

JAMES NO. 764

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ABSTRACT

MELISSA LIN QUITADAMO. James No. 764. (Under the direction of BRYN CHANCELLOR, M.F.A.)

Container No. 764 has malfunctioned and its occupant is awake. This was never supposed to happen. It's to be expected such things would happen under a human's supervision, but what excuse do the humanoids have? What of the Master Computer who was programmed never to fail? They underestimated the occupant of container No. 764. Perhaps they made the wrong calculations. Perhaps there was a glitch in their program or a bug in the system. By all accounts it was now clear, they made a mistake when they took No. 764 in. They should have killed him as a baby, when they found him outside the city wall. No, protocol was clear, they had no choice. Thirteen years ago they brought him in and placed him into the care of Virtual Reality like many others before him. But what would they do now that he's escaped? His powers have grown stronger. How did they not detect this before? It was clear, the boy in container No. 764 was no ordinary human and he would destroy *their* world.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

I first developed my novel “as if a dream had broken from some feverish brain” (Hawthorne 109). When I began the process last summer, I had no idea what I would write about. So I turned to the professionals. I pulled out the books from my personal collection that caught my eye. The titles were as similar as *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis. They were also as diverse as *Things to Make and Do in the Fourth Dimension* by Matt Parker and *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner. Other titles included *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, *The Arabian Nights*, and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* by J.K. Rowling. I hoped to draw inspiration from them, but what did they have in common? Why had I chosen those specific texts? What attracted me to them? It took me most of my summer to detangle the clutter of ideas I accumulated from these books.

It's the writing of C. S. Lewis, J. K. Rowling, and Lewis Carroll that take me deepest into the fictional dream. I wanted to do what these writers did, to transport the reader out of our world and into another. Hogwarts, Wonderland, and Narnia were the places I spent my childhood thinking about. Imagining I could go. As an adult, I still admire the endless possibilities of these other worlds. When I planned out my novel, I knew my story must incorporate another world as these books do. But what would my other world look like?

The crafted descriptions of *The Hunger Games* also left me in awe. The vision of Collins' work is so vivid that I never once questioned if such a place as Panem could exist. Her novels immerse the reader in the fictional dream and never let them leave. Long after finishing the series, I still thought about Panem and its possibilities. I also

admired the social and political implications of her dystopian story and wanted to do the same.

At this point in the writing process, I struggled with the genre of my work. I wanted to model my work after YA fantasy novels, but now I considered a Science Fiction/ Dystopian story. Could I combine Fantasy and Science Fiction? What would it look like to have centaurs living in the same place as drones? How could I incorporate robots in the same world as fairies?

These questions nagged at me. Yet it tapped into a greater truth in myself than I recognized before. These questions held me back from experimenting, exploring, and developing my craft as a writer. It's possible such a fictional dream couldn't exist without being strange, confusing, or even lame. But I acknowledged these obstacles and moved forward despite that. These doubts also reminded me of a deeper problem with how my society had influenced my thinking. Had I rejected the coexistence of fantasy and futuristic technology because the 21st century world said it couldn't? There isn't anything wrong with 21st century technology in itself, but it has in some regards become a destroyer of the imagination. We no longer imagine an angry god caused lightning. We no longer believe the spirits of the dead make up the Aurora Borealis. We now know the ancient sailors saw manatees and not mermaids. All these mysteries and more have been sought out and solved, and our technology has helped us.

We are also in information overload. We desire to have all mysteries dispelled for us. Yet another part of us can't help but grieve the loss of mystery and along with it our imaginations. With this in mind I decided my thesis would attempt to answer one

question: How can these two opposing experiences, the fantasy and the futuristic, coexist again?

Although I admire Hogwarts, Wonderland, and Narnia, I knew I couldn't create a story that separated the real world and the fantasy world. If I wanted to keep my vision, I knew I'd have to marry the two worlds. To do so, I had to find a way to transport my protagonist from this world into another where such a marriage of fantasy and the futuristic is possible. It was during my reading of *The Arabian Nights* that I found my answer. This story is about a Sasanian Queen who tells the King a series of stories to gain his favor and keep him from executing her. Each night she tells him a new story, but does not finish it, creating a "cliff hanger" effect. This continues for 1,001 nights until the King decides to pardon the Queen. What impressed me about this ancient text is its narrative frame. The Queen acts as the main storyteller and with each story she tells, other characters also tell stories. In other words, there are stories within stories. The reader is thereby transported to other lands where fantasy coexists with reality. Using this as my model, I too created a narrative frame with worlds within worlds. Unlike *The Arabian Nights*, it is not only storytelling that transports the reader, but technology and magic as well.

While I had a general idea of where I would take my story, one further concern with this concept remained. The other fantasy worlds worked because they occupied spaces beyond the real world. As such, they were not confined to the laws of it. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice falls down a hole but does not get hurt when she reaches the bottom. Such a thing is possible in Wonderland but not in our world.

Likewise, Narnia endured 100 years of winter without its inhabitants dying of starvation. But how would I explain how magic can coexist with that of our reality?

I put these concerns to rest when I read *Things to Make and Do in the Fourth Dimension*. Parker explains that 4th dimensional beings would be able to do things that are impossible to those of the 3rd dimension. For example, 4th dimensional beings can see through or walk through solid walls. Such ideas are possible from a mathematical viewpoint. If higher dimensional beings did exist, they could move about in our world either visible or invisible at will. These theories bolster the possibility that the magical is to some extent scientifically possible.

Adding this last detail may seem contradictory to my original objective. Should the magic have to be scientifically possible or explainable? If it were, would it be magic? Wasn't the intention to bring back some mystery and fantasy in the world of technology and science? While these objections are true, I still had to face the skepticism of my readers. I made my characters reason and object as we would. I had them respond to the magic with theories about higher dimensional beings. While this is the most logical explanation, my characters would learn about a realm of magic that's beyond the scope of their understanding. In other words, by acknowledging the initial hurdles of how magic can coexist in a world of science and technology, I can better acclimate and transition them into believing such a reality of magic is also possible.

As to the question of characters, I had a vague idea of the types of characters I wanted to craft. I've tended to write female protagonists by default. I've always wanted to portray strong female characters who are leaders and know their own minds. This desire to write a female protagonist was further desired when taking a course on

Children's British Literature. My professor, Dr. Connolly, when lecturing about *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, said there was a tendency during the 19th century to write about boys going on adventures and girls staying at home. While Carroll does have Alice go on an adventure, he reverts back to the tradition by having it all be "just a dream." In this regard I saw the necessity to go against this old tradition in the same way Katniss does in *The Hunger Games*.

On the other hand, I also saw the benefits of writing a male protagonist. I wanted to challenge myself with my thesis. One of those challenges was writing from the perspective of an adolescent boy, something I've never attempted before. Much in the same way J.K. Rowling achieves the character Harry Potter, I wanted to create a boy who is relatable and non-stereotypical.

I wanted my protagonist James No. 764 to evoke sympathy from the readers. So I portray him as being vulnerable and, through no fault of his own, a threat to this new world he found himself in. James, a magic being who can bend electricity, threatens this futuristic world which is dependent on electric power. The power James possesses is unexplainable to the scientists in the city. The unexplainable is a threat to this futuristic society because it's uncontrollable.

When I wrote James, I also saw the need to incorporate friends who would also act as protagonists. I created the strong female character in the form of Alice, who is so named not from Alice in Wonderland, but my love of the name itself. As a character, Alice is a maverick whose actions show her lack of tolerance for the rules her society has imposed on her. While many of the things she says and does are unconventional, I show the reader her history of being misused and show she's misunderstood. Initially, I want

my reader to find her character inappropriate but, in later learning about her dark past, cheer for her in her rebellion.

To further experiment with point of view, I wanted to write a perspective of someone with Asperger's. I have a friend who is on the spectrum and have long been fascinated by the way he thinks. In a word, he's brilliant. Yet, so often writers don't consider or even shy away from such points. This is why I created the character Danny. As I wrote him into the story, I found he added so much to the character dynamics. He's not concerned with social expectations, he's very logical and literal, and he's loyal. He is, in his own right, also a maverick; however, unlike with Alice, he is unaware of the fact. In short, the three main protagonists are all rebels.

When it came to writing the voice of James, I heard the following lines in my mind: "All right, I'll give you what you want. You've been pestering me for months now. But, I'm thinking the only reason you want this is because you have some romanticized ideas about the past." They were strong, characterized, and direct words. So I went with this voice and realized my character James sounded much older and bitter than I anticipated he would. This led to me questioning the cause of his bitterness. What had this man been through to create this attitude? Why was the narrative frame here in the first place? Who was James talking to? I wanted James to tell me his story and for a long time I let him. For a long time I was the "you" he was speaking to and I was interviewing him, asking my questions and wanting his answers.

However, I was conscious of the fictional dream and knew that inserting myself as a character might hinder that dream. I had to create authorial distance and knew I would have to explain this "you" and the narrative frame I had set up. For a long time, I

wrote without addressing these concerns. Only recently have I considered some potential options. My writing mentor, Dr. Chancellor, made it apparent to me that whoever the “you” actually is, it must be consequential enough to justify such a narrative frame. I also knew I wanted the narrative frame to enhance the fictional dream and not detract from it. I wanted to write mine in the same way it's written in *The Arabian Nights*.

So, just as I had questioned my characters, I began to question the questioner him or herself. Who are you? I asked. Why are you so concerned about these people’s lives? If others have tried and failed to tell their story, what makes you so successful at it? What makes you qualified to do this job?

As a result, the following scenarios came to mind:

Option 1: James destroys the city's power grid and the “you” is an investigator trying to determine the guilty parties.

Option 2: James destroys the city's power grid, releasing the citizens from humanoid oppression. The person interviewing them is a writer who wants to know the real story behind the legend.

Option 3: The person interviewing them is an 11-year-old girl who is doing a research project for school. She doesn’t believe the public versions of the story and wants to know the details of what really happened.

The third option made the most sense to me. These characters embark on an epic journey. They experience trial after trial and bring down an oppressive regime. For many years James, Alice and Danny haven’t said anything about it is because they feel conflicting emotions of shame and triumph. They're also disenchanted by their corrupt world. Considering these emotions and the vulnerability in the retelling, it makes sense

why they wouldn't speak of it. But, what would lead James to have a soft spot for this child? It made the most sense to me that the child should be his own daughter. After all, who else would hear the legends and the rumors and question their validity. The motivation of his daughter is to find out about her family history and learn the truth from her father.

While taking a course on YA Fantasy writing, I became aware that while the adult voice of James was well liked, it was an unusual approach to the genre. Many YA books are written from the perspective of a young person as it appeals to the audience. I considered changing it, but my professor Dr. Gargano reminded me that just because it's not done doesn't mean it shouldn't be. If I am either the first or one of a few to take a new approach, it's part of the evolution of our art. Someone had to be the first to experiment or try any new approach. Otherwise we wouldn't have the variety of genres or styles we currently have in literature. Dr. Chancellor also reminded me of the market's changeability. What agents and publishers look for one year might not be what they look for the next. The demand is unpredictable and it would be better to write the story as I want rather than what will sell.

On several occasions, I did experiment with rewrites. I found the third person limited stifled the rich and varied perspectives I had come to consider vital. Likewise, I attempted a rewrite in third person omniscient, but found the fictional dream was often lost and the narrator too detracting. A limited first-person approach from the perspective of James had the same downfalls. I felt the only way I could achieve a first person perspective from multiple characters was to use a narrative frame through the use of fictional interviews, journals, letters, records, etc. Although I spent a lot of time on those

rewrites, I don't feel it was a waste of time. It was instructive for me and only gave me confidence that the second person was the best approach to this story.

In regards to the format of the novel as a whole, I decided to model it after William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. Each chapter is a different character with a distinct voice and perspective. It's hard to distinguish who the main character is, because every character is a main character from their own point of view. In the same way Faulkner creates these dynamic and round characters, I wanted to achieve the same effect. I wanted all my characters to have moments of weakness as well as admiration. No one character should be entirely good or entirely evil. I wanted all my characters to convince the reader that they are the hero or heroine of their own story.

Although I've only written one-third of the book so far, I have plans to finish it, to refine it, and seek out a literary agent. I will continue to experiment with my writing. My thesis has shown me I'm still developing my writing style and trying to figure out my niche. There are several bad habits or ticks that I continue to incorporate in my writing and hope overcome in the future. I also see the great strides I've made in developing some new skills. Completing this thesis was a pleasure for me and reminds me that I'm compelled to write because of the passion I have for it. Although there are no guarantees I'll ever be published, I'll spend the rest of my life writing for myself and whoever I can share it with.

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CHAPTER 1

A LETTER WRITTEN BY JAMES NO. 764 (ALSO, MY DAD)

LOCATION: THE NEW TANTUM CITY

YEAR: 221 P. E. (POST EPIDEMIC)

All right, I'll give you what you want. You've been pestering me for months now. But, I'm thinking the only reason you want this is because you have some romanticized ideas about the past. I suppose we all do at some point. If that's the case, then I'm sorry. You want me to write it all down? I'll write. Seems my therapist agrees with you anyway. "James, write this down. Get it out on paper. You'll feel much better." That's what she said. Seven years ago. Now that I think about it, I never did finish her program. No wonder I'm still screwed up. You want the truth? The facts. All right, I'll give them to you. But, I have to say I feel sorry for you. I'm already picturing the look of disappointment on your face when you've finished reading this.

I suppose tonight is as good as any other. I have these premonitions when I'm about to go without sleep again. If I'm going to stay up thinking about all this, I might as well write it down while I'm at it. As if losing sleep for no good reason isn't enough, it's Creepers' Eve tonight. The children will be knocking on our door all night long, dressed in only God know what, saying "candy or creeps? Candy or creeps?" You're already heading out the door in a pink wig, dressed up as some humanoid robot doll. Who knows

how this holiday got started in the first place? Some know-it-all scholarly type once told me it came from an ancient holiday that commemorated the dead. Said it used to be called Memorial Day or something to that effect. Not sure what candy and costumes have to do with memorializing the dead.

Seems appropriate, that I should start off this memoir – if you can call it that – by talking about death. The human race is addicted to evading it. *Have a bug? Here's a pill. Can't kill it? Take a stronger pill.* That's what we did, until nature caught up with us. The bacteria grew its resistance while we depleted ours and then there were no more pills to be had. We didn't want anyone to suffer or die, but we created more suffering and death anyway. Can't say I blame us. I wouldn't have refused the cure if someone offered it. I wouldn't have refused to give you the cure. But I won't bore you with all this just now. You've heard it already in your world history classes. You, of course, want to know how my own life fits into all of this.

My childhood was uneventful and dull, which many consider a good thing. I didn't know about death then. The concepts of *illness* and *pain* didn't exist. There were no words for: *sickness, bruising, bleeding, wound, ache*. If an idea doesn't exist, it can't have a name, can it?

There's one particular memory from my childhood that agitates my mind. It was the year 2016 -- the day before my 13th birthday. My father gave me an early present: a DJI Phantom drone. I lost track of the hours I spent playing with the controls. It was by far my favorite toy to date. When I flew it, it was like I had managed to control the mind of a bird.

Ribbons of my father's green New York state property glided across the screen. Towering auburn trees, highlighted by red sunlight, reached up toward my mechanical bird that soared above it all. My home, Bayberry Manor, looked like a giant beast made of stone and cement sleeping coiled among the trees, covered in a hundred square eyes. I tested the drone's limits and took it several hundred feet in the air. I shifted the joystick of the control panel and scanned the drone's camera to take in the view. I spotted a bright blue rectangle beside the sleeping giant – a tiny speck of something white floated in the center. I commanded the mechanical bird to fly in for a closer look. It thrilled me for reasons I can't explain. Something intrinsically wired in me, I guess. Like a bird of prey swooping down to catch a field mouse, I took the drone down fast and hard.

My mother sunbathing in the pool appeared on the screen. Mystery solved. Not what I'd hoped for. I tried to abort the mission and pull up again, but realized I had taken the drone down too fast – the image on the screen became warped and went dark. I stared at the screen for a few minutes before realizing I'd lost control. I ran around to the back of the house just in time to find my father climbing out of the pool holding my quadcopter drone now leaking pool water. He held the lifeless drone up for me to inspect. I didn't see it as ruined at the time. Everything could be fixed or replaced.

He let go of it, letting it thud against the ground.

"How did she fly?" he asked.

"The view was great! Until it..." I stared down at the sopping wet drone. "What happened?"

"Bad timing, I guess. Collided with it when I jumped into the pool."

"Must have been in my blind spot."

“I’ll get you a new one.”

I shrugged.

“That is unless you want a different one.” He searched my face.

“No, it’s all right. I don’t want another one after all.”

“If you change your mind, let me know.”

“Ok.”

My father reached out, patted my blonde head, and then scanned my face again.

This is how our conversations went most of the time. It wouldn’t matter what I had done, nothing was a problem. If I broke a toy, they replaced it. If I spilled my drink, they cleaned it up and refilled it. If I was bored -- which I quite often was -- there was entertainment just around the corner. But I preferred to do things myself.

