

To whom it may concern,

We had not thought those before us had managed to make it onto this strange world. It was a hypothesis that we were not the only ones to have ended up living after our deaths. And yet, it is a shame that the only ones this realm saw fit to bring back were you, Training.

Just recently we received your scout, along with your invitation letter. We have read and considered it to the length we allotted, and I am afraid we must decline your offer.

Information, as a team, prides itself on its data, including previous information on workplace-wide catastrophic events-- you should know this. Because of this, we are well aware of who you are; the history of that place was written in blood, after all. If you think that we would be ignorant enough to accept your command, you are sorely mistaken. Your gung-ho approach to this job, your misplaced loyalty to the corporation, your inexperience, your recklessness-- these are the reasons you are here. It was your leader's incompetence, along with Control's equally empty-headed captain, that caused the [REDACTED] incident to occur in the first place... We have long learned everything we needed to know about you, and that is that we will never be you.

The Corporation is dead, along with its technology-- and may it stay dead, for the damage it caused far outweighed whatever good it could have mustered. You are fools to have dedicated yourselves to reanimating a corpse, especially after the changes that are apparent in all of you; you are the monsters now, set on this place to terrorize the living, and we are savvy enough to predict we may not be immune to this treatment. While we do not have any intent to interfere with the lives of those unfortunate enough to live in this world, I cannot help but wonder... what will you do? Will you attempt to cage us? I would detest putting down a fellow employee for following orders, but perhaps it will teach you how far we have come from your humble work conditions.

If you are wise, you will let us be, and we will stay clear of your 'mission'. But if we see another one of you again-- and I believe we will-- then you should know I have authorized the team to use lethal force against you. Think twice before you choose to break this agreement.

Do not attempt to contact us again.

*Information*

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What is that? What is she looking at?

She's yelling. No, *screaming*. Worst of all, she cannot stop.

The air in her lungs finally gives in, and the world goes black.

When she wakes up, the world is not any brighter for it.

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Oh god. Oh god oh jeez oh no oh no oh no *oh no*.

Where is she? Where's the light? She can't see. She can't see anything. She rubs on her eyes over and over, like a lawn mower engine she could just kickstart into working, each rub more frantic and forceful than the last. She needs to see, she needs to know where she is, she needs to get out of here. *If only she could see*.

It is as she sits on this thought, consumed by her fear, that her teeth sink into her bottom lip, rending into her flesh and drawing blood. And, as her tongue relishes in the metallic aftertaste, licking it away as it rises from the skin, the darkness around her recedes somewhat. She blinks once, then twice-- the shadows give away their shapes, her sight adapting to match.

It's the mall. The far away echoes of muzak meant it could never have been anything else. Above her are the grandiose once-glass ceilings, long replaced with the dull cardboard and wood so that no one would ever know what time of day again.

This... checks out. This shouldn't be strange to her. This is where she tends to be, and yet ... she doesn't recognize this place.

She has spent so much time here. So much time cataloging every room of what can only be described as a hellish maze, so full of anything a mall could muster; she'd taken note of stores and regulars and employees and staff and their hours and the days they come in, and materials in the floor and the advertisements and all the dining options, just in case her and Neville got tired of subsisting only on ramen, pizza, and Witherby's obviously lifted cheese and ham. And yet, even after all that scrupulous research, she is not done.

*She's not done*. Through her spine runs a spark of both dread and excitement.

Someone is standing over her. Some stranger is standing over her. She feels their gaze, firm and unyielding, judging her with reserved intent even before she dares to look their way. The courage builds up in her heart in small doses, each breath pumping adrenaline into her. All she has to do is find out what it is. This is easy. Just count. One. Two. Three.

She looks.

...where are the eyes? She swears she felt them on her.

Wait, no. There they are. They're on the garments of the person in front of her, each one narrowed more on her own equipment than on her. Her eyes follow the buttons of their shirt, to their tie, and finally, to their face. What she sees in that glimpse of whoever is watching her, is...

Nothing?

No, not quite. What she sees is the absence of nothing: it is something that she knows, and yet she doesn't; a shape so intimately familiar that she swears she has seen it before, and yet she has never seen it at all. There are no eyes, and yet they judge her incessantly. Something urges her to look away, to unknow this unknowing, to save herself before it's too late--

But she can't. She cannot make sense of it, no matter how many times she rearranges the image in her head, as if reality itself has hidden its visage from even her own thoughts.

