.

Soon enough, the moon bowed out, replaced by the warm embrace of dawn. We had shared the entire night, two solitary souls keeping each other company amidst the looming uncertainty.

Our departure was imminent. Each passing day was a scratched mark on the face of a merciless calendar.

“Something terrible happened!” Aurora’s voice reverberated throughout her stately throne room. “The town... it was attacked during the night.”

“What!?” I exclaimed. “Why didn’t you inform me?”

“There was nothing you could have done. The onslaught came without warning. I only realized after the fact when my bishops relayed the grim news.”

“And the people? My friends?” My voice trembled.

Her eyes bore into mine.

“I don’t know... The town is now a haven of hollowness.”

I spun on my heels, a rush of adrenaline propelling me towards the door.

“Wait!” Aurora’s voice halted me. “You’ll need a weapon for when the battle seeks you out. You’ll need it for ‘him.’”

At her signal, one of her guards approached, carrying a small silver chest.

“What’s inside?” I asked.

The guard unlocked the chest with a key dangling from his neck. He revealed a sleek silver surgical scalpel. Confusion knitted my brows together, a reaction Aurora seemed to anticipate.

“You expected something different. A sword perhaps?”

The scalpel bore markings, inscriptions beyond my understanding.

Should’ve guessed. How can you kill something with your own hand that is killing you from the inside. A tumor needs to be cut out and removed.

She stepped forward as she spoke. “They will reveal themselves to you when the time is right. As it was decreed, once you hear them, your chains will be broken. This is the only way to end it... to end him. Such a cruel fate. It doesn’t allow you to run from it.”

She gently placed the scalpel in my hand, enclosing my fingers around it.

“Trust me.”

Our gazes locked. It was a bizarre instrument. A scalpel, of all things, beguiling in its simplicity. Who would have thought the fulcrum of everything rested on such a small, striking item.

“I trust you.”

Her smile was her final gift to me. At the tower’s base, the husky awaited us. Basking in the sun, on the verdant grass, he was stealing a quick nap.

“Sven,” Rose summoned. “Come, boy, we’re leaving!”

At her call, his eyes snapped open and his ears pricked up. With his tongue lolling, he scampered towards Rose.

“He reminds me of my Zev.”

“I met him once. He was waiting for you. I gave him a pat on the head.”

“If he trusts you, then so do I. He has a nose for it.”

As we navigated the sprawling field, I resisted the urge to glance back. I sensed Aurora’s gaze from her elevated perch, watching our departure. It didn’t matter. The future was before us, and it was the direction we were destined to tread.

7

The city still stood, but the heartbeat that once thrummed in its veins was silent. Its people, the lifeblood of the metropolis, were like marionettes with severed strings, trapped in their own bodies, in a state of living death. From above, the sun’s glare didn’t spark reflections of their souls,

only casting long, hollow shadows. The essence of life had been choked out of them, not extinguishing their lives, but stealing their ability to truly live.

On that day, no children's laughter echoed through the alleys, no musicians strummed heart-tugging melodies, and no merchants haggled over deals. The marketplace was silent, unable to negotiate with an enemy that had no desire for commerce.

What was the worth of a shadow in such times?

Color, once vibrant and dazzling, now seemed muted and lifeless, though it was still present. A somber stillness enveloped the city, the streets now a tableau of unmoving bodies, trapped not in the present, but in a past that felt increasingly like a dream. My thoughts turned to Nayu, the little girl I played with in the snow. Her house was just down the street. With a sense of dread twisting my gut, my legs carried me towards it over the countless bodies, with Rose hot on my heels.

Approaching her house was like chasing a mirage, a futile grasp at hope. Despair gnawed at me from the inside, breaking my emotional fortress as easily as ribs cracking under pressure. Around the corner, her house stood. The door was ajar, darkness seeping out from the entrance like a melancholic sigh, except for the faint light filtering through a crack in the window.

A leg jutted out ominously from the dark interior. My heart hammered as I entered, realizing it belonged to Nayu's mother. She was not in the living room, nor in the kitchen. Across from me, a door stood slightly ajar. A sickening fear gripped me as I moved past the motionless body and into that room.

And there she was, Nayu, in her own bed. Her arms lay rigid at her sides, her face serene, as if she were just sleeping. I sat on her bed, a lump forming in my throat.

Why am I too late? If this is just a dream, why is my chest so tight?

Gently, I held her still warm hand. At the door, Rose appeared.

“You knew this girl?”

“No. I understood her.”

“I’m terribly sorry.”

“How long does she have? How long do they all have?”

“I don’t know. It depends from person to person. Maybe days, months, or even years.”

A crushing sadness coursed through me, poisoning my spirit, overpowering my other emotions. It felt as though my body was turning into a hollow shell, a ghost ship without a crew. Even as reality seemed to blur, her hand in mine and the sight of her peaceful face felt painfully real. I slowly pressed my lips against her forehead, kissing her dreams and calming her mind.

We set out searching for Tyger and Matthew. They were nowhere to be found in the deserted streets, and their hotel room was just as empty. All their belongings were still there, but they were missing.

As we searched for traces of them, the sound of footsteps came from downstairs. Instinctively, my hand reached for my weapon, but Rose assured me it was safe. An old man appeared, a mix of relief and despair etched on his face.

“There are more of you I hope,” he said. “Or is this all that is left?” A current of hopelessness carrying his voice.

“We weren’t present,” Rose said softly.

He nodded and explained he was searching the town for survivors. He had recovered eight.

As we followed the old man back to his home, to a peculiar V-shaped upside-down house on the outskirts, I couldn’t help but voice a suspicion to Rose.

“When we were attacked earlier, they attempted to strangle us, even me. None of these bodies have a scratch on them.”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “He might’ve gotten desperate.”

The upside-down house felt like a safe house in a world filled with danger. Its odd design was somehow comforting. But beneath the calm exterior, my mind was a tempest.

What if they didn’t make it? What if they’re gone?

It was all a dream but felt more real than anything I had felt prior. Every dream has a hidden meaning. *What is the meaning of this one?*

That was the question I had to answer every so often. If I didn't, then nothing would matter any longer. A dream without meaning is a worthless endeavor.

"It's not much but it is home, I suppose," the old man's words rippled in my mind.

We entered the building, the creak of the threshold under our feet lingering in the space. Inside, a few individuals lay scattered across the floor, enshrouded in blankets. A fire flickered warmly in the hearth.

"Salvador!" a voice called out. The sound of my name being said was a comfort, and the tension in my body eased. It was Tyger, who quickly got to his feet and hurried over. I felt like a weight had been lifted from my chest. We hugged each other tightly, our arms wrapped around one another.

Glancing around the room, I spotted Matthew sitting in a corner, fiddling with a piece of scrap metal. I scanned the room further, but saw no other familiar faces.

"Is this it?" I asked, to which Tyger simply nodded.

"They've only been targeting individuals before, like wolves picking off sheep. But this... this was a full-blown bloodless massacre."

I introduced Rose.

"She helped me find the Mystic."

They shook hands, exchanged names.

"You found him," Tyger exclaimed, his eyes wide. "What did he tell you?"

"She," I corrected him. "She told me many things. But let's talk about that later. This isn't the right place."

Tyger looked surprised, but he nodded in understanding.

"Turns out Matthew wasn't lying," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Marcus Drake. He didn't introduce himself?" Tyger gestured towards the old man tending to the fire.

I shook my head.

"He gave us shelter, food, anything we needed after the attack."

Guilt washed over me, and I remembered how harshly I had treated Matthew.

“But why couldn’t he remember?”

Why hadn’t Memory allowed the people to do so?

Tyger leaned in, his voice dropping to a whisper.

“They haven’t spoken a word to each other since we arrived. They just ignore each other. I don’t know why, and I don’t plan to ask. I think you should talk to Matthew about this.”

Approaching Matthew slowly, I noticed he was aware of my presence, though he didn’t acknowledge me.

“Matthew?” I began softly, sitting down next to him. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have...”

His response stunned me.

“I am not real, Salvador,” he said, his voice hollow.

“What do you mean?” I questioned, taken aback.

Does he know? It’s impossible.

“This body, this heart, and even this brain... they are not natural. I was built from scratch. My memory was manipulated, programmed to forget this place. It was deleted.”

Silence filled the space between us.

“Are you telling me you’re...”

He revealed his body, riddled with scars and openings that showed his mechanical insides.

“I deleted my own memory. I could not bear the pain. I managed to forget I was unwelcome here, but I couldn’t forget the person. Never the person.”

Overwhelmed, I leaned my head against the wall.

“Why don’t you try to talk to him?” I said, my face blank.

Matthew swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. He nodded slowly, as if each dip of his chin cost him a part of his courage. Rising from his seat was a slow process. Every muscle movement seemed deliberate, his reluctance palpable. His neck jerked to the side slightly, a nervous tic that surfaced more when he was on edge.

“Father?” His voice came out, hushed and hesitant, as though grappling with a lump in his throat... unresolved emotions permeating through the room.

His features, in that moment, took on a softness, a vulnerability that reminded me of a portrait I once saw of his mother, her eyes mirroring the same uncertain hope. A stillness hung heavy in the room, only accentuated by Matthew’s voice, a needle on the tense fabric of silence.

“Father?” he asked again, and with each repetition, his voice grew more distorted, his neck twitching more pronounced.

Marcus finally stood, turning to face Matthew. His gaze was stern, his eyes hard as flint, but they were averted, dancing around Matthew’s visage as if avoiding the painful reminder of a love lost. He glanced at his son, his creation, but his eyes never met Matthew’s face. There was an unspoken sorrow in that avoidance. His head moved in a slow denial, his silence cutting through the tension, screaming louder than words, as he passed by Matthew without uttering a single one.

The room was dead silent, the disappointment tangible, sticking to our skins like a layer of grime. I felt a pit in my stomach, a hollow feeling echoing the hollowness in the room. Tyger and I locked eyes. An understanding passed between us—shared empathy for a man in need. As Marcus disappeared upstairs, leaving behind the fading sound of his footsteps, we moved towards Matthew, our silence offering the only support we could muster.

“You were brave,” I said to Matthew. “You don’t belong where you’re not wanted. You belong with us. We want you.”

We four stepped out into the snow-crusted landscape, the chill air nipping at our faces. We were leaving behind a reality further fractured for Matthew, stepping away from the raw hurt that lingered inside the shelter.

To Tyger’s surprise, the husky was outside. It lay peacefully on a raised mound, its thick, silvery coat dusted with frost, resembling an ice sculpture finding solace in its frozen haven. Tyger spoke first, his gaze distant.

“I lost both of my parents,” he said, his voice carrying a lingering weight. “It hasn’t been easy. See all of those wounds?” He gestured vaguely to Matthew, whose mechanical insides lay partially exposed. “Those can be patched up and fixed. The ones inside, they can only be healed with time. Life goes on.”

“You believe you aren’t real,” Rose’s voice softened as she took a step toward Matthew. “But the pain you’re experiencing, the emotions stirring within you—they’re as real as any I’ve known. You can feel the crushing weight, can’t you?” She paused, offering a melancholic smile, tinged with her own pain and understanding. “Sometimes when you’re in a dark place you think you’ve been buried, but actually you’ve just been planted...”

We left him with his thoughts, our presence an unspoken promise of solidarity. Words would not mend his pain, but our silent support offered solace, an acknowledgment that he was not alone.

There was a river nearby. Its glacial waters, jade in hue, flowed steadily, its whispers mingling with the soft sigh of the winter wind. We settled on the riverbank, each lost in our own world. Tyger was building a fortress of snowballs, his hands busy with the cold matter. Sven lay at my feet, his body a comforting warmth, as I idly stroked underneath his jaw. Rose was lost in her thoughts, her gaze fixed on the distant horizon, her eyes a mirror of the swirling emotions within her. Matthew, on the other hand, had his eyes fixed on the river, the emerald waters reflecting in his stare, but his thoughts were miles away, caught in the maze of his newly remembered past. Tyger broke the silence, a snowball cupped in his hands.

“What is she like?” he asked, tossing the snowball from one hand to another, his gaze flicking between the ball and me.

“Assertive, yet gentle at the same time. Wise, very wise,” I answered.

A small smile tugged at my lips, the memory of Aurora warming me from within.

“She cares for everyone,” Rose added, her voice soft yet firm. Her words hung in the air, a testament to the Mystic’s empathetic nature.

Tyger's interest was piqued. He paused in his snowball play, focusing his attention fully on me.

"What did she tell you?" he asked.

"A lot of things," I replied, a slight hesitation in my voice. I was not entirely sure how much I could reveal. "There is a war happening behind the scenes. Well, it was, you two witnessed the first head-on attack around these parts. After meeting her, I've learned a lot of things about myself. Things I cannot tell you and not because I don't trust you. I simply can't. I've found my way home, and it involves me participating in this war."

A look of intrigued confusion crossed Tyger's face.

"Participate? How do you intend to do that? You aren't a fighter yet," he said, his voice carrying an undertone of concern.

A thought flashed across my mind and I focused on the snowball in his hands. To his surprise, it sprang up and hit his face. He quickly wiped away the snow, blinking in astonishment.

"With that."

Matthew turned to me, a shocked expression etched on his face.

"With magic?" he whispered, disbelief lacing his voice. I shook my head, a small smile pulling at my lips.

"No, with my mind. The *Mystic* taught me that this ability was there all along, within me. I was just oblivious to it."

Tyger, still a little shaken from the snowball surprise, chuckled.

"She clearly doesn't know you're illiterate," he said, a teasing glint in his eyes. "You should stick with the snowballs. They're much more effective than whatever is lurking up there in that head of yours."

Rose and I shared a smirk.

"I can control the world around me with my thoughts. Admittedly not by much currently, but it will improve over time. At least I hope it will."

"That is fascinating, indeed," Matthew chimed in, his voice filled with awe.

Tyger looked at Rose and me, his earlier humor replaced by a serious expression.

"How do you two intend to get involved exactly?" he asked.

Rose's gaze hardened, her voice growing firm. "There is one way to turn the tides. It won't secure victory, but it will destabilize them. We chop the head of the snake, and the body loses its direction. In other words, assassination of their leader."

Tyger blinked, taken aback by her blunt words.

"Why not appeal to his ego? A grandiose speech about the burdens of power. Maybe he'll tire of his own importance and just vanish... Do you even know where you're going?"

I held his gaze, my voice calm.

"Do you trust me?"

Their nods came in unison. I continued, my gaze shifting to Rose.

"Rose is one of them," I said, my tone just above a whisper in case someone was watching.

Tyger's face contorted with a mix of anger and betrayal, his eyes burning with a raw intensity. He was silent, his lips pressed into a thin line as he looked away. His hands clenched and unclenched, a visible sign of the storm of thoughts and emotions brewing within him. His fists trembled slightly, and his gaze never left Rose, a bitter skepticism mounting in his eyes. He was silent for a long moment before speaking, his voice choked with suppressed rage.

"You trust one of them? After what happened? My parents..."

I held my ground, my gaze steady.

"The Mystic trusts her, and so do I. She will lead us through the dark."

Tyger took a deep breath, his features softening. He sighed, an edge of defeat in his voice.

"What makes you different?" he asked Rose, his stare still wary. Rose met his gaze head-on.

"Not all of us are evil, some are just lost and following orders. He is the main problem. Without him, the black sheep will scatter."

Tyger's suspicion didn't waver.

"I've never heard of a good one. I've never heard a story of even one helping anyone. All they do is bring pain and sorrow to people, good innocent people!"

“He!” Rose’s voice was firm, her eyes shifting to Sven. “I sent the wolves to get you when the Mystic foresaw the attack. Or shouldn’t I have? Perhaps you’d prefer death?”

Tyger had no reply to that. He watched her silently, the fire in his eyes dimming slightly as he took in her words. Her conviction was clear, her steadfast gaze holding no deceit. I could see the struggle in his eyes, the clashing emotions as he weighed his suspicion against her evident sincerity.

“I felt the same way you did. Rose wants to help her people, and I want to help her. I need to return the favor for saving us.”

My words hung in the stillness that enveloped us. The moment stretched on, filled only by the constant whispers of the river and the faint sighs of the wind. Tyger stood up, turning his back to us. He let out a long sigh, his shoulders sagging slightly under the weight of his thoughts.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said, his voice carrying a hint of resignation. “All those people were put to sleep. When we encountered them, they went at our throats, yours, mine, and Matthew’s. Why us?”

I remained silent. The question was one I had no answer to.

Nothing would have happened to me. I would have likely just remained in a suffocating state until he came. But why Tyger? Why Matthew?

“How do you plan to do it? With what? I’m guessing she gave you some information. Last time we were powerless,” he continued, his tone reflecting his lingering doubts.

I pulled out the scalpel, its blade gleaming ominously in the waning light.

“She gave me this. Apparently, it’s the only thing that can do the deed.”

“And why are you telling us all of this?” Matthew chimed in, his voice carrying a hint of curiosity.

A sigh escaped my lips.

“I need your help, both of you. I know it is not a fair thing to ask. You three are the only people I know and trust. I don’t think us two can do

this on our own. She also told me, Tyger, that the fruits of your journey lie within Rose.”

Matthew was the first to respond, his voice firm and resolute.

“Only if you hustle and get me a new car one day,” he said, his mechanical features betraying no emotion.

“A white one,” I lied, still refusing to believe I wrecked his car.

Tyger, however, remained silent. He kicked at the snow, his gaze fixed on the sky.

“It’s not my battle,” he muttered.

“You can say no,” I reminded him.

His gaze hardened, a hint of defiance in his eyes.

“I can say the word but it won’t mean anything. I don’t like owing people debts.” He turned to Rose, a small smile pulling at his lips. “I’m sorry. I hope that I won’t have to save your skin. It’s pretty the way it is.”

His words lifted the somber mood slightly. A small chuckle escaped my lips. “Where to now?”

“The realm devoid of meaning, purpose and individuality. The place where all rules break,” Rose replied, her voice trembling. “The Void.”

HANGING FORREST

1

Days slipped by like sand through fingers, the countdown of our time, rapidly dwindling. Sky-borne balloons, elegant like chariots, bore us towards the heavens. The journey stretched endlessly, as journeys often do when they carry one not across the earth, but into the space above. The balloons' shells, fashioned from a cloud-like substance, mirrored the parachutes I'd known before—woven from wisps of the sky, unrushed and unhurried.

Clouds danced a slow ballet in the sky. Watch them long enough, and time seemed to slow to their languid pace. Yet a brief glance away, and their formless mass twisted into shapes of every imaginable guise. The universe seemed to speak in this mutable language of cloud sculptures—one moment a dog, the next a tiger, then a dragon spewing forth celestial fire.

While my mind tried to decipher these cryptic sky messages, the balloon clouds behaved more like disciplined soldiers than free-spirited artists. They held their form and course, unwavering, as we climbed ever higher. The ascent struck a chilling note within me. Not a fear of heights, but of the bone-crushing impact of a fall. I pondered over the fate of the clouds, of parachutes, and of us if they simply chose to dissolve. But Rose surely knew the clouds' secret language. Still, I had to constantly remind myself that this was just a dream.

“Ever been on one of these?” Tyger asked, addressing Matthew.

“No. My world was largely confined to writing code and sketching out concepts. Not much room for sky jaunts,” he responded, somewhat ruefully.

“Isn’t life about experiencing the world firsthand?”

“Which is precisely what we’re doing now,” I chipped in.

“To think this journey, this destiny, was penned for me,” Tyger mused further. “Go to the Void. It would have been easier to refuse. But

something within insisted on this path. I feel like something has its hand on my mind. I feel like a puppet. I want to cut the strings, but it doesn't allow me."

With every foot of altitude we conquered, my thoughts crystallized further, distant memories drifting within reach.

Rose suddenly spoke, her voice steady and strong. "Funny, I just remembered my brother's childhood promise—to take me on one of these balloon rides. I was terrified of the very thought."

At her unexpected revelation, interest flickered in our eyes.

"Younger or older?" Tyger asked, a hint of surprise in his voice.

"Older... Not anymore... He passed on," Rose replied, a hint of a tremble in her voice.

The finality of the words still seemed to be a punch to her gut, even years later. We watched as she blinked away the prickling behind her eyes, and she continued, "It happened when I was ten. He was my hero, still is."

Conversations halted momentarily, the silence heavy with shared sorrow. Matthew, his voice careful and respectful, ventured to ask the reason behind her brother's early death.

"Society," Rose admitted, her voice wavering. "One day... they told me he contracted a lung disease... which was curable. Having a disease is considered a weakness where I'm from, not even worthy of life. So they let him die. He was set aside from society and denied any form of treatment. I had to break the law to spend the final days of his life trying to make him smile. His humor was even darker than mine. I don't think I would be here if it wasn't for him. He is the cataclysm that made me see the truth."