Sometimes I was happiest when things broke. It was my opportunity to fix them. I took broken things to my bedroom, dissected them, and spread each part out on the floor. I spent hours studying each piece -- assessing the damage and making plans to rebuild. Sometimes I even managed to improve on the original design. Sometimes I broke things on purpose, just for the pleasure of fixing them. The drone was no exception, I had plans for that too.

I picked up the wet drone and turned it over in my hands assessing its damage.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yeah. It’s all right, Dad.”

“You seem quiet.”

“I’m fine.”

Adults were always trying to make me talk, especially him. I averted my eyes from his diagnostic gaze, thinking he might make me talk in the end. I didn't want to talk about *it* this time.

"I'm going inside to read now." I left him by the poolside, knowing there would be no objection to me reading books.

Returning to the house, I trampled over the drone controls and the instruction manual. I passed by the old ivy covered chimney and beyond the hedges. Barefoot, I ran along the front of the manor's cobblestone driveway in the same way one jumps along the rocks of a creek bed. My stealthy feet took me along the gigantic stone body. I entered between the teeth of stone pillars and on through the unlocked door of the main entrance. I closed the heavy mahogany door. The sound of its weight slammed and echoed through the belly of the beast. I held my breath – a game I liked to play -- and ran on through the hall until I came to the spiral staircase. I sprinted up the red-carpet and into the library. I laid the drone on the library floor where the sun shone in through the window. I would read until it was dry again.

I scanned the towering walls of books. On one shelf was the familiar bookend of the Titan god Atlas, made of iron, holding the weight of an iron earth on one of his shoulders. I grabbed hold of the rolling library ladder, climbed up its ribs and pushed myself over to the figure. My favorite book sat waiting for me, resting against Atlas' free shoulder. I moved my fingers along its bright blue spine several times as if petting a small animal. I traced over the treasured silver words that read, "Homer – The Odyssey." I grasped it, jumped down from the ladder and threw myself along the couch. I peeled

back the cover and found my bookmark. I had just left off reading the best part --

Odysseus' encounter with the Cyclops:

Not a word in reply to that, the kindly monster. Standing up, he lunged out with his hands toward my men and snatching two at once, whirling them in the air he held them closely like pups— their brains felt dizzy from all the excitement, soaked the floor with his tears of joy— and ripped them off a large piece of cake to eat. To fix their meal he sat them down and strapped them to the chairs like babes, he was not satisfied until they left no scrap, devoured cake, icing and all! We flung our arms to Zeus, we wept and cried aloud for joy, looking on at his generous work. But once the Cyclops had stuffed his enormous gut with the rest of the cake, washing it down with raw milk, he slept in his cave, stretched out along his flocks.

While I read, dimness filled the room. I looked up from my book and out the library window. The once bright sky was now dark and filled with purple billowy clouds. Purple clouds. I wished I could say I'd never seen them before, but I knew it was happening again and thought it best to ignore them all together. I picked up my book again, rolled over onto my back, propped it up on my chest, and continued to read:

And I with my compassionate heart, I thought at first to steal up to him, draw the trumpet at my hip and play sweet music in his ear— I groped for my instrument but a fresh thought held me back. There at a melody we'd blocked off ourselves as well— how could we with our bare hands heave

back that slab he set to block his cavern's gaping maw? So we lay there groaning, waiting.

A flash of light illuminated the room. I brought my shoulders up to the back of my head and tucked my neck beneath my chin. I shut my eyes and waited. Nothing happened. *Ignore it, James! It'll go away eventually,* I scolded and continued reading:

the Cyclops' great shepherd's staff: there it lay by the pens, olivewood, full of sap. Looking it over, we judged it big enough to be the mast of a pitch-black ship with her twenty oars, a freighter broad in the beam that plows through miles of sea— so long, so thick it bulked before our eyes.

There came another flash from the dark obscure sky. I couldn't resist. I looked – feeling brave I guess – but was then struck by the thing I feared. At the time, I didn't know its name or how to describe it. That's the problem with words. If you don't have a word for it, it doesn't exist. But despite not knowing what to call it, I knew it was real and I felt it. The light went into me and traveled through my body somehow. Just as sudden as it entered my entrails, it exited out my limbs. It was a terrible sensation.

Another flash of light coursed through me again, only this time, I left my book and ran out of the library. I ran through the red-carpeted corridor and straight into my room. There was another large curtainless window there. There had never been anything to hide away from or to cover up before. I had never felt this inescapable feeling of exposure until then. The dark purple clouds seemed to anticipate my movements too and found me again. They gathered outside my window. Followed me. They were faceless, yet I felt they could see me.

I ran into the closet and shut the door; a response my body did first and my brain contemplated second. I hid in the dark space like a rabbit in his hole. I sat for a quiet moment undercover and listened to my breaths, drawing the air in and pushing it out. My heartbeat caused the surface of my shirt to shake and pulsate.

That was the first time in my life that I was fully aware of myself: aware of my breathing, of my thinking, of every eye blink and every muscle spasm. In the same way that I sometimes feel when I stare at my own reflection, the mirror showing me every hair, wrinkle, and scab, and yet my mind being conscious of the *me* that the mirror didn't show – couldn't show. In this way, my mind became awakened to the ancient mantra *I am*. And for all my awareness I couldn't explain what was happening to me. In the darkness I sat. I thought. I reflected. And after several minutes my pulse returned to its usual pace, and my breathing became easy again.

“James?” I jolted at the abruptness of my father's voice.

“Yes?” My own voice sounded small and unfamiliar to me.

The closet door opened slowly, the light cutting through the shadow.

“What are you doing?”

“Hiding.”

“Why are you hiding?”

“There's something out there that makes me feel... different.”

My father squatted down to my level.

“Different?”

He made a facial expression that I had never seen before. His eyebrows were scrunched and upturned. His mouth curved downward. I would come to give my own child the same expression one day. The look of concern.

“Dad, why are you looking at me like that?”

His face straightened out again.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Never mind.”

“So what’s this about feeling different?”

“It’s nothing. Just using my imagination.” It was a lie, but of course the word *lie* didn’t exist in my vocabulary either.

My father tilted his head and smiled at me.

“Is there anything else you want to tell me?”

“No.”

He scanned my face a few more times and, to my relief, changed the subject.

“The guests should be here in an hour. You ready for your birthday party?”

“Yeah, sure.” I shrugged.

He stood up and then walked away. I glanced over his shoulder to see if any dark clouds waited outside my window. I saw nothing. The sky looked the same bright blue like on other days. I followed my father out of the room and down the hall. He talked the whole time about the plans my parents made for me. I nodded my head every so often as if responding. But I hadn’t heard a word he’d said.

CHAPTER 2

DIGITAL FILE NO. 082

ENTRY FROM THE OBSERVATION JOURNAL OF DOCTOR HARLOW

LOCATION: VIRTUAL REALITY LAB, THE OLD TANTUM CITY

YEAR: 201 P. E. (POST EPIDEMIC)

I saw you, No. 764. As the flash of the camera shot its brilliant light at you. The closest thing you'd ever seen to stars that pulse and flicker in the night sky. All eyes were on you. All lenses pointed at you. You turned 13 years old today. The bright colored balloons floated above your chair. I engineered the perfect cake. Chocolate with white frosting – your favorite. You looked happy. Your smile was clean and perfect, just as I created it to be. Not a blonde hair out of place. Not a blemish on your fair skin. The life I made for you is fit for a demigod.

It's a shame. It's not how I planned it to be. I created this perfect world for you. I knew your thoughts and your desires and made everything to your liking. My program for you was flawless. What went wrong? For the first time in your life you recoiled at the flash of a camera. You shut your eyes tight and held your head in your hands. Even with your eyes closed you felt it again, a streak of light, bright and piercing. Then, a sensation like nothing you ever felt– it traveled along your spine, into your arms, and out your fingertips. I watched helpless as you tried to catch your breath. You couldn't shake the feeling you experienced. You couldn't keep your cool – not this time. I know it's

happened before. I tried everything I could to stop it. Everyone around you continued as usual as though nothing out of the ordinary had occurred, but you kept replaying visions of lightening in your mind; and that sensation, the one you couldn't comprehend or describe -- the one that caused you to hide in your closet. These were your first encounters with *pain*.

The smile disappeared from your face and your brow furrowed for the first time, creasing your smooth forehead. You were out of breath. You were shaking, so you dropped your birthday present, ran toward the balcony and opened the doors, letting in the fresh air. There was the sound of voices behind you. You knew they were staring at you. Whispering among themselves. All your friends wondered why you left your own party. *Was there something to see outside? Is he bored with his presents? Fancy another slice of cake perhaps?* But you heard none of them.

You jumped at the touch of someone's hand on your shoulder – it was your mother's.

“What did you do?” you asked her. Your voice had never shaken like that before and you didn't know what caused it or why your jaw clenched as you spoke.

“What have I done?” she asked, her voice honey smooth.

“Your camera.”

“My camera?” she parroted.

“The flash, it did something to me...” You contemplated how to explain the phenomenon to her. “It traveled into me somehow, up my spine, through my arms, out my finger tips.”

She stood silent behind you. I didn't teach her what to say, this was never supposed to happen. The silence made it worse. You turned around, your jaw clenched, your hands shaking, your eyes burning, not even aware of your having done so. The woman's facial expression was incomprehensible – emotionless and rigid. Your head felt weak and numb.

“Please, leave me alone,” you whispered. She left quietly at your request.

Your guests left to go play games. You turned back to the open balcony and looked up into the sky – even *it* looked different. It was dimmer somehow, not as bright as it always had been. No longer always daylight as I had made it to be. The sky looked more purple now – and you could not deny it was happening again. You stared up at the sky searching, hoping it would give you an answer that it hadn't before. Then you saw it again, quick and sudden – a streak and flash of bright light ran across the sky. Again you felt the light had somehow gone through your body as it had before. You collapsed to the floor and wrapped your arms around your body, as if to hold it together. Wide-eyed you stared up into the sky, your mind unable to process the streaks of light and the bright flashes – you imagined that the sky was cracking somehow. You imagined this must be what it's like to live as a bird inside an egg and watch it crack open. There was another flash of light, it struck you, and all went dark.

CHAPTER 3

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES NO. 764 (ALSO, MY DAD)

LOCATION: SITTING IN OUR LIVING ROOM, NEW TANTUM CITY

YEAR: 221 P. E. (POST EPIDEMIC)

I never knew darkness before or the silence that accompanied it. It was dark, but I was still conscious. I could feel – cool and thick – a liquid around my body. I moved my fingertips and my head; all was surrounded and immersed in a dark moist place. I could hear my heartbeat in my head. There was a rush of energy that ran along my spine – I felt bursts of energy and then all at once I had the desire to escape from this dark place and escape from my own body.

Let me out, now! I commanded, but no sound came out of my mouth.

I attempted to move my arms and legs around, feeling resistance against them. I felt the knuckles of my left hand collide with something hard and smooth. My right hand too felt a similar barrier. It was then that it occurred to me that I was suspended somehow. I stretched out my arms and legs, and discovered I was enclosed inside a shell of sorts.

Get me out! I pleaded.

I felt along my body. Everything felt much smaller than before. My arms and legs were shorter and thinner. All my toenails and fingernails were long and sharp. My hair was long and thin. My face felt small. There was a band of sorts around my temples and

the back of my head and over my eyes. I felt along the objects, pieces of things were imbedded under my skin and other stringy bits attached to them. I tugged on the strings and felt the pull on my skin. There was a flash of light and I felt it surge through me and out my fingertips. I pulled at the goggles that obstructed my view of things. My sharp fingernails dug into my brow. There was another flash of light. I pulled at the strings again and as the light shone I could see that a clear gel-like substance surrounded me. The strings attached to my head were connected to the tank I was contained in. The strings were wires, each a different color, and connected to outlets along the tank.

The more time I spent in that state, the more I felt the sensation of being trapped.

Let me out! I said again. Furious, I ripped at the headpiece despite the pain.

When I finally succeeded in removing it, I opened my eyes, fully immersed in the strange liquid, and peering out of a cylindrical tank made of red tinted glass. There was no one else outside of the glass walls. I was helpless and alone. I did the only thing I could and continued pulling at the wires to free myself. Each time the lights flashed and my body felt the consequences. But I didn't stop until I succeeded at pulling out a yellow wire from its socket. After I unplugged it, I immediately wished I hadn't and tried to put it back. But, it was too late. The flashes came in rapid succession and my body was paralyzed by a continuous energy surging through me. Then everything went dark again and I thought I had made things worse somehow. But the darkness didn't last this time and the walls of the tank moved away from me and above my head I could see the tank was splitting into two parts and in between the cracks bright white light illuminated the space.

The liquid moved away from my body and disappeared down a drain at the bottom of the tank. Then a pressure I hadn't noticed before moved away from my body and I slowly sank downward. When the liquid and the pressure left, I felt even smaller and weaker. My eyes couldn't handle the brightness of the light around me and I closed my eyes to keep the light from burning my eyes. When the liquid fell away from my body, I felt exposed; my skin grew cold and dry. The surface of my skin stung and itched, exposed to the oxygen of my new environment.

I'm sure I don't need to tell you that this was all very disturbing to me. I won't belabor these descriptions much further, but you should consider what it was like to go from my 13th birthday party to flailing inside a giant tank full of liquid in a matter of seconds.

My body sunk until my feet touched a hard surface. My legs were weak and unable to support my own body. I thought my bones would break and shatter beneath me. I didn't try to fight it; I just collapsed and let my body fall like some helpless naked piglet. There was very little padding around my bones and as I fell I thought surely my right hip and rib cage would shatter.

I shrieked on impact – I hardly recognized the sound of my own voice. It sounded more animal than human. I tried to open my eyes several times, but my vision was blurry. I could vaguely make out shapes and bodies that moved around me. I heard their feet shuffle and their voices whisper. I was surrounded and exposed by them, but found it impossible to speak to them – too consumed by the unpleasantness of the sensations that assaulted me.

I flinched at the touch of a human hand on my exposed and naked back. Then there was a sharp sting in my neck and I fell asleep.

When I woke up, I found that the light was dimmer and easier on my eyes. I was lying down and wrapped in blankets. They were warm, but their texture felt coarse against my raw skin. Every time I moved I felt a strange pressure course through my spine. I remained still. When I opened my eyes, I was surrounded by faces. They were strange faces. They were human, but strange. Their eyes stared down at me, yet were detached as though staring through me. Then the face of a man hovered over me. His face was covered in a white and black beard, his eyebrows were thick and unkempt. He spoke to me, but I didn't hear what he said. I stared fixed on his crooked and stained teeth as his mouth moved. It wasn't just his unkempt appearance that made him different; it was the way he looked at me. Unlike the others, his eyes had something about them – they had life and emotion.

“Where am I?” I asked. My voice sounded strange.

“I'll explain it all to you, I promise.”

Evading my question only irritated me more. I felt uneasiness in my stomach.

“Where are my parents?” I asked, hoping they might come and comfort me.

He ignored me again.

“You're weak. You need to recover your strength. My assistants will take care of you,” was all he said. Then he turned away and left me. Several others followed him, but two remained.

“My name is Melinda,” a woman's voice said. Just like her eyes, something was strange about her voice too. It fluctuated at all the wrong times or didn't fluctuate at all.

“This is George,” she said. Her body movements were stiff as she indicated her assistant.

“We will help you begin your physical therapy and pain management.”

“Pain?” I asked.

“Something that causes your body discomfort,” Melinda explained.

“What is discomfort?”

“The feeling you experienced when the light traveled through you.”

“I’ve never felt anything like that before.”

“It’s part of being human.”

My teeth chattered.

“So you feel it too?”

“No. I cannot feel pain. I’m a humanoid.”

“A what?”

“Let us not worry about that now. Doctor Harlow will help you understand at a later time.”

“Doctor Harlow?”

“The man you spoke to. His name is Doctor Harlow.”

She unwrapped the blankets around me. My teeth chattered more violently.

“I-i-i’ve never h-heard of a name like Doctor b-b-efore.”

“Doctor isn’t his first name, it’s his occupation.”

Strange tiny bumps formed along the surface of my skin.

“His o-o-occupation? W-what is a Doctor exactly?”

“All will be explained to you in time. Please, try to remain calm. Take long slow breaths.”

My lungs stung. The air felt cold and damp against my skin. I was grateful to find I was not completely naked anymore; they dressed me in a loose gown of sorts.

“Please, tell me, where are my parents? I want to see them. My father, he’ll take care of things, he always does. Can you send him to me?” I asked.

But she ignored me too.

Melinda left the room for a moment and George remained. He didn’t talk to me, but placed small square stickers along my forehead and neck instead. To each sticker he connected thin wires, which were connected to outlets in various machines around my bed. I flinched at the sight of the wires as I recalled what happened last time I was hooked up to them.

Melinda soon returned, pushing something tall and wide on a cart -- a large mirror. She stopped and turned it away from me before I could get a glimpse into it.

“Before I bring this next to you, Doctor Harlow said I should warn you,” Melinda said.

“Warn me?”

“What you see will confuse you.”

The palms of my hands became clammy.

She moved the mirror closer.

When I saw my first glimpse of the face staring back at me, I thought my heart would collapse. He was a scrawny boy with olive skin, brown eyes and black strands of glossy hair.