A grumble escapes her. Things she can't see are never good news.

The stranger shifts on their spot as she 'wakes', interest returning to their gaze. All she can do is tremble helplessly as they look at her and don't, judge her and don't, acknowledge her presence and see straight through her.

"I meant to keep good on our threats, you know." They *tsk* audibly, a finger tapping at the side of their head. "I was planning to kill you."

Oh *no*. Oh *nooooo*. This is bad. A yelp escapes her, the hairs on her arms preemptively standing up, as if they will somehow make her look bigger from her prone position.

Her hunter remains unfazed at this display. Instead, they bury their face in their hands, dragging them down across their features until they rest over their chin. "But we have seen you around before. You are the one who keeps cataloging the food options. I *cannot* have your death on my conscience."

...oh.

So she isn't in... *immediate* danger. A part of her cannot help but wonder if this is a ruse to get her to calm down, but... that armor remains ever so familiar to her. If this person wanted to hurt her, well, they've had ample time to do so.

Her breathing settles into a steady rhythm, her awareness coming back with it. Everything is a bit clearer, now that she isn't panicking: the faintest smell of butter and sugar lingers in the air, accented only by the dust this strange room has accumulated over the years. She's laid down on a bench, its metal cold from lack of use; there's a pillow, stiff and reeking of mold, keeping her head up just high enough for comfort. The stranger is sitting next to her, 'watching' her gaze as it jumps around the room. They keep a walker to one side, presumably their own, and a long-rotten table with various mugs and snacks--most likely salvaged, as anything else here-- on the other. And, of course, there's the ferris wheel behind them.

Wait. What?

No, she got that right. As she shifts her focus to what lays behind them, she has to wonder how she didn't see it before: a large ferris wheel, easily three stories tall, stands proudly over the hall they are in, its steel axle rusted and worn after years locked away from the public. It is hard to tell the last time such an imposing fixture ever saw a child, but in the darkness that looms over this place, its arms would sooner steal them from their bed than entertain the thought of bringing them joy. A single question is clear in her mind.

How the hell did she never find this?

She goes to ask, but her body resists, paralyzed by a force creeping in the back of her mind. What comes out of her is not a question but a meaningless wail as she throws her arms forward in self-defense; a surprisingly primal reaction to asking a mere question.

The stranger just watches her fight against nothing, letting out a short sigh. "My apologies for that. I cannot help but cause that reaction, it seems, but Yongki and Khana... they have become adept at pushing back the mental corruption. Curious, what being beaten to near-death will do to the psyche." They lean forward as they grab a mug and offer it towards her, their hand shaking somewhat from the strain. "Please. Make yourself comfortable."

She grabs the cup with both her hands, wincing somewhat at the heat. The liquid threatens to jump out with how much it jitters under her grasp. This drink could have anything in it. Water? Juice? Poison? She can't see it very well, and even if she could, there's no way she could tell just by sight. The stranger eyes the cup. The cup is red and warm. Her hands are shaking. Something. She has to do something.

She takes a sip.

It's... it's good, actually. It's tea. At least it tastes like it. She drinks some more. Its aroma hits her nose as she does so, the fragrance sitting in her lungs like it's always lived there. The flavor is strong, with a subtle sweetness to it that is not overpowering, enhanced only by the sheer physical experience of it all; the warmth of the cup, her lips on the ceramic, the smell and flavor combining into an experience she can't quite describe. It takes all her willpower to not gulp the hot drink in one go, sitting up just to pace herself correctly.

"I see you had the same reaction we did," they muse, reaching in for their own cup. "It's really good tea. Khana found a box of it nearby, you know. We've had to ration it so we won't run out of it as fast."

A content smile blooms in her as she nods along, her shoulders relaxing as she takes the drink in controlled sips. It's a feeling she hasn't felt in a while; this peace of mind, achievable only by food or discipline. A memory emerges from the recesses of her mind about what she has to do now, and it seems right. It's procedure, really. How else will they know who she is?

"Devona, Training, Number 04," she drones off, in the calmest tone she has ever mustered. She does not linger on her words, as they've been practiced many times before. "I was here to deliver a notice when I suffered a decline in my sanity by unknown means. I present physical injuries, but my mental state feels ... normal."