Understanding passed silently between us, the air punctuated with our unspoken empathy. Breaking the brief quietude, Tyger asked about her brother's persona.

"Different from me, in every way possible," she started. "Carefree, always joking. You would never think him to be an intellectual and yet he was the sharpest tool in the shed. He was the firstborn child and a boy. He had all the privileges I never did; all the qualities and relationships I

wanted with my family and friends. I was always jealous of him, but I never was able to bring myself to hate him. He was the only one around me who cared for what I had to say.”

Her eyes glazed over, her spirit briefly lost in the haunting remnants of her past. Matthew rose from his seat and gazed ahead. “Broken hearts, broken people, bound for the same destination.”

As he spoke, a brilliant light enveloped us, signaling our arrival at the colossal lighthouse I had once leapt from. We alighted onto the familiar, sturdy blocks once more, their resilience a testament to the passage of time.

The person I was during my previous visit seemed like a distant memory. Burdened by the weight of my existence, and the infinite galaxies within me, I longed to pass on this responsibility. But the only person I could deceive was myself. It was a journey I had to embark on, carrying the weight of my being, my body, myself.

Tyger’s chuckle still bounced off the ancient lighthouse’s weathered stones as he gleefully declared, “Who would have thought, huh? You were a coward, and now you’re back on this old rock.”

His words, however innocently spoken, danced provocatively in the brisk, salty air. I shot him a pointed look.

“I’m still a coward, always will be. The thing is I’m a determined one now.”

His laughter slowly faded as he found himself lost in the old structure’s timeless appeal.

“You know, I’ve always liked these,” he mused, casting a longing glance at the sentinel of the ocean. “The view, along with the silence. I remember sitting at the steps of one, just like those, just like this.”

He chuckled again, a hint of nostalgia sweetening the sound. He mimicked strumming a ukulele, a bittersweet note of remembrance punctuating his actions.

“My ukulele would be in my hands, and I would pull on the strings until they snapped.”

“You don’t play anymore?” Rose asked, her tone more gentle than the wind buffeting us.

“We were in a rush. I forgot it on the damn cruiser. I still can’t get over the stupid old thing. I repaired the strings countless times. It wouldn’t sound the same, but it still worked. Well, sometimes you just have to let go.”

Intrigued, I asked, “You play the piano, ukulele, and sing. What else do you do?”

His laughter now held a rueful note.

“I used to sing,” he admitted. “My vocal cords are as useless as the strings on my ukulele right about now. I doubt I’ll be doing much of it in the future. You know... That’s the largest scar. All of these others are just decoration.”

As his words fell away, an uneasy silence filled the space, disrupted only by the howling wind. The discomfort evident in Rose’s eyes led me to quickly change the topic, asking about our method of travel.

“A submarine? That’s what we’ll be using?” Tyger interjected incredulously.

Before our conversation could proceed further, a gruff voice cut through the noise.

“Hey! You two! You’re the idiots that stole my suits!”

An irate man, presumably a new lighthouse worker, emerged from the shadowy doorway.

Matthew, taken aback, asked, “Who is that character?”

Tyger sighed. “We found ourselves short on resources, so we helped ourselves to some suits from the keeper’s stash... But that wasn’t the guy.”

“You took the suits from him,” I retorted. “I had no part in this scheme. You didn’t even tell me your plan.”

Deflecting, Tyger shot back, “Everything turned out great, it’s not a big deal.”

“You couldn’t have possibly foreseen that at the time.”

“No I could not. But, don’t be too hard on me. I am tagging along so you don’t have to die alone.”

Caught off guard, I had to admit, “You know, I really appreciate your honesty.”

In the concert of existence, death is the closing note that gives the preceding melody its beauty, I thought, but the thought was not my own.

The man before us was a walking paradox. His strides were swift and resolute, akin to a vigilant deer rather than an enraged boar. He wasn't physically formidable. However, there was an unmistakable aura of command about him, a sense of authority that rendered his lean form irrelevant. His significant height, a polar opposite to the shorter frame of the man we remembered, made me lift my gaze to meet his eyes. His cold, penetrating stare was a chilling reflection of the lighthouse's lonely beacon slicing through the night.

With a grace that defied the tense atmosphere, Rose asked, "How much do they owe you?"

Confused, the keeper retorted, "Who the hell are you?"

Unfazed, she repeated her question.

"How much?"

His response was swift. "Twenty-one coins per person. Double that for the trouble."

With this, Rose revealed three small bags from under her robe, their clinking coins adding a subtle presence to the air.

"One is for all the trouble, and the other two are for a submarine."

His gaze, transfixed on the bags, betrayed his inner turmoil. The coins were enough to compensate for the misadventures Tyger and I had embroiled him in. Yet, he still had to decide whether the compensation was worth relinquishing his submarine, his hesitation palpable.

"Do you want the money or not?" Rose asked, her tone decisive.

In response, he grabbed the bags and agreed to the terms, stipulating, "You can have it if you bring it back in one piece. I've had people returning a complete wreck."

"Of course," Rose assured him, concluding our transaction.

As the lighthouse keeper led us to our golden submarine, the memory of the short, furious man we'd initially encountered seemed to hang like a mist in the salty sea breeze. Tyger finally broke the silence, his voice carrying an edge of suspicion.

"Where's the old lighthouse keeper? I don't remember you."

The man turned, a puzzled expression on his face. “Funny how thieves never seemed to remember the faces of the people they stole from. I’ve been manning this post for over twenty years.”

Our submarine was shaped whimsically like a goldfish. It was a peculiar sight, its gilded scales glinting under the pale sky, large enough to house six seats, and an additional row for Sven and our equipment. Tyger and I exchanged knowing glances as Matthew, as ever, remained unperturbed by the unfolding events.

Upon reaching the submarine, Sven made his mark by urinating on its gleaming surface, much to the keeper’s consternation. Tyger, always the instigator, pushed the man’s tolerance further with his devil-may-care attitude.

“These things seem cozy enough. I plan on kicking back and resting my eyes,” he announced, causing the keeper to bristle with indignation.

Matthew, ever the pragmatist, responded, “Well, as long as it is not a sub-standard submarine, I will be present. For far too long have I repeated the same old day. No more.”

Tyger merely chuckled at Matthew’s resolve and proceeded to make himself comfortable in the back of the submarine, using Sven as an impromptu cushion.

Once we were all settled and prepared for the voyage, Rose gave the signal. The golden submarine was launched, skimming along the railway before plunging into the sea of space. The realization that we were now sinking into the unknown depths struck me.

“I want to get to know you two,” she declared.

“Bad timing,” said Tyger, curtly dismissing her question.

“Why?”

His response was laced with a solemn truth.

“Bad for your heart. Better to never know the person you’re going into battle with. You’ll just end up getting emotionally attached. That connection even transcends hate.”

Undeterred, Rose pressed on. “I just want to know one thing. What’s the most vile thing you’ve ever done?”

There was a significant pause from Tyger, his eyes hidden behind tightly shut lids as he grappled with memories he'd rather forget.

"I once put hands on a pretty girl such as yourself for betraying me. It was with my best friend."

Unanticipated empathy colored Rose's quick response.

"She deserved it," she stated, her tone not carrying judgement but a shared understanding.

Tyger's subsequent affirmation was resigned, a sigh barely concealed in his words.

"True," he agreed. "But not from me. Love is poison. It slowly kills you if you don't have the anti-venom. I don't."

"I had a relationship once," Matthew chimed.

Tyger shot back a playful jab, the corner of his mouth twisting into a smirk.

"Did she know you were together?"

"No."

Rose then turned her attention to the last man in the room, me.

"What about you, Salvador?" she asked, the curiosity in her voice clear as crystal.

My self-deprecating confession came wrapped in years of hidden pain.

"I've hated myself most of my life. How could I have expected others to love me?"

"So, you're a virgin," Tyger responded. "Nothing wrong with being one. It's honorable of you, even if it wasn't self-inflicted."

Some experiences transcend the limitations of body, I mused.

As we continued our descent, the conversation turned to the nature of our journey, the challenges we may face, and the time it would take. The daunting reality of what lay ahead of us began to settle in. But for better or worse, we were on our way, falling deeper into the unknown. Rose revealed to us that the black hole wasn't as crushing as people made it out to be. Falling in did not mean certain death.

People are afraid of what they don't understand. I don't blame them.

As we delved into the cosmic ocean, an hour unfurled in tranquil silence. Rose, steering our golden submarine with focus, rarely spoke, her gaze fixed on the vast expanse stretching ahead of us. The quiet was punctuated by the sight of celestial fish darting in and out of our path, their colors high-spirited against the darkness. Some orange, others blue, entire schools of them danced around us as if welcoming us on our journey.

Matthew's voice broke the quiet, his question echoing in the confines of our vessel. "Not to be disrespectful, but how do we defend ourselves if need be? Last time we could not even touch them."

Rose responded, her voice carrying a note of regret. "Those weren't our true forms. You aren't bound to the light, but they are to the shadows. The Void's pull usually only allows our essence to project itself from the cave. I'm an exception to the rule. She brought me into the light and covered me in it. She allowed me to tread where they cannot and gave me a new identity. Once we sink in, you'll come to understand a new reality of yourselves. There's not much difference between my kind and yours. It's always easier to integrate into the darkness over the light."

She raised her hand, revealing her tattoo, the mark that signified her freedom from the laws of the Void. Its symbolism, once enigmatic, now rang clear.

"Irene," she added. "Stripe."

Our descent into the Void continued, the pressure of the depths squeezing against my head. The sensation was overwhelming, an uncanny sense of being sealed off from the external world. My ears popped, my head throbbing with the relentless compression. Tyger, roused from his rest by the turbulence, murmured some wisdom. "The void of being, the black hole of the universe. Don't fight it. Let them pass through you." His words held truth as we continued to plumb the depths of infinite, but I exerted my mental prowess to counteract the endless expanse of the void. Fleeting waves of light washed over us, illuminating the endless strain and soothe the pain. Finally, the void for what seemed like eternity. Then... everything became nothing itself.

2

The ocean swaddled me, as dark and as viscous as unrefined oil, tugging me into its fathomless abyss. Vision was nothing more than a deceptive glimmer in the murk. A sudden grip on my shoulder anchored me back to reality. It was Tyger. He wrenched my shirt, bidding me to follow, his movements as urgent as my pounding heartbeat.

Get out, get out...

We were still trapped within the metallic belly of the goldfish, a sinking submarine. When its maw had yawned open, a deluge of water had stormed inside, propelling Rose, Matthew and Sven out. Yet the ocean's cruel grasp was dragging us downward along with the submarine, turning our desperate swim into a disorienting spiral.

Panic hammered inside my chest, air clawing its way out of my lungs in violent bubbles that lodged in my throat. Abruptly, an unseen force slammed against the submarine, a harsh blow that sent it spinning and flung us out. When the disorientation abated, my breath hitched at the sight that greeted us: a massive shadow undulating beneath our dangling feet, a creature so vast it seemed one with the ocean depths.

Tyger was already powering his way upwards, the surface shimmering distantly, a mirage in this underwater nightmare. Suddenly, the monstrous shadow surged upward, jaws agape, swallowing our goldfish submarine whole as if it was mere plankton. Then, it plunged back into the abyss, leaving nothing but the traces of my own terror.

A surge of adrenaline spurred me into action. I churned the water beneath me, hands clawing towards the teasing glimpse of freedom. The figures of my companions bobbed above me, their legs furiously kicking. The surface neared, each stroke heavier, more desperate than the last until, finally, I broke free with a gasp, cold air filling my lungs with life. The others too, panted with effort and relief.

“Is everyone alright?” Rose’s shout cut through the icy wind.

“There’s something in the water,” I blurted, eyes still fixed on the depths below.

The chilling waters, the looming specter of the sea serpent and the biting winds seemed to conspire against us, their intensity whipping my heart into a wild rhythm.

We were adrift in a sea that tossed us like flotsam, on waves that towered like rolling hills only to vanish, replaced by others in an unending succession. Tyger’s shouts were lost in the wind’s furious howl.

He pointed in a direction—the direction didn’t matter. What mattered was the sighting of a coast—a beacon of hope in our despair. The sea, despite its violent temper, hadn’t shown its full wrath yet. As the waves carried us closer to each other, I saw faces grim but resolute. We were in this battle together, determined not to surrender.

Soon, we clasped onto each other, forming a human chain. Tyger and I linked arms, as did Rose and Matthew. Suddenly, the fight against the monstrous waves felt less hopeless. We rode their crests and troughs together, making our way towards the shore.

Led by Sven, we gave the race our all. The current was our ally, flinging us towards the shore. But the ocean’s icy tendrils were relentless. My body screamed against the penetrating cold, every inch feeling the assault of a thousand icy needles. The relief of solid ground beneath my feet was like the lifting of an insurmountable burden. Yet the welcome was far from warm.

We dragged ourselves onto a shore of dark rocks, the waves lashing at them relentlessly. The white foam they left behind resembled a grinning skull, a grim welcome.

Our clothes hung heavy with seawater, each movement an effort. Even breathing felt laborious, the cold air biting into our lungs. We huddled for warmth, the crash of the waves splashing in our ears, the vibration seeping into our bones. The wind wailed around us, its salty spray stinging our faces. It felt as if we were in the heart of a hungry typhoon threatening to consume us. Tyger collapsed on his back, Sven shaking off water beside him.

“Nobody mentioned this,” Tyger gasped. “What were you thinking? Just hoping for the best?”

Rose got up shakily. “Hope is all I have. I didn’t realize the Void’s power had grown this destructive. I thought the submarine would suffice.”

“We are still alive, that is what matters. Does everyone still have their belongings?” Matthew asked.

His calm demeanor contrasted sharply with the rest of us. He was scanning our surroundings, ever vigilant.

I checked for the scalpel. My fingers traced over its engraved markings. The thrill of the journey had awakened a deeper curiosity within me.

“Yeah, everything’s here,” Tyger responded.

We emptied our boots of water and wrung our shirts dry.

“Never had pneumonia before,” Tyger murmured. “What an opportunity.”

His voice was barely audible over the wind’s sharp keening.

“Something’s off,” I observed.

“The color,” Matthew chimed in. “There is none.”

“The Void absorbs light. It’ll take time for your eyes to adjust to the darkness. But when night falls...”

“When night falls?” Tyger interjected.

“This is daytime. It won’t get any brighter.”

My mind recalled scenes from old black and white films. The technological leaps and advancements were not evident here. This realm defied expectations. It was eerily serene, apart from the eternal night that ruled it.

“How well do you know this place?” I asked.

“Well enough, but the Void is never complacent; it constantly morphs and expands. It’s never satisfied.”

“And how many unfriendly things live in that forest?” Tyger pointed at the expanse of trees stretching out before us.

“The constant reminder was to stay out. Those who entered never returned apparently. But that could just be propaganda.”

“Good stuff,” Tyger huffed. “We go around then.”

But my gaze was drawn to a colossal ship sailing in the skies above the ocean, descending towards the water below. Constructed from dark wood, with its stern shaped like a grinning skull, the ship was an imposing sight. Yet it moved in silence, quieter than a ghost ship.

“There isn’t much time. Going around would take us a week, and we’d be highly visible. We could potentially dodge the coastal patrols in the forest, though...”

“There it is,” Tyger cut in. “Knew it was coming.”

“But not all stories are mere tales. Some have more truth to them.”

“What’s the most dangerous thing we could encounter?” I asked.

“Like I said, nobody has returned to share their experiences. But they didn’t possess your capabilities nor did they have weapons. And remember, there are four of us, five with Sven.”

Matthew nodded. “That does increase our odds. And we have been unnoticed by the ship. So how do you folks feel about taking risks?”

All eyes turned to me. *The act of existing itself is so risky that we won’t get out alive.*

“Let’s go then. We’ve no time to waste.”

The wilderness emanated an ominous aura that unnerved me, reflected in every detail within its borders. The forest was home to towering trees that loomed over us, with skyscraper-tall trunks as wide as compact huts, standing a respectful distance apart. Their roots interwove like silent accomplices in some forgotten pact. However, amidst their grandeur, there was a noticeable absence of leaves. The forest bore the haunting scars of burn marks and lifeless, charred remnants, serving as a bleak reminder of a fiery past.

With a heightened sense of vigilance, we pushed forward, keenly aware of the potential threats hidden behind each massive tree and lurking in the dark foliage overhead. The air hung thick with foreboding, obscuring our vision to mere glimpses of our surroundings. From a distance, we would have appeared as shadowy silhouettes trudging into the unknown.

As we trekked beneath the seemingly infinite canopy, an occasional crack of a breaking branch would serve as an auditory manifestation of our growing unease. Ignoring the clear signs of impending danger, I preferred the comforting narrative that our footsteps were causing the unsettling sounds.

Our quiet expedition was broken by Matthew's whispered query as he gestured towards the trees. Dangling from the branches were ropes, each ending in a sinister slipknot. The grim implication of this sight sent a chilling realization through us all.

"This is where people come to die..." Rose voiced our sentiments, her words hanging in the air like a mournful dirge.

The forest's dreadful secrets amplified the tension. The urge to question further was suppressed by our shared understanding that we weren't ready to uncover more horrifying truths. Suddenly, Tyger claimed to hear whispers, invisible to the rest of us. Despite our strained listening, we heard nothing.

Suddenly, a whisper crept into our awareness.

"Jump."

The chilling prompt seemed to emanate from right behind my neck, making the hair on my skin stand on end. On reflex, I swung around, scalpel at the ready.

The whispering continued, each phrase more unsettling than the last.

"All they need is a little push!"

"Dry the ink."

"Why even bother, they will get you. End the suffering now and spare yourselves the torment."

Amid the rising panic, Rose made a startling revelation - the whispers were emanating from the trees.

The taunting intensified. "You're all worthless. You deserve to die."

"Cowards! You can't even take your own life."

"You're all alone! Nobody cares about you. Look at that sick face! Disgusting."

Provoked by the trees' relentless jeering, Tyger lashed out with his sword, hacking at a tree while yelling for the voices to shut up.

The voices from the trees responded to his fury. “He’s angry. I think we hurt his feelings. Look at that distorted face riddled with disease. I can’t tell which part I’m talking to.”

“Tyger, calm down,” Matthew said with intensity. “You are drawing too much attention. It is pure stupidity. They want this from you.”

He reached out, grabbing his shoulder.

Tyger violently turned and got in Matthew’s face. “Shut up! You don’t know what it’s like,” he burst out.

“You are impulsive. You have probably not had a logical thought in your entire life. I do not know what it is like, but that does not make me wrong. Think!”

His pain and anger spilled like a pot boiling over, his rage blazing with an intensity that rivaled a wildfire.

In the midst of this pandemonium, Rose nudged me, drawing my attention to a horrifying spectacle. Human hands, scratched and bleeding, emerged from behind the trees and the ground, clawing and reaching out for us. Some bore familiar, troubling markings on their wrists, a sight that spurred a visceral dread within me. *I recognize you...*

“Cut us...”

Despite the nightmare unfolding around us, we found the strength to retaliate and push forward, our survival instincts kicking in. We were stuck in a timeless limbo of fear and despair, the forest stretching endlessly around us. Rose’s estimation of our journey ahead was disheartening—we were still hours away, but then... the Blink happened.

As Rose explained, the sun vanished, replaced by the moon in the blink of an eye. As we ventured deeper into the wilderness, the small amount of light we had seemed to dwindle, pulling us further into an encompassing darkness.

The path grew denser and the darkness around us started to swallow the little light we had. We couldn’t tell if it was the night descending or the forest becoming denser, but the effect was the same—our world shrank, limiting our vision to a mere few feet around us.

As we pressed on, the hands continued to reach out from the shadows, scratching at the tree trunks and scraping at the ground. One latched onto

Rose's leg, but Sven, ever vigilant, wrestled it free. It fell dead. Others targeted Matthew and Tyger, while I managed to slither past their grasp. We struck back at every opportunity, every second of our struggle chipping away at our hope of escaping the cursed forest. Tyger's sword cut through the encroaching hands, while Matthew used the butt of his weapon to fend them off.

Each moment in that forest seemed to stretch into an eternity. It felt as if we were caught in a dreadful emptiness where time ceased to exist.

Amidst the chaos, Tyger voiced his desperation to Rose; "When will this end?"

Rose's answer, despite being intended as reassurance, only magnified the hopelessness of our situation.

"The forest is narrow. I know it doesn't feel like it. You have to be patient."

But patience was in short supply. The growing darkness around us mirrored the despair encroaching upon our spirits. The taunting whispers of the trees, the wooden hands reaching out from the shadows, the endless expanse of the forest—they all combined to form an oppressive weight on our minds, a test of our resilience and determination to survive.

Just then, from the corner of my eye, I spotted a dark hooded figure standing in the distance, a scythe gleaming ominously in its hand. An icy shiver ran down my spine. The specter seemed out of place, even in this realm of shadows and fear, as if it was a physical embodiment of Death itself, sent to claim us. But as quickly as it appeared, it vanished, leaving behind only a doubt of its chilling presence.