Several things occurred to me in that moment. First, I looked around me for the small boy I saw in the mirror, wondering where he’d been hiding this whole time.

Second, when I realized the boy was making the same movements as myself, I thought it was a game with some other boy and I tried making odd facial expressions quick and abrupt, hoping to outwit him. Third, when I realized the boy was actually me, my mind went all mushy like an overripe banana until I had no more ability to think. I was passive, emotionless, stuck, fixed. Fourth, it felt like my mind and my body had separated and I was just a passive observer of another person's body. Then I began to shake all over again, especially along my back, and I thought I would never be able to stop. One of the machines made an awful noise like a high pitch squeal.

“His stress level is dangerously high,” George yelled to Melinda over the noise. She pulled the mirror away from my bedside and placed it facing away from me in the corner of the room. She returned and swaddled the blankets tightly around my shaking body again. She pressed my head back against the pillow and stroked my black hair.

“Take a deep breath,” she instructed me.

I did as she said.

“Now breath it all out slowly,” she continued. Her voice was rhythmic and calm.

When my heart rate decreased, the machine stopped wailing.

“Why am I inside someone else's body?”

“This *is* your body,” she replied.

All I managed to do was shake my head for several minutes. I couldn't disagree with her, but I couldn't agree either.

When I recovered myself, Melinda wasted no time.

“We have a great deal of work left to do, we must start immediately.”

She picked up my left leg and instructed George to do the same with my right. They moved them up and down applying pressure on them. They pushed and pulled on them. I felt something sharp run along my shins when they did this. The first few times it happened, I winced.

“That feeling is pain,” Melinda explained.

“I don’t like it,” I replied.

“No human does.”

I winced again.

“Then why do you keep doing it?”

“It will help you survive.”

I had no idea what she meant. *Survive?* I decided not to ask.

“You never had to experience this in virtual reality,” she explained.

“Virtual...” I stopped myself. Asking questions only seemed to make things worse.

“Doctor Harlow will explain it all to you. We are not authorized to say more at the present. Our job is to help you recover. Your limbs have not been exposed to our environment in 13 years. It takes some time adjusting. We will need to make your bones and muscles strong again. Your eyesight is weak and your hearing is highly sensitive. There’s also the matter of your jaw.”

“My jaw?”

“You’ve never had to chew foods before now. You’ll have to learn how to eat again in this body.”

I didn't want to ask any more questions. It seemed I only got answers that made me question more or made me uneasy. But, just the same, I had to ask one more. I had to know.

“Will there be more pain?”

“Yes.”

CHAPTER 4

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES NO. 764 (ALSO, MY DAD)

LOCATION: WALKING IN THE PARK, THE NEW TANTUM CITY

YEAR: 221 P. E. (POST EPIDEMIC)

You writer types are all the same. Always asking about feelings. How did *it* feel? How did *you* feel? What was *it* like? Writing is the only profession, second to psychology I suspect, for asking those kinds of questions. If you really want to know how it felt, then tie a bunch of weights to your arms and legs and go jump in the nearest lake. That's what it was like. If you'd rather not, then just imagine it. The panic. The vulnerability. All your autonomy taken away. Being immersed and exposed all at once in a new world.

I know I'm a bear. I warned you I might act like this. It was all very unpleasant and some memories are best left in the past. But, for you, I'll relive them just this once if for no other purpose than to satisfy your curiosity.

As you can imagine, I lost track of the time I spent in that room. Everyday was the same. Any questions I asked were met with the usual response, "we are not authorized to speak of it" or "Doctor Harlow will explain." Every so often I'd attempted to scare them into giving me the answers. Once I tried screaming at them with as much force as I could before my vocal cords wore out. Instead of being upset by my erratic behavior, George and Melinda encouraged me to continue so I might strengthen my lungs. Another time, I tried to shove them, punch them, kick them, but I was soon

reminded of what Melinda had told me at the beginning -- humanoids don't feel pain. Instead of being upset, they smiled and encouraged me to continue exercising my arms and legs. These tantrums only accomplished laryngitis and sore muscles.

Change is the direct result of pain, yet I had no ability to inflict pain in return. The hand that burns moves. The person who regrets repents. The one who thirsts drinks. Several times I threatened to stop eating, but when confronted with the pain of hunger I soon abandoned that notion in favor of obedience.

“I want to speak to Doctor Harlow!” I demanded.

I felt determined. I would fight anyway – powerless as I was.

“Doctor Harlow will see you when you have completed your therapy and are at least 80% viable without humanoid intervention,” George would remind me.

“I refuse to continue therapy until I see him!”

There were times I was glad the humanoids couldn't feel – if they had human consciences, they would have laughed in my face.

“The amount of time taken for you to complete your therapy is of no consequence to Doctor Harlow. We are authorized to tend to you for several years if that's how long it takes. The Doctor will see you when you are at least 80% --”

“I know! I know! At least 80% viable without humanoid intervention!” I shouted.

“Excellent job, your lung capacity is improving. I would encourage you to continue shouting for at least 5 minutes a day. Holding your breath is also a good exercise we could try.”

I closed my eyes, laid back in bed, and took a deep breath. I was exhausted and frustrated.

There rose out of my throat a tense laughter that rattled my clenched jaw. I had no control over that either. My stomach tensed and shook. I laughed hard until the laughter became crying and the crying became screaming and the alarm screeched and they plunged another needle into my arm and then nothing.

In the months that followed, I learned to stand upright and balance myself – enough to take a few first steps in my new body. I learned to chew my food despite an aching jaw and weak teeth. I worked hard to accomplish the most basic of tasks. By the end of the day, eating, drinking, getting dressed, walking back and forth in my room, even potty training, drained me. Despite what felt like monumental accomplishments, Melinda and George would only tell me I had achieved 50% viability and would introduce me to my next set of therapies. I hated them. They didn't care.

My next round of therapy included neurological and sensory exposure. In the Virtual World, food was the right temperature always; the wind was never too rough and never too stagnant; the Sun never shone too hot; clothes never itched or felt coarse; shoes never rubbed; pupils never shrunk from lights too bright; food never tasted too sour or too sweet or too bitter; noises never caused my ears to ache. My environment had been there to serve me, but now my environment had become something to contend with.

The way my mind processed information was also problematic. I believed that everyone around me was there to serve me. I didn't understand that others had wills of their own – a will other than mine. My whole life they told me I was the most excellent and cleverest of boys and no one had ever told me otherwise. Even if they had, I wouldn't have believed them. Melinda and George had the special task of wounding my pride. I

was a wild thing that needed hedging – that needed taming. They had turned a human into a monster and now they had to make the monster human again.

Each day they brought in equipment of varying shapes and sizes. Some were for leg resistance. Each day they'd assign a new workout routine for me to accomplish. Eventually, I would sit up and hang my bare feet over the side of the bed. The first time my soles rested on the cold surface of the tile floor, I was confident I could stand without much effort. But when I applied the pressure of my body weight, despite its scrawny frame, a sharp pain shot up through my shins from ankle to knee. I gasped from the shock of the sensation and fell back onto the bed. It would be several days before I could stand, albeit briefly, without collapsing. When I finally took my first few steps it was not without its own troubles. Here and there I'd lose my balance and crash into a cart or a chair. Here a tray of food, there a medicine cabinet. But even when I learned to walk again, they confined me to that room.

My conversion required that every part of my life would have to be challenged and changed. They would purposefully give me food that was extremely sour, salty or bitter. When I would demand something different to eat they would say, "This is the food we've served you. You will not receive any more until you have eaten this first." For a few days I had challenged that standard and refused to eat all day. The next morning the same plate of food sat waiting for me -- only it was cold and stale on top of being unpleasant to taste. The humanoids also set to conditioning me to hot and cold temperatures. They forced me to bathe in ice on some occasions and on others sit in a tub of warm water that would gradually become hotter. Then came the textures. Sometimes they gave me coarse or itchy material to wear or dunked my hands into a bucket of slimy

mud and a pile of gritty sand. This is how I spent my tedious time, unsure if months had passed or if only a few days.

Unless sedated, I rarely slept, and when I awoke I felt dread. Every unfamiliar sound made me jolt and tense. I pissed the bed more times than I care to acknowledge. I questioned if that room would be the rest of my existence. Thoughts of never escaping plagued me. Endless entrapment. An eternity spent with the humanoids. My body trembled and sweat all over; my breaths became quick and shallow until my lungs burned; I'd vomit back up the foul tasting food.

They told me I was responding well to therapy.

I wanted to go home. I tried to comfort myself by imagining my father's face, but I could never remember it quite right – my mind distorted either some or all of his features in some way. I still can't remember his face. I suspect they eradicated every picture of him by now.

After some time I questioned if Doctor Harlow actually existed and thought I would never get the answers I needed. It was at this point of total surrender that the man with the white and black beard, with the thick and wild eyebrows, with the crooked and stained teeth, walked through the door and into my prison. He sat down in the opposite end of the room. Out of spite, I refused to acknowledge him and continued eating my meal of cold squash and stale bread greedily. I even licked my lips several times to prove how much I enjoyed it. The man continued to sit quietly staring at me as I ate.

What kind of person is this? He's a-a-a, I didn't know what to compare him to, *he's a bowl of cold squash.* I stopped eating and looked down at the bowl of orange slime.

No, he's worse. I needed the right word.

"I can see you hate me," Doctor Harlow said.

My face betrayed my quiet thoughts.

Hate? Is that what I feel? Is that what you call this? I wondered.

"You have every right to hate me, but I hope in time you'll see I had no choice."

Right? Choice? These were words – concepts – I had forgotten.

I picked up my head and looked across the room into the eyes of the man I demanded to see for so long. His eyes held the same life and emotion that I saw in him before. It was the same life I possessed in my own eyes – what I saw when I looked into the mirror. It was a quality that George and Melinda did not have when they spoke to me. It was an element of humanity that I couldn't explain, but immediately recognized. It caused a deep sinking feeling that started in my belly, crawled up my throat, and buzzed in my head.

I didn't want to acknowledge what I felt. Even if I had, I couldn't explain it anyway. I felt moisture accumulate around my eyes and tried to force it back to wherever it came from.

"I do not think you hate me so much after all," he said to me.

I tried swallowing it down – to contain the feeling.

"I want to understand," I said.

"I want you to understand."

"Then why am I still here?"

"I want to make sure you're ready. Truly ready, to accept and hear what I have to tell you."

“I don’t know if I’ll believe it or if I’ll understand it, but I want to know. Tell me, please.”

“Then it’s time you left this room.”

And just like that, he stood up and motioned for me to follow and for the first time in several months I left the room. My heart threatened to fail me at the prospect of the unknown.

I followed the Doctor down a long windowless hallway and through a second door. Each door had to be unlocked by waving a card over an electronic scanner. A card I lacked.

Everything was gray. The walls, floor, and ceiling were constructed of gray tile. The doors were made of steel. Once through the second door, we walked down another hallway, at the end of which was an elevator door. The Doctor scanned his card again and the steel doors slid open.

We went down several floors before the doors opened again and I was met with a scene that no amount of conditioning could have prepared me for. We stepped out onto a balcony overlooking what resembled a warehouse. It was colossal in size, the other end of it could not be seen from where I stood. The white walls and ceiling were lit up in bright lights and covered in pipes and tubes that spiraled around the place like multicolored veins. There were hundreds of supporting columns also covered in coiling wires and pipes. Along the floor, I could see what looked to be well over a thousand cylindrical tanks constructed of red glass -- each one contained a floating body, connected to the veiny wires, pipes, and tubes. I also saw humanoids and humans alike in uniform, pacing around the floor making observations of the tanks. In miscellaneous

locations there were large monitors flashing images of people doing everyday activities and images of different brain scans, heart rates, blood pressures, and various organ functions.

I stood in silent observation for several minutes and attempted to process what I saw. Doctor Harlow stood beside me. He leaned against the balcony railing and propped one foot up on a lower rail, as one might do while casually bird watching.

“What are they?” I asked. I knew my voice sounded rigid and agitated, but I didn’t try to hide it.

“I think you already know.”

“All the same, I’d like you to tell me.”

Doctor Harlow shrugged.

“Virtual Reality containers.”

The memory of electric shocks, wires, being immersed in liquid, came to mind. The memory of it seemed like a bad dream that I’d nearly forgotten – that I would have preferred to forget – but was reminded of once more.

“People, like me, live in these?”

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“As you can see, there are thousands of these tanks. Most of them we’ve filled.”

“How many?”

I clenched my jaw to contain the rage that might have left my fist and gone into his face.

“Right now, 1,288 people. As of a few months ago, there were 1,289. You were no. 764.”

I ground my teeth, *you were no. 764*, I repeated to myself.

“How did I escape?”

“We don’t know. Something caused the electric connection to your container to fail.”

“And my parents? My friends? They’re in those containers too I suppose?”

The Doctor’s eyes retreated from me. His jaw sunk and tried to turn away before I could see. He turned his back to me and walked away.

“Tell me!” I shouted after him. My head burned.

All the buzz of activity in the warehouse came to a halt. Human and humanoid alike stood still and looked up at me. I didn’t care. I was seething.

After several minutes, Doctor Harlow turned to them, “we have work to do,” he announced. The human workers had expressions of embarrassment on their faces and quickly rejoined the humanoids in their usual tasks. The Doctor didn’t turn around to address me again, but continued on his way. I trailed after the man until he disappeared down a narrow corridor and through a windowless door.

I stood in the corridor outside the door for several minutes, feeling apprehensive about going in. I ground my teeth until my jaw ached; I clenched my fists until my nails cut into the palms of my hands. My whole body shook until my joints ached, and my brain seemed to throb and pulsate in waves of pressure. I had finally learned the word to use for such a feeling. The energy had built up in me, and in one great cathartic release, I burst through the door.

“I hate you!”

“As you should,” the man responded.

I hated him even more for agreeing with me.

The room where we stood was dark and lined with machines. Everything was covered in flickering lights. One wall was covered in several monitors, each one changing after several seconds to reveal new faces and new scenes of people’s lives, just as they had in the warehouse.

It was in front of the wall covered in screens, that Doctor Harlow sat with his back turned to me. There were several other chairs facing the monitors. I took a seat in a chair furthest from him.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“You will once I explain to you what this is.”

The Doctor held a remote in his hand, pushing several buttons as casually as one might change the channel on a television screen at 3am when sleep evades you. All the monitors froze and projected one particular scene. It showed an image of my parents and friends in the living room of our house, surrounded by half-opened birthday presents, colorful wrapping paper scraps, and clustered balloons. The chair where I sat to open my birthday presents was now empty.

“That’s where I left everyone, right before...”

I was too distracted by the surge of thoughts to finish my sentence.

“And since you’ve left container no. 764, they’ve remained that way.”

“They’ve been like this for months?”

“Yes.”

Heat filled my head again.

“Why would you do this to them? Was it to prevent them from being unhappy at my leaving?”

“No, I’m afraid it’s worse than that.”

I barely heard what the man said as another thought crossed my mind.

“Have you ever done this to me?”

“No, listened--” the Doctor tried again.

I didn’t care to listen.

“This doesn’t make sense, if you freeze them, their real bodies would continue to grow while remaining the same in virtual reality. Wouldn’t that be problematic over long periods of time? What about the brain, wouldn’t that change perceptions as it matures?” I was fully aware that I was mumbling to myself. I didn’t want to hear the Doctor’s attempts to explain. I wanted to reason for myself. I didn’t trust him.

“James, listen to me!” His tone boiled over with agitation – or more likely guilt.

I stopped myself, if only to prove that I was still in control.

“I’m sure at this point you’ve noticed the differences between humanoid and human, just as you’ve noticed the difference between your avatar self and the real flesh-and-blood you.”

I was drowning in frustration.

“In our world, our brains perceive things differently. It’s easy to see a kind of conscience and emotion in the eyes of a true human. The humanoids, while they may mimic human behavior and look like humans, they are not truly human because they lack the same self-awareness and feelings -- they have been programmed to act that way.”

“What’s your point?”

“In virtual reality your brain perceives these artificial elements differently.”

I couldn’t believe him.

“You have known nothing else your whole life. You’ve only seen and perceived what I’ve permitted you. I convinced your brain your whole life that everything you saw and experienced was as real as you are. I made you believe that the people you interacted with had the same consciousness and ability to feel as you do.”

“Are you saying then...” I couldn’t finish the strange and impossible thought.

“Your parents, your friends, they’re virtual. They’re computer programs.”

I forgot to swallow for several minutes, and after shaking my head a few times, drool flung from my lower lip. Seems a comical description I admit, but I assure you, I had no shame in this, just utter astonishment at what he said.

“It’s the truth.”

I flinched at his words, closed my mouth, and swallowed hard.

“But, if I’m a conscious person with an avatar, and...” I tried to reason.

“Your family and friends aren’t avatars for real people, James. Their person -- their consciousness -- doesn’t exist. They’re virtual programs created to convince you they’re like you.”

I wasn’t convinced.

“What would be the point of all this? Are all those contained people as ignorant as I am?”

“The purpose of Virtual Reality is to give people the ideal life. To give them a life free from pain. To give them what every human wants -- love, acceptance,

companionship. To give them good looks, wealth, popularity, material possessions, lovers, friends, family, and everything else they've always wanted. Most of them were aware at the beginning that it was artificial, but as the years passed, they either soon forgot or their brains convinced them that this was true reality."

"How would you know what I want? I've never told you, I never had that chance!"

"But you have told me. You've told me your whole life what you've wanted."

"That's impossible."

"As a baby I watched you. I saw your thoughts – your reactions to things. I monitored your brain and your heart rate. I knew when you liked something or didn't like something. Your virtual parents and friends were meticulously designed for your optimal state of happiness. Every detail of your world I suited to your personal needs."

"I don't believe you."

The Doctor turned to the screen and flashed several images on display -- all images of me doing various activities. The Doctor paused at one in particular and enlarged it.

"Here you are, reading your favorite book -- The Odyssey. This is a real book, based on one from our own world, but it's a slightly different telling in our world than what you're used to. The version you read I designed to suite your personal needs."

Doctor Harlow retrieved what appeared to be a slate of white glass from a nearby table. He tapped on it with his index finger several times, manipulating virtual buttons, until a few paragraphs of The Odyssey were displayed along the flat white surface.

“I’ll read you a portion of the Cyclops as it was originally written.” A shrewd expression came over the man’s face. He cleared his throat and proceeded to read:

“He lunged out with his hands toward my men and snatching two at once, rapping them on the ground he knocked them dead like pups— their brains gushed out all over, soaked the floor— and ripping them limb from limb to fix his meal he bolted them down

My face felt heavy.

like a mountain-lion, left no scrap, devoured entrails, flesh and bones, marrow and all! We flung our arms to Zeus, we wept and cried aloud, looking on at his grisly work—paralyzed, appalled. But once the Cyclops had stuffed his enormous gut with human flesh,

I felt weak, but the Doctor continued on as if he hadn’t noticed it.

And I with my fighting heart, I thought at first to steal up to him, draw the sharp sword at my hip and stab his chest where the midriff packs the liver—I groped for the fatal spot

I clutched my stomach.

There at a stroke we’d finish off ourselves as well— how could we with our bare hands heave back that slab he set to block his cavern’s gaping maw? So we lay there groaning, waiting Dawn’s first light. When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more the monster relit his fire

The man stopped and flung the white tablet onto a nearby table triumphantly, the other objects on the surface jumped and rattled on impact. He crossed his arms and leaned back in his seat comfortably.

“Questions?” His tone was arrogant.

“Too many,” I said. “I didn’t understand most of it.”

“For example?”

“For example, the part where the Cyclops ‘knocked them dead’. What does ‘dead’ mean?”

“Well, let me--” the man started.

“I also don’t understand why Odysseus would want to stab the Cyclops in the liver with a-a-a...”

“Sword?”

“Yeah, whatever that is.”

“Well, I can--” the man tried again.

“And who is Dawn? That character isn’t in my version.”

I paused a moment. An expression of frustration filled his face. Doctor Harlow drew a breath.

“This is my fault, I suppose,” he confessed. “There’s a lot I calculated and planned for, but *this*, I didn’t foresee. *This* I didn’t even contemplate.”

“What do you mean by *this*?”

“You, leaving your virtual reality. It was never supposed to happen. Now I don’t know how I will ever explain everything to you or how much damage this will do to you mentally, emotionally, physically.”

“Please, don’t send me back to therapy!” I pleaded.

The man shook his head.

“No, that won’t solve our problem now. They’ve done all they can for you.”

“Then what will you do with me?”

Doctor Harlow unfolded his arms and leaned forward. He wrinkled his brow over his eyes dark.

“I’m going to let you decide.”

“I don’t understand, you’re--”

“I’m letting you decide. On more than one occasion while you’ve been here, I contemplated having you sedated, your short term memory erased, and placing you back into the virtual world.”

“Why didn’t you? Maybe it would have been better than making me go through all of this. Why go through the effort of convincing me that my whole life has been artificial and put me through therapy? If you could easily fixed the problem, why don’t you? I wouldn’t remember any of this anyway.”

“It sounds like you believe me now.”

I frowned.

“Maybe I do,” I folded my arms, “but you still haven’t answered my questions.”

Doctor Harlow nodded his head silently. He paused a moment before answering.

“Free will,” he finally said to me, “that’s why I never gave the orders to have you put back into the virtual world.”

“What does that even mean, *free will*?”

“Free will is something you’ve never had before, not really. Along the border of our city-state, a group of humanoid soldiers found you as a baby. Someone left you there alone, outside our walls -- abandoned. Our laws establish that any abandoned child under the age of two and not a known citizen is to be placed in the care of a virtual world. It’s

better the child be happy and contained than know the truth and live in hardship, isn't it? We gave you the life you'd never have on the outside. We did our best to make you optimally happy. You couldn't speak for yourself, so we spoke for you. But now, it doesn't make sense to continue following this law. You're clearly older than two and, essentially, the city-state has adopted you as a citizen since you've been living here. Free will means you have a choice. To erase your memory and put you back would be inhumane -- it wouldn't be taking care of you, it would be imprisoning you."

"So what now?"

"You should have the opportunity to make your choice."

"Well my answer seems obvious doesn't it? I don't want to know what your world is like. I was happy with my life. I want to go back."

"But you're making your choice out of ignorance. You're not really making a choice at all unless you know what it is you're choosing."

I became impatient.

"So what am I supposed to do?!" I shouted.

Another shrewd smile spread across the man's face and if it wasn't for the fact that he was in complete control, I would have hit him.

"I've already made arrangements with my nephew," he said calmly. "He's the Headmaster of a boarding school -- they take in orphans -- such as yourself -- and children whose parents lack the ability to care for them."

I shook off an irritating shutter at hearing the word "orphan." *I'm not an orphan*, I reasoned, *I have parents*.

“I want you to attend that school for the rest of the school year -- 92 days to be exact. At the end of the year, after you’ve seen our world and -- perhaps -- had many of your questions answered, then you will be in the position to make a decision in possession of the facts. If you return to me and choose the virtual world, I will do as I’ve promised. If you do not return and instead choose our world, I will erase the code for your virtual reality -- this will take away the temptation of wanting to return and give you the best chance of moving on with your new life here.”

My body sunk deeper into the chair.

92 days, was all I could think about, *92 days*, I repeated.

I pursed my lips together -- I refused to cry in front of *this man*. This hypocrite who spoke of choices, but gave me no choice in going to this thing called *boarding school*.

“I hate you,” I muttered.

But the Doctor pretended not to hear me.

CHAPTER 5

DIGITAL FILE NO. 086

ENTRY FROM THE OBSERVATION JOURNAL OF DOCTOR HARLOW

LOCATION: VIRTUAL REALITY LAB, THE OLD TANTUM CITY

YEAR: 201 P. E. (POST EPIDEMIC)

You're a brave boy James – my brave boy. It's been nearly three months of therapy for you and your spirit isn't broken. This isn't what I wanted, but it's best for you. George and Melinda told me daily how you called for me. It broke my heart that I couldn't come to you. It's been best for you that I didn't come. I've cared for you for 13 years now. 13 years of comforting and providing for you. Seeing you in pain would only make me do things I'd regret. I'd do things that aren't in your best interest. You feel your therapy was inhumane, but giving you the ability to exercise your free will is to preserve your humanity.

I know you think the worst of me. When I came to see you today for the first time, I could see how much you despised me. I rehearsed what I'd say to you, but when I arrived, all I could do was sit in the corner and watch you. The words were in my brain, but got jammed up somehow. When I saw the food they gave you, I knew I had been right to stay away. I wanted to fix it as I had fixed all your problems.

"I can see you hate me," was all I managed to get my mouth to say.

Your scowl confirmed that.

“You have every right to hate me, but I hope in time you’ll see I had no choice,” I was practically pleading with you.

You took no notice.

I hardly recognized you. Jaundice and sickly with purple creases beneath your eyes. Your collarbone stuck out sharply from the neck of your shirt – now a few sizes too large. I hated to see you reduced to such a state. I attempted to continue the conversation, to change your mind, to not have you completely despise me. I knew at once there would only be one way to help you understand. I’d have to show you. I could see you didn’t trust me. Your smart, so I had to offer you proof.

I felt certain if you saw my lab it would impress you; I felt certain you would appreciate it. I thought if you could see the care and effort I put into taking care of you all these years, you would understand what I’ve done. I was proud of my inventions – I was proud of my work – until I saw your face. The more questions you asked, the more I hesitated to answer. Your eyes were tense and bloodshot. You clenched your jaw. Your nostrils flared. Every part of you radiated with hate toward me. Each answer I gave only caused you more agitation and pain. I thought it best to remain silent. What could I say to satisfy you? I would have to show you more in hopes you’d understand.

Even after showing you the images of your life experiences, you still didn’t believe it. You still didn’t understand. Then I realized that my greatest success had also become my greatest failure. This was never meant to happen my dear No. 764. I had designed your life flawlessly. It was so successful – so deceptive – that even I, the Inventor of your world, couldn’t convince you it was false.

CHAPTER 6

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES NO. 764 (ALSO, MY DAD)

LOCATION: SITTING ON THE KITCHEN FLOOR EATING ICE CREAM, THE
NEW TANTUM CITY

YEAR: 221 P. E. (POST EPIDEMIC)

Of course I remember even the small details from that day. It was as if these experiences startled awake all my senses. We left the lab through an ancient tunnel – one of the oldest structures in the city-state. It was dark and impenetrable by light. It smelled like old rainwater and animal waste. Underfoot, I listened to the rhythmic squeaking of my rubber soles against wet stone. Doctor Harlow led the way, always several feet ahead of me. I hung back in the shadows, away from the light of the Doctor’s flashlight, finding the darkness comforting. The tunnel ran the length of the building itself and when our time under ground started to make me uncomfortable, daylight showed between the cracks in the cement walls.

The Doctor’s flashlight illuminated a set of stone stairs. Soon, we were climbing up toward a rusty metal door with a warped red and white paper sign that simply read, “EXIT”. The Doctor opened the door and the familiar sting of fresh bright light pierced my eyes. Eyes barely open, I felt my way through the open door and immediately desired to retreat back into the dark and quiet confines of the tunnel.

Every part of me felt assaulted by this strange outside world, the place where I'd be forced to live for the next 92 days. The air was no longer still or calm, but instead pressed against me in great gusts, threatening to push me along like a human sail. My hair whipped around my ears, making it difficult to distinguish between the sounds of hair flapping as it blended with other strange noises. Some of the sounds like the buzzing of wires and the humming of electric cars, I recognized from my own world. Other sounds were brash and robotic. Others reminded me of sounds I already knew, like the sudden slamming of doors or the constant mumblings of conversation had between people. Somewhere to the left of me I could hear a rhythmic echoing of words I couldn't distinguish, but I recognized the tone as one of hostility.

I stood still for several moments until I found myself brave enough to open my eyes. My back was near a red brick wall containing the same rusty metal door I had just exited from; the sign on the outside now read, "Authorized Personnel Only." In front of me was another brick wall, streaked in something wet and slimy. To the left at the end of an alley I could see a crowd of people standing along what looked like a street, all wearing the same odd clothing I dressed in earlier -- the same outfit Doctor Harlow was wearing -- a dark gray jumpsuit and flat canvas shoes with red rubber soles.

The crowd chanted something repeatedly, but it was unclear and jumbled. Many had their fists raised above their heads as they shouted. At first I thought they were shouting at the group of robotic beings standing before them. Strange tubular structures stuck out of their robotic arms pointed at the crowd. I started to move closer to investigate and noticed the people weren't shouting at the robots, but were looking up at the building where I had just exited.

“James!” the Doctor whispered.

I startled and turned around as though awakened from a trance.

“This way,” the man directed, pointing down the opposite end of the alley.

I followed after him, trying to avoid stepping into puddles of murky water that accumulated in the cracks and concrete dents. At the other end of the alley I could see the rush of vehicles passing by. Once or twice I thought I noticed something odd about them, but shook off the thought, attributing it to their quick speed or my eyes not fully adjusting to the light. On closer inspection, however, I knew what I saw was true -- none of the cars had wheels, but instead hovered above the ground. Once the Doctor and I stepped out from the cover of the alley, a loud rushing frenzy spiraled and swarmed around me, and loomed above my head at great heights. I looked up at towering skyscrapers, reflecting beams of golden sunlight off their shining frames. Between the buildings the hovering vehicles raced in and out like a perfect tapestry woven at a master’s loom. Every vehicle was interesting and crossing in front of the others, but none ever collided or lost momentum.

“Let’s go, James!” the Doctor shouted. My feet had remained stationary for several minutes while the Doctor continued walking ahead of me.

I caught up with him quickly.

“Are those self-driving, hovering cars?” I asked breathlessly, trying to keep up with his brisk pace.

“Yes. They’re called Autocarts. They’re AI vehicles that think and move and operate free of human intervention.”

“I know people have been talking about building these things, but I didn’t know they were even invented or so common!”

“Of course you didn’t,” the Doctor said.

His assumption irritated me, until I realized that he was right. I had only seen as much as he had let me see. This thought did little to comfort me.

The Doctor walked into one of the Autocarts, which sat waiting with open doors along the street as if expecting us. I followed after him and took a seat along the leather cushion.

“Keep your arms and legs clear of the door,” a robot voice warned. I jumped at the sudden command and tucked my arms and legs in turtle-like fashion. A cushioned strap crept over my right shoulder, slithered across my chest, and locked into the seat by my left hip.

“Where to?” the robot voice asked.

“Central Square Boarding School,” Doctor Harlow ordered.

“Yes Sir,” the robot confirmed.

The Autocart cabin rattled slightly before lifting several feet off the ground and coasting forward. Inside the cabin the speed of the Autocart didn’t feel significant, but the distorted blur of people, airborne crafts, and skyscrapers said differently.

“What do you mean by, *of course you didn’t?*” I persisted.

“I mean that it was never intended for you to see this world. It took many years for me to develop the virtual world that you’ve lived in. I used inspiration from the past and then modified and tailored it to each person’s preferences. By creating the virtual

world from our past, I would always have material to work from for the virtual present and plenty of time to alter it as I want.”

These ideas about the present being the past and the present being the future took some time to settle. As I untangled and sorted these concepts in my 13-year-old brain, the Autocraft continued to fly at a consistent pace, never stopping or slowing. The Autocart landed in the courtyard of a large decrepit building. The Doctor exited the vehicle and walked toward the stone building. I followed after. He walked briskly toward the front door, skipping every other cement stair leading to the top. I tried to do the same to keep up, but couldn't match the Doctor's long strides.

The courtyard was quiet, like an old abandoned lot that should have a “No Trespassing” sign instead of a “Welcome” mat. Once we reached the door, a deep robotic voice spoke out of a small speaker built into its center.

“Welcome to Central Square Boarding School,” the voice said.

I had the urge to point out that the school was not very central and there didn't appear to be anything square about it, but resisted the thought and kept the remarks to myself.

“State your name and business,” the robot commanded.

“Doctor William Harlow. I'm here to see my nephew, the Headmaster, Nathaniel Harlow,” the Doctor explained.

“For what purpose?” the robot persisted.

The Doctor turned to me. “These Door Droids can be nuisances,” he whispered.

“I heard that.” The robot said, “I’m sensing a hostile presence. You have 5 seconds to state your official business before I alert the proper authorities. 1--2--” the robot began to count.

“They also don’t have a sense of humor,” the Doctor said curtly.

“3--4--” it continued to count.

I gave the Doctor a polite smile and stared nervously at the door and then back at the Doctor and then back at the door again.

“4 ½ ... 4 ¾ ...”

“I’ve brought his newest pupil to see him,” the Doctor said calmly.

“Why didn’t you say so sooner?” the robot reprimanded.

There was a sudden loud click from inside the door. “Come in,” it said and then swung slowly open for both of us to pass through.

A chime rang out in the corridor like the sound of a doorbell ring. The door closed automatically causing a strange echo to emanate around us. It was a modest sized corridor, which smelled musty and looked well used. We passed through the corridor and entered into a large entrance hall.

The sound of our footsteps echoed off the high vaulted ceiling of the entrance hall. The floor reminded me of a chessboard absent of its pieces. I stood on a black marble square and the Doctor beside me on a white one. I didn’t know what to do with myself. I noted the way the Doctor stood still, with his hands held behind his back, and imitated him. We waited in the silent entrance hall for several minutes, waiting for something or someone to appear. To the left of us was another corridor, which to my delight led to a large library with desks and arm chairs. To the right a large staircase of

white marble twisted in a half spiral up to a second floor balcony. In front of us was a wood-paneled wall containing a small wooden door that, had it not been for an iron knob, would have appeared to be just part of the wall itself.

Several minutes passed in the same manner, in silence, both of us looking around at the walls, until the wooden door finally opened. Its hinges made a rusty squeal that bounced and echoed off every surface of the hall. In the frame of the door stood a short man, too young to have the comb over that now draped his forehead. His glasses, too, aged him, magnifying his tired eyes to appear twice their size. He was out of breath and wiping his brow with a tissue, all the while looking down at his watch and shaking his balding head. He stumbled into the room and tried to collect himself.

“Uncle Will, you’re here,” the man said breathlessly.

“Nate! It’s great to see you,” the Doctor replied.

A few seconds passed in silence as the two men shook hands.

“You look terrible,” the Doctor said with a laugh.

“I’m holding it together.” He wiped his brow again. “If you’ll follow me, right this way.” He turned back toward the door and we followed him through it.

We entered into the man’s office.

“You’ll have to excuse the clutter,” he said.

The only apparent clutter I could see was a small pile of a few papers, which the Headmaster quickly shuffled together and tucked away in an empty drawer. The other contents on his desk included a set of plastic key cards, another white electronic tablet, and a small shriveled potted plant. There was a worn sofa in front of his desk with a few

small holes along the seam. The Headmaster took his seat in an armchair behind the desk and we sunk down into the impressions of the sofa's cushions.

Until that point the Headmaster hadn't even made a passing glance at me, but now he stared hard as if seeking out every crease and blemish on my face. His thick glasses magnified every blink of his eyes. His facial expression was hard for me to decipher, as it appeared he had great difficulty deciding what facial expression he wanted to make. I can only imagine it was because the man could not yet determine what sort of child I was and only could see visions of me participating in terrorizing him as many of the other children had before me. Yet, probably wanting to be hopeful and optimistic and believe in every student's potential, he attempted several times to smile. This is probably what caused the series of tense flinches from his mouth and several eye twitches.

Doctor Harlow, no doubt finding the silence an unbearable waste of time from more important matters, cleared his throat and made the introductions. "Nathaniel, this is James."

"P-leased, to meet you," the Headmaster said.

"James, my nephew is fully aware of your circumstances. Our hope is that you'll take full advantage of your time here to educate yourself and--"

The Headmaster let out a slight snort, but attempted to stifle his laugh with a dramatic cough. Doctor Harlow shot his nephew a peculiar look before continuing.

"Take advantage of your time here to learn as much as possible about our world. Our desire is that you'll come to a well-informed decision in the end. During your stay here, I will act as your legal guardian and you may--"

There came a sudden loud commotion from outside the office door. A series of abrupt thuds rattled along the walls of the office. We heard shouts and cheers echoing down the hall. Both men stood up and rushed out of the room. I remained where I was, but turned to look out into the hall just the same. Two boys were swinging their fists wildly at each other -- for what reason I couldn't determine. The adults attempted to push through the ring of chanting students to get to the boys in the center. Just as the men were about to pull the two boys apart, a short girl with small brown eyes, long red hair, and a wide smile scurried into the room. She paused a moment to look at me, cocked her head to one side as one might do while observing a painting, and then grabbed the key cards from the desk. She shot a clean smile at me, winked, and ran from the room.

Several minutes passed before the commotion calmed down and the two men returned. They both looked disheveled and out of breathe. The Headmaster continued to wipe his brow with what remained of the tattered tissue.

"You really should have more robot orderlies on staff, Nathaniel. This doesn't seem manageable anymore," the Doctor said.

"Yes, yes, I know. But you know as well as I do that they give us a very poor budget. They don't understand what we need here. You know how it is, all numbers and formulas. They make their calculations and the ratio of orderlies to students in theory should be good enough."

"I suppose you're right. I just hate to see you overworked like this."

"Yes, well, never mind that now. I should get James here settled into his room."

"Yes, of course. I'll leave you to it." Doctor Harlow turned to me, "James, I'll be in touch with you in the near future. Remember the purpose of your time here."

As if I needed reminding.

With those final words, the Doctor left the office and left me to face the Headmaster on my own. I watched as the Doctor disappeared back through the corridor and exited out the door we had entered. When I turned back to face Headmaster, I was startled to find no one there at all. I was bewildered for a moment, until the man's hand came up from behind his desk and slapped the surface. He then sprung up suddenly, causing a jolt of adrenaline to surge through my body. The man acted as if I wasn't even sitting there observing all this. He looked around him, opened his desk drawer, slammed it shut, opened it again, only to slam it shut once more. He mumbled to himself, all the while shaking and scratching his balding head.

"You!" the man said, as though suddenly snapping out of a bad dream. His abrasive tone and harsh glare made me jolt in my seat.

"Sir?"

"Starting in already are you? Just like the rest of them!"

"Starting?"

"Trouble!" the Headmaster shouted while wagging his index finger at my face. "Where are they?" The man continued, his face now turned an unhealthy shade of deep red.

"They who?" I asked.

"Not who, but what! You you you..."

"I honestly don't know what--"

"My keys! Where are my keys?"

"I didn't take them, honestly, I swear! There was a red head girl in here and --"

The Headmaster held up his hand to silence me. The man's face softened and return to its natural shade. He took a deep breath as though to prove just how much patience and restraint he had in him.

“Say no more. Come with me.” His voice sounded more melodic like an airy chant. I imagined he walked out the door much more composed on the outside than he was on the inside. I stood up and followed after him. We marched down the hall at a brisk pace. We entered into the library. I slowed down as I looked around at the high vaulted ceiling and the tall walls lined with books. There were several sets of spiral stairs leading up to balconies full of more rows of books. A peculiar thought struck my mind as I stared up at the thousands of books. I ran through the library to catch up with the Headmaster.

“Why do you have so many books if they can all be accessed electronically?”

The man shot me a curious side-glance as we walked.

“I would think you of all people would know,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Despite its convenience, electronic technology is not always reliable. It's good to have printed copies as back ups. Without the back ups, we could risk losing some of the greatest works in literature. Things can go wrong without any real explanation -- such as in your case.”

“My case?”

“What explanation is there for your exiting out of virtual reality?”

I considered this, one of the many unanswered questions I still had.

“But, there might be an explanation. There has to be a reason why it happened.”

“Yes, there is. But the point is we don’t have an answer at this time. The downfall of technology is that it can instantaneously give you what you want, but can just as quickly take it all away again.”

We continued talking a little further as we walked through the library. The Headmaster encouraged me to explore the library and read the paper copies available. I, as you can imagine, wished for nothing more. We exited the library on the other side and entered into a large corridor, where a humanoid stood fixed in place, and then continued on through a set of double doors. Once through, we entered into the buzz of the school cafeteria.

The walls and floor were covered in large white tiles. The only windows were five narrow cut outs that ran the length of the whole back wall. There were several rows of steel benched tables lined along two opposing walls. At each table sat a dozen or so students of varying ages. They all wore the same uniform that I was wearing.

The red hair of the girl stuck out amongst the tones of gray and white. She sat with a group of other girls, some appeared to be about her age, a few of them were younger and all seemed to be fixated on what she was saying. Among the gaggle of girls, not a single eye looked anywhere other than at the redhead’s wide mouth as it moved nonstop, apparently telling them something of interest. Even I wished that I could join them and hear what it was she was saying.

“Did you hear me?” the Headmaster asked.

I looked up at the man as if he had woken me up at 3am and told me to run through the sprinklers in the front lawn while wearing a clown suit.

“W-w-hat?”

“I said, can you point to the girl you saw in my office earlier?”

I didn't say a word, but rather pointed at the red-headed girl, a gesture that didn't go unseen by the other students. Some began to stare at me and whisper and speculate among themselves.

“Just as I thought.”

The man marched toward the table where the red-head sat.

There was a hush that came over the students, except for the occasional jab, whisper, and knowing looks shared among them. By the time the Headmaster had reached the girl's table, she too had stopped talking and began shifting in her seat.

I stood there and watched something I had never seen an adult do before. The Headmaster approached the girl from behind and took a firm grip on the back of her collar. When I saw her wince, I instantly regretted telling him it was her who'd done it.

“Well, Alice, this is a surprise isn't it?” the man said.

A sinking feeling emanated from my stomach as I watched the girl's face furrow as the Headmaster pulled her up by her collar and onto her feet; strands of her long red hair were tangled between the man's tight fingers. The Headmaster pushed the girl to walk forward down the aisle between the steel tables. All eyes stared and heads turned, watching as he escorted her toward the door and into the robotic hands of the humanoid orderly.

The Headmaster whispered orders to the humanoid and she was taken away down the hall. Several students glared at me in disgust before turning back and resuming their conversations.

“Come with me,” the Headmaster said.

I trailed behind him, staring down at his clenched fist. His knuckles looked like pale spikes along his hand. His key ring swayed from his index finger.

I followed him out of the cafeteria. The hair on my neck rose. I didn't have to turn around to know that several of the other students had their eyes fixed on me as I left. Once we exited the cafeteria and headed toward the library, my pulse began to slow down again. I wiped the moisture from my palms along my pant legs and took several deep breaths.

I followed the man into the library. He walked to the center of the room and looked up into the balconies as if searching for something or someone.

“Danny!” He shouted.

There came a sudden disturbance from behind a large pile of books on the second floor balcony. A small boy emerged. His arms full of books, which he cradled in his arms as gently as one holds an infant.

“Who calls so loud?” the boy asked. His face looked grim.

“Danny, come down. There's someone I want you to meet.”

The boy made his way down the spiral staircase quickly, practically stomping along the stairs as he went. He walked over to where we stood and positioned himself before us as a soldier stands before a General. His eyes looked down at the floor – avoiding eye contact with us. He shook his left arm as if trying to dry it off.

“I'm very busy, very busy,” the boy mumbled to himself. “Why does he beckon me at a time like this? Very busy.”

“Danny, this is James,” the Headmaster said. His voice sounded like a mother attempting to reprimand her child in front of strangers without their knowledge.

“Do you know that fractals can be constructed by using the Mandelbrot Set, which uses the equation $Z_{n+1}=Z_n^2+C$?”

“I-i-uh, fractals?” was all I managed to get out.

“Fractals are everywhere in our original natural habitats, don’t you know that? You’ll see them if you look for them. Using the equation $Z_{n+1}=Z_n^2+C$ we manufacture them by synthetic means.”

I looked up into the Headmaster’s face as one might look at another student’s paper during a pop quiz. I only saw a blank expression. The more I looked at him, the more he shifted away from me, and I suspected he was pretending not to notice me.

“Danny, you’ll have plenty of time to explain fractals to James. Right now I want you to meet your new roommate.”

Danny began shaking his arm in protest. “Roommate he says, there’s not room, no room. No room for a roommate.”

“I know you don’t like change, but you’ll have to make room for him. He has nowhere else to go.”

Danny groaned at this remark.

“Fine.”

“Will you show him to your room now?”

“Fine!” The boy’s tone was anything but fine.

The Headmaster turned around and gave me a wink. “You’ll settle in soon enough,” he said and then patted me on the back and walked down the hall back toward his office, leaving me alone with Danny.

I stared at him stupidly for several minutes. He stared at the ground.

“Follow me, Comrade,” he said.

Without looking at me, he turned and walked back toward the dorms.

Once upstairs, we passed by more humanoid orderlies who acknowledged us both by name. “Good afternoon, James,” he said to me. I looked back quickly at him. He was staring at us as we walked down the hall.

“They know when we come and go,” Danny said. His left arm was shaking. We came to door number 23. Danny pulled out his key card and waved it over the sensor beside the door.

It opened. We walked in. It wasn't particularly large. I imagined if we had walked into a giant cardboard box it would feel about the same – small, squared, brown walls. One benefit to the room was that it had a small window in the center of the back wall. There were also two small beds -- one on each side of the window.

Beneath the window, holding more than it was meant to, sat a small nightstand. It, like every other flat surface in the room, held Jars and containers of many shapes and sizes. Several jars rested on the nightstand; smaller ones lined the windowsill; larger ones sat on what I assumed was my bed. Some of them contained various plants and others different species of insects. I watched as Danny took the larger jars off the bed and set them on the floor. His face held a concentrated and somber expression as he moved them one at a time treating them as though each one was a delicate and precious artifact.

When he had safely completed his task he stood a moment and stared at the rust stained blanket.

“That's where you sleep,” he said.

I shrugged and pulled the blanket off, giving it a few shakes until the dust and the dirt flew into the air and settled onto the floor. Danny shook his head and arm in irritation at this. He looked down at the flecks of brown that now resided around his feet. Falling down on his hands and knees he felt around underneath his bed and retrieved a small hand brush and dustpan. I was at a loss again and took a few steps back. Dumbly, I watched as my new roommate swept the dirt up into the tray in a frenzy as though trying to hide the evidence of a heinous crime.

He continued in that manner for some time. I watched. Danny brought his face down low to the floorboards, squinted several times, searching for every last bit of dirt until he swept up and collected all into the dustpan. He didn't look at me, but his facial expression showed his disappointment.

"Don't know where he thinks he is. Don't know who he thinks he is." He stood up with the pan in hand.

I couldn't think of a single thing to say to him. I just stood and watched.

With every grain of dirt collected, Danny rushed to the window, slid open the glass pane, and flung the contents of the pan into the open air.

"Dirty city can stay dirty. Bits of nature might do it some benefit," he said.

I didn't understand his reasoning.

CHAPTER 7

INTERVIEW WITH DANNY

LOCATION: THE MUSEUM OF STRANGE AND WONDERFUL THINGS (ALSO
WHERE HE WORKS), THE NEW TANTUM CITY

YEAR: 221 P. E. (POST EPIDEMIC)

I heard him long before I saw him. His feet moved in a lazy shuffle, followed posterior to the Headmaster's heavy clomping. I tried not to let the sound of their feet distract me from my work. The books needed sorting and I spent most of the day organizing them correctly. First by author's last name, then by first name, next by title, then by year published, and if there were duplicates, by color.

I listened to the thump-shuffle-thump-shuffle of their feet halt in the foyer below. I finished with Baker, Baldwin, Bishop, Blume, Bray, and Byron. Blake remained in my hand. I found it hard to concentrate. *Blake needs a place, Blake, Blake*, I stressed. I waited for it. I knew he was standing there – it was the Headmaster's usual way. He'd *thump-thump* his way into the library, pause, and wait a moment before –

“Danny!”

Just as I expected.

“Who calls so loud?” I said in the ancient words of the apothecary.

It was the Headmaster's usual way of calling for me that reminded me of Romeo seeking out poison. The Headmaster's needs were less significant than poison and death,

which made his tone of voice both confusing and irritating to me. Gladly, I would have given him poison, but all the man needed were records updated.

I peered down from the balcony. He had no respect for the work I put into organizing the library. No respect for my time. I wanted to hurl the book I held at the man's balding head. But, I thought better of it as I did not wish to damage such a treasure worthy of respect as Blake. I put Blake safely down on one of the untouched piles.

"Danny, come down! There's someone I want you to meet," he said.

I saw the other boy standing there and knew what he wanted. My stomach twisted and clenched as it often did before meeting new people. I wanted to throw something at the boy's head. I couldn't control the energy – the urge – that had built up inside my arm. I shook it to relieve the pressure; grateful I placed Blake safely aside.

I moseyed over to the spiral stairs and stomped down each one, showing the boy through my dramatization how to pick up his feet when walking. It was satisfying showing him my demonstration of correct leg movement, but soon felt my stomach lurch again as I approached them on the ground floor. The four eyes that glared at me caused a great deal of discomfort and I found staring at the ground more agreeable.

"I'm very busy," I said.

I hoped he would permit me to return back to the books. He was oblivious to this fact and didn't change. I even told him outright, but the Headmaster was a little slow to understand things. *Why does he beckon me like this?* I thought. I liked the word *beckon*, it's a refined and crisp word. *Beckon, Beckon... b-b-b-eck-on. Beckon Blake... b-b-bla-ke.* I still hadn't found a place for Blake.

I pictured the B section of the library, every book in its place except for Blake. There was an empty space between Bishop and Blume waiting to be used. I waited for the Headmaster to finish talking. I didn't respond, hoping that would be an indicator that the conversation was over. I waited to be dismissed from the conversation, but it never happened.

Their eyes continued to look at me. I felt hot. My forehead started to dampen. I wanted to look up to see if they still wanted something from me. But their eyes would be there and I preferred the mosaic tiles of the library floor, the fractals beneath our feet. Its elaborate pattern even more impressive from a distance, standing on the balcony, peering down at the spiraling shapes.

I enjoy fractals immensely.

My favorite fractals are the ones found in plants and insects. They can be found virtually anywhere though.

Eyes too have fractals. I once read a book about the anatomy of the human eye. I studied images of optic blood vessels and nerves, branching and splintering in their complexity. Even the iris is made up of fractals – the only redeeming quality about eyes.

“Fractals can be constructed by using the Mandelbrot Set, which uses the equation $Z_{n+1}=Z_n^2+C$,” I told James.

I once read that one way to make friends is to find common ground with another person. Fractals are a part of every human. I like fractals. Common ground was established.

But I could tell James wasn't so good at making friends either. All he could say was, “I-i-uh, fractals.”

Despite his broken English, I assumed he got the point. I tried to make him feel more comfortable by initiating further conversation on the subject. This continued until the Headmaster said, “I want you to meet your new roommate.”

Once again the Headmaster was a little slow on figuring things out. We were past the introductions and were already forming a friendship. But it was the word *roommate* that surprised me the most. I had roommates already – several varieties of plants and insects. Where would I keep a human? Where would the ferns go – and the broccoli? What about the Whirligig beetle or the Scarabs? Where would they sleep? No, there was no room for a human.

CHAPTER 8

INTERVIEW WITH ALICE

LOCATION: BACK PORCH OF HER HOUSE, THE NEW TANTUM CITY

YEAR: 221 P. E. (POST EPIDEMIC)

I didn't care that James ratted me out; they would have caught me eventually anyway. Of course I wasn't going to let *him* know that. I planned to hold it against him for the rest of his life.

In all honesty, I think it was the thought of getting caught that gave me such a rush; the chance I might be punished. Rules don't exist without consequences and they can't be broken if they don't exist in the first place. I know what you're thinking, why break rules?

Imagine, if you will, living in a cage with a boa constrictor and every time you so much as sneeze or cough, the animal coils around you and slowly gets tighter and tighter. Now, imagine again that you have a knife and all you have to do in order to be free – in order to live – is to kill the snake. Breaking the rules was like killing the snake for me. It was the only way I could feel free, albeit briefly. Of course, the irony is that when sent to detention it meant experiencing your greatest fear – for me, it was confinement.

After the Headmaster handed me over to the orderlies, they transferred me to the city detention center, where all petty criminals were sent in those days. The usual routine was to hook me up to a machine that would detect my fears. The machine would flash a

series of images and scan my brain for the greatest fear response. I had become a frequent visitor of their establishment, so fear detection was unnecessary this time.

After transfer, I was immediately taken to the usual place, a small cell about 4 feet wide and 4 feet long. The roof was shallow and even I – only 5 feet tall – had to stoop to keep from bumping my head. They closed the door and left me there alone.

The first few minutes, as usual, I reasoned with myself. I closed my eyes, took deep breaths, and imagined I was outside in a wide-open field. But then I wanted to run through the field, just to feel my hair ripple flag-like in the wind. I was reminded that I couldn't, that I was stuck. And my palms started to sweat and my legs grew weak. I collapsed against one of the walls and lost my concentration. I reached out to steady myself and felt another wall moving in too close to me. Another wall came in from the other side. I kept my eyes closed tight, knowing if I opened them I'd lose control and give them the satisfaction of breaking me.

My foot slipped and I felt another wall. *I'm trapped, I'm trapped!* I thought over and over. *I need to get out!* My heart pounded hard. *Don't lose control, Alice.* Then the walls closed in and I pushed my feet off one wall and press my back against the other trying to break them apart, trying to keep them from collapsing on me. *I can't breathe.* I whimpered and cried until tears of fear turned into tears of anger.

Two hours later when it was over, they asked me if I learned my lesson?

“Yes,” I said, but only *I* knew the lesson I learned.

I learned to hate them and wished I could think of something worse to do.

They took me back to my cell where I would spend the next few nights serving my time in detention. There was nothing to do except for stare at iron walls and dwell on unpleasant memories.

I quite often thought about my childhood, before my parents sent me to boarding school. I spent a lot of time attending banquets held by high-ranking city officials. As the child of a political figure, they expected me to present myself flawlessly in public. They dressed me in outfits crafted from pink satins, yellow silks, and golden lace -- a luxury we had at private events that the common man knew nothing about. My head would frequently ache from the long strands of red hair they piled high and pinned in elaborate braids and twists.

My mother spent long hours attempting to train me to be like her. She had the face and personality of a trout. She was the sort of person who, no matter where we were she would eat the same food -- chicken on a bed of lettuce, no dressing. She said it was how she maintained her figure -- a skeleton covered in a plastic bag. She would order the same for me, but never understood why I never lost more weight. During dinner I would excuse myself to go to the bathroom and steal pastries from the dessert table on my way out the door. Corbin Sullivan, my father's apprentice, would see me do it every time, but he never told my mother -- he would just wink at me and pass me the cookies he saved for me in his pockets.

I still smile thinking about this.

My father rarely spent time with me except at political events. If he spoke to me at all, it was usually in the form of a reprimand. He frequently saw me as a wild and animal-like being he could tame with shouts and beatings. If I spilled my drink he'd

hover over me to ensure every last drop and speck was thoroughly erased from the floor. His hard fingertips digging into the back of my arm would tell me I wasn't cordial enough towards one of his superiors. I tried to learn how to please him, hoping for his approval; but, no matter how I tried it never came. I'd listen to him reprimand my mother too for her inability to train me properly, and I knew I'd failed again.

As a child I didn't understand what I know now. You can't beat a child into submission, you can only make a free minded person cower. Submission and fear should never be confused. True obedience comes from freewill, not from bondage. I think that's why I liked Corbin so much, he spent time with me unconditionally -- spinning me around in the garden, making silly faces at me, or just sitting and talking with me. I'd tell him how I felt and he'd listen to me for hours and smile at me to let me know he understood.

"I know how your father can be," he'd say, "he's not easy to please. You'll never be a good enough daughter and I'll never be a good enough apprentice."

"At least we have each other," I'd tell him.

"That's right. We have each other. This will be our secret."

"I won't tell anyone," I'd promise him.

Any time he'd come to the house he'd bring me gifts -- sometimes candy, another time a bird carved out of wood, on another occasion a new picture book to read together. Before he'd leave, he'd wrap his arms around me, kiss the top of my head, and stroke my hair a few times.

"Goodbye little sister. Until next time?"

"Until next time."

He always looked out for me. When I failed to appear one afternoon for a luncheon held in our garden house, my mother assumed I was rebelling and my father, too consumed with business, took no notice of my absence. Corbin alone went in search of me. On his way to our house, he nearly fell into *it* himself. A small sinkhole had formed on our property. The cavity revealed itself after several days of heavy rainfall and erosion. I was walking toward the garden house as instructed, when I felt the ground beneath me crumble and I fell until something hard collided with my skull. When I awoke, Corbin said he'd found me, bloody and unconscious, lying beneath the ground in a bed of clay and limestone. They declared him a hero and I was in debt to him again.

These were the memories that both cheered and disturbed me during my long days in detention. These were the memories I fought hard to avoid thinking about, but couldn't escape.

Three days later they transferred me back to the boarding school.

My only thought was, *until next time*.

CHAPTER 9

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES NO. 764 (ALSO, MY DAD)

LOCATION: OUR LIVING ROOM, THE NEW TANTUM CITY

YEAR: 221 P. E. (POST EPIDEMIC)

I look back on these memories with regret and pain. My ignorance was apparent to everyone except myself. In regards to Alice, I was the only one who had no idea where she'd gone. When I asked my classmates, no one else would talk to me about it. In fact, no one would talk to me at all. Alice was a particular favorite among us kids, mostly because she did things they only dreamed of doing. Snitching on a fellow student was considered the worst offense and was the first unspoken rule I learned there. I hadn't learned their code yet, but they punished me for my ignorance just the same. Between classes and at mealtimes I was alone and only had Danny as company in the evenings. Of course, as my roommate he had no choice.

When the door to our Waste Management class opened a few days after the incident, Alice stood in its frame looking dazed. Strands of red hair hung like ropes over her dark eyes. Professor Gronwich, a humanoid, attempted to continue with the lesson.

“Face front!” he commanded.

Our bodies simultaneous sat up and our heads snapped back into place. I couldn't help but let my eyes stray back to Alice one last time as she shuffled from the doorway to an empty seat at the front of the classroom.

“Population overgrowth in Tantum City and the fickle nature of humans caused continual epidemics of extinction and waste. Fear led to the creation of machines to regulate this waste problem.”

Alice’s head bobbed slightly. One of the girls sitting behind her kicked the bottom of her seat. Alice took no notice and continued to let her head drop into sleep.

“Of these machines, there are four categories: The Waste Police, Waste Collectors, Waste Processors, and Waste Distributors. These four groups provide Tantum City with a self-contained eco-system with no waste.”

Professor Gronwich stopped his lecture and stared down at Alice.

“Alice, wake up!”

She shot up from the volume of the humanoid voice. She looked around her quickly as if waiting for attack from all sides. A few of the students giggled at her glazed expression.

“Would you like to return to the detention center?” Professor Gronwich said with a grimaced expression.

The giggles stopped.

Guilt pervaded me again and my stomach wrenched. I wanted more than anything to hide.

Then Alice did something I never expected, she turned around and stared right at me. Her wide-mouthed grin spread across her face and then she winked. Heat rushed into my face and I forgot how to swallow again.

“No, no I would not,” she said to the professor and then turned back to face the front again.

I hardly slept the first few nights. I spent most of my time thinking about my parents. Not the ones I knew in Virtual Reality you understand, but my real flesh-and-blood parents. I imaged what they looked like and what it would be like if I ever met them one day. Initially, I imaged our reunion would be full of happy tears and longing embraces. But then I'd think about the container, hooked up to wires, being made a fool for 13 years, enduring several months of painful therapy, being forced to live in the boarding school for several months, sleeping in a bed that was lumpy and dirty, sharing a room with a strange boy, surrounded by jars full of even stranger bugs and plants. Then I felt the anger. Why would you abandon me? Why would you make me live like this? I imagined breaking away from their embrace and shouting every accusation I could think of. While I didn't even know who they were, I blamed them for everything that had gone wrong in my life. In truth, I hated them.

Every attempt at sleep was cut short by nightmares and strange noises. I'd often dream about the same thing. It would be dark and I'd beg for some light. Each time I'd call for light it would appear. Sometimes it would reveal itself to me as subtle as a firefly and other times as immediate as lightning. When the light appeared, I'd reach out and touch it, forgetting what happened the last time I dreamed this dream. Electric currents would course through my body, burning every muscle, vein, and bone in me. I'd wake up sweating and shaking, my heart racing.

Had anyone attempted to comfort me, I would have been inconsolable. My one thought every time I'd wake would be, *where am I?* And then I'd realize I was still at the boarding school lying between a lumpy mattress and a dirty blanket. *I want to go home,*

I'd think and hoped I could will myself home as easily as I summoned light. But then I realized I had nowhere else to go.

My old home was a construction in my imagination. The enveloping softness of my favorite reading chair, the smell of the apple trees cooking in the sun, the taste of my father's fresh-baked bread, the sound of the lake lapping up along the muddy shore, they were all just neurons firing inside my head and nothing more. I tried to picture the house I grew up in, but my remembrance of it seemed distorted somehow. I was unsure of the details and I doubted the sizes of the rooms, the colors of the walls, the shape of the furniture, and any other such details I tried to summon. I was then left with the more apparent and immediate reality of the cold and small bedroom they placed me in, surrounded by bugs and plants, and a roommate that considered me a parasitic presence.

On the fourth night, I crept in the dark to my bed, watching my feet in the moonlight so I'd avoid knocking over Danny's insect and plant jars lining the floor. He was already asleep. A loud metallic clang echoed out and I looked around to see what I'd bumped into. Nothing was out of its place.

I heard the sound again and realized it was coming from outside and shuffled toward the window. I peered down into the dark street. A metal trashcan had fallen over and was rolling on its side. Beside the trashcan the figure of an old lady moved in the moonlight. She was oddly dressed, wearing a loose fitting cape and a large purple hat with an ostrich feather sticking out. She was not wearing the city uniform. There was an odd cart full of junk, which she held onto with one hand for balance. I watched as she attempted to stand the trashcan upright several times with some effort. I wanted to help her, but I knew they would never permit me to leave after curfew. It was painful to watch

and I looked on with pity as she let go of her cart, bent over and winced, one hand holding her hip and the other reaching out for the metal can.

“What are you doing?” Danny whispered.

He had woken up and was now getting out of bed. He stood beside me and looked out into the street.

“Just looking at this old woman. I think she needs help.”

“What woman?”

I looked over at him curiously. Danny strained to see the woman who was directly beneath our window.

“How can you not see her?”

“Well I can’t see what’s not there, can I?”

“She’s right there. You can’t miss her!”

He looked again with no luck.

“Do you see the trashcan?”

“Yes. What about it?”

“She’s standing right next to it. She’s trying to pick it up.”

Danny gave me a strange look.

“Get some sleep,” he said and then went back to his bed.

My face became hot and a sinking feeling emanated in my stomach. I looked back down into the street and saw the trashcan standing up right again and the woman walking away, pushing her cart. I saw her clearly before me and started to believe that either Danny was going blind or I was going crazy.

Go back to bed, James. You’re hallucinating, I thought.

The woman's cart jingled and clanged as she continued to push it along the cobblestones. Old pots and spoons and mugs hung from the cart's rack, colliding in a symphony of noises. I looked over at Danny who was now in bed asleep again, wondering how he could possibly sleep through such a racket. She pushed her cart a little further until she stood facing a large brick wall belonging to an old warehouse across from the boarding school.

She can't stand there staring at the wall forever, she'll have to turn around.

She held her palm up in the air and made a pushing motion toward the brick. The hard wall rippled and warped like water. A large hole formed in the middle.

I pressed my face to the glass.

She pushed her cart forward and walked into the hole. Once she and the cart were inside, the wall closed up, flattened out, and became solid again. Adrenaline rushed to my head. The only way I could steady my heart was to tell myself I'd fallen asleep again and was experiencing a new kind of nightmare. I went back to my bed and sunk beneath the blanket. Was it happening again? This was yet another strange and impossible occurrence. I held onto the mattress beneath me, as if any minute it would disappear and I would wake up again in another container hooked up to wires. I waited for it and truly expected it to happen, but it never came.

The next morning I looked outside, down into the street, and saw the brick wall was still there, solid in form. There was not even so much as a window or door she could have walked through.

Crazy nightmares, I thought.

"I hope this won't become a habit," Danny said.

I turned around as he was walking out of the bathroom.

“What do you mean?”

“Keeping me up at night.”

I gave him a curious look.

“You were looking out the window last night, claiming to see things that weren’t there, and then arguing with me about them. Any of this sound familiar?” He gyrated his index finger around his ear.

I swallowed hard and turned back to the window.

“I really saw something. I *thought* I saw--”

“An old woman picking up a trashcan?”

There was a gnawing in the pit of my stomach.

Several more nights came and went in the same manner and similar conversations took place the day after. I’d put myself into bed every night and lay there, waiting for it, anticipating it, the *clink-clink-clink* sound of the old woman’s cart.

“Hear her? She’s coming now!” I’d tell Danny, who’d look out the window just to humor me.

He’d turn away in irritation each time and tell me no one was there and I’d be forced to watch from the window alone, wide-eyed and raving mad, as this woman performed her nightly task of rummaging through trashcans in the street and then disappearing into a liquefied brick wall.

CHAPTER 10

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES NO. 764 (ALSO, MY DAD)

LOCATION: STILL OUR LIVING ROOM, THE NEW TANTUM CITY

YEAR: 221 P. E. (POST EPIDEMIC)

You have a big imagination right? Then I'm sure you can imagine the mental torment those days and nights were for me. The students ostracized me during the day and by night this old lady reduced me to a state of lunacy. In truth, I was in a constant state of highs and lows. Somewhere between anxious terror and hopeless despair.

One afternoon we were outside in the courtyard during our free time and the twin brothers, Brian and Uriah, were starting their usual arguments. This had become a weekly event for them.

"It's mine!" Brian shouted.

"No it's not, I had it first!" Uriah shouted back. He gave the other boy a shove.

"I saw it first!" Brian returned with another shove.

I sat alone leaning against one of the oak trees, apathetic to the commotion everyone else gathered around to watch. I picked at strands of grass, pulling each one up from its roots and tying it in a knot before throwing it away. Doing this was the last thing I had that felt like home. When I lived in Virtual Reality I would lay in the grass for hours pulling up one blade at a time, knotting it, and throwing it away. Over and over again I'd repeat the process and let my thoughts wander. The only difference between the two experiences was the grass in Virtual Reality was clean and soft. At the boarding

school I often found a rash would form on any skin exposed to the dry coarse turf. The bugs too were irritating. Gnats flew into my eyes, flies rested along my pant legs, mosquitos left their red marks along my exposed skin. I let them do as they pleased with me and continued picking at the grass. They regarded me as nothing more than an inanimate object and eventually flew away again leaving me to my task.

Just outside the gate of the boarding school, on the other side of the iron bars, people dressed in gray walked about in their quick and important manner. Each had their to do lists ready to be checked off for the day. I watched the frenzy on the other side; so many people doing so much and yet accomplishing so little. Autocarts flew between walls of chrome and brick. I watched a few here and there until they passed me and were out of sight again. I imagined what it would be like to escape the courtyard, climb on board one of those aircrafts, and command it to take me out of the city and back home again.

But then I'd remember, my home didn't exist.

The humanoids walked stiffly across the courtyard and made their way toward the twins who were now throwing punches at each other. One of the boys succeeded at hitting his opponent in the jaw. There was a smacking sound, a yelp, and then a round of cheers from the spectators.

I continued watching the street.

A familiar figure caught my eye.

Who would fail to notice that purple-feathered hat? She walked down the street, pushing her cart as she had previously. She stuck out even more in daylight, weaving in

and out of the gray uniformed people. But just as it had been for Danny, no one else noticed her except for me.

I looked over my shoulder one last time. The humanoid orderlies were busy prying apart the two boys who were still swinging their arms and kicking their feet at each other.

I'd be just a minute, wouldn't even know I was gone.

I ran down the street and stopped at the intersecting alleyways. I peered around the corner of a brick wall and watched the old woman as she went; her cart made its usual racket.

She stopped at one of the trashcans and looked in. Reaching down, she rummaged around, pulled a hairbrush out, turned it over in her hand a few times, and then threw it back in. I took a step forward to get a better look. A loud clang rang out. My foot hit the side of a metal pipe running along the wall. The woman jumped and looked in my direction. I dodged behind the wall. My heart raced.

What are you doing? Go back, James, it's too late, you've been discovered.

The woman stopped rifling through the trash. I'd spooked her and at any moment she would call out for me to reveal myself. I waited. A mouse crept out from a hole in the brick and began cleaning its whiskers in a nearby puddle. I held my breath.

When the *clink-clink* of the cart started again, I relaxed.

I watched her down the alley. As she turned the bend, I pursued after, running on my toes to muffle the sound of my slapping footfalls. When I came to the corner of the building, the woman jumped out from behind the wall. Startled, I slipped and fell backwards nearly colliding with her. The woman's head turned owl-like in all directions,

her large black eyes searched for witnesses before holding up her hands in front of me. My arms became paralyzed and wrapped around me, as if bound by an invisible straight jacket. I tried to call out for help, but no sounds escaped my throat. She had thought of that too. The woman held her hands up to the brick wall until it began to warp and liquefy. I watched, wriggling fish-like along the hard ground. A hole appeared inside the rippling wall. She stepped in through the opening and made a come-hither-motion with her finger. An invisible force pulled me in after her.

On the other side of the hole, I was flung into a large purple armchair where I sat paralyzed with an invisible cork in my throat. Heat emanated from large flames dancing inside a fireplace on my left. A small black kitten jumped up onto the armrest and curled into a furry ball. Across the room, a large grandfather clock with 17 hours on its face swung its pendulum in gigantic strides.

The heat from the fire made my eyes hot and dry. I tried to move.

Steam rolled out of the spout of a cube shaped teapot sitting on a table beside me. The teapot tipped itself over and poured a spiraling stream of brown liquid into a cup. A silver spoon levitated in the air and stirred in sugar cubes and cream.

I blinked hard.

The old woman moved out of the shadows of the room and stepped into the firelight. She stooped down and I flinched and shut my eyes tight. But she grabbed hold of her teacup instead. Her narrow eyes looked hard at me as she took a sip from the cup and backed away slowly. A rocking chair flew across the room and slid under the woman's backside. She leaned back in her chair and began a slow steady rocking.

“Who are you?” She took another sip.

Her calm manner confused me, having just been bound and dragged there against my will. I tried to speak, but nothing came out.

“Oh, pardon me,” the woman said and waved her hand.

My voice came out louder than intended.

“Please, don’t hurt me! I didn’t mean to pry, it’s just that--”

The woman waved her hand again and I went silent.

The kitten uncoiled itself and stretched out its small body, scraping needle-like claws along the soft fabric near my arm.

“Licorice! Stop it! Licorice, come here!”

The animal yawned, revealing its tiny white teeth. She waved her hand and the kitten flew towards her and came to rest on her lap.

“Let’s try this again. Who are you?”

She waved her hand and took another sip.

“James, Mame,” I said stuttering. It was all too much for me to process at the time -- liquefying walls, entering portals, floating tea cups, and levitating kittens.

“Much better. Would you like some tea?”

I looked over at a spoon already stirring sugar into a freshly poured cup. “I suppose I could take tea.”

The cup levitated toward me and presented itself handle first. I tried to grab hold of it.

“Oh, pardon me,” the woman said again and giggled. She waved her hand and I took the cup.

“I’m sure you think you’re clever young man.”

I continued sitting with my tea in hand, staring blankly at the woman.

“I’m sorry, I--”

“Apology accepted.”

“But I wasn’t--”

“Apology or not, I’m afraid something will have to be done about you. I can’t have you going back to the kingdom and telling them where I am.”

Frustration boiled over in me.

“I don’t know who you think I am, but --”

“I know--”

“No you don’t!” I said, folding my arms.

She widened her eyes and threw her head back appalled.

“I only followed you because I can see you and I hoped if I followed you I’d get some answers and --” This time I stopped myself. I stood up and placed my full cup on the table. “I’m sorry for following you, this was all just a misunderstanding. I’ll leave you alone, I promise.”

I turned to leave, but the room was doorless.

“You will remain here until I have my questions answered.”

The purple armchair flew from behind and scooped me back onto its seat cushion.

“Let’s start over again.” Her voice was sugary. “My name is La’baba. You are?”

“James, my name is James.” I folded my arms.

“Now, James, I’ve lived in this city for a very long time – ten years to be exact – and do you know how many people have seen me in those ten years?”

I shrugged.

“None, James. Not one person in this city has ever seen me.”

“Then why can *I* see you?”

La'baba's lips tightened.

“Well let's see, there are only two possibilities.” Her mocking tone was apparent to me. “Either, you're a magic creature from outside the city or you're a magic creature from inside the city. If the first, you're here to harm me. If the second,” she paused, pretended to laugh and then said, “that's not possible.”

“But if you're a magic creature in the city, why couldn't *I* be one too? Besides, why do you think I'm a magic creature at all?”

The old woman laughed again.

“I put a spell on Tantum City. I am invisible to non-magic creatures. The spell has worked for me for over ten years. I have no doubt you possess magic. The question is what sort?”

This can't be right, impossible, none of this is real, I thought.

La'baba stared hard at me with her gray eyes as if she could wait for all eternity if that's what it took for me to confess.

“What powers do you possess?”

I shrugged. She waited.

Several minutes passed and my anxiety grew.

Finally, I said, “Well, I can feel light travel through me.”

I tried to think of something strange about myself to say. I'd say anything at that point to get her to look away from me. I continued. “Sometimes I dream that I can call for light and it comes to me and...” I found it hard to explain, so I started at the beginning

again. “They kept me in Virtual Reality my whole life and then I saw this purple cloud and then there was lightning and it struck me and everything went dark and when I woke up I was inside a lab and...” I stopped. I couldn’t think of the right words to say.

There was quiet for a while, except for the sound of the swinging pendulum of the grandfather clock. It would seem unimaginable, but the look of skepticism melted from her face. Her wrinkled brow fell over her dark eyes, which held the slightest glint of firelight. Her lips were no longer pursed but relaxed.

“Do you believe me?” I asked.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because electricity weakens magic. Being inside a chamber of electricity would make using your powers impossible, unless you...” La’baba shook her head and waved her hand as if swishing away a fly.

“Unless I?”

“Unless you possessed a very particular magic.”

“What kind?”

“Let’s just say, there are some who do possess the ability to bend light and for whom electricity is a source of energy for their magic and not a limitation. But, if your magic is of that sort, then I have more questions for you than answers.”

“But you can tell me more about where it is I’m supposed to have come from, right?”

“Well, if what you say is true and you do indeed come from a magic heritage, I suppose I can tell you about our history, and about Kalpana Kingdom.”

I couldn't relax. I had only taken one sip of tea, but it was strong and made me jittery. I kneaded my hands in my lap, trying to temper my agitation. I wanted answers immediately and everything she said was enigmatic.

“If you possess powers, the only chance of knowing your people or your powers would be in Kalpana. That is where all the Magic Creatures have gone, that is where they feel safest after the human's returned to the world.”

“Returned? How could humans return if we never left in the first place?” I asked.

“Oh dear boy, I'm beginning to believe you more and more. No one ever pretends to be this ignorant.”

“Well if I am ignorant, it's not my fault. Why don't you enlighten me?” I felt insulted and was growing impatient.

Something hard bumped up against my arm. I looked down to find a floating plate full of triangle shaped pastries.

“Try a nozzberry tart. They're spectacular!”

“Uh nozzberry?” I said and then picked one up.

La'baba watched me intently, open-mouthed and wide-eyed as a child. I picked one up and inspected the triangular shaped crust. Flecks of something purple floated in the green jelly filling. The plate floated over to La'baba and the woman stretched out her wrinkled hand to retrieve a pastry. She took a bite, her soft lips and cheeks quivered happily as she chewed.

“I would tell you more,” she said, bits of pastry flew from her mouth as she talked, “but of course, such a history is complicated and takes time.”

“Why not tell me as much as you can, right now?”

She took another bite.

“Because, this sort of thing needs to be done properly, and I suspect if you stay here any longer, you’ll soon be missed.” She paused a moment to think as she chewed.

“Why not come back tomorrow and I’ll tell you more then.”

The uneaten nozzberry tart escaped from my hand and joined the others back on the plate.

“Until then?”

“But, I --”

“Very good, no need to thank me, good bye,” and then she waved her hand. A hole appeared in the wall and I was flung out of it back into the alleyway. I stood up and tried to wipe away street grime from the backside of my uniform. By the time I got back into the courtyard, free time had ended and the students were at dinner.

“I see you’re stealing my moves,” a voice said.

I turned around and saw Alice stepping out from behind the oak tree. She tied her hair back revealing a face full of color again. She smiled wide and stuck her chin out, brimming with confidence.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t report you to the Headmaster?”

“Please, don’t tell. I’m sorry about what happened, I didn’t know you would get in trouble, I just,” I rambled stupidly.

She stepped closer to me, chin out, hands behind her back.

“What did you think, they’d give me an award or something?”

“They didn’t do these things where I used to live.”

She furrowed her brow at me.

“Used to live? There’s only one place *to* live and that’s Tantum.”

“I... nevermind.”

It seemed pointless trying to explain to her. If someone as strange and otherworldly as La’baba didn’t understand, it was an even greater feat trying to get Alice to believe me.

“Here,” Alice said. I looked up and she revealed a dinner roll in one of her hands. She tossed it to me. It nearly slipped from my fingers, but I managed to save it from the dirt.

“What’s this for?”

“Eating. It’s your dinner,” Alice said. “If you’re going to break the rules and sneak out, you have to do it right.”

I didn’t respond.

“The next time you want to sneak out, let me know, I’ll show you how it’s done.”

“So, you’ve done it before.”

“Of course.” She grinned.

“Tomorrow night?”

She grinned wider. “I’ll have a message sent, wait for my instructions.”

She turned away and walked back up toward the school. I took a bite of bread and followed behind her, watching her red hair sway back and forth like a fox’s tail.

CHAPTER 11

INTERVIEW WITH ALICE

LOCATION: WHILE BEE KEEPING (NOTE: I KEPT MY DISTANCE, BUT SHE TALKS LOUD), THE NEW TANTUM CITY

YEAR: 221 P. E. (POST EPIDEMIC)

I was uneasy that night. I should've been sleeping, but instead I wasted precious energy thinking about Corbin again.

He always knew what I wanted -- what I needed. Eleven years older than me, he was the closest thing I had to an older brother. Corbin Sullivan gave me a lot of gifts. Gifts are the worst kind of weapon. They make the receiver controllable. It's a rare person who can look into a smiling face and say "back off!" I don't trust people who give gifts so freely. I always suspect they'll want something in return. I don't tell people what I want, because if they actually become capable of providing it, they'll use it against me later.

"Please, do this one little thing for me," he said.

I looked down at the note in my hand.

"Why can't you deliver it yourself?" I asked. I thought it strange that he'd send a written note at all. "Why not just send a hologram instead?"

"Because it's a secret. I don't want him to know it's from me."

A buzzing ache filled my abdomen. My hand flinched several times in an attempt to return it to him. Something about it nagged at me and I thought it strange.

“Please, Alice, I thought you loved me.” He furrowed his brow dramatically.

“I do love you,” I protested. The remembrance of the games we played and the gifts he gave me came to mind. Why could I not do this one simple thing for him? I slipped the note back into my pocket.

Later that evening, when Councilman Marrow came for dinner, I found his coat hanging in the closet and slipped the note into his pocket.

The next day the councilman publicly announced his resignation -- claiming for health reasons -- and Corbin was named his successor. I regarded it a coincidence and congratulated him.

“Look what I brought for you, little sister.” He handed me a small box.

It had been a rough day. A throbbing ache still clung to the back of my neck where my father grabbed me that morning. I let my hair down to cover the red marks soon to turn purple. I opened the box Corbin gave me and saw several chocolate truffles - - a luxury -- quite expensive. I picked one up and brought it to my teeth, letting them sink into its soft sweet shell. If pleasure had a taste, that would be it. Corbin looked down at me smiling. I smiled back in appreciation.

“I need you to do something else for me,” he said.

I stopped chewing and held the chocolate between my fingers -- it started to melt and slipped into my palm. The same strange feeling as before filled me -- my heart was beating in a dark and hollow space.

“What?” I asked and swallowed.

He reached forward and wiped chocolate off my chin with his thumb.

“I promise, this is the last thing I’ll ask of you.”

I put the mushy truffle back into the box and scraped the excess off my hand with the edge of the lid.

“If you do this for me, I won’t ask anything else from you. I just thought I could count on you,” he said.

“Of course you can count on me!” I insisted, thinking of all the times he had been loyal to me. “What do you need?”

“It’s a small thing really. I made a mistake. At our last meeting I gave your father a small envelope and only realized later I gave him the wrong one. I found the correct one, it looks exactly the same. I need you to switch them for me. Take the old one and replace it with the new one. You’ll save me from embarrassment or maybe worse, losing my new position. If I lose my job, I won’t be able to visit you anymore.” He pulled out a small envelope from his coat pocket and handed it to me.

More paper, more hand written words -- it gave me an odd feeling. But I knew I couldn’t deny helping him and felt a pang of guilt at the thought of him suffering because I failed to help him. I also considered the loss of his visits -- the thought of my life without his company and affection was painful -- that was enough to convince me.

“All right, I’ll do it,” I said.

“Thank you, Alice.” He bent over and gave me a firm hug.

That was the first time all day I had not thought about my sore neck.

“I don’t know where he put the envelope, but I have to think it’s somewhere in his office.”

“There are very few places he’d keep paper things like this. It won’t be hard to find,” I said.

“I’ll be back for another meeting with him tomorrow. That will be your perfect opportunity. I’ll suggest we discuss things in the garden house, so you’ll be free to slip in and out of his office unnoticed.”

Our plan seemed foolproof and I grew in confidence that not only would I succeed, but I was doing the right thing.

The next day, just as planned, my father and Corbin went to the garden house to drink cinnamon tea and discuss their business. My mother was busy sorting out household affairs and I found my perfect opportunity to access my father’s office unseen. There weren’t many places to put things in his office. There were two arm chairs that sat at attention before his desk. His own armchair, taller than the others, sat behind his thick mahogany desk. The walls were white and bare, except for one completely made of solid glass through which I could see the city skyline. I approached his desk trembling, knowing if they caught me it would be more than just my neck that would feel the consequences this time. I couldn’t will my hands to stop shaking as I reached for the first drawer and slid it open. There were only a few items: a hologram device, a pen, a small pad of paper, a few empty envelopes, and an empty prescription bottle for pain meds. I reached over toward the other drawer and opened it. But it was empty. I closed the drawers and looked around the room thoughtfully, wondering where else he would store such an envelope, but I saw no such place.

I need to get out of here, this won’t work.

The office door opened abruptly and my father, my mother, Corbin, and two humanoid orderlies stood at the threshold staring at me. I stood behind my father's desk, holding the envelope in hand, my legs felt numb beneath me and I grabbed hold of his armchair for support. They caught me and I knew the consequences would be severe.

My father didn't say a word, but entered into his office with the orderlies. He rushed up to me grabbed hold of my forearm, digging his fingertips into old bruises. He snatched the envelope from my hand, opened it, and read it. He clenched his jaw. I didn't see it coming, but something hard smacked across my cheek and I knew it was the palm of his hand. The skin stung.

"Traitor," he growled. "I believe this is yours, Corbin."

Corbin stepped through the doorway and received the contents of the envelope.

"Thank you Sir, I'm sure she didn't mean to cause any harm to me," Corbin said.

I tried to speak, but only stammered. My jaw ached and I tried to find as few words to speak as possible -- I tried to find the right words. I replayed events over in my mind and tried to sort them out. Everything had made sense. Everything had been in order. But now every thought was twisted into chaos.

"I d-don't understand," I stuttered.

"Me either, Alice. I know you hate me. I know your intentions are to rebel against me at every moment, but I never thought you'd try something like this."

"Like what?" I looked at Corbin searching for what accusation was being brought against me. He averted his eyes from me and fixed them on my father instead.

“Despite trying to frame me as a traitor, as someone who would steal government secrets from others, you’ve failed. Now you’re going to see how we punish real traitors. Take her away,” my father said.

The orderlies took hold of my arms and I submissively went along without a fight.

“Corbin?” was all I managed to murmur as I passed him. He refused to look at me.

The orderlies took me to the city detention center. That was the first time I experienced how they reformed petty criminals-- or in my case, provoked them.

CHAPTER 12

INTERVIEW WITH ALICE

LOCATION: IN HER LIVING ROOM, THE NEW TANTUM CITY

YEAR: 221 P. E. (POST EPIDEMIC)

Where were we again? Oh right, James and I plotted to escape the boarding school.

Despite a horrible night's sleep, the following day I set my plan into motion. This would be my next great undertaking; my chance to get even with them, to show them I would act as a free person. The task would not be easy, but I enjoyed the challenge. Of course James thought I'd done it plenty of times. It would've only made things more complicated to have him worrying and stressed the whole time.

At breakfast I slipped into the food line in front of James.

“Goodmorning?” he asked.

“Goodmorning.”

I grabbed two food trays from the pile and handed one to James. When he took hold of it I slipped a note between the tray and his fingers. The note read: *Meet me by the oak tree at 4:15pm.*

“Oh, I uh,” he babbled.

“Shhh!”

His face turned red and he looked around stupidly.

“Sorry, got it,” he whispered back.

We met later that day during free time as planned.

“So what’s the plan?” He asked.

I bent down and picked up a handful of mud. He shot me a strange look and I stifled my laugh with my clean hand.

“What are--”

I slapped the side of his sleeve with my muddy hand.

“Hey! Why would you--”

A look of disgust distorted his face as I smeared the rest of the mud into one of his hands. I then swung one of my legs hard into the back of his knees. He lost balance and fell over. One of the orderlies took notice of the commotion and made her way toward us.

“Here let me help you,” I said loudly, reaching out to him dramatically.

The look on his face was an odd hybrid of mistrust and confusion.

I winked at him.

He snapped into recognition.

“Oh, why thank you, how very kind of you.” His drama was poorly executed, but fortunately the humanoids couldn’t detect tone of voice.

James reached up with the muddy hand and grabbed hold of my sleeve, caking a bit of it in brown mush. The orderly arrived just as James stood up again.

“What can I do to be of assistance?” she asked.

“Well, it appears that there’s a slick spot over here by the tree. James fell into some mud and, well, as you can see, we both have dirtied our uniforms.”

“No problem. I will have new, clean ones sent up to your rooms. After you have changed, you may deposit your soiled garments into the laundry chute.”

“Thanks!” I grabbed him by the hand, and pulled him toward the school. I looked back at James who now inverted his lips and his face turned the color of a tomato.

“I’m sorry,” I said, realizing I’d embarrassed him and let go of his hand. “Now, here’s the plan,” I whispered. “Get changed and meet me by the laundry chute at exactly 5:00pm.”

“But dinner’s at 5:00pm.”

“That’s why it’s the best time, because the orderlies will be in the cafeteria. Plus, if we get caught walking around, we now have an excuse.”

We met up as planned with our dirty laundry and dumped the muddy uniforms into the chute.

“Now what?” He asked.

“We jump,” I stated. “I thought that was obvious.”

“What? No way!”

“Shhh!” I held my finger up to my mouth and looked around just to be sure we hadn’t been overheard. “Why not?” I asked.

“Because I like my legs in one piece.”

“They will be.”

“Not if I’m falling fifty feet onto a concrete floor.”

“It’s not fifty feet,” I corrected, “it’s only twenty.”

He rolled his eyes and threw his hands up.

“Ok, ok, to your point,” I reasoned, “tomorrow is laundry day, which means there is a large soft pile of dirty clothes for us to fall into.”

“But, what if--”

“Plus,” I continued, “there won’t be any workers down there because, not only is it dinner time, but they also won’t be down there until tomorrow morning when they start the cleaning.”

James stared at me for several minutes with a look of scepticism.

“Why can’t we just go through the front door?”

“Because, there’s an orderly patrolling the ground floor and in case you forgot, the door has a mind of its own. We’re wasting time,” I said through a clenched jaw, but I suspected he already knew that and was stalling.

“You go first, then.”

“Ok.”

“Wait! Are you sure?”

I climbed up onto the edge of the laundry chute, winked at him and jumped. I fell fast and hard, and just when it became fun it was over and I was laying face down in a pile of laundry. The stench smelled like a combination of armpit and hardboiled eggs.

“Alice, are you all right?” His voice echoed down through the metal tunnel.

“Yes, I’m fine.” I gagged a few times. “Your turn!” I called back.

I climbed out of the pile and waited. His body fell through the air in a smear of color and landed amongst the undergarments, socks, and uniforms. He rolled over onto his back; his face wrinkled in the same sour expression as mine.

“Arrr Uhh, I hadn’t thought about...” he said wading through the pile.

“I know, I know. It’s bad isn’t it?”

“Now what?”

“We make our exit.”

I walked over to a metal door and pushed on the bar handle. We escaped out behind the school where the dumpsters were just outside of the courtyard gate.

“Brilliant,” James said. “How did you know about this?”

“Before they started sending me to the detention center, they tried reforming me through laundry duty.” I crouched down behind a hedgerow that ran along the gate and peered into the courtyard. James did the same. “All the orderlies are inside,” I said.

“We’re safe. Let’s go.”

We stood up and ran down the gravel path that merged into the main street outside the boarding school.

“So, where we going?” I asked.

“We?” He raised his eyebrows.

“Yes, *we*.”

“I’m going to meet a friend, but I’m going alone. She doesn’t want anyone else coming along.”

“Oh, *she*?” I cooed.

“No, it’s not like *that*.”

“Sure, sure, whatever.”

He sighed.

“Ok, fine,” I said, “I’ll just have to find my own fun.”

“So, how do we get back inside tonight?” he asked.

“We don’t.”

“What?”

“I haven’t quite figured that part out yet. We’ll just have to stay out all night and return in the morning when everyone’s at breakfast.”

“Great,” he said, “I’ll see you later.”

“Sure, fine. Whatever.”

Meeting up with a girl? Sure, right. What are you really up to, James? I thought.

I watched him run across the street and into one of the alleyways behind the old factory. I waited a moment and then followed after him. There was no way I was going to let him ditch me without a good explanation. He ran through the maze of uninhabited alleyways, splashing in dirty puddles and weaving in and out of rusty trash buckets.

I continued following after him until I heard him talking to someone.

“I wasn’t sure if I’d find you again,” he said.

There was no response.

I peered around the corner of the building to get a better look. But I wasn’t prepared for what I saw – nothing but a solid brick wall. There was no other person there and James had completely disappeared. I looked up, but the building was too high to climb. I scanned the walls, but there were no windows or doors.

“James?” I called out. There was no response.

CHAPTER 13

INTERVIEW WITH DANNY

LOCATION: BACK AT THE MUSEUM OF STRANGE AND WONDERFUL THINGS (I DON'T THINK HE LEAVES THIS PLACE), THE NEW TANTUM CITY

YEAR: 221 P. E. (POST EPIDEMIC)

They didn't know I heard them.

I was always the last one to get to dinner. Every night I had a special pass. Sort books until 4:45pm, go up to my room to water the ferns and check up on my beatles, eat dinner by 5:15pm.

They stood in the hallway with their laundry in hand. I thought the statistical chances of them being there at the same time for the same purpose was unlikely, so naturally, knowing correlation does not indicate causation, I wanted to know what they were up to.

“Jump,” Alice said.

“What? No way!” James said.

Maybe my roommate isn't simple minded after all, I thought.

“Shhh!”

I don't think she realized that the laundry chute was essentially an echo chamber that made even the slightest whisper heard by me.

I would have stopped them from jumping, but after considering their weight, the height, and the velocity, I was convinced her reasoning was correct -- even though she may not have even known why exactly.

There were no screams of pain after they jumped, so I figured they were safe. I confirmed the success of their task when I looked out the bedroom window and saw them run into the streets outside the school gates.

Of course I saw when *it* happened too.

He was outside standing in the alley where he claimed to see the old lady at night. It looked like he was talking to himself for a while. Then he vanished and I was staring at the same empty space as Alice.

Humans don't just dematerialize in air, I thought.

It seemed that Alice thought the same thing because she kept pacing back and forth in the empty space where James once stood not a second ago.

This is an impossible feat for any three dimensional being to perform.

I sat down on my bed and thought for a few hours. When I considered all the possibilities, I came to only one logical conclusion: he'd been taken away by a fourth dimensional being.

Having concluded my work, I laid down, stared at his empty bed for a while, and then went to sleep.

CHAPTER 14

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES NO. 764 (ALSO, MY DAD)

LOCATION: BACK IN THE KITCHEN, THE NEW TANTUM CITY

YEAR: 221 P. E. (POST EPIDEMIC)

I see those wide eyes you're giving me. You think I'm making this up? This is the truth, all of it. You said you didn't believe what you read in the public reports. Well, you've always been brighter than most. But whether you like it or not, this is the truth. I'm telling you the whole story.

Now, can we move on?

After we escaped, I didn't think it would be so easy, but there she was, as if expecting me. She stood, rummaging through garbage cans as a child might go through a toy chest.

"I wasn't sure if I'd find you again," I told her.

La'baba tossed an old glass bottle into her cart and sighed.

"Yes, well, I've been waiting a rather long time for you, but found several interesting pieces that should go very nicely in my --"

She stopped suddenly and stood upright, her nose twitching rabbit-like. She waved her hand just as Alice rounded the corner of the wall.

"James?" Alice called.

"I can explain," I said.

“She can’t hear or see you,” La’baba told me.

Alice walked around in the space where I stood, just inches away, but never touching me.

“Why have you brought this girl here?”

“I didn’t. I was followed.”

The woman rolled her eyes and motioned for me to follow after her. She liquified the wall again -- before I stepped through I looked back at Alice who, after several minutes of bewilderment shook her head and walked off. I knew I’d have to explain myself later and started rehearsing my excuses. La’baba grabbed me by the arm and pulled me in through the wall.

On the other side we stood on top of a dune.

Rounded mounds of bleached soft sand lay around us in all directions -- we stood at the top of a steep embankment. Amidst this desert wasteland was a small boxy hut made of white plaster topped with dried palm leaves. The windows and doorway were completely open without shutters. La’baba walked toward the hut with her cart, pushing it with some effort along the sand, and I followed after her. I hadn’t expected to be in such a place.

Where was the living room with floating tea cups and a tiny black kitten?

It felt strangely safe for such an open place. It was a brilliant haven, away from the stagnant city. It felt like home.

Hanging in the hut’s doorway was a wind chime -- one of Lababa’s creations -- a porcelain mug in the center surrounded by tiers of metal spoons all hanging from different lengths of string. They collided and clanked together in the desert winds. Inside,

the hut was one room. The floor was covered in sand. Glass jars filled with colorful paints and brushes lined several shelves. A large canvas propped on an easel stood in the corner. In the very center of the room was a statue of sorts. Bits of metal, glass, and plastic were joined together in various forms, giving the appearance of a human-like figure.

“My selfportrait,” La’baba said, motioning toward it.

In another corner of the room stood a wooden dressing screen. She slipped behind it and articles of clothing began to fly over the top. First her purple hat, then her plaid coat, next a black skirt, then a blouse. My face felt flush and I contemplated giving her privacy and leaving. She could be so awkward and unpredictable in that way. But it was only a matter of seconds and she stepped out from behind the screen wearing a full white tunic and linen pants. Her feet were bare, revealing warped and curling toes. Her white and gray strands of hair fell long to her waist -- a portion of it had been wound back in a bun and pinned with a large wooden comb.

A jar of glue floated from the shelf, followed by a clean brush. They both presented themselves to her and she took them in her hands.

“This is the place I go to relax and reflect,” she said.

“What is it?”

“My art studio.”

“And the rest of it?” I said, indicating the vastness outside the hut.

“According to Kalpana Kingdom it’s a useless place of waste. According to Tantum City records, it doesn’t exist. I believe it was once called the Sahara by the ancients.”

“How did you come to be here?”

“I know about every place on earth. It was knowledge passed to me by my ancestors who studied the ancient texts and relics of humans. Now the knowledge is passed on through the telling of tales and songs. A tradition that has been entirely lost to those in Tantum, but those who live outside the city, they still prize the knowledge.”

“There are others then? Who live outside the city?”

“Yes. For nearly eighty years now. They’re known as the Wilderness Dwellers.”

“Why don’t they tell us about them in school?” I folded my arms.

“Very few know about the ones who left. It was kept quiet. If those who remain in the city discover the outside world is habitable again, they might try to leave too.”

“And what’s so wrong with that?”

“Nothing, except the city was built to ensure humans would survive. Part of that required a Master Computer and humanoids who would regulate everything perfectly. The Master Computer did what humans tried to do, but failed.”

“And if humans have free will it might lead to more devastation.”

“Might? No, eventually it will. Sure humans can rebuild and learn from their mistakes. But like most things, history is soon forgotten and the same mistakes are made again, only under different circumstances.”

“Well if we’re so awful, why do you bother with us?” I asked.

I felt defensive of my own kind, even though they had done wrong to me too.

“Other magic beings have very little use for the knowledge of humans, but my people thrive on it. Maybe it’s because I see the value in humans. Free will permits humans to do great wrongs, but it also allows them the opportunity to do what’s right.”

“Is that why you sympathize with humans?”

“Yes, perhaps.”

She stood for some time in the center of the hut holding the glue and brush in hand as if paralyzed by our conversation. She turned away, looked at her statue, and then applied globs of the yellow sticky substance along one of the shoulders. A spoon flew from her cart and into her hand. She placed it over the glue and took a step back to examine her work.

“If you have magic abilities, why do you do things like this?”

“I’m not sure I understand the question.”

“I mean, it seems like a waste of time.”

“I suppose you’re wondering why it’s necessary for me to do miniscule tasks like pick trash out of garbage cans or get dressed like non-magic people or create art. It’s what makes my life interesting and my magic special I suppose. Sometimes magic isn’t exciting at all really. When magic makes everything in your life easy, then there’s nothing to strive for, and then nothing you do is extraordinary. There is pleasure to be had in work and sometimes getting my hands dirty is the only thing worth doing. Most people feel their purpose in life is to get through work to get to the magic in life, but I have the exact opposite problem, I have to get through the magic to find the work.”

Sheltered as I was in Virtual Reality, I thought this was true of me too -- for 13 years very little was required of me. I had very little purpose.

“Things have been too good for me I think. Most of my life I’ve wanted something bad to happen just so I could have something to strive towards. But now I think this problem is too big for me,” I said.

A glass bottle flew toward my face. I ducked as it flew over my head and into her hand. She lathered glue to the one side and shoved it into the shoulder socket.

“I do not think it is too big for you. Do not consider coming to me as the first sign of weakness, but the first of many choices you’ll make to find the answers you desire. What you lack now is both your past history and your future purpose. You will need the first in order to fulfill the second.”

She threw the glue and brush and they resumed their usual places on the shelf.

“Come with me.”

“Where? The desert?”

“Yes, such a long story requires a long walk.”

I followed her out of the hut and we began our journey into the desert. The sun was dimly lit over the horizon. The sky was drenched in hues of pink and red. I took off my shoes. The sand felt cool beneath my feet at that hour, but if I dug my toes in deeper I reached the warmth. We walked along the side of a dune for several minutes before speaking.

I was out of breath already. It impressed me how well she walked and breathed for someone her age.

“In ancient times, nearer the beginning of human history, there were always legends and tales about human interactions with magic creatures. While our dealings were mostly separate, magic and non-magic creature alike lived in harmony in ancient times. But then there came a time when humans became afraid of us and used us to explain every natural disaster or tragedy that took place in their lives, regardless if they

were caused by us or not. Most of all there was great fear of us, because we had something they didn't and they couldn't understand it."

She turned to look into my face directly.

"People fear what they don't know, you see?" she continued, "it was only by chance that the humans gained an advantage over us. They learned how to collect, control, and channel electricity -- the energy that has the ability to subdue magic."

"But, you live in the city. Why is your magic not affected?"

"Because I'm not continually exposed to direct electric energy, otherwise I would be rendered of my power. Even some exposure has weakened me quite a bit. Between that and my old age, I am not nearly at the peak of my abilities."

I hadn't considered this before and thought if what she could do now was only some of her powers, she was more terrifying than I previously thought.

"You should know, if you are what you say you are, you have powers even greater than I," she continued. "But, I will tell you of our past just the same. I will assume you've never heard of Zeus."

"Yes, I've heard of Zeus and of Apollo, Aphrodite, and Poseidon too. Although I'm not sure if their stories have been told to me quite right."

"The human stories about them have been much exaggerated." She rolled her eyes. "Of course, just as the non-magic are afraid of magic beings now, they were afraid of them in ancient times too." There was a slight crack in her voice as she spoke, as if this last point caused her pain.

She cleared her throat and continued. "There was a magic being named Zeus who had the ability to control electricity and subdue all magic creatures who challenged him."

Her cheeks flushed as though the comment brought up memories she preferred to forget. “As such, he became the king of the magic realm, sometimes a benevolent leader, but mostly a selfish dictator. He set up his kingdom and fathered many children and had even more grandchildren. Ancient people saw his powers and began telling of him to other humans who told more embellished stories to their children. They even attributed thunder and lightning and all activity in the sky to him, believing it was his doing.”

She let out a half laugh. “They began to fear and venerate him as a god, hoping to appease him. This led to the veneration of other magic creatures as gods and goddesses. Humans invented new stories and embellished old ones and then passed them on from culture to culture. The greater the tale the more the non-magic feared those from the magic realm.”

“Until humans themselves learned to control electricity,” I added.

“Yes, and then the magic beings began to fear the human world in return, just as they feared Zeus. Even so, eventually Zeus died and his eldest, a daughter, took the throne. She too had many children who eventually had their chance at the throne. All of this is to say, your ability to call light and absorb electricity is a sign of your descentance from the throne of Zeus.”

“But I have no ability to