The person next to her frowns. Or maybe they don't. It's hard to tell. "04, I am well aware you are from Training. You wandered into our department without authorization, even after our warnings. It's as if you don't have even the slightest respect for..." they mumble the rest of their words, gripping their mug with newfound frustration. She'd worry they'd throw it in her face if it wasn't such a delightful drink. "What am I doing, arguing with one of you? Just hand it over."

Putting her cup to the side, Devona reaches into her pant pocket, producing a neat envelope. Once it's in their hand, they examine it, flipping each side as if looking for something.

"You are testing your luck, 04."

"I... just... just read it, please. We wrote it as a team."

There's that gaze again for just a moment as they size her up; they put their own cup away as they cleanly open the letter. She sits there, finishing the last of her drink as they read, but she doesn't even get to finish her sip. They spare it a single glance, then turn back to her.

"An exchange."

"... yeah?"

"I don't think you understand." They lean forward, their voice marked with incredulity more than anything else. "We warned that we would *kill* you, and you came back here because you want to do an exchange with us. The people who want you dead."

Devona pulls at her tie. "I... I guess it sounds kind of stupid when you say it out loud."

"Fascinating. Simply *fascinating*, isn't it? Future departments will be studying your groundbreaking decision-making for centuries to come. But... sure. Why not?" They lay the letter on the counter, then turn back to the wheel. "Yongki!"

Her moment of calm errs somewhat as she sees a head peek out from one of the cars-- one she can only assume had always been there. In seconds from being called, he leaps out of his hiding spot, grasping onto the iron bars as he makes his way down with unparalleled finesse. This Yongki slides two stories down through the wheel, landing near its ticket booth, then runs to where they both stand. He does not appear to be breaking a sweat, nor does his expression betray any emotion other than sheer concentration.

It dawns upon her that she might have actually died here, had she done anything rash.

"Viktor?"

"Yongki," they say, their tone stiffening into something more authoritative, "read this letter out loud for us, please. It's something you would like to read yourself."

"A letter..." he grabs at it, hands stiff in every motion-- a stark contrast to the flow he possessed as he climbed down the wheel. He stretches it out with both his hands and begins to speak in a slow, monotone drone:

“Dear... information. We would like to apologize if our statements... have caused you any discomfort. We did not mean... to insult you... or your team.”

He stops reading. “Information. That’s... us.”

Devona thinks they’re trying to hide it, but it’s no use. A tight-lipped smile creeps onto Viktor’s features as they listen on. “Yes, it’s us. Continue, please.”

Yongki nods once, then continues. “I am... afraid that we are not as kn... kn... knowledgeable about you, as you... as you are... about us. We only... knew... our comrades, and we think they are long gone. We have not seen... other teams... aside from you. We believe this to be... be an opp... opportunity... that we could both benefit from. We would like... to exchange... one of our... agents... with one of yours... for a week. We think that... getting to experience... different... meth.. metho... m...” his brow furrows.

“Methodologies,” Devona chimes, unable to stop herself. She shrinks on her seat somewhat as she feels Viktor’s non-stare pierce three inches into her.

Yongki turns to stare at her directly. His stare is blank as he does so, as if not a thought or will rests inside him; the lights are on, but no one’s home. “Metho... dologies...” he repeats, nodding once again. “Different methodologies... would be... beneficial... to both of us. Please... let us know... if you would be interested.”

He trails off, staring blankly at the paper, then at her once again.

“Thank you, Yongki.” Viktor answers, offering their cup to him. “Explain to me what you just read, if you can.”

Yongki trades the letter for the cup with the same mechanical motion. “The training team... they want to trade agents with the information team.”

“That makes sense. Go on.”

“They have different... knowledge. And... method... dologies.”

The words escape her once again, too eager to help. “Different ways of doing things.”

“Yeah. Yes... thank you.” There’s a shine to his eyes as he says that, as if enraptured by the words themselves. “Different ideas.”

"That's pretty close," she mumbles.

"If you're done *interrupting* him," Viktor says, staring still into Devona with what she only now has learned is anger, "I believe we will consider your proposal. We shall see, after analyzing the risks and what little possible advantages you can give, if this 'partnership' would actually be *fruitful*. And when we are done thinking, we will inform you. If you send someone down here again, you will not be offered the same mercy twice. Remember that, 04." They signal to a doorway far past the wheel, where only the softest rays of artificial light have begun to trickle in. "Yongki, lead her back to the surface level of the mall, please."