Focus, I reminded myself, my mind echoing my earlier attempts to quell my fears.

This is a dream. This isn't real. Don't forget.

But every thought felt hollow as the tangible horror around me belied my attempts to reassure myself. The night grew more impenetrable, and we pressed on, guided only by the faint glow of our eyes and a grim resolve to confront the unknown.

Amid the suffocating obscurity, an isolated house emerged, spectral and cryptic, like a remote celestial body lurking in the unseen.

Wordlessly, we all shared a mutual understanding; the gnarled, whispering trees had worn out their charm. Our hearts, weary and desperate, throbbed for an escape, an asylum in the encroaching wilderness.

We moved as if drawn by an invisible thread, trudging through the undergrowth. Leaves rustled beneath our feet, a harsh intrusion in the otherwise ominous silence. Our bodies craved rest, but our minds craved it more. The prospect of another night under the shadowy canopies was more terrifying than the exhausting journey.

The house swayed before us; a macabre spectacle suspended in the air. It hung like a lifeless body from a tree. Its timbers, painted an unnatural white, gleamed with an otherworldly pallor that resembled the color of drained skin under the ethereal moonlight. The slender structure towered ominously above us, its two stories threateningly tall and narrow, seeming like a wraith reaching out from beyond the grave. It was bound to the massive tree branch above by a thick iron rope, a sinister umbilical cord tethering this monstrous apparition to the world of the living.

Balconies protruded like bony arms from the body of the house, each pointing out in a different direction. One barely visible balcony jutted out towards the back, a silent whisper of dread seeping from the darkness. The roof, with its unsettling tilt, seemed to leer at us, adding a layer of disquiet to the entire scene.

As we advanced towards it, the house remained hauntingly still; no illumination escaped from its window eyes, holding in its secrets. The only contact it had with the ground were the six steps leading to its entrance, much like the final walk towards the gallows.

Rose and I moved ahead. Our steps resounded in the eerie stillness. A silver bell hung by the door, its teardrop shape glinting mournfully. The act of reaching out and knocking set into motion a carved crow above swinging back and forth on a rope. With every knock, its beak opened wide as if uttering a silent scream.

Sven, curious as ever, sniffed the imposing door, as if trying to discern any sign of life within. His tail held a steady rhythm, swaying cautiously to the silence of the night.

“Strange.” Rose’s voice sliced through the still air, laced with a trace of uncertainty.

“Is it really?” Tyger countered, his gaze fixed onto the gnarled trees behind us.

They seemed to sway in time with the creaking house, murmuring their own tales to the wind.

“No.” Matthew’s confirmation was soft, but true.

The house appeared to be devoid of life, its stillness more suggestive of a tomb than a dwelling. The idea of trespassing into the ghostly structure loomed in my mind, unnerving yet seemingly the only path forward.

No sooner had the thought conjured in my mind than the doorknob twisted with an ominous creak. Time seemed to stretch into a yawning chasm as the door gradually opened from within. The figure that materialized at the threshold was as mysterious as the house itself. It was a young woman, draped in the blackness of the night, her face obscured by a ghostly translucent cloth. She surveyed us. Her eyes were an abyss, devoid of light. They matched the endless darkness around us.

“Yes?” she intoned, her voice winding around us like a spectral lullaby.

“We were just being stupid, and...” Rose began, but the woman cut through her sentence like a knife through the dark.

“And attacked by those trees, I presume.”

The woman’s voice was disconcertingly gentle and soothing, a contrast to the dark reality we found ourselves in. The moon’s soft light skimmed the surface of her cloth, painting a picture of her pale face. It appeared as though her features were illuminated from within, their ethereal glow trapped behind the veil, much like her unnerving allure.

“You are headed in the right path, left,” she continued, her voice as serene as a grave. “Continue, and you should be out in a matter of hours.”

"I'm sorry to be so abrupt, but would you mind if we stayed the night? We've been walking and running for hours. We're tired," Rose added, unsure of her response.

She paused, her inscrutable gaze sweeping over us once again. Her hesitation hung heavy in the air, a noticeable tension that reflected the same uncertainty that churned within me. Would she let us in or were we to become one with the forest's haunting tales?

"We won't be trouble," Rose pledged, her tone surprisingly gentle, yet firm.

"I don't believe it a good idea to let strangers enter my home," the woman in black responded, her words lingering in the air like a ghost's whisper.

"Please. In return, I'll give you pure Essence," Rose pleaded, her words dripping with persuasive intent. With a delicate touch, she produced a crystal vial adorned with intricate engravings.

The woman's eyes widened with anticipation as its contents shimmered with an ethereal radiance. A smile played upon her lips as she gracefully stepped aside, granting us passage. Matthew's gaze fixated on Rose, his face contorted with curiosity. His expression silently questioned the nature of this enigmatic Essence. A flicker of guilt crossed her features. She responded with a smile, her eyes sparkling with mystery.

I stepped in first. Immediately, I was hit by a strong smell that caused me to fuddle. I did my best to hide my reaction, not to show disrespect. Tyger's voice interrupted the harrowing silence, a beacon of curiosity in the dark and decrepit room.

"Why do you live here?"

His gaze swept across the dank environment, a silent nod to the obvious dangers it held.

"Only if you all promise to keep it a secret," the woman in black responded, her form receding further behind her veil, a specter in this ghoulish habitat.

With an exchange of affirming nods, we vowed to keep her secret.

"I'm in hiding. Who would be insane enough to seek asylum in this forsaken abyss?"

Her words, laced with a fatalistic humor, reverberated in the stagnant air.

"Smart," Matthew acknowledged. The traces of a grim smile played on his lips. "How long have you been here?" His question, innocent and full of curiosity, belied the gravity of our situation.

"Years," she confessed, her voice a ghostly whisper against the rotting walls. "Almost far too long to even recollect. Here, time has no meaning. A day and a month, they blur into the same unending nightmare. Change is a stranger in this realm."

In the dim light, the woman's eyes were like two black voids.

"Where do you come from? Are you the latest lost souls that got caught?" Her question hung heavily in the damp, chilling air.

"Our ship got pulled in. We're the lucky ones," Tyger responded, a note of bitter irony in his voice.

"There are no lucky ones," she retorted. "Only the damned and the yet to be."

"Not yet then, I suppose."

"What happens to the bodies?" Matthew asked, the question seeming to hang heavy in the air.

A moment's hesitation tainted her calm façade, the silence stretching taut between us. Her pale countenance seemed to bleach further, contrasting starkly with the somber darkness of her eyes.

"I plant them into the ground," she finally spoke, her voice almost a whisper. "I take them down from their ropes. They bring them themselves."

"Are you afraid of the things that occur out there, the things people do? How they... jump?" Tyger's words, laced with a dark curiosity, filled the room, bouncing off the rotting walls, adding an uncanny resonance. His eyes, an inquisitive gleam within, stared into the black abysses, seeking an answer.

"Most of them outsiders that did not integrate." The woman's voice, as chilling as the house itself, echoed within the confines of the

deteriorating structure. “It used to disturb me. Not anymore. I’ve become desensitized.” The edges of her mouth turned upward, a mockery of a smile. “After spending as much time here as I have, anyone would feel the same.”

In the discomforting silence that followed, the house’s queer disharmony took over. Every creak and groan seemed amplified, as if the very structure was telling its own tale of horror. The frigid chill of the room seeped deeper into our bones, the damp smell of decay clinging stubbornly to the air.

“Why do they do that? Why here?” Matthew’s wide eyes fixed on her, the question hanging heavily in the dank, chilling air.

Her lips curled into a macabre smile, her voice weaving tales of despair and depression.

“The jump isn’t what kills them, loneliness is. They all search for a way out. The forest—” She swept her hand in a dramatic gesture, encompassing the unseen dread beyond the walls. “—is the best of providers.”

“Do you feel lonely here?” Rose asked, her voice cutting through the pensive silence.

“No,” she answered, her eyes acquiring a distant look. “I am never alone. I have my silent guardian.”

Moving away from the kitchen table, she crossed the room to where a crow resided in a blackened cage. With a gentle touch, she let the bird perch on her arm.

“It’s my companion. My little whisperer of secrets.”

As she caressed its wings, I found myself drawn into her curious companionship. The black bird had piercing blood-blue eyes.

“What does it say?”

My question hung in the room, all eyes on her.

“It’s of little importance,” she brushed it off, a fleeting smile gracing her lips. “I must... leave you now. Remember, I’ll be upstairs. And you, stay here!”

The abrupt change in her tone took us by surprise, it was the first time she had raised her voice since our arrival. The woman in black fixed us

with an empty stare that made the air chillier, her eyes holding a feral intensity that gave us pause. Abruptly, as if snapping out of a trance, she averted her gaze. She shrugged, her tone returning to its earlier placidity.

“Rest in peace.”

With those cryptic parting words, she vanished from our sight, her departure accompanied by the mournful creaks of the wooden stairs, reminiscent of a beast in torment.

“Did we upset her?” Matthew wondered aloud.

“She’s not entirely in the realm of the sane,” Rose conjectured.

“Who would be?” Tyger retorted. “You’ve seen her backyard.”

“We need to leave before dawn,” Rose decided.

“We don’t want too many eyes on us.”

“I plan to get some sleep,” Tyger announced, his tone wry, “As much as one can in a place that smells like a slaughterhouse.”

“I’ll keep my eyes open,” I offered.

The spookiness of our surroundings was a barrier to any thoughts of sleep, even without considering my sleepless condition.

“I’ll keep you company,” Rose volunteered.

“No, you need to rest. We need you ready.”

I could see the exhaustion weighing on her. The way her eyes seemed to droop, her body yearning for ease. Reluctantly, she nodded, her figure retreating from the table as she sought the comforts of sleep.

3

The lone lamp sputtered in the midst of damp walls, the light playing nervously with the dark. Enclosed in a solitary confinement, neither warmth from a hearth nor the soft comfort of a bed was at my disposal. The noxious scent of decay, seemingly radiating from the kitchen, was a persistent assault on my senses. A grim question nagged at my mind: *How can they sleep through this reek of death?*

“Sleep is Death being shy,” I murmured to myself, my words dissolving into the chilled air.

Overhead, the ceiling groaned under heavy footfalls, betraying the sleepless woman in black. Strains of whispers slid down the stairs, their unintelligible murmurings feeding my curiosity. Then, a hacking cough sliced through the silence, oddly discordant from her young form. Those around me lay undisturbed, unaware of the puzzle I was being drawn into.

Motivated by the growing intrigue, my steps led me to the front door. Unsurprisingly, it was locked. The key had disappeared, although intuition whispered its possible hiding place. Each creaking floorboard under my cautious tread seemed a formidable obstacle, as I was drawn towards the looming staircase, my gaze riveted to its shadowy apex.

Carefully, I placed my foot on the first stair, my movement causing the old wood to groan in protest. Frozen mid-step, I listened to the whispers that seemed determined to continue. Time elongated as I waited between each step, striving not to draw unwanted attention.

As I ascended further, my heart pounded a loud accompaniment to the mystery unfolding. Another cough, louder this time, followed by a chilling laughter of perverse joy. The woman in black whispered in an unknown tongue once more, sending shivers down my spine.

Finally at the landing, a sprawling hallway stretched before me, punctuated by closed doors. At the end, an ominous circle of an open door leaked a feeble light, the origin of the strange whispers. I stayed within the shadows, my eyes locked on the dimly lit room, curiosity ensnaring my fear.

Suddenly, a light sparked within it, catching my eye. It flared up and then retreated, before growing brighter on its second attempt. On its third appearance, it persisted, casting the hunched figure of the woman in a fiery silhouette. Crouched before the fire was the crow, poised atop a vertical shovel, while she seemed to murmur to it, but dare not look it in the eye. My heart pounded its protest, even as I strained to understand the woman’s alien discourse.

“Emoc... Ouy ot meht reviled llahs I. Emoc. Roivas ho!”

The urge to intervene seized me, but I hesitated, aware of the potential repercussions. Instead, I focused my thoughts on the flame, straining to diminish it. The fire seemed to respond, flickering lower until a black bottle of Essence appeared in her hand.

As she raised the bottle, the flickering firelight traced the sinews of her hands, revealing age-spotted skin stretched taut over prominent bones. The sight was jarring, a stark contradiction to the smooth, youthful skin she had exhibited earlier. With a sudden jerk, she removed the cork and began splashing the liquid into the room. The Essence seemed to taunt the fire, sparking it into a violent rage, yet curiously sparing her from its wrath. It went untamed.

My eyes widened as the warm air reached the tip of my nose. The fire reacted, snarling and writhing. A ribbon of dread unfurled within me as I saw her lift the bottle to her lips, letting the last drops trickle down her throat before breaking and tossing the empty vessel into the hungry fire. The blaze roared, fed and furious.

With realization slamming into me, I rushed back downstairs, alarm lending wings to my steps.

“Wake up! We need to move, now!” I cried out, panic lining each word.

The slumbering forms around me stirred, confusion knitting their brows.

“She’s burning the house down!” My proclamation hung in the air, underscored by maniacal laughter spiraling down from above.

The drumming of footsteps pounded overhead, their rhythm quickening in urgency. We listened, transfixed, as the sound stampeded toward the staircase.

With desperation etched on her face, Rose made a dive for the door, oblivious to its stubbornly locked state. The stairwell quaked under the relentless assault of the old hag’s descent, each step she drove into the timbers threatening to splinter the ancient wood beneath her...

There she was, the woman in black, her appearance no longer that of a young woman, but an old hag with wild, unbrushed hair. A wicked blade, as cruel as twisted metal, danced in her gnarled grip, mirroring the

volatile glow of the encroaching fire. The sudden clash of our eyes felt like the sickening crunch of colliding steel.

“Remember the smell of burning steel and the taste of your own blood?” she growled, her words threading through the room like smoke slipping from an unseen blaze.

As the ceiling surrendered to the flames, the haunting lick and crackle painted an sinister canvas, much like the crunching whispers of buckling metal.

Her knife lunged at Rose, missing by a hair’s breadth and embedding into the stubborn door. Tyger drew his sword, his attack intercepted by the fiercely protective crow. The once-calm abode was being swiftly devoured by the frenzied flames, smoke swirling to claim the remaining breathable air.

Through the curtain of rising smoke and embers, a fierce growl from the outside came. Sven, our loyal guardian, scratched at the door with his massive paws. However, even his tremendous strength proved inadequate against the unyielding barrier.

Seizing an opportunity, Matthew lunged at her from behind. However, she was quick to counter, her blade finding a home in his gut. Undeterred, Matthew pulled her to the floor with him, managing to wrestle his way atop her. His forearm bore down on her throat, suppressing her cackling laughter to strained wheezes.

Meanwhile, Tyger battled the aggressive bird, finally felling it after sustaining a scratch across his nose.

Amidst the chaos, Rose found Matthew’s discarded weapon and aimed it at the woman’s face.

“Where is the key?” The desperation in Rose’s voice rippled through the room, temporarily overshadowing the crackling of the fire.

The woman ignored the question, her focus on the knife lodged in Matthew’s side. Her bony hand attempted to twist the weapon further into him, but Matthew caught her wrist, bending it backward. The sound of cracking splintered in the room. His intention was clear—he would break her hand if need be. Despite the pain, her laugh only grew more chilling, a perverse sign of her unnatural resilience.

“Eid!” she yelled.

As their struggle continued, Tyger and I turned our attention to the unyielding door. Each desperate kick seemed to have little effect. The room was rapidly transforming into a smoky prison, the air thinning to near suffocation. I tried to focus, to channel my ability against the encroaching flames.

Concentrate!

Then, the unimaginable happened. The house lurched, throwing us into disarray as the rope holding the structure gave way to the merciless fire. A vicious blow to the head knocked my senses askew, and I was barely conscious of Matthew being flung off the woman.

Regaining her weapon, the old hag swung it wildly at Rose, her arm painting a bloody arc in the smoky air. The gun slipped from Rose’s grip as she recoiled from the near miss. But before the woman could land another attack, a blur of movement intercepted her. Sven, having finally breached the barrier, clamped his jaws onto her arm, his growl resonating with our desperate will to survive. The muddy blood that oozed out mirrored the dirt within her. He then moved to Rose, gently grabbing her shirt in his mouth and dragging her out into the night.

Stumbling back onto our feet, the rest of us sprinted after them, our focus single-pointed: escape. Matthew managed to retrieve his fallen weapon, and I summoned the last of my strength to manipulate the consuming flames, parting them just enough to create a pathway. Behind us, the house let out an agonized roar as it succumbed completely to the inferno, the woman’s unhinged laughter muffled by the crackling fire, fading into the warm embrace of the night.

4

“What the hell is that?” Tyger’s voice trembled a bit, betraying his typically unflappable demeanor.

“I don’t know,” Rose replied, her gaze stuck on the inexplicable thing before us. Her voice carried a note of horror. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Was,” Matthew added, his voice hollow, his gaze distant. “It no longer is, whatever it was.”

The air hung thick and choked with an oppressive silence, punctuated only by the distant crackle of the burning house. Rose’s hand brushed against her arm, coming away slick with a thin stream of dark, muddy blue.

“Are you okay?” I asked, my words barely rising above a whisper.

“I’m alright,” she assured, but her pallor told a different story.

We stood in silence, our breath ragged, exhaustion gnawing at our bones. It was the dead of the night, and we were surrounded by trees whispering in twisted tongues, oblivious to our presence—for now. But their ignorance wouldn’t last, of that I was certain.

“You came running from up there.” Tyger shifted his gaze towards me, his question hanging in the air like a guillotine. “What did you see?”

The crow. Its image had etched itself into my mind.

“She was speaking to the crow. Worshiping it, even,” I confessed.

Matthew froze, a statue in the dim light, his eyes unblinking as they burrowed into the ground.

“Strange,” Tyger murmured, his frown deepening. “Why would she do that?”

A flicker of fear ignited in Rose’s eyes, widening them.

“Rose... what’s wrong?” I queried, my heart pounding in my chest.

“Anything else?” Her voice trembled, urgency seeping through her words. “Did you see or hear anything else?”

“She spoke in another language I couldn’t decipher,” I confessed.

“He knows.” Rose’s voice was so quiet it was almost lost in the wind.

The bridge of her nose crinkled, and her face seemed to lose some of its vitality, as if a shadow had descended over her. Tyger, puzzled, questioned her cryptic statement, but comprehension dawned on me. He knows our location. He would come for me.

“Hatman, that’s his symbol. I’ve never seen crows speak before. I thought she was just unhinged, but he spoke through the bird.”

“She could just be deranged,” Tyger offered, a flicker of hope in his voice.

Matthew stepped forward, breaking his trance.

“Did she not admit to isolating herself to escape?”

“Are you willing to stake everything on her sanity? I’m not! She was but a puppet to her master,” Rose spat out. “How much does a lie cost him?”

“In the end, it will cost him everything,” I told her. “We’ll get him. I promise.”

I infused my words with as much conviction as I could muster. If Rose succumbed to defeat, we were all lost. We needed her strength. She nodded, her expression hardening.

“We have to move now. They’ll be on our trail.”

“Lead the way,” Tyger offered, his voice a steely whisper. As my hand found Rose’s shoulder, she began to walk, leading us deeper into the unknown. Tyger hung back with me.

“You still sure about this?”

“I’m not sure about anything anymore,” I confessed. “Just trusting my gut.”

“Don’t worry, you’re just hungry,” he jested weakly.

Matthew’s metallic insides were on display. He hastily covered the damage with his jacket, pushing the buttons through the shredded holes. Tyger sighed, a weary smile on his face.

“Well, sometimes that’s the only thing we can trust. The heart’s a traitor, and the mind a philosopher. What a crazy existence this is...”

5

Sweat trickled down my spine, seeping into the cotton shirt that clung uncomfortably to my back. Droplets freckled my forehead, slipping off

my skin. My feet ached with a dull pain that spiked and danced its way up my legs, like tiny threads weaving themselves into my brain. Thick fog weaved around me, wrapping my vision and thoughts in its smoky veil. A subtle disruption, an ethereal form cloaked in a hue of light gray, seemed to materialize and dissolve intermittently in the obscurity, its shape mixing with the swirling mists. The once chattering trees fell into an uneasy silence, as if they, too, had succumbed to fear.

Death was not our mission here. We sought life. But as my eyes strained to separate reality from phantasm, my sanity teetered on a precipice.

Am I going mad? Or perhaps these are hallucinations born of my fraught nerves? Is there something else lurking out there, beyond the veil of fog?

A man could lose himself in these questions. Many did.

Suddenly, a voice, familiar and yet distant, cut through the oppressive silence.

“Son,” it called, a phantom in the night.

I recognised it immediately—my father’s voice, yet its origin was shrouded in Memory.

“We’re here, son,” the fragile voice echoed again, prompting my eyes to dart around in futile search.

“Dad?” My voice faltered.

“Salvador?” Rose said, confusion tinging her tone.

“That’s my father’s voice,” I affirmed, my ears still ringing with the spectral call.

“My sweet little boy,” another voice implored, feminine this time—my mother’s.

A chill ran down my spine.

“Mum?”

Their spectral voices filled me with a confusion I could not articulate.

“I’m sorry son, I’m sorry.” My dad’s voice fractured, splitting into resounding shards of remorse. “I failed you. Forgive me.”

“Stay strong, and don’t forget we love you. We’re... just going to fall asleep,” my mum added, her voice soft as the gentle rustling of leaves.

Suddenly, Matthew's hand anchored on my shoulder, his grip firm and grounding.

"There are no voices."

"What?" I stuttered, the disbelief settling heavily on my chest. "Of course there are. They were loud and clear, not whispers."

"The forest is playing tricks on you," Tyger ventured, his voice steady in the surrounding chaos.

"This felt more real than anything, as from a distant memory," I retorted, shaking my head in denial.

Matthew looked at me, his eyes hardened like flints.

"I do not know what you heard, if it was real or not, but keep in mind where we are," he reminded.

Nodding in acquiescence, I couldn't help but feel the otherworldliness of our situation.

What do these voices mean? Is there a message hidden amongst the chaos, or were they just distant memories of the past?

Perhaps some mysteries were not meant to be solved, just accepted. Letting go required a different kind of strength, one that was harder to muster. With each passing moment, our past seemed to recede further into the distance, transforming into a distant memory locked in the depths of time. An involuntary shiver ran through me, my body reacting to an emotion I couldn't yet name.

6

Beneath us, the earth convulsed. Unseen terrors birthed a thousand wails, painting the night air with an sinister orchestra of doom. The grotesque symphony seeped into the trembling ground, reverberating against our soles and threatening to rupture the fabric of reality. My hands instinctively flew to my ears, pressing against the soft flesh in a vain attempt to silence the ghastly crescendo. A gossamer choir of feminine voices rose in sync, their raw screams resounding the terrifying narrative

of an unseen massacre. The maestro of this deathly orchestra, unseen but present, was surely orchestrating this catastrophe nearby.

Inside my chest, my heart pounded an erratic rhythm. My veins became rivers of adrenaline, surging against the boundaries of my skin. Confusion and terror painted our faces as we turned to Rose, seeking some kind of understanding amidst the chaos.

“Death Troopers!” Rose’s shout came as a faint trace, swallowed by the terrifying noise around us.

“Run!” The command tore itself from my throat.

A shroud of despair began to wrap around us. We had been running for what seemed like an endless day, our limbs heavy and minds fogged with exhaustion. Each moment twisted into the next, devoid of any reprieve, like a sentence punctuated with comas but lacking a full stop.

Shadows began to unfurl in the distance, encircling us with a chilling precision. Fear gnawed at our hearts as we acknowledged our predicament—no crevices to hide within, no trees hollow enough to provide shelter. Our giant companion, Sven, growled menacingly, though the gesture seemed pitifully inadequate in the face of our predicament.

“What weapons do your people use?” I questioned Rose, my voice barely above a whisper.

She looked at me, confusion swimming in her trembling eyes.

“What weapons?!” I repeated.

“Guns and knives,” she stuttered out.

I weighed her words, formulating a desperate plan.

“Everyone, keep running straight. I’ll try and block as many bullets as I can.”

“Can you?” There was a note of skepticism in her voice.

“I don’t know.”

The truth tasted bitter on my tongue. With no alternatives, we were lambs waiting for the slaughter. I could feel the cold touch of the scalpel against my skin through the fabric of my pocket. It seemed prudent to conceal it, so I slipped it into my boot. Losing it wasn’t an option; it was a small beacon of hope in a sea of despair.

A thought crossed my mind, and I turned to Rose.

“They won’t harm him if he stays behind...” I ventured.

She looked taken aback, her eyes wide with surprise. After a moment’s hesitation, she understood and nodded.

“Sven, stay here, boy. Be quiet, no matter what happens. Stay low. We’ll find a way to come back.”

In response, Sven whimpered, his once bright eyes losing their sparkle. We didn’t have time for long goodbyes, but the heaviness of the moment lingered as he nestled behind a tree, watching us disappear into the treacherous darkness.

My legs felt like they were dragging boulders, struggling to gain momentum. The deadly hiss of bullets whizzing past us lingered in the air, some grazing the surrounding trees and others flying dangerously close to our heads. The enemy line was fast approaching, a menacing barrier of armed men, their weapons spitting out fiery projectiles. Tyger grimaced as a bullet grazed his arm while another pierced Matthew’s shoulder, his face contorting in pain. I tried to deflect as many bullets as I could but my control was inconsistent, faltering in the midst of chaos. Matthew retaliated with his own gun, bringing down a few of the adversaries as we approached their line.

Suddenly, my world flipped upside down. An assailant barrelled into me, sending my skull crashing into the unforgiving ground. My vision clouded over, speckled with black dots as I fought to regain my senses. Before I could recover, I was subdued.

The shadow soldiers that loomed over me were blanketed in black, their identities concealed behind masks of dark cotton, leaving no holes for their eyes. Their uniform was military-esque, their hands clad in gloves, their legs shod in tall boots. A knife was secured at their lower back, a side-arm holstered at their waist, and an ominous skull-shaped whistle clung to their top—the instrument responsible for the earlier haunting symphony.

While I was pinned down, Tyger fought against the dark shadow soldiers. His movements were fluid and precise. His sword swung

through the air in a graceful arc, expertly parrying each strike from his opponents; a thing of beauty, even in the midst of such violence.

Despite being outnumbered, he remained calm and focused, scanning the battlefield for any signs of weakness in his foes. The dark shadow soldiers moved in an erratic and unsettling manner, their twitching movements making it difficult for Tyger to anticipate their attacks. But he adapted quickly, using his years of training and experience to outmaneuver his opponents and find openings to strike. His expertise notwithstanding, he was ultimately overpowered by sheer numbers. Three shadow soldiers closed in, their weapons pointed menacingly as they subdued him.

More soldiers rushed to seize my limbs, flipping me onto my belly and lashing my hands together with a biting rope. A harsh punch to my head drew blood, and a knee forced the air out of my lungs. My lower lip throbbed in sync with my gasping lungs, a thin trail of dark blue blood trickling down my chin. The harsh underbrush showed no mercy, its sharp roots lacerating my skin in an uninvited partnership of pain. They were now our masters, our lives dangling on their whim.

A soldier wrenched Rose's silver hair, earning a defiant spit in return before he sent her sprawling with a slap. Matthew proved more difficult to subdue, his foot finding an enemy's ear and rendering him unconscious before a sea of weapons aimed at his skull coerced him into submission.

Their voices were alien, reverberating from a depth that instilled a fresh surge of fear within us. Incorporated into their native tongue was a clicking sound, whose meaning only Rose understood. Every move they made was abrupt, void of any fluidity. A gloved hand seized my hair, hoisting me onto my knees while our weapons were stripped from us.

My hidden scalpel remained undiscovered. The soldiers parted, clearing a path for their commander, a towering figure on a dark horse, distinguished from the others by a military cap and badge. His gaze seemed to drill into me from his elevated position, my mind gone eerily blank in the face of such commanding presence.

The general signaled his men, his thumb and index forming a circle while the rest of his fingers pointed outward. His soldiers mirrored the gesture, hauling me up and compelling me to march forwards. Matthew managed a hushed “sixty-six” before a blow silenced him.

The others were led ahead of me. The captors maintained an unwavering upright stance, their gazes fixed forward, indifferent to our plight. My mind wandered to Aurora.

We failed you. Did you know we had no chance and simply wanted to prolong the inevitable? Bloody fools, all of us!

7

The shadowed city in the Void unfurled its vast, spectral hands, drawing us in. Each finger wound around us, tightening like a noose, squeezing out the breath of hope from our lungs.

Nocturnopolis, it revealed its name to me.

Our journey—what should have been a marathon—truncated by our own ignorance and recklessness. I looked at my friends, one by one. The veneer of determination had dissolved, revealing a canvas washed in helplessness. Their eyes reflected silent pleas, firing thoughts that pierced my skull. The onslaught of images—alien, yet eerily familiar—were surfacing from inside.

On the other side of the carriage, Tyger sat with his back straight, eyes closed, and still calm. His chest rose and fell with measured rhythm, each breath a dance with control. He looked untouched by the fear that gripped the rest of us—his face serene, his energy centered. There was something almost otherworldly about him in that moment, a monk meditating amidst anarchy. A pair of figures appeared, towering over me, their dark skin taut over chiselled faces—faces as cold and unreadable as stone. They turned their backs to me, their departing footsteps amplifying the hollow pang in my chest.

In the chaos, I dared to glance at Matthew. His face was a blank canvas, wiped of emotion and mirroring the very Void we journeyed into. His stoic silence, however, didn't conceal the dark shadows looming in his eyes. His father materialized in front of me, a screwdriver in hand. It danced across my face, leaving trails of phantom pain. A woman—her face a mirror of warmth and affection—drifted in from the shadows. “He’s beautiful,” she cooed, a gentle hand on my cheek. “I made him in your image,” the man replied, his voice resonating throughout the room.

Beside Matthew, Rose strained against her bindings. She grunted, sweat pouring from her brow as she twisted and writhed, the embodiment of resistance. Her every breath came as a determined snarl. Despite the hopelessness enveloping us, she refused to surrender. Her fight was her lifeline, an untamed flame burning amidst the cold obsidian around us. Then a vision manifested itself in front of me as the world plunged into darkness. A corset strangled my breath, its grip relentless, a cloth blinding my vision. It was as if I’d been encased within myself, buried in darkness and silence.

Bewilderment crept through me, a creeping vine of dread. These visions—where were they stemming from? They felt like memories, yet they weren’t mine. A new wave of lucidity crashed over me, but it wasn’t fast enough—it needed to surge. The relentless tide of time, my ever-unforgiving foe, dragged us towards our fate. Each ticking second was a reminder—it had never granted me any mercy. It was an enemy. It was time, and it hadn’t stopped for me.

We were hauled in carriages, skeletal remains of bygone equines dragging us onward. Every surge of hope was brutally extinguished, met by relentless lashes. We were shackled and encased in separate death chariots, shadowed and overseen.

The intimidating walls of the metropolis loomed on the horizon, colossal monuments hewn from obsidian. An entire necropolis forged from nothing but shadow and stone.

The cityscape was pierced with desolate trees, their bony branches twisted into charred semblances of slender skeletal fingers, their eternal white blaze uncannily immune to the hands of time. These macabre replicas of timber candles held steadfast, their physical vitality relinquished to the ceaseless flame.

Long rows of electricity poles, carrying pale bodies eaten by wire-bound sunlight, decorated the sides of the road.

What were your sins? I pondered.

Our procession halted at the colossal gate, presided over by two immense figures, their skeletal forms shrouded in cloaks of oblivion. Soldiers exchanged curt nods, a swift rotation of hands signalling our acceptance. The looming barrier, adorned with a crow sigil. Suspended by chains, it creaked and groaned, halting intermittently before it begrudgingly ascended.

An unending road of broken concrete unraveled before us, its lines chaotic, haphazard. Flanking this path of despair stood a somber line of multi-storied monoliths, their facades a canvas of ebony brick, vacant of windows. This grotesque beauty ensnared the eye, its stifling oppression ironically entrancing. Factories belched tendrils of darkness that blotted out the light incrementally with each passing moment. Sparse figures navigated the concrete arteries of the city.

A woman, cloaked in mourning black, guided her child along the pavement. Their gazes pierced my soul, carrying the weight of their discomfort. A sharp gesture from the mother silenced the child, whose words died on his covered lips.

A hot gust whipped my face, my hair dancing to its tune, each strand a fresh sting against my skin. Traces of past journeys whispered in my mind, drawing parallels between different paths leading to disparate destinies. The *Mystic*, the *Hatman*—fragmented imaginations, two sides of the same spinning coin. My mind swirled with questions, plagued with uncertainty.

Would acceptance, surrender, be simpler? Or would it be synonymous with the death of my soul?

Tyger's gaze was transfixed on the darkened heavens, a smile barely perceptible on his countenance. His unspoken joy was a paradox in our tragic tableau, a riddle I could not solve.

As we neared our final destination, my heart pounded a frantic tattoo in my chest, muscles tightening in anticipated horror. A pained sound escaped me as a sudden cramp seized my leg. My cries were silenced by a swift, brutal kick, the composition of galloping hooves turning into a low, menacing drone as our skeletal steeds slowed to a halt.

A monolithic structure, devoid of windows, dome, or discernible purpose, towered above the surrounding buildings. An architectural behemoth whose countless stairs and entrances reflecting the grandeur of ancient domeless towers.

As we descended from the carriages, my legs buckled, my bindings denying me balance. My body crashed into the hard surface, the right side absorbing the impact, stoking the fires of anger within me. I drew upon my remaining strength, inciting panic in our equine specters. As the horses bolted, the soldiers were thrown into disarray, their sights trained on us. I was rewarded with a gut-churning kick, the shock stealing my breath away.

Pain blossomed, sharp as a blade, with every gasping breath.

As we were ushered into the foreboding structure, I could only stare at my feet, my body pushed beyond the brink of exhaustion. The labyrinthine hallways within swallowed all light, our footfall returning like ghosts of the past. My spirit felt drained, every step closer to our destination pulling me further into a well of desolation. We had become unwilling guests in the heart of the nightmare, the predator savouring his captured prey.

An endless pit greeted us, the fluttering wings of crows overhead the only source of movement. The unsettling sensation of being the feast had settled in. The sight of seven paths dividing the pit into open graves holding lifeless bodies draped in white burial shrouds. At the center, a stairway descended into an abysmal void, welcoming us into the depths of darkness.

TOWER OF SILENCE

1

Crows cawed their mournful dirges from the abyss below, their voices stitching together an eldritch tapestry of sound. We held our collective breaths, the silence itself an entity among us. Like cloud, the birds burst forth from the pit, their obsidian bodies forming a shadowy veil against the tower of silence. Some ascended higher, etching their silhouettes on the sky, while others descended upon the lifeless bodies, their pointed beaks prying at the cold flesh.

The earth rebelled beneath us, a sudden upheaval that rattled the crow feasting grounds. An involuntary jolt of fear rippled through me as something clawed at my insides, pulling me forward. An unseen hand, a malevolent force. The pulse of the demonic entity within me mirrored the rhythm of an unseen arrival. A cadence of impending dread grew louder with each successive footfall; an unseen puppet master tugged at my foot, pulling it forward for a single step.

I fought against the force, my legs rooted firmly in defiance. I was adamant. I wouldn't surrender to another step. His entrance was imminent. The brim of a hat emerged first, casting a grim shadow that stretched across the grounds. Each step was a crescendo of dread, each moment revealing more of his towering figure. The Hatman, from the whispers of nightmares, had finally emerged from his stygian abode. Our fated encounter was nigh. The soldiers communicated in a secret language of hand signs, forcing us down to a posture of submission.

“Do you feel fear?” he rumbled.

His voice resonated deep within, coarser and more chilling than the rest, a demonic utterance that curled around us. He stood apart, his difference not just manifest in his attire—a trench coat as dark as nightfall and a top hat, his visage concealed by black cotton akin to the others. Yet, it was his pervasive dark aura, palpable and chilling, that marked his true distinction.

Hatman hadn't glanced our way; his gaze instead fixated into the blue, a sight that somehow seemed fitting. Our silence lingered, an unspoken reply hanging heavy in the air.

"You will!" he declared, continuing his dark soliloquy.

Perched on his left shoulder, a crow surveyed its surroundings before launching into the air, its trajectory targeting me. It alighted before me, the ground beneath its claws. It regarded me with an intelligence that sent chills down my spine. I was caught in its gaze, uncertain of the meaning behind this avian encounter.

Bizarre.

Before I could further question the situation, the bird's beak lashed out, puncturing my knee. A sudden surge of pain electrified my body, drawing a sharp gasp from me. I reached out with my mind, creating an unseen barrier between us. Undeterred, it lunged again, this time aiming for my head. In a last-ditch effort, I redirected its flight path, sending it crashing into the ground. The crow lay motionless, its death seemingly instant.

"All in goodwill," he observed dryly. "Your nature leans towards violence. You'll adapt to the darkness soon enough."

His stride was a predator's languid prowl as he advanced towards us.

"You all came with the intention to kill me, didn't you? Fools to think I wouldn't be watching. Now, tell me, what is the consequence of attempted murder?"

He towered over us, a mere few feet away, his gaze scrutinizing our every move.

"There's a reason laws are put in place. The greatest of them is the law of power. A lesson you will learn well."

He wove between us, an elegant serpent amongst its prey.

"You!"

His tone was pointed as he faced Rose.

"I gave you everything, and you betray me for her. Treachery is an unforgivable sin, and you should know this."

"You've taken more from us than you ever intended to give back," Rose retorted, her voice escalating.

He responded by stooping down to her level.

“You’re no savior. You’ve razed everything we held dear.”

His retaliation was swift: a harsh backhand across her face, marking her skin with an immediate bruise. Her hair whipped across her face, a few strands finding their way into her mouth. As she jerked her head, he grabbed the back of her neck, yanking her closer. Blood seeped from her nose, staining her lips a dark crimson. He traced the trail with his finger, lifting it to his nose for a sniff.

“But I am your savior. We were weak. We had to destroy our past to rebuild our future. It’s the natural order—the strong prey on the weak. You’re a liability, a succubus gone soft. I’ll hold your secret, but bear this in mind... Disturbing the natural order leads to extinction.”

Silhouettes, shrouded in dark robes with priestly skull caps, began to filter into the tower. Their pale faces were concealed within the shadows of their hoods; their hands were neatly crossed within their sleeves. Out of the seven, only one wearing a ceremonial bishop’s miter. Hatman regained his stature.

“You two were the pawns she was willing to sacrifice for my demise. You’ve been manipulated, played as the fools you are.”

Matthew and Tyger materialized, their faces hollow as they gazed into nothingness.

“Do you fear death?”

He directed his question at Tyger, propping his chin to meet his gaze. Panic surged through me. The scalpel hidden in my boot was within reach. He had turned his back to me. The knot binding my hands had slackened. I cautiously manipulated the ropes, stretching them just enough with my power. The soldiers watched us like hawks, their eyes never straying. I needed to retrieve the scalpel swiftly, execute the plan.

But then what? Our escape route was unclear. The gravity of the situation sank in. There was no turning back.

Tyger responded with a shake of his head.

“Good,” Hatman noted. “We have no room for beggars here.”

I felt my hair stand on end, my eyes widening in anticipation. His fingers threaded through my hair, yanking my head backward.

“What did she say about me? Was she courteous?”

His figure loomed over me, appearing even more intimidating. His grip on my hair tightened.

“She called you a sadistic monster,” I shot back.

“Just as you are, deep down. A burden to those around you. Did my beautiful ex-fiancé reveal my true identity or did she keep that from you, as well?”

Fiance? I thought. *Lies.*

“You’re nothing more than a figment of my imagination. You’re not real.”

“That’s her deception. Fear and death are very real, as are dreams. Why do people weep in dreams if they’re not real? I have lurked in your subconscious since your birth. Manipulating your thoughts from the shadows. I am your shadow. I am you...”

His face was an abyss of emptiness. My mind reeled. *You’re not that. Impossible! Shut up!*

“Lies,” I retorted. “You’re hollow, inside and out. I’m not.”

“There’s a reason monsters lurk in the depths of the unknown. They prefer to remain hidden.”

Hatman retreated, his departure leaving a void of intimidation. Matthew and Tyger stood, their faces etched with confusion, their eyes seeking answers that time wouldn’t permit me to provide.

“It was you...” said Tyger. “You were there, down under in that submerged castle watching me through the mirror glass. I saw him and I saw you.”

He spoke of an encounter I did not bear witness to... but would I?

Hatman’s gaze wandered over the multitude of lifeless forms strewn about. He uttered something in their cryptic language. The ever-watching soldiers stepped forward, reaching down to hoist a body from its grim repose. Limbs hung limply, grazing the floor as the soldiers transported their lifeless cargo. They halted above a gaping opening, while Hatman

swivelled around to regard us. The body was cast into the abyss, crashing against the walls during its descent. A tomb had been emptied.

“People pray for passage into heaven, but don’t realize that hell is right beneath their feet. This is my tower, and its roots are in the very depths of it.”

A tremor racked my hands, the sounds sending chilling ripples of horror through me. The faces of my comrades mirrored my own terror. Shock froze us all in place, our jaws trembling, their heartbeats resonating through the ground like eerie reverberations. We were a tableau of horror-stricken faces. Matthew, however, was a bastion of calm amidst the storm. His composed demeanor offered a sense of tranquility that had an anchoring effect on me.

A part of me felt as if it was clawing its way out of my body, like a corpse breaking free from its grave.

Is this hope? Light? Or the will to live?

Perhaps a composite of all these elements. Our hands were bound, our tongues effectively stilled. Words felt trivial, meaningless. The ropes binding my hands were loose but did that matter?

How the hell am I supposed to close the distance and strike? What secret are you hiding, if we are the same? I should know it. Do I even stand a chance against myself? One shot, just one is all I need...

Timing was critical. I couldn’t afford a misstep, especially at that crucial juncture.

Hatman murmured another phrase in their backward language. My eyes instinctively sought Rose. Her jaw slackened, her pupils dilating in surprise. Her brows and lips twitched nervously. She shot a glance at Matthew and Tyger. The soldiers hoisted them up, ushering them towards Hatman. Their attempts to resist proved futile against the overpowering grip of their captors.

“You are our esteemed guests. We shall accord you more courtesy than our usual fare. They weren’t given a choice. You... you have the privilege of choosing your grave.”

His words hung heavy in the air, laden with foreboding. His eyes were shrouded, yet their unseen gaze felt like icy needles piercing the very core of our souls.

2

Matthew and Tyger, their gazes locked, seemed to communicate a silent decision. **Hatman's** voice sliced through the tense silence.

“There are many to pick from. If I have to ask again, I will show no courtesy.”

A soldier shuffled forward, his knees sinking into the damp earth as he offered his master a shovel. **Hatman** seized it, his arm a threatening arc in the cold, gray light.

“Dig a decent grave. I’d hate to see your remains unceremoniously exposed to the light, then feasted upon by the crows.”

“No!” The cry erupted from Rose, her voice raw.

Black tears cascaded down her face, the liquid sorrow staining her cheeks.

“I’ll do it. Let them go. They were manipulated to come here. They’re pawns. It’s all my fault.”

Hatman remained immovable, a statue of cold indifference. His silence screamed louder than any words, making the soldiers shift nervously as they held Rose down, waiting for their leader’s directive.

“A volunteer! This isn’t that kind of story.” **Hatman’s** voice was laden with bitter amusement. “Yes, you are the reason a life will be taken. But I don’t take orders from traitors, my dear. Since you yearn for death so much, I’ll deny you that pleasure... for now. The incubi will have their fun first.”

“Kill me,” I heard my voice tremble with the weight of my desperation. “Kill me and end it. I don’t care anymore. Please... just let them go...”

I felt exhaustion pull at my bones, a weighty anchor tugging me down into oblivion. I longed for release, for the blissful embrace of non-existence.

“How narcissistic of you.” Hatman sneered, his dark eyes glittering. “No. It’s time for you to make a choice. You wanted to take my life, so now you get to decide who gives theirs.”

A sudden tightness gripped my chest. My breath hitched, words caught in my throat. The crows cawed in the distance, their song a chilling symphony of death.

“You’re sick. I won’t play.” My voice was a mere whisper against the howling wind.

“Then they both get the lively opportunity to meet the Reaper...” Hatman’s words hung heavy in the cold air.

My heart plummeted into a chasm of despair.

This can’t be... Am I ready to die? A thought crossed my mind, but it didn’t feel like my own. *I don’t want to die but...*

“I will go,” Matthew declared, his voice steady despite the habitual tilt of his head. “It makes sense. I’ve lived longer. I’ll feel less pain...”

His head ticked aside again, underscoring his final words. “As will you.”

“No, I’ll be the one. I’ve lived. You’re the one that’s hid himself...” Tyger cut in, his tone pleading.

“Enough!” Matthew’s shout was an unexpected explosion of sound.

His words, heavy with conviction, seemed to strike Tyger like a physical blow.

“You all have a purpose in life. I was made for a reason. I want the freedom to choose mine, and if I can save a life doing so, then it gives my existence meaning.”

Matthew turned to Hatman, his eyes resolute.

“Salvador chooses me.”

“Touching, truly... Your death shall not be in vain. I keep my promises. He shall be set free. You have my word.” Hatman’s voice was filled with a sinister satisfaction.

Matthew's bonds were swiftly undone. His hands, now free, accepted the shovel from Hatman. Hatman, in turn, studied him, his gaze speculative. Matthew dug the shovel into the earth with a ferocity that made the ground quake. His face, contorted with fury, held no trace of fear. I struggled to voice my protest, to beg him to stop, but the words refused to take flight.

As Matthew labored, earth soiling his once-white shirt, Rose lay prostrate, her body wracked with sobs, her chin dusted with the earth her tears fell upon. Tyger watched her, the anguish written clear in his gaze.

"This isn't right," he muttered. "Matthew, let me, please. I won't be able to live with myself. Matthew!"

His pleas went unanswered, lost in the grim rhythm of the digging. Matthew's resolve was ironclad. His mind was set. He was willing to pay the ultimate price.

"You deserve the mark of the spare... spared ones," Hatman intoned, his gaze resting heavily on Tyger. "Blood of the nightmare, of course. Kneel..."

Without hesitation, Tyger sank onto his knees, his body rigid. Priests emerged from the background, their robes whispering against the ground as they encircled Tyger. Each bore a glass bottle, suspended at their waists and glowing with an ancient, forbidding aura. A single priest advanced, his fingers closing around one such vial. A dark, blue elixir flowed onto his fingertips, the excess spilling between them to patter onto the ground like a mournful rain. He reached out, marking Tyger's face with an encircling sweep of his stained fingers.

"In the name of Death, the scion of Seven," he chanted.

Tyger flinched at the touch, a lone tear escaping his eye. Yet his gaze remained riveted on Matthew.

"Rise!" Hatman commanded.

Tyger rose, his movements robotic.

Stay calm, stay calm...

A bird fluttered nearby, its frantic wingbeats capturing my attention. I willed it towards the soldiers behind me, hoping for a moment of

distraction. It obeyed, swooping at a soldier's face. I seized the moment of chaos, wrenching free from my bindings and lunging for the blade.

This is it! I thought, my heart thundering. Hatman deftly sidestepped my charge, his fingers wrapping around my wrists, wrenching the scalpel from my grasp.

He pinned me beneath his boot, the pressure against my chest a stark reminder of my failed attempt.

"So, here it is," he drawled, pocketing the blade in his coat. "We wouldn't want any slips on my part, would we?"

I was caught, just like an animal in a snare. The hunter's grin was mirrored in Hatman's triumphant smirk.

"You..." I began, but my protest was drowned in the thundering footsteps of the soldiers.

Their grips were iron shackles, their weight pressing me further into the unforgiving earth. I struggled, kicked, but it was all futile. It always was.

Matthew, now standing in the grave he had dug himself, was the silent observer of my plight.

"There," Matthew declared. "It is deep enough."

"Good, now get out!"

"What is the point?"

Suddenly, the crushing weight was lifted off me, and I gasped for breath. The temporary relief was quickly shattered by Hatman's voice.

"In life, some things must be sacrificed..."

He turned towards Tyger, his hand closing around Tyger's neck, lifting him off the ground with an easy strength. Tyger's futile kicks cut through the air, his eyes bulging with panic. His face was a frightening hue of blue, blood trickling into his eyes as the bones of his neck protested under the strain. He was fighting an unwinnable war. The dread-filled silence screamed the question in all our minds: when would the clock stop ticking?

"Stop, please stop!"

My plea was cut short by a brutal kick to the head from a soldier. The cold muzzles of guns were the last thing I saw before darkness descended.

When clarity returned to my vision, the grisly handiwork of Hatman was completed. Tyger's form, once brimming with life and vigor, was now motionless in his clutches. Strikingly, upon release, his body didn't crumble. Instead, he remained standing, rigid and erect—a final act of rebellion, even in death.

"Truly remarkable, a man with a fiery spirit. If I had known, I would have chosen otherwise and killed 'him' first," he said, referring to Matthew.

"Far too late now. A sacrifice has been given."

A tear streaked down my cheek. *This can't be real. Tyger, wake up!*
Please wake up...

"I apologize for having to do this. It was the only way to teach you. I did warn you to choose, and you disobeyed." Hatman's voice was cold, devoid of remorse.

He moved towards Tyger's still form, grasping it and throwing it into the waiting grave. Matthew caught him in a desperate embrace, his eyes flicking between Tyger's face and Hatman. His body vibrated with a silent rage, stoking the flames of his fury.

"Such a precious thing life is. We only understand its value when we face death. It wouldn't have been fair for me to kill something that isn't alive in the first place."

Hatman's words echoed. He tenderly closed Tyger's eyes, a final farewell. He was asleep... dreaming.

"People pray for their dreams to come true, but are too blind to see that nightmares are dreams too."

The stygian clouds roiled with a fury that mirrored my own, bloating and brooding until they blackened into a tempest of untamed wrath. An invisible blade of wind, cold and cruel, lashed at us like an executioner's whip, a prelude to the impending cataclysm. Lightning unfurled across the tumultuous Void, each flash a savage display of bright rage, culminating in a spear-thrust at the earth below. A drumroll of thunder reverberated, its primal roar defying the heavens, tearing the silence asunder.

Acid rain poured forth, its relentless onslaught a barrage of crystalline daggers. They fell first in hundreds, then multiplied to thousands, saturating the world with an unyielding deluge. The earth beneath us recoiled and convulsed, each tremor more violent than its predecessor, shaking us to our core. Soldiers around us, once pillars of discipline, crumbled in despair, their bravado crumbling beneath the onslaught.

Hatman lunged at me, his snarl reflecting the fury of the storm, his hand slashing through the rain, aiming to throttle me as he had Tyger. A rogue gale intervened, thrusting him backwards and prying the scalpel from his coat. That glint of salvation lay between us, a silver symbol of hope amid the pandemonium. I flung myself towards it, every fiber of my being channelled into beating him to it. My fingers clamped onto the instrument, holding it in a death grip.

Seized by a relentless surge of momentum, I barrelled forward, a tempest in my own right. Hatman materialized in the rain, a specter in the storm, the final obstacle on my path. Unfaltering, I collided into him, our bodies entwined as we hurtled towards the maw of the deep forgotten well.

Our descent into the pit was a whirlwind of chaos and defiance. The rushing wind clawed at my skin, its howling a mocking counterpoint to our struggles. Hatman fought with feral desperation, his fingers digging into my flesh. Yet I was an iron vise, a fixture of unyielding will. The entrance above retreated to a vanishing point, the storm raging above in a world we left behind. Our violent tussle filled the hollow Void.

With a final surge, I ripped off his hat, and slashed his arm with the scalpel, his agonized grunt reverberating in the cavernous pit. The boundaries of the pit disappeared, the stone walls replaced by an abyss of disconcerting emptiness. Below, a vast expanse of water, black as obsidian, raced to meet us. We drifted apart.

The impact was like a flare of white-hot pain, branding every inch of my body. As I sank, effervescent bubbles ascended like luminescent pearls against the void. The water invaded my senses—into my nostrils, filling my ears, a relentless siege. Each feeble attempt to rise was a battle against the crushing depths. My mouth filled with the acerbic taste of saltwater, its buoyancy a silver lining in my relentless descent. Then from the surface a whisper appeared.

“The blast... it took everything... my shadow... my life... our city...”

With the strength of sheer will, I ascended to the surface. Gasping, I broke the surface, expelling the unwanted sea within. The salt grated at the raw reminders of a beating. Panic clawed at my sanity as I scanned the water—bodies, lifeless and grotesque, surrounded me. Their dead eyes mirrored the terror I felt. Afloat in the saline water, my body expanded, drifting in the petrifying calm.

Then, Hatman’s hat gently floated by, a serene memento of our shared journey. Time, in its unhurried pace, played a suspenseful melody in the backdrop. I made my way towards the solid silhouette of the encircling cavern, my will steering me towards it like a gentle current. Progress felt slow and laborious, yet it was constant, like the determined march of a glacier. My gaze sought the scalpel, my beacon of hope.

Where is it? Where is it?

There it was, not far off, hovering in the empty space of darkness. It was approaching. Upon my touch, the scalpel awakened, casting a surreal blue radiance into the water. The glow traced my path like the night sky guiding a lone mariner. Propelled by the ethereal light show, I advanced towards the cavernous boundary, each stroke seemingly painting a swath of luminescence in the water. The distant rhythm of splashing whispered promises of proximity.

Land—that sacred, solid ground—was no more than a handful of powerful, yet graceful strokes away. As my feet found purchase on the rocky shore, the weight of the water released from my body, and all that remained was my hand holding the scalpel.

Staggering deeper into the gloom, I sought concealment in the ebony arms of the cavern. My back throbbed with an intensity that mirrored the rage of a firestorm, each blistering stroke leaving scars on my skin. As we descended into the belly of the cave, the jagged walls scraped against my exposed flesh, leaving their cruel marks.

What remained of my shirt was a shredded banner of defeat, bearing the savage testimony of an invisible beast's wrath. In the aftermath of this onslaught, an unnerving sight unfolded before me. The cave morphed into a chilling image: a graveyard where the tombstones were disturbing mirrors, reflecting not my face, but the back of my head.

Each reflective monolith told a tale of despair. Etched into one, the word “Anger” glowed ominously. The immense stones stretched towards the inky heavens. I sank into the comforting darkness of one such refuge, releasing a strained grunt as I wrestled with the fiery sting that had consumed my back. The faint sound of water splashing against an unseen shore resonated in my ears.

“Hate... does it make you feel powerful?”

The demonic echo of his voice bounced ominously off the damp cavern walls, in the pitch-black theater.

“You feed on self-hatred like a starved beast, gorging on the carcass of your failures. But tell me, doesn’t the feast turn sour, devouring the bones of your own regrets?”

Each venomous word was a barb lodged deep within my psyche, twisting and turning, making me question the reality of my past actions. The bait he dangled was too painful to ignore. *Tyger... my friend, forever lost, because I'm too weak.*

Each reflected tombstone I passed, each grotesque image of the back of my head served as a harsh reminder of my silent vow. *I need to live.*

He was getting closer. I moved stealthily from mirror to mirror, hiding within their chilling reflections. Each one bore a single word engraving—some indecipherable, others imbued with haunting familiarity.

“Hate,” “Despair,” “Depression”...

“Look at all the graves you’ve filled!” His voice crescendoed, drowning the cavern in a chorus of accusation. “You are the architect of this horror, not me. Dare you look deeper into these mirrors? Dare you dig out the graves and confront what you’ll find?”

His cruel mockery repeated through the sprawling maze, setting my nerves alight. All the while, the soft whisper of shifting black sand underfoot was my only companion, carrying me from one disturbing reflection to another.

“Did you really believe you could escape by dragging us here? By ending us both? We are different from them. We trusted her blindly. Not all light is good light. Stare at the sun and you’ll understand. It has dark spots as well.” His voice was a bone-chilling wind, whispering tales of doom. “Thank you. You have only brought yourself one step closer to your own grave. A grave I’ve been patiently preparing all these years.”

What? Where?

In the gloom, a distant patch of earth, an island in the heart of a hidden water body, caught my attention. There lay an open grave, a silent spectator in the center of this macabre theater. A lone shovel, embedded in the earth, stood as a grim marker.

Behind me, an opening yawned—the mouth to a lengthy, gnarled hall that twisted into the heart of a cavernous labyrinth. To live, I first needed to be devoured. With each forced step I took, I plunged deeper into its bowels, venturing into a realm where even light dared not trespass. The guttural sound of my shallow breaths bounced off the uneven, damp walls. The alarming whispers of the silent walls felt like disembodied hands tugging at the tattered edges of my shredded sanity. This was a deadly game of hide and seek. The mirrors—tombstones of reflective dread—were left behind, their daunting images receding into the shrouded depths of the cavern.

The labyrinth morphed around me, its pathways winding and forking like the sinewy tendrils of a monstrous beast, each tunnel another gaping maw waiting to swallow me whole.

How many times could one man die? I asked myself. When he does, what is left? A soul, or the rot?

After what felt like an eternity, my stumbling steps led me into an unexpected clearing within the labyrinth's heart. There was a strange room hidden within the depths of the cave, untouched by time. Clothes and belongings of various sizes and shapes, remnants of numerous past lives, lay scattered across the floor. Each piece was a puzzle, an answer of the wearers' fate within this underworld. They lay strewn haphazardly, like mournful confetti at a parade long since ended. The sight was as bewildering as it was eerie, and I was careful not to disturb it. A strange book titled *The Fiery Manifesto* laid on top of it all.

But, hidden amongst the sea of abandoned garments, something else caught my eye. It was a strange, box-like device, nestled unassumingly amongst the rags and tatters. A quick inspection identified it as a Geiger counter. It called to me for some reason. It wanted me to have it. My hands, slick with cold perspiration, trembled as I retrieved the counter from its textile nest. Its metallic cold bit into my palm, grounding me in the horrifying reality I was ensnared in. A thin veneer of dust lay on its surface, whispering tales of long-held neglect. I wiped it clean, the coarse fabric of my torn shirt serving as a makeshift rag.

With bated breath and a fluttering heart, I switched on the device. It came alive in my hand, a tiny light winking on its surface. The soft hum of its mechanism filled the silent room, an unfamiliar yet comforting rhythm.

I hovered the device over the clothing pile and whispered a silent prayer. Then it started. A dull clicking noise that grew in intensity as I moved the Geiger closer to the clothes. The counter was chattering, a frantic chatter that sent a shiver down my spine.

4

The clicking noise amplified, with each sharp note gnawing at my sanity. I willed the Geiger counter to rise, the metallic hum of its machinery intensifying as it levitated in my grasp. A bead of sweat trickled down my forehead as I focused on the device, forcing it to sway gently under my control.

Releasing my mental grip, the device bobbed unsteadily before darting around a corner, its manic clicking growing fainter with distance. I didn't wait to see if it continued. Turning on my heels, I plunged into the opposite direction, heart pounding in rhythm with my frantic steps.

The labyrinth twisted and turned, its claustrophobic walls closing in, seemingly feeding on my fear. My breath hitched as the clicking crescendoed abruptly, the sound bouncing off the confining stone, vibrating within my skull. *It works.* He was close. I rounded a corner, the narrow pathway leading to an unending series of similar passages. A thousand possible ways I could go, a thousand possible ways he could appear. The distant clicking of the Geiger counter from one direction was mirrored by a chilling repetition from another.

My footfalls filled the dead air with their relentless drumming. I barely noticed the sharp sting in my side, the lactic acid biting into my muscles with each forced step. As I pressed forward, the harsh scraping sound of shifting stone from behind stopped me dead in my tracks.

There it was again—the amplified clicking, closer this time, the noise cutting through the network like a serrated blade. He was on the right path, drawn to the Geiger counter's song. And that meant I had to keep moving. Terror lent wings to my weary legs, carrying me deeper, farther away from the horror of Hatman's pursuit. I swerved around a corner, nearly colliding with the wall as I raced blindly through the emptiness.

Up ahead, a faint glimmer of dim light beckoned, an elusive beacon amidst the engulfing darkness. With renewed vigor, I hurled myself towards the faint promise of an exit, willing myself to beat the oppressive

claustrophobia, to emerge victorious from the long serpent's deadly embrace.

Suddenly, a brutal gust of wind blew through the labyrinth. Darkness swarmed in, gnawing at my courage. But I couldn't afford to panic. Stumbling, I reached for the Geiger counter, retrieving the sole source of light within range. I was surrounded by an supernatural glow, a spectral dim luminescence that painted the walls with an otherworldly hue.

The exit was close, its haunting allure pulling me forward. Yet a guttural growl resonated from behind, the walls vibrating with the deep timbre of **Hatman**'s voice.

"Running from yourself won't save you!"

His voice was a cruel mockery, punctuating the manic clicking of the machine that now again slowly receded in the distance. Yet his words didn't faze me. They were but the desperate threats of a predator deprived of its prey.

I pushed forward, each strained breath reflecting my will. **Hatman**'s pursuit faded behind me, his menacing presence overshadowed by the enticing call of escape. The clicking faded to a whisper, a mere afterthought in the resounding chorus of my racing heartbeat.

Up ahead, the sliver of light grew brighter. With one last surge of strength, I stumbled out of the serpent and into the cave.

It was not over, not yet. But now, I was out, and I had a chance to strike. With the exit at my back, I lurked in the shadows, becoming one with them, waiting for the moment **Hatman** would appear, his attention on the deceptive lure of the Geiger counter. I would be ready. I would end it all. And this time, it was my turn to enjoy the chase.

The dim light of the cave turned the labyrinth's exit into a ghostly gateway. My heart pounded in my chest. Then, the metallic clicking of the Geiger counter grew louder, the sound growing into a crescendo as a dark silhouette emerged.

Hatman, his mask a grotesque smirk in the pallid light. He paused, attention diverted to the hovering device, its whirring and clicking

painting a false picture of his prey. The moment hung in the balance, a suspended breath before the plunge.

Seizing the chance, I lunged from the shadows, my left hand clenching the collar of his coat. In one swift move, I plunged the blade deep into his heart. The sudden intrusion caught him off guard.

Yet, quicker than lightning, his hand shot out, closing around my throat. I could feel his satisfaction, a perceptible delight radiating from behind the mask. He reveled in the searing pain, fed off it like a fiendish parasite.

“None,” he said.

No heart...

In a swift, brutal motion, he lifted me off the ground, his skull colliding with mine in a punishing headbutt. Warmth spilled across my forehead, a heated stream trickling down my face. Everything became a haze, the world tinted in a dark blue. But the grip on my blade never wavered.

As his hold tightened, I drove my knee upwards, catching him squarely in the gut. We separated, my body stumbling back from the force, the scalpel never leaving my hand. His grimaced silhouette blurred before my eyes as I staggered away, blood and sweat mixing in a stinging trail down my face. I moved instinctively, dashing away from the maze and deeper into the cave, my every sense heightened to the silence of my pursuer. The final confrontation was upon us. I was ready.

Soon enough, I found myself trapped in a dead end; a foreboding lake sprawling before me, a mirror of the pitch-black cavern above. It was filled with bodies, floating lifelessly, their pallid flesh illuminated by the somber, glimmering light... and his wasn't one of them. **Hatman** was fast on my heels, the final resonating clicks of the Geiger counter fading in the distance. I was cornered, and the only escape was through the lake.

He advanced, striding purposefully in my direction, a forceful presence closing in upon me. In an instant, our powers crackled to life, pulling at each other like invisible tethers. Neither of us could resist this magnetic force, and it dragged us both into an unexpected duet. My pull

was greater. We spiralled together, the momentum sending us crashing into the frigid waters below.

“He promised... promised to protect us... instead he... he...”

A ghostly voice reverberated, sounding as if it originated from behind a spectral veil. His hands shot out, snaking around my throat, as I stabbed him once more with the blade. He tightened his grip, ignoring the pain, his dark blue blood seeping into the luminescent water. In a desperate move, I pushed off his chest, freeing myself from his hold. I gasped for breath, but there was no time to rest—the salty lake rejected us, pushing us back towards the surface. Yet **Hatman** was relentless, dragging me back down by my leg.

“The sun... it was so bright... brighter than anything I’d ever seen... then everything was dark...” chimed in another voice, a trace of haunting torment lingering in the tones.

We struggled in the shallow depths. I had no choice but to swim further into the lake, my eyes locked on the gruesome mound of bodies that marked the way to my salvation. Each body served me as a raft, aiding me in my escape.

“It wasn’t the enemy... it was him!... It was him all along...” a third voice interjected, simmering with a rising tide of fury.

Hatman’s voice resonated through the night.

“Fear!” he boomed. “I can smell your blood. Hers is red, ours is blue. Look at all the ones she’s laid to rest!”

His words wrapped around me, tightening like a noose. But something else was taking over—adrenaline. It surged through me, drowning out his taunts and fuelling my desperate fight for survival. The land was an arm’s length away, though it felt as if I’d swam an ocean.

“He was our leader... our savior... a traitor!”

The voice roared, simmering with a fury so potent it could shatter stones. Each grasp for the muddy bank felt like I was trying to hold onto smoke, slippery and elusive. My heart pounded in time with my slipping, scrambling attempts to ascend. Then, like a specter, **Hatman** was there again, his hand clamping around my leg. I retaliated, limbs flailing wildly

in the air, in the water, trying to dislodge him, each frantic kick bringing me closer to escape.

Then I saw it, the shovel, half-buried in the sodden bank. I lunged for it, swinging blindly at Hatman's shadow. He moved with a fluidity that belied his size, easily avoiding the makeshift weapon. A triumphant snarl echoed in my ears as he wrenched the shovel from my grasp, using it to launch a retaliating blow. I was sent sprawling backward, the world tilting as I plummeted into an open grave.

Everything darkened, a murky twilight encroaching at the corners of my vision. I pawed at the earth, feeling for the scalpel that had slipped from my grip during the fall, but my fingers met only cold soil.

"Please," I gasped, the realization of my weaponless state sinking into my gut.

Hatman towered above, his silhouette blotting out the stars.

"If you don't want to be buried dead, then I'll bury you alive," he snarled, his voice bouncing off the grave's narrow walls.

The weight of his words was punctuated by the first clods of dirt he threw onto me. Each handful was a physical blow, covering me, burying me. As it piled onto my chest, slipped into my mouth, scratched at my eyes, I could feel the walls of the grave closing in.

Frantically, I rolled, struggling onto my knees, clawing at the dirt as if I could somehow reverse this burial. But Hatman was relentless, striking me with the flat of the shovel, forcing me back down onto the unyielding earth. The taste of dirt filled my mouth, choking my gasps for breath. I pushed against it, against him, mustering every shred of strength I had left. He descended into the grave, pressing me into the dirt, his hands again finding my throat.

"Your nature is violent. It has revealed itself to you. You've always wanted to make them pay for how they treated you. After everything, now you decide to fight back. You must die for me to live," he taunted, his grip tightening. A maniacal cackle erupted from his throat, resembling the unhinged squeal of a wild animal set loose.

Every heartbeat was a drumroll in my ears, my vision blurring, narrowing to a single pinpoint of light. It wasn't over, it couldn't be. With my life slipping away, my will, my determination burned brighter.

"You're a plague," I managed to croak. "When I go, you go!"

Suddenly, the oppressive weight of Hatman was lifted as a new shadow fell onto him. It was Rose, the scalpel gleaming in her hand. Their struggle was a dance of shadows and silver, but the scalpel slipped from her grasp, falling towards me. In that moment, everything moved in slow motion. I could see the truth clearly. My mind closed around the scalpel's cold handle, a puppet guided by primal instinct, and plunged the blade horizontally, into the side of Hatman's skull.

His body crumbled onto me, a dead weight that threatened to crush the life from me. Summoning the last reserves of strength, I forcefully pushed his lifeless form away, the sharp blade now in my quivering hand becoming an extension of my fury.

With a brutal and relentless motion, I drove it into Hatman's now motionless body, the sickening sound of flesh tearing apart mingling with the metallic tang of blood. The chilling night air carried my screams of defiance, each piercing cry a vivid testament to the harrowing battle I had endured, my survival etched in every gasp and wail.

"Salvador," Rose's voice cut through my frenzied cries.

Her touch on my shoulder was like a lifeline, grounding me.

"This isn't you," she whispered. "It's done. No more blood, no more."

Looking down at the lifeless form beside me, my hands coated in the same darkness that seeped from him, I felt a shiver of dread. *Is this truly me? This violent being? Is he right?*

"Don't even think it," Rose cautioned me, her words a balm to my tumultuous thoughts. "Don't even go there."

Her reassurance grounded me, a beacon in the chaos of my thoughts.

"Matthew?" I asked, needing to know he was safe.

"Guarding the entrance. We have to leave."

Hatman's body twitched beside me. A bitter laugh bubbled up from my chest.

“This is where you live, huh? This is what it looks like. Now I know where it all comes from, thank you.”

I moved to retrieve the scalpel, but Rose’s voice stopped me.

“Salvador!” she pleaded, her hand outstretched, a lifeline offered.

I clung onto her, and with her help, managed to rise from the grave.

“You’re bleeding everywhere. We have to go,” she urged.

Hatman’s earlier words reverberated in my mind: “You have only brought yourself closer to your own grave. I had it prepared for you all this time.”

A shiver coursed through me. He was right. I paused, something still pulling me back. It had to be done.

“Wait,” I said, catching Rose’s questioning gaze.

I reached for the shovel, my fingers closing around the rough handle. With each shovelful of dirt, I buried Hatman deeper, hoping that maybe, from this darkness, something pure might bloom. The task was daunting, the earth heavy and unyielding, but I continued. The tombstone bore my name, but my essence was not inside, only my shadow.

5

Energy was leaving my body, evaporating like morning dew under a summer sun. Vision grew hazy, balance uncertain. A modest wooden boat bobbed gently on the water’s mirror surface, waiting to offer us passage. It promised enough room for a handful of souls. Our mission: traverse the lake. As I collapsed onto the wooden seat, my back sought solace in the boat’s sturdy structure. Rose took charge of the oar with determined hands. Each push and pull of the oar sliced through the water, moving us forward and the grim gatherings of bodies aside.

“Do you know these people?”

The question, heavy with implications, hung between us.

“I don’t want to look,” she whispered, her voice fragile. “I’m afraid, afraid of what I’ll see.”

“Peace... after death?”

“Peace is temporary. If I’ve learned anything in my life, that’s it. Still, we must strive for it. Otherwise, we’ll end up struggling eternally.”

The lake, a hypnotic canvas of undulating waves, lured me. Over its edge, blue drops of my blood fell and scattered into tiny, cobalt ripples. As if through a silent, unseen siphon, life was slowly trickling out of me. Eyes, heavy and resisting, were succumbing to the darkness. It almost claimed me, when a sharp jolt interrupted.

“Salvador!” Rose’s voice broke through the encroaching void. It was distant and urgent. “Get up, please! We’re counting on you.”

Blinking away the darkness, I found us at our destination. A future unexplored. The need for sleep wasn’t what claimed me; rather, it was an incessant exhaustion gnawing at the edges of my consciousness. My eyes pleaded for a moment’s reprieve.

Her grip on my shirt was firm, insistent. We navigated past tombs, their stillness whispering of those who’d journeyed before us. The farther we ventured, the fewer they became. A stairway lay ahead, its steps seemingly spiraling into infinity, leading back to where we started.

Her arm around me was a lifeline, pulling me onward, upward. The world around us seemed a strange tapestry—the salty expanse of water beneath us, a beacon of light above. We were mere cogs in this unforgiving wheel of fate, repeating our ascent in a seemingly endless cycle.

My left knee faltered, buckling under the weight of our journey. I crumbled, arm outstretched, absorbing the impact.

“I’m tired, Rose, I’m tired.”

“We have to continue... Now isn’t the time,” she countered, black trails of sorrow painting her cheeks.

“A moment,” I rasped. “All I need is a moment.”

My energy reserves were fast depleting, threatening the very framework of my existence. My body felt on the brink of succumbing.

“Salvador, Matthew is still up there. We have to hurry and go hide.”

A faint protest formed, words barely making their way out. “Where could we possibly hide, Rose? They’re everywhere.”

She lowered herself, her gaze level with mine. Her eyes held a captivating power.

"They? Never paint everyone with the same brush. Isn't that what she told you? People will help. Good people."

"Good people, huh? They seem to have been well hidden across each world. Few and far in between."

"You're not well; you've been through a lot. You're not thinking straight right now. Do you trust me?"

With an effort that took everything I had left, I nodded.

"We're not going to rot down here, not after everything. Now get up... and don't make me angry, got that?"

Her words brought forth a weary smile.

"You've never been easily impressed, have you?"

Straining every muscle, I pushed against the relentless pull of gravity. The battle against my own body was brutal. For a moment, time seemed to stretch into an eternity. I had to keep going, for Matthew, for Rose. I couldn't let anyone else fall.

One foot after the other, I dragged myself up the cold stairs. My hand sought support from the stone wall. Faint illumination graced the path ahead. It was not much, but it was all I needed.

Shivering in the biting cold, wounds aching with every gust of wind, I pressed on. They said time heals all wounds, but it was a matter of surviving long enough for time to do its job. Real healing, the kind that mends the deepest scars, had to come from within.

Ash floated down from the vast unknown above, covering everything in a blanket of white. The engulfing darkness was receding, replaced by a brightness. I felt a force, invisible yet profound, guiding me, pulling me up an invisible chain. The din of the world faded away.

Rose was speaking, her words blending with the stillness. But I had slipped into a trance.

Up, up, up... climb, climb... She's right. I've come this far. I'm already in hell, I'm not stopping here!

6

“Matthew!” The urgency in my voice ricocheted off the pit’s walls.

Matthew’s form, smeared with dirt, was barely visible. His sleeves were a patchwork of torn holes, and a single cut streaked his cheek, its smallness contradicting its fierceness. A collection of stolen rifles lay haphazardly near his crouched figure.

He recoiled instinctively as we entered his line of sight, before his eyes met ours, hinting a sliver of relief.

“Is he...” he muttered, the ghost of a smile fleeting across his lips.

“Yes,” replied Rose, her words curt.

A shroud of contemplation veiled Matthew’s gaze as he mulled over our predicament. His alertness was electric in the oppressive silence.

“More are coming or waiting. Both options are unwelcome guests. Can you hold up?”

I nodded, gritting my teeth. “I’ll manage.”

“You have no choice.” His words were a direct challenge, dispelling any room for doubt. He passed us the firearms he’d scavenged, their cold metallic touch an ominous prelude to the storm we were about to weather.

“Ready yourselves. We will need every ounce of stamina left. Salvador, how is your aim?”

My memories hurtled back to a simpler time, my youthful hands shaking under my grandad’s patient guidance as we took aim at innocent cans. But now, the stakes were horrifyingly different, the cans replaced by living, breathing targets. My mind ached from exhaustion, my body protested against any further strain, and I feared my hands would betray me.

“Horrible,” I admitted, my voice echoing the harsh reality.

“Time to practice,” he replied, accepting our circumstances.

The weapon felt like a leaden anchor in my hands, and as Matthew risked a peek over the pit, my heart pounded in my chest.

“Now is our chance.”

Our feet pounded against the stairs; our grip on the guns tightened.

Suddenly, a soldier appeared, and before I could react, Matthew had already fired, his bullet striking the enemy's chest with ruthless precision. He crumbled, his arms flailing like a dying bird's wings.

"Tyger?"

The question choked in my throat. Matthew averted his eyes, his words tripping over each other in his haste.

"We have to leave him."

Rose's grip on my sleeve tugged me forward, but I was rooted to the spot. My heart howled in protest.

"I'm not going to leave him here. I'll drag him if I have to. I don't care what happens."

Matthew's grip on me tightened, pulling me back from the brink of madness. "Listen!" His roar brought me back to reality. "He will... slow us down. If we carry him, we won't outrun what's coming."

Rationality gnawed at the edges of my grief-stricken fog. Could I find the strength to accept this brutal necessity?

"The best way to do him justice is by surviving. Live on, and his memory will live on with you."

"Okay," I muttered, my voice hollow.

As we ventured further into the tunnel, the sounds of a large debate taking place seemed to be coming from outside the walls.

They must be waiting for us.

My mind spun with confusion and dread. Emerging into the open, we were met by an anxious sea of faces. Bullets began to rain down from the infantry rifles, and we dove for cover behind the short walls by the staircase.

A citizen dared to raise his voice in our direction, his words puncturing the disarray. A shout from one of the men sought to silence him, a demand for obedience. He shrugged it off, his defiance louder than their attempts at suppression.

Suddenly, Rose's voice cut through it all, silencing the crowd. Whispers spread like wildfire, and disbelief painted the faces of soldiers

and civilians alike. Then, an eruption of rebellion against the oppressors. As some fell, others took their place.

“Now,” commanded Rose, her voice a lifeline.

We ran, dodging stray bullets, weaving our way through the madness. Narrow alleyways yawned before us, the buildings towering ominously. The path was uncertain, the crowd chaotic, but we had no choice but to push on, driven by the relentless tide of desperation. We were swept into the storm. Buildings exhaled dark smoke as shadows clashed in primal violence. Women fled, children in tow, their cries swallowed by the uproar. Bullets from the soldiers tore through friend and foe alike, the distinction blurred by the haze of conflict. Above, the sirens grew louder, the harbinger of winged predators circling the sky. These metallic crows, single-seater fighter planes, swooped and swirled.

We slithered down the alleyways, away from the enemy’s gaze as defiant rebels stood firms with their arms outstretched pointing the way. Soon, their arms went limp and they began to fall, their resistance met with lethal consequence. A sudden shockwave knocked us off our feet as one of the large crows plunged into a nearby building, a fiery phoenix in its dying throes. The explosion vomited bricks in all directions, the heat searing my skin.

A disorienting ring filled my ears, as if I was underwater, my senses faltering under the onslaught. It felt as if my head had been severed from my body, leaving it to aimlessly wander. By the time we pieced together the calamity, it was too late for many. Their loved ones lay sprawled on the ground, life seeping out of them. As they clung to them in their final moments, their tears soaked the fabric, a dark ink spreading.

Confusion fogged my mind, replaced by piercing cries as I was yanked from the ground. Words buzzed in my ears, indecipherable amidst the turmoil. My senses were jolted back to reality by a few sharp slaps to my cheek. Matthew’s anxious face filled my vision, his voice strained as he turned to Rose.

“Did they manage to take it down?” he asked.

“No. They dived of their own will,” Rose murmured.

His words hung in the air, cut short by another crash as a plane plummeted into the adjacent building. Like a black rain, debris of all sizes showered down on us. As the wave of rubble came crashing, I felt a forceful push...

7

Fragments of buildings and rubble had conspired to form a cocoon around me, a chaos-crafted asylum. The world was a blurry eruption of motion and debris, with me at its center. Breath, once a simple task, had turned into a luxury my lungs couldn't afford as dust clogged the air.

My eyes skittered about like trapped birds, disoriented and frantic. Another tremor, I registered. Then a realization hit me like a punch to the gut. *The others!*

Extricating myself from my position, I folded into a hunched sit, knees flaring outwards. The world's noise had turned mute for me, muffled behind the beats of my pounding heart. With methodical motions, I brushed off the grit clinging to my skin, rotating my head like a bewildered owl in a storm.

“Salvador!”

The shout was a ghost, half-swallowed by the thunderous noise of collapse. Rose. Again, the phantom sound. It came from beneath a pile of rubble. A spark of resolve ignited within me, and I forced my weighted limbs into motion.

Stumbling, grunting, I strained to move the rocks. Some felt like the world itself, heavier than their size suggested. They scratched my palms, imprinting white streaks onto the blue, as I discarded them behind me. It was a desperate excavation, a dog digging for buried treasure. Perhaps they weren't truly that heavy. Maybe it was my strength wavering, crumbling like the world around us. Mentally commanding them, I coaxed the rocks to tumble down the small incline of their own accord.

A stone monolith leaned ominously against the remains of a building. With grunts and grimaces, my arms tugged and pushed until an aperture materialized.

“Rose!” My voice cracked with strain and hope.

“I’m in here,” came her response, solidifying my hope into reality.

The rocks, now in a hurry to obey gravity, cascaded down faster. The wall she was under had been her fortress against the raining debris. A makeshift bulwark.

Soon, the crevice had grown enough for her to snake an arm through. I grasped her hand, pulling with all my might, until she emerged, a chalky apparition. A fine layer of dust masked her skin, turning her dark robe into a ghostly shroud. A cloud of dust escaped her lungs in a fit of coughing, momentarily clearing the air around her.

“Matthew?” Rose’s query hung heavy in the smoky air, a question mark etching itself into our hearts.

We shouted his name, casting it into the chaos, but silence was our only answer.

Up ahead, a solitary rock, animated by some unseen force, skittered across the floor. Debris, indiscriminate in its violence, blocked our path. Undeterred, we clambered over the obstruction, each uneven step amplifying my escalating dread.

No, no, no, not this, please not this. Please!

“Salvador,” a voice, as weak as the flicker of a dying candle, called.

His left side appeared motionless, an eerily still landscape in contrast to the trembling of his right arm. His head struggled to perform its familiar tilt, an unyielding force preventing it from surfacing. A rush of adrenaline spurred me into action, my hands clawing at the stones that imprisoned him. Shock laced my system with ice, rendering me in a state of panicked paralysis. Rose’s gasp was muffled by her hands, clapped over her mouth in horror.

“N-no,” Matthew’s words stuttered out, “...point. My body is... crushed. I won’t m-m-make it...”

“Matthew, we have to try! Someone can help.”

His sigh was a gust of resignation. “You’ve already d-d-done enough...”

I’ve done nothing. I’ve brought you nothingness.

My lip trembled; my vision was blurred by an impending downpour of tears. Amidst the sounds of gunfire and panic, my focus was narrow and tunnelled.

“Why did you do this?”

“Choice... had none... and I am glad,” His words fragmented, as if the synapses carrying them had been frayed. “Met you, been useful. Would do it again... for you accepted me.” Each word was a shard, their sharp edges carving into my heart. His body was compromised, his emotions held prisoner. “What hurts... not rocks. It’s the inability... to shed a tear... at our parting.”

My head sagged, burdened by the weight of his words. As my tears splattered on the debris-strewn floor, one landed on his lifeless palm. Memories were our richest inheritance, and our deepest despair. In that moment, I yearned for the gift of forgetfulness, to purge the pain from my chest. But grief, being the ocean it was, had swallowed me whole. Tyger, and now Matthew, both martyrs in my cause. I was a fallen soldier, a soul splintered by loss. Each labored breath, each choked back sob, was a memory I tried my hardest to forget.

Summoning the last vestiges of strength, I lifted my gaze to Matthew, his eyes shut, his lips curved into an unseen smile.

“You were just like us... rest now,” I managed to whisper.

Rose, a pillar of strength, leaned into my shoulder.

Exhaling a sigh, I wiped my tears on my sleeve. We rose, knowing our mourning had to be delayed. Survival, the immediate priority.

“We have to keep moving,” I declared. “We can’t die.”

Rose remained silent, a statue in our fractured world. We turned our faces to the onslaught ahead, bracing ourselves. One last glance at Matthew’s lifeless form. Another fallen comrade. His rest was our burden to bear. We treaded with our senses heightened, the weight of danger pressing down on us.

At the end of a narrow alley, we paused, casting wary glances at the open sky where aircraft prowled. Their colossal wings extended over the city, an omnipresent specter, shadowing the streets and buildings. It was as though an enormous dragon cruised the firmament, unleashing fire and death from its monstrous jaws. The winds danced down the alleyways, carrying the scent of destruction.

Without warning, a soldier, a mere silhouette against the flickering backdrop, came into view. Recognition sparked in his eyes, followed by a roar of alarm. His gun lifted with the intention to end us, but my reflexes were quicker. I seized the weapon, shoving him backwards. His skull collided with the ground with a sickening thud. My fist rose and fell, a relentless hammer on his helmeted head. He reached up, hands clawing at my face, but I fought back with desperate determination, evading his attempt to gouge my eyes. Seconds later, his limp fingers grazed the rubble-strewn floor.

More figures approached, their footfalls an impending doom. Rose and I plunged into a damaged building, riddled with gaping wounds that led into its heart, and out the other side. There was no time for games in this smoke-choked city. The blaze of civil war spread like wildfire, pushing us forward on its scorching breath. As my boots crunched over the bodies of the fallen, an unexpected force rammed into me. Tossed to the ground, I was met by the glint of a hunting knife. The man wielding it was intent on claiming my life. But before he could land a fatal strike, Rose's gunshot echoed. His body crumpled beside me, his lifeblood splattering my face, staining it in a gruesome baptism.

Blood, the city's new river, flowed down each street, around every corner, ferrying departed souls to their eternal rest. The river called to us all, each destined to witness the grand finale. Debris swirled around us, a chaotic storm in each direction. Bullets zipped past, their whine creating a jarring disarray in our ears. We were either ghosts to be ignored or targets to be exterminated—there were no other choices.

The scalpel was a toothless weapon in this bedlam. Instead, I held a salvaged rifle, its weight a solid reassurance in my grip. It was my shield and my sword, ready to unleash its deadly argument. In the swirling

tumult, the lines of allegiance were blurred, enemies and allies indistinguishable.

The towering city walls loomed ominously before us. Engaged in their own battles, the guards paid us no heed. Stealthily, we moved like shadows along the walls, out of their line of sight. As we slipped unnoticed through the gates, I tasted the bittersweet tang of victory. It was tinged with the smoky flavor of the scorched city behind us. We made our way to a grove of fire-ravaged trees, their once majestic forms reduced to skeletal shadows.

Rose led us to one, its thin and brittle branches reaching upwards like twisted fingers. Bereft of life, the wind found no leaves to carry in its autumnal dance.

“What now, where do we go?” I asked, looking at her. “How do we get out?”

She paused, rooted to the spot like a blossoming flower, her expression laden with an unspoken sorrow.

Her lips remained sealed.

“Rose?” My voice lingered in the eerily quiet surroundings. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“We don’t,” she said, her voice carrying a poignant note of sadness. “You do.”

My mind reeled. “What do you mean?”

Her cryptic words sent a flurry of questions swirling.

What are you implying? Why would you stay behind?

“I have to be here for what comes next. I have to stay and fight alongside my people. I’ve run long enough. I’ve felt guilt long enough. It has eaten me from within. We all have our demons to face; mine just happens to be a pure reflection in the mirror.”

Her confession left me speechless, my tongue twisted as if knotted.

“I’ll help you,” I managed to blurt out, my words filled with resolve despite the uncertainty clouding my mind.

“No,” she interrupted softly. “Your job here is done. You have done as much as you could. It’s time for you to leave us all behind. I’ll go back for Sven. He’ll protect me.”

“Where am I to go?” I stammered, the abruptness of her proclamation leaving me reeling.

In that moment an unfinished puzzle presented itself before me.

“Wait a moment... Were you real, or did I create you?”

Her response was a tender smile and a gentle kiss on my forehead, followed by a warm embrace.

My lips are dry; why didn't you water them?

Leaning her head against my chest, she murmured, “Shut up. Listen to me. Thank you for everything. I will never forget.”

I responded by wrapping my arms around her and resting my jaw on her shoulder. Her silver hair, surprisingly fragrant with the scent of roses amidst the surrounding devastation, tickled my cheek. I heard her sniffle as she held me tighter.

“The scalpel,” she whispered. “Read the markings.”

With her still nestled in my arms, I fumbled in my pocket for the scalpel. It was where I had left it, the same weight, but seemingly imbued with an extraordinary energy. As I held it up, the light played across the markings, transforming them into luminescent script. I squinted at the changed engraving. Its mysterious elegance had evolved into a familiar phrase. It read:

Remember, remember dreams do not last forever

A DREAM OF REALITY

1

The sky, a canvas of the eternal, was splashed with an array of hues. They coalesced into a rich blend, a mosaic of light and darkness. Bold purples ruled, a sovereign shade that served as the foundation. Stars, once flickering messengers in the abyss, now held their peace. Planets ceased their circular waltz around a far-off sun. Including what was once hidden or lost, all had merged into a seamless tapestry.

A cloak of numbness wrapped around me, akin to a warm silk blanket. Slowly, deliberately, I rotated my head, noticing a young girl slumbering on a bed twinned to mine. A construction of unblemished gold held a glowing white mattress under the coverlet. Her eyelids fluttered gently in her sleep. I shifted upwards, cradling my face in my hands, giving my eyes a slow rub.

Confusion pricked at my mind.

Where am I? What happened?

A trace of a memory—Rose, the scalpel! They were no longer nestled within my grasp. They had evaporated, slipping beyond my reach.

As I took in my surroundings, a sense of wonder ensnared me. Beds, more than I could count, spread across the vast expanse, each cradling a figure in repose. Shaking free the silken weight, my bare feet found contact with the ground. A sea of sand was underfoot, sliding between my wriggling toes and providing a gritty massage.

My attire had been altered. The tattered, damp clothes I wore had given way to fresh and crisp whites, a T-shirt and shorts adorning me. The injuries that once marred my skin were conspicuously absent. My back felt aligned, my head devoid of any throbbing pain. It was a sensation akin to tranquility.

Reaching out, I felt the cold touch of the gold headboard beneath my hand, providing me the support I needed to stand. Behind every bed, a stone pillar held aloft an hourglass filled with purple sand. My gaze

traced back to mine, which lay in shards. As my eyes roved further, it became evident that I was the only one awake amidst a sea of sleepers. The oddity of the situation struck me.

Curiosity compelled me to weave through the maze of beds, surveying the others. A layer of sand veiled their eyes, varying in thickness. I found the same grainy substance crusted over my own, growing sticky with each blink. With a swift brush of my fingers, I scraped it off.

The inhabitants of this place were not all young as I initially surmised. Faces etched with the wisdom of age and the bloom of middle years rested peacefully. Regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, the same expression of calm sleep was mirrored. One such face belonged to a boy, no older than twelve, his raven locks tousled and eyes shut tight. My hand reached for his arm, giving it a gentle shake, but his sleep remained undisturbed. I moved on, attempting to rouse others, but met with similar results. Every direction I turned offered the same view. Bewilderment washed over me.

What now? Where do I go from here?

My journey persisted, each footfall etching a memory into the sand beneath. The canvas of my mind was vacant, with thoughts escaping, evading my grasp like elusive shadows. The world around me seemed trapped in a time warp. Hours seemed to stretch and compress simultaneously until my path crossed a trail of black sand. Like a serpent, it wound into the distance in either direction, disappearing into the abstract blur of eternity. The logical deduction—there must be an end to this path.

But the quandary—*which way to head? Left, or right?* I decided to bank on the wisdom hiding in the semantics—right must be right for a reason. A decision was made.

The trail beneath me felt strangely cool, an anomaly in the otherwise sun-baked landscape. It did not scorch my bare feet. The experience was paradoxical. It felt like I had been walking for eons and yet not at all. My body hummed with an inexhaustible energy, and the warmth of the environment failed to evoke even a drop of sweat from me. A pinprick

appeared in the vastness ahead—a tiny moving silhouette, barely discernible against the expanse. Relief washed over me—I was not alone.

A newfound urgency propelled me forward, my footprints erupting with trails of dark sand. I did not want to lose sight of this beacon. As I closed in, my pace slackened. The silhouette materialized into a figure of a man, his back to me. He was swathed in a cloak of royal purple, a hood shrouding his head, crowned with an hourglass—an unusual choice for headgear. His arms extended from the short sleeves of the cloak, sheathed in dark fabric from the elbows down. I lingered behind him, an uninvited presence waiting for recognition.

“You are not supposed to be here,” he said calmly, still refusing to show his face.

“I agree. That’s why I approached you. What is this place anyway? How do I wake up?”

“You just did. You woke up to the truth.”

The truth? “What is the truth?”

“There are seven sides to the truth. This is one of them. This is my realm, my seventh of the Mindhive.”

“You control all of this? Everything?”

His silence filled the vacuum between us as he began a slow pirouette. With every minute movement, a new fragment of him revealed itself. Pointy shoes of a dark shade peeped from beneath his cloak, poulaines. His face, however, remained hidden within the cloak’s inky depths.

“In countless guises I am known, across every culture, every tongue. Each reserves a word for us: Sleep, the sanctuary of minds; Death, the great equalizer; Wake, our daily battle; Memory, the ghost of time; Time, our relentless march; Reality, the veil of the present, and lastly, Dream. This name, it resonates with me most. I am the Seven, yet We are the One.”

Caught off guard, I was at a loss for words...

“You mean this is...”

“Yes. When you fall asleep, this is where your higher conscience comes.”

“Why am I here now?” I asked, stunned, and amazed.

“Because deep within yourself, you chose to be. You have reached the final layer of lucidity. A rare few have ever been able to do so. Consider yourself fortunate.”

My hand instinctively reached for the golden headboard nearby, the enormity of the revelation proving too much to bear.

The final layer, huh? It was almost beyond belief...

“How many layers are there?” I asked with great curiosity.

“Four main layers. The second, third, and fourth have a sub-layer to them each.”

I dropped onto a soft mattress next to me, its surface yielding beneath me. My palms covered my face, disbelief coursing through my veins.

“A part of me wants to believe all of this. Another part is telling me this is all just my fantasy.”

“The imaginary is what tends to become real.”

With that, he moved closer, his left hand finding a place on my shoulder before he moved past me. I tracked his movement, standing up to follow him as he walked away.

“Your mistake is believing that your reality is the only one that exists and that the others are hallucinations the same way these people forget about the others and believe this is the only one that is real. You’ll come to learn that reality is in a way a dream within a dream.”

Each of his words rippled around, seeming to permeate the very sands beneath our feet. Just as I began to contemplate the depth of his statement, his pace led him to a halt by a bed. Its corresponding hourglass sat on the edge of oblivion, the last few grains of time threatening to slip through. With an unfaltering grip, he seized and inverted the hourglass, coaxing the sands to resume their measured fall.

“When one dream ends, another begins. When I deem it to be time, I remove it altogether.”

Puzzled by his diligence, I found myself questioning, “Why don’t you have someone else do this? Why bother yourself?”

“As I mentioned earlier, this is my realm. What kind of figure would I be if I burdened others with my own responsibilities? I am the only one that can keep order. That being said, time is an illusion. If I willed it,

everything would stay in place for eternity. I control every single grain of sand that falls within each hourglass.”

His words left an uncanny silence that had me lost in a sea of thoughts.
Reality? Illusion? Time?

“What about **Hatman** and the **Mystic**. Are they real?”

“Dreams are strange things. They are full of meaning and symbolism. One just has to know where and how to look. Your dreams are real to you alone. They only make sense within your mind.”

“I feel like I’m losing my mind right about now,” I blurted out, a tingling sensation taking hold of my senses.

“Good. Once you lose everything you have, including your mind and all the burdens that weigh you down, only then will you be able to be free and truly fly.”

Intrigued, I let out a thoughtful sigh. “Huh, I never thought of it that way.”

“You have a strong mind. It is experiencing itself through dreams the same way the Universe is experiencing itself through sentience. The pain of the other reality is what gives you strength in this one. You had no other option but to strengthen this one and evolve. Your glass shatters easier than others, as you’ve noticed. It’s quite colorful and vast to contain within such a condensed space.”

His words left me warm with recognition, “Nobody else ever seemed to notice.”

“One day, perhaps. That’s up to you. Your need for acceptance is what made you invisible.”

We continued our journey across the sands, leaving our distinct trails behind.

“Would you like to know your score on that test you did?”

“You know about that?”

“I am within everyone’s mind. My eyes are everywhere, and I see all.”

An uncomfortable mixture of curiosity and apprehension washed over me. Would knowing the score serve as closure or feed my insecurities?

“No, I don’t think I do. I’d rather not have a piece of paper labelling me as stupid or intelligent for the rest of my life. My actions should determine that.”

I felt Dream’s shadowed face brighten momentarily. “You are an old soul in a young body.”

I found myself drifting back to the cherished memories of philosophical discussions with my grandpa, surrounded by sunflowers and roses, sipping on tea as the sun dipped behind the mountains.

“This is my house,” Dream declared.

Before us stood an imposing golden clock tower, its grandeur commanding awe. Surrounding it was a garden, unlike any I’d seen before. Various time tellers from different eras were scattered about, intermingling with the local flora. Broken sundials were strewn across the sandy floor, half-buried in the shifting sands. Two statues of hands clutching a compass seemed to guard the entrance like silent sentinels.

“Surreal.”

From the depths of his cloak, Dream’s voice resonated. “Since you have made it this far, I will give you an opportunity. Stay here for eternity and travel the universe within yourself or wake up and never achieve this state again.”

The weight of his offer hung heavy in the air.

“Why couldn’t I achieve this again?”

“Longevity,” was his simple answer.

The word engraved itself in my mind, its meaning elusive.

“What do you mean?”

He paused, his back to me. “That is something I am not willing to say until your decision is final. If you choose to stay, I will elaborate; if not...you will find out for yourself.”

I looked around, my eyes drawn to the golden clock tower and the array of timepieces scattered about. Recollections of my dream journey flooded my mind: the thrilling dive from the lighthouse, the Mystic’s red tree house tower with its complex chess game, the tempting delicacies of the Milky Way Cruiser...

“I’ve made up my mind,” I announced. Dream turned, his gaze piercing, hands clasped behind him. “I have decided to leave.”

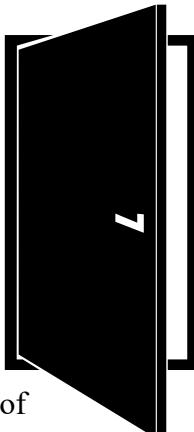
His voice bore no judgment, only curiosity, “May I ask why?” I paused, thinking about the dream I had of becoming _____ and proving myself right.

“Some dreams are worth more than sleep. Should I tell them mine? To the observers...”

“Never tell your dream to a stranger. Keep them guessing. It is better that way,” Dream advised. “Now, what I am about say may not make sense to you right now, but never forget: your mind can do miracles for you if you know how to use it properly and apply it in your life. Convince yourself that you already possess everything you desire and it shall be yours.”

With a nod of acknowledgment, I watched
as he extended his hand.
from thin air, whipped by
Shielding my eyes from
descending from the sky
was identical to Owlfred,
eyes, seemingly peering

“Your body is full of
more obvious than
placed them at every step of
you to follow your trail.”



Acknowledgment, I watched
A black door materialized
a sudden gust of warm wind.
the dust, I noticed an owl
to perch on Dream’s arm. It
with those same piercing
through me.

distinct doorways, some
others. I have carefully
the journey. Now it’s up to

The door cracked open to reveal a bright light beyond. Drawn to it, I ambled forward, gripping the handle to pull it open. As I crossed the threshold, I paused, looking back at Dream.

“What happens to Tyger, Matthew, and Rose? Are they gone? Forever?”

“Some slumbers you’ll forget and others We’ll return, but remember, remember, no dream lasts forever.”

His final words imprinted themselves on my consciousness, a solemn reminder as I moved forward into the unknown.

2

White light—harsh, uncompromising—breached the haven behind my eyes. Recoiling, my eyes squinted, veering to the right to elude its attack. Black spots danced across my sight, a chaos mirroring old signal-less TV screens, their static specter a relic of sleepless nights.

Endurance anchored me in the abyss. Eyelids fluttered against the luminary's assault, dancing with the invading light. It was a good kind of light. The world began to reassemble, shy fragments merging at my sight's edges. Edges that pushed the inky rebellion into retreat. The spots shrunk with time, their realm sporadic specks on a clearing battlefield.

Reality started returning in vivid hues. My senses, victorious, welcomed a rocky ceiling—a surprise sight for my restored vision. My thoughts spun in a whirlpool of disarray.

The car... its presence was merely a phantom limb. And my parents... only echoes in hollow silence. The hum of the car, the radio... I could still hear it all. They lingered in my memory as if the sounds were just there a moment ago.

There, beside the bed, lay the moonflower, the plant a hushed witness to my wakefulness. The invasive presence of an alien object lodged in my throat yanked me back. Its identity unveiled itself as my tongue navigated its plastic contours—a sizeable tube, assertive in its unwelcome residence.

A corner of my eye spied the comforting sight of a warm blanket—a lagoon of tranquility in the chaotic sea of my reality. Its soft azure hue danced over my skin, a contrast to the rigidity of my fingers confined to my sides.

Like dormant marionettes awaiting their puppeteer's command, my fingers refused to respond. But patience rewarded me. After what seemed like an eternity of helpless inertia, my left index finger stirred—a timid insurgent spearheading the rebellion against numb oblivion. Its victory rallied the others into movement, slowly shaking off their icy numbness.

My attempt at a full-body stretch was met with stiff resistance. My protest reverberated across the room as my feet drummed a muted rhythm against the sturdy footboard.

Encased within four walls, my only escape was through the inviting window, its pane a silent usher of sunlight. The radiant luminescence sketched a serene portrait of distant mountains against the canvas of my newfound vision.

Muted murmurs from the world beyond weaved an incoherent tapestry of sound. The distinct creaking opening of my door broke the loud silence. The newcomer was a woman, her lively chatter fading into the room's sterile silence. A wide grin occupied her face—a permanent fixture that seemed to have found a home on her friendly features. Swaddled in the pristine white of a nurse uniform, her brown hair danced in a disciplined ponytail.

Oblivious to my watchful gaze, she moved around the room, her focus ensnared by the blinking lights and rhythmic hums coming from the medical machinery on my left. As she navigated the foot of my bed, our gazes locked. Her eyes, once calm pools of assurance, now mirrored the shock rippling through her.

“You’re awake,” she whispered.

My vocal cords rebelled against my attempt to speak, twisting my words into a garbled mess.

With the soothing rhythm of a lullaby, she instructed, “Don’t try to speak. Stay calm.”

She fled the room as swiftly as she had entered, leaving behind the half-closed door. While she vanished from sight, her voice carried into the room, a desperate plea for assistance. I found my solace in the mesmerizing sight beyond the window. But a storm of questions churned inside me, their violent gusts threatening to uproot my understanding of reality.

Is this reality? Or is it another dream?

The image of Dream and his realm—were they mere creations of my imagination?

Amid the spiraling cyclone of confusion, a single yearning pierced through—a fervent desire for clarity. I offered a silent prayer for a resolution to my tumult, a beacon of understanding to guide me through the fog of uncertainty. My silent plea was answered with the nurse's return, a graying doctor in tow. His white coat swished around his ankles, and his glasses glinted in the room's soft lighting. A small, metallic glint caught my eye—a name tag on his coat that read "Dr. Realdo." Rushing to my side, his eyes scanned the medical equipment, soaking in the information displayed.

His gaze landed on me. "Good morning. Can you hear me?"

I nodded, his words landing softly in the quiet of the room.

"Very good," he replied, the ghost of a smile gracing his lips. "You went through a bit of a tribulation. I'm going to need you to not make any sudden movements and stay as calm as possible. You're going to need to take some time to rest. As soon as that is done, all your questions will be answered."

3

I was a shell by the sea, void within. My heart pulsed wildly, thrumming a frenzied rhythm in my chest as if attempting to escape. An icy sensation enveloped me, turning my once steady limbs into shuddering reflections of their former selves. Grandad inhabited the space beside me, his form sinking into a chair next to my bed.

Am I afraid to look at him?

Age had etched itself onto his once familiar face in merciless detail. His hair was thinner, the remnants of a proud mane that had surrendered to time. Sleepless nights had gifted him with crescents beneath his eyes, pulling them downwards. A network of wrinkles now defined his forehead, but his glasses—they remained, perched as always halfway down his nose.

It's impossible. This can't be. I refuse. I...

His hand found mine, a feeble squeeze that hinted at lost strength, but the fire of his will was still palpable. His gaze was elsewhere, lost in the worn fabric of the floor. A tear made its journey down the ravines of his aged face, reaching the precipice and falling into oblivion without a sound.

Why me? Of all people, why me? Why did this have to happen?

He moved his arm, shuffling toward the drawer nestled in the bedside table. Inside, he found a round mirror, passing it into my custody. The cool metal met my palm, reflecting a stranger's face. Or was it? The man in the mirror bore striking similarities to my own visage, but he was not the same.

My face was a colored canvas of white, brown and black skin. My hair, now tangled and long, framed a face bearing sharper eyebrows and a straighter nose. Unruly patches of facial hair clung to my cheeks and chin, a puberty-inflicted surprise. My jawline was more defined now, my body skinnier. A reintroduction was necessary. And then I saw it—a patch of bare skin amidst the wilderness of my hair. A scar, a healed gash running along the side of my head. I touched it. No pain, just the disquieting texture of healed skin. A brutal, indelible reminder of something I dared not remember.

I exhaled, the mirror slipping from my grip to rest in my lap. My fists tightened, left around the handle of the mirror, right in the softness of the blanket.

A sudden urge to rend everything apart surged within me, but my hands betrayed me. Their weakness mirrored my impotence, turning frustration into a cascade of salty tears that blurred my vision.

I did not want to see myself anymore...

“Do you mind if we stop on our way and...” I asked, my words dissolving into the humming drone of the car engine, a certain longing hidden within my voice.

“If that’s what you wish, of course,” Grandpa answered, the unsaid sentiments of understanding resonating in his response.

With a push of the button, the window retreated, surrendering to the onslaught of wind that wrestled with my hair. It prodded my scar, a visceral reminder of my past. Outstretching my hand, I connected with the rough roof of the car, grounding myself as I observed the looming sight in the horizon.

“Are you ready?” he asked, his eyes affixed to his lap, his voice straddling the line between concern and reassurance.

The cold, metallic handle rejected my initial attempt. After a moment of heart-thumping pause, it yielded. My right leg met the ground first, bearing the weight of my emotion-laden body. The sight awaiting me was solemnly silent and patiently enduring. Grandpa mirrored my actions, his movements betraying his own fragility.

Together, we carved our path on the soft grass, each step laden with the gravity of the situation. Our bodies swayed, a testament to our shared vulnerability. Ahead lay my parents, their final resting place adorned with marble and pebbles, as eternal as our memories of them.

Each footfall seemed to amplify the mounting pressure within me, a vise tightening around my throat. The greying clouds of my thoughts threatened a storm, casting a pall over the moment. Sitting on the cold, uncompromising stone, my hand unconsciously played with the tiny pebbles. Their cool presence provided a scant comfort.

“This is where they came all those years ago,” I confessed to the wind.

“Resting, sleeping,” Grandad added, his voice a quiet hymn.

A wave of confusion washed over me, blurring the line between my dreams and reality.

“I dreamt so much of my life... I can’t tell what’s real anymore, and I don’t know what to feel... or not to feel.”

His hand on my shoulder, firm and gentle, brought me back from the edge of my contemplation.

“What does your heart tell you?”

Barely audibly, I began to unearth my buried feelings.

“We may have never gotten along the way I hoped, but that doesn’t change the fact of who they were to me. I was a whining brat. I’ve blamed them for far more than they’ve actually done in reality. Now I forgive them for all they haven’t.”

My thumb traced the cool marble, mimicking the tender touch my father once bestowed upon me in my childhood.

“Some things in life are necessary for growth. No matter what they are, we can only thank them and move on.”

The sunlight burned through my defenses as I spoke my hard-earned truth.

“I was the root of my own suffering, and I’ll be the spring of my own salvation.”

A solitary tear carved its path down my cheek, an unspoken testament of my journey. It found its final resting place on the grave, soaking into the marble. An overwhelming longing for peace seized me. The silence that blanketed us intensified my unsaid regrets and unfulfilled dreams. The sharp sting of “what could have been” and the throbbing ache of “what should have been” wrestled in the confines of my heart. I was losing my chance to experience such depth of emotion, akin to a departing train disappearing into the vast sea of clouds.

That day marked a poignant transition—while I woke up from my slumber of denial and ignorance, my parents had entered their eternal sleep.

5

“Go ahead.” Grandpa’s voice resonated, a poignant reflection of his age. My knuckles turned white as I held the doorknob, a cold, metallic contrast to the emotional heat engulfing me. Each knock against the wooden door seemed to throb in synchrony with my own heartbeat. My

chest tightened, every breath I took was a battle—the enormity of the moment was upon me.

“Every day, she would ask about you. ‘How is my sweet little boy? Is he getting better? Have they said anything new?’ You’re not so little anymore. You’re taller than me now.”

His words etched an aching image of her longing in my mind, further elevating the lump in my throat. Anticipation prickled at my skin as I heard the gentle shuffle of footsteps from within. The raspy rhythm of her slippers scrapping against the floor reached my ears, a lullaby I had missed.

The door groaned as it was pushed open, framing the silhouette of my grandmother. Silver strands of her hair, free from any tie, cascaded behind her shoulders, reflecting years of wisdom. Her eyes, a reservoir of raw emotion, teemed with tears at the mere sight of me.

“I told you I had a surprise for you. Look who came by today.” Grandpa’s voice trembled with mirth, yet laden with an undercurrent of sorrow.

A soft gasp escaped Grandma’s lips, and she brought a trembling hand to her lower lip as if to hold back a sob. She took me in, her eyes wide, drinking in the sight of me, as I returned a grin. The moment her arms, fragile yet laden with love, wrapped around me, I could feel the dam break. Tears streamed down her cheeks in an unstoppable flow. Her grip tightened, and I knew she wouldn’t let go anytime soon. Grandad’s eyes found mine over her shoulder, a flicker of relief passing between us.

“I’m glad we were able to be with you. Who knows how much time we...”

“Don’t,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. I knew the path his words were leading us down.

A path I refused to tread in that moment. She broke the hug, taking a step back, her eyes raking over me yet again. It was as if she was seeing me for the first time and the last, all at once.

“My boy...”

“How have you been?” I asked, my voice choked with concern.

A beat of silence. She looked down, her emotions momentarily hidden. When she lifted her gaze, a fragile smile graced her lips.

“Well,” she said, but her eyes told a different tale.

They were brimming with a quiet sorrow I knew she would never voice out loud. She turned to her husband.

“Did you tell him?” Her head tilted slightly to the left, a private signal. An understanding passed between them, one only time and love could decode.

“Tell me what?” The question slipped out before I could stop it.

“Let’s go for a walk if you think you’re able to,” Grandad suggested, his hand firm on my shoulder. He pushed his glasses up his nose with his other hand, a practiced motion.

I don’t know if I’m ready...

6

An echo of wolves’ howls resonated deep within me, their mournful ballad setting the melody of my own soul. The trees, like silent protectors, lined our path, their leafy arms reaching high into the heavens. The grass, a verdant carpet beneath my feet, was softer, greener than I had remembered. Birds conducted an orchestra in the air, their melodies reaching every corner of the forest. Above, perched in an outstretched arm of the tree canopy, a choir of feathered singers harmonized. Beneath them, Grandad and I journeyed.

“Do you remember your old treehouse?” he asked me.

“Of course,” I replied. “How could I forget?”

“That’s where I’m taking you. I want to show you something. I thought it would be a fitting place.”

“What will you show me?”

“It’s best you see for yourself.”

As we continued our silent pilgrimage, I found my mind ensnared in a web of anticipation and curiosity.

What's inside of it, I wonder.

Our footfalls marked the minutes as the question reverberated in my mind, intensifying with each beat of my heart. The answer, when it revealed itself, hit me like a lightning bolt. Beneath the purple tree stood a statue, a canine guardian of stone. Its presence was punctuated by the earthen mound freshly turned, marking a grave. I looked at Grandad, my question caught in my throat.

“He never left your side, not for a moment. They couldn’t get him out of your room. Not even I could do anything. He kept growling at me. So, they decided to make an exception and let him stay since he wasn’t causing any harm to anyone. It wasn’t professional in the least, but I’m good friends with the hospital director. Considering the circumstances, they made an exception.”

He took a pause before continuing.

“He passed not so long ago waiting for you to wake up. He wasn’t ill. The vets said he died from sadness. His tiny heart couldn’t take it anymore. For his loyalty, till the very end, I brought him here and got this carved statue of a husky. It was the closest I could find. I owed him that much for watching over you and keeping you safe.”

Kneeling next to the statue, sounds of lively panting and resonating barks from our playful chases seemed to fill the air. Now, all that remained was the cold stone beneath my hand.

“Thank you,” I said, a single tear tracing a path down my cheek.
“Thank you for bringing him here.”

“I grew close to the poor thing over the years when I visited. He seemed to be fond of me later on. At first, he was very suspicious of outsiders. Our relationship changed when I brought him to see you for the first time. He almost jumped on the bed beside you. Each morning he would wake up and put his head underneath your palm. That was as much affection he could receive from you. He repeated the same thing before he went to sleep at night,” Grandad added.

“I spent a lot more time with him in my dreams. More than I understood. Now I realize... That may not mean anything to him, but it means the world to me.”

The treehouse loomed above us, raised by time.

“I didn’t have anyone touch anything up there. Everything is as you left it.”

I stared up at the familiar structure. The tree had grown, but the house had failed to follow. It was like an infant that grew out of his clothes.

“Now isn’t the time. When everything settles, I’ll go back up there. I’ll come back and do the climb. First, I have to learn how to stand on my own two feet without any help.”

7

The Nightmare was gone, removed from my bedroom. Its eviction to the basement was a conscious act of distancing the fears and memories that it brought to light—leftovers from the past, or what seemed to be the past. This process formed a complex knot in my mind, one that tangled reality with my dreams, sometimes making the latter feel more real.

Life’s next chapter would now revolve around untangling this Gordian knot, I realized. *Which sleep was my last? Which closing of the eyes?*

Each day, I found myself meandering among the trees, like an old friend finding solace in their familiar whispers. A change was in the air, I felt it. Something was calling me, an invisible beacon guiding me towards the unknown within the purple tree.

As I climbed the ladder, its sturdy wooden boards provided an unwavering support—just as strong as my grip. This time, I reassured myself, I wouldn’t tumble. With my head held high, I scaled higher, my burdens cloaked in my green attire blending in with nature. Though my knees once trembled, they were now my allies in this climb, thrusting me upwards despite dwindling energy. My mind remained clear, free from dizzying thoughts.

The treehouse’s entrance groaned as I nudged it open. A gust of dust rose from the floor, dancing around me as the door swung open. I

coughed and waved it off, and once inside, let my legs hang freely, sitting at the entrance. Everything was in its place, familiar and untouched.

My gaze was drawn to an old chessboard, still open and housing scattered pieces of both red and white armies. Grandad's books—The Joyous Science, The Red Book and The Antichrist—along with old clover and phoenix drawings were all still there, dusted by time. And in the corner, the sight of a seven-headed toy dragon sparked a rush of memories. One of the walls was fully covered by masks, each carrying a different emotion. The one on the left was that of a plague doctor. Next to the mirror lay a realistic wolf costume I used in a winter school play, and next to it sat a small crystal globe with a green city trapped inside of it.

Sweeping my hand across the floor, I marked a clear path through the years of dust.

Cleaning and redecorating were in order, but that could wait. My attention shifted to a bobblehead of a white tiger by the window. A gentle tap set its head swaying, bringing a smile to my face. On the balcony, a surprise awaited—an old Walkman was resting on the hammock.

Strange. What's this doing here? Someone wanted me to find this, Grandpa. He must have got one of the neighborhood kids to place it here.

The device, a relic even from my childhood days, was in a surprisingly good condition, with a tape labeled “Alan Watts”—a name Grandad held in high regard.

I wonder...

The headphones felt fragile as I placed them over my ears, holding the Walkman in one hand. The anticipation hung heavy in the air as I pressed play.

“Let’s suppose that you were able every night to dream any dream that you wanted to dream. And that you could, for example, have the power within one night to dream 75 years of time. Or any length of time you wanted to have. And you would, naturally as you began on this adventure of dreams, you would fulfill all your wishes. You would have every kind of pleasure you could conceive. And after several nights of 75 years of

total pleasure each, you would say, "Well, that was pretty great." But now let's have a surprise. Let's have a dream which isn't under control. Where something is gonna happen to me that I don't know what it's going to be. And you would dig that and come out of that and say, "Wow, that was a close shave, wasn't it?" And then you would get more and more adventurous, and you would make further and further out gambles as to what you would dream. And finally, you would dream... where you are now. You would dream the dream of living the life that you are actually living today."

EPILOGUE

“There you are,” said Grandad. “I’ve been waiting for you to find me.”

He was sitting on an old wooden bench facing the open water. The sun was saying its farewell for the day. It was seven times as large as I had ever seen, and yet it still hid behind the dark moon. A large ring of fire was circling the horizon. The water was soon to take a big bite out of it, and swallow it whole, piece by piece. The light came jumping off the waves, leaving a sparkle. The sky was not blue, nor was it dark. It was orange and clear.

“Come, take a seat,” he told me.

He was wearing a green suit and a white shirt underneath. He gave off a sweet, perfumed smell. It was pleasant for the nose. I did as he said. I leaned my back against the smooth wood and relaxed, observing the distance.

“What a beautiful sight to a beautiful day,” he added. “Look at that, can you believe it?”

His expression was that of a child’s, excited by everything he saw with a touch of wisdom hidden behind it. I felt a certain calmness. The birds flew in flocks across the sky. They were free. The air underneath their wings propelled them and kept them from falling. The grass beneath my feet was greener than any. A small white ladybug was crawling up my finger. I lifted my hand to my eyes, and it flew off. *Where to?* I wondered.

“You didn’t bring anything to read.”

“Not today. Today I’ve come to clear my head, nothing more.”

“Meditating,” I said. “I go to the forest almost every day to just sit down and think. Think about the nature of the world around me and my place in it. I cannot hope to ever understand it, but still, I go there and contemplate.”

“That’s good. Everyone needs time spent with themselves. It’s in those quiet moments you hear your own thoughts and realize who you truly are.”

“I just want peace. I think I’ve found it. I think that my war is over.”

He lets out an almost silent laugh. He turned his gaze towards me. He looked me straight in the eye.

“The war is never over. You still have a lot to experience. Take on one battle at a time. Life will offer you many more hardships that you’ll need to overcome. True peace doesn’t exist forever, nothing does. The best thing you can do is appreciate it while it lasts. Take that from an old man who’s lived.”

His reply stung me for a moment.

Perhaps you’re right. I pondered his words. . . I’ll battle life to achieve peace. Even if it turns into a losing battle in the end, I’ll keep fighting to live another day. I’ll keep fighting for that glimmer of hope that one day things might turn around and flip the world on its head.

“I’ve listened to the old recording you left me about dreams, up in the treehouse. You did quite the climb.”

“You finally did,” he said as he let out a laugh. “Everything you told me reminded me of those words for some reason. Funny thing reality is. We give ourselves the authority to decide what’s real and what’s not. Which reminds me, I got a present for your birthday. I’m a bit late, but...”

“You didn’t have to get me anything. Your company is enough. You’ve given everything already.”

“Of course I had to get you something. A few things, actually. Firstly, take this.”

There was a bag next to his feet. He picked it up and opened it. He reached in and took out a notebook.

“I didn’t bring something to read, but I did bring something for you to write in now that you no longer have issues with reading.”

It was a dream journal. He placed it in my hands with his hand slightly trembling.

“I also recall your grandmother giving you that old necklace for your seventh birthday. Shame it was lost, but I got you a replacement. A new present. Keep it safe... You only become an adult once in your life. I wouldn’t miss it no matter where I was. Neither would she...”

His eyes sunk for a brief moment before placing his hand one more time in the bag. He took out a strange artifact. It was a hoop strung with a loose net that formed a heptagon and decorated with beads and feathers. It was a dream catcher. It had the date of my eighteenth birthday inked on it...**7.7.2023**.

“What’s this for?” I asked.

“I’m not much of a superstitious man, but I hear it protects one from nightmares. Think of it in the same light as the dream journal. They both capture dreams, except with my gift I wanted you to put in a little more effort. Struggle is good, but you know your grandmother. If you lived for a hundred years you would still remain a child in her eyes. I need you to be man.”

A pleasant and warm smile covered his face as he placed it in my hand.

“Thank you. This means everything to me.”

I leaned closer to him and wrapped my right arm around him while still holding the dream catcher in my left. It had a long string attached to it. I spread out and made an opening for my head to enter. It laid to rest on my chest where it belonged. It felt natural, unlike anything I ever wore.

“It’s different. Bet no one else is wearing one of these around,” I said.

“I seriously doubt they are. They probably should. Everyone needs to be reminded of their dreams from time to time. Whenever you look in the mirror, you will see yourself and it around you. Then all you have to do is visualize where you want to be.”

We both leaned back and took a moment.

He broke the lasting silence. “It’s time you go and live life.”

I turned to him, showcasing a puzzled expression.

“Like you said. You spend every day in your head alone in the forest. You’ve had enough rest. Your metamorphosis is complete. Go, go, and

live life. Don't waste your time sitting around here with an old man. I'll always be here. Life's opportunities won't."

I paused, gazing downwards as I pondered my next move. I gave a nod of assent before rising to my full height. Turning away from him, I strode purposefully across the verdant expanse before me wearing my custom made black summer suit and white Panama hat.

Abruptly, an idea materialized in my thoughts, causing me to snatch up the dream catcher and clasp it tightly to my chest. Gradually, I pivoted on my heel, casting my eyes to the ground as a sly grin crossed my features.

I understand now. I remember. We're all someone's projection. I'm only real to myself. Thank you for dreaming of me, because dreams have meaning and you gave me mine. I understand what you need me to do. I will become a symbol for the youth throughout eternity. Thank you, Din.

A sudden rush of warmth went across me. I looked at the sunset, the trees, the grass, and the old bench. My path was in a different direction. I continued walking down it. The sun had withdrawn its light for the upcoming night. Times came, and life changed. Some I would remember and others I would come to forget. The inscrutable enigma of reality is one that always looms before me. What is real? What is not? Perhaps, in the end, all that a dreamer can dream is but a dream within a dream.....

About the Author

I'm a young dreamer and writer, born in Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina on June 18th, 2001, a couple of years after the Bosnian war. My early days were spent in a humble orphanage until I was adopted by a Bosnian/Aussie couple from Australia. After that, a legal battle ensued before I officially became an Aussie citizen, but we made a miracle happen. Eventually, after a multiple year long process, I settled in Sydney with my new family.

Growing up wasn't all smooth sailing either. I went to school in New South Wales before heading back to Mostar for more schooling. Along the way, I faced some tough losses, including my adoptive mom's battle with cancer in 2010.

I've always been drawn to storytelling, finding comfort in the escapist nature of movies, manga, and anime, especially when life got tough. Originally, I wanted to be a filmmaker, but life had other plans. Inspired by Tupac's "Ghetto Gospel" and the struggles I saw around me, I turned to songwriting and poetry.

It was a high school English class when we were dissecting T.S Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" that really sparked my creativity and made it into something more than just a hobby. That was the period when I wrote my first book which isn't this one. It's still locked away somewhere in my mansion. This was also the period I lost my grandfather. His death left a deep impact on me, so much so that it led to the creation of this very novel. I started writing it on the 6th of June 2019.

Life threw me some curveballs—false accusations, personal betrayals, heartbreak and the loss of loved ones such as my friend, uncle, and grandmother. Each challenge pushed me to pour my emotions into writing. As of 2024, I've written six books, though they're still waiting to see the light of day. If you're reading this, that means *The Dreamer* has been published and I'm one step closer to achieving my dreams.

My experiences have shaped my writing, allowing me to create stories that reflect the messy, beautiful reality of being human. I believe in using my writing to make a difference, and I consider this my opportunity to make life fair.

I'm a very contemplative person. I'd also describe myself as infinitely curious. I want to know everything about everything.

My goal is to change the world by changing myself, and in my mind, this is the very first step. So, who am I?

I am the savior of my own universe.