Okay. That's... that's better than nothing, right? She gives a curt nod, holding back the panic from settling back in her chest as she stands up. Step by step, Devona starts walking away, secure at least in the knowledge that she still lives. She wonders why they didn't send Neville instead-- he would take this a lot better than she is right now.

Actually... she trashes that thought. He would've gotten lost coming in AND out of this place. Perhaps its for the best this is how it all played out.

It is during her internal monologue that she glances back, and Yongki has yet to move. He's standing still as a board, staring off into the blackness around them, mug in his hand. What... what *is* he doing? Did the drink break him? Is this a strike? Is there a ghost?

Viktor catches this as well as they turn to look, first in the direction they're staring off at, then at Yongki themselves. "...Yongki? What is the issue?"

Five seconds pass. Then ten. The gears in his brain march ever so slowly, until Yongki stares back at Viktor with unparalleled focus. "Captain," he says, with a degree of certainty she's only ever heard from Neville, "I would like to go."

She can *feel* Viktor raising a brow, but the rest of their body doesn't react. They don't move an inch. They're as calm and as composed as they can be at that statement. "...right now? Why are you volunteering?"

Yongki glances over at Devona, then back to them. "Different ideas. I want to know... more."

"About the Training team?"

"Yes. I will learn more about them. And their... ideas."



Viktor leans back, head staring directly at the ceiling. Their sigh is chest-deep, shaking their entire body, as if a ghost just flew out of their lungs. “I don’t suppose I can stop you, can I?”

Yongki thinks about it, then shakes his head.

“Well, at least you’re honest.” They shoo both of them away with a motion of their hand. “Go on, then. Let them know we have agreed to their contract. And you...” he says, pointing at Devona, “04, come back here for a second.”

God damn it. So close yet so far. Devona inches closer once again, keeping a reasonable distance between her and Viktor’s strange aura of obfuscation. “Y-yeah?”

Viktor grabs onto her tie, their grasp unfirm but decisive. “No mirrors near him, he doesn’t react well to them. No talking about his past, he doesn’t know how to answer that. He sleepwalks, so if you find him at night, you gently lead him back to his bed. Be clear with him. And no funny business. If you put a finger on him, he will kill you, and then we will go there and burn your body. You have twenty-four hours to decide who you are exchanging with us. Is that clear?”

Devona nods furiously, grabbing back her tie. “Y-yep! Clear like water! I’m gonna go tell them all that now!” She runs back to where Yongki stands, grabbing at his hand for dear life as she waves back. “T-t-thank you for not killing me and burning my body! I wouldn’t have liked that!”

Yongki takes it as enough of a permission to start walking. As they reach the door, he imitates the wave at his own pace, mug still awkwardly in hand as he does so, turning back to Viktor as well. “Bye, Captain. Bye, Khana.”

“Bye, Yong.”

“Wait, wh--!!”

Devona’s words are cut off as Yongki closes the door.

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“Shame.” Khana doesn’t look back at the door as he strides over to where Devona was sitting, taking her place as he rests his feet over the armbars. The eye in his armor begins its daily staring contest with Viktor’s as he winds down. “I wanted to wreck their equipment.”

“I thought about it,” Viktor mumbles. “But we don’t know what they have yet. And…” they put their palm over their forehead, or at least where their forehead would be, “you know I can’t stop him.”

“It’s going to be a reeeal quiet week.”

“Unless they send their rabble-rousers.”

“Nothing ol’ trusty can’t solve.” Khana drags the wrench in his hand across the floor, letting it whine metallically as he does so.

“You’re not hitting a guest with a wrench, no matter how insufferable.”

He sticks his tongue out. “Boo. You’re no fun, Vic. Speaking of, hope you didn’t mean the whole ‘burning their bodies’ thing, either.” Khana eyes the walker with not a trace of dissimulation. “Both of us can carry you up the stairs. Just me, though… kinda stretching it there, Cap.”

“It’s not my fault these stairs were made by someone with hatred for sensible design,” they chide. “I will *float* up there if I have to, Khana. Just you wait.”

“If it makes you feel better,” he laughs. “Yeah, you will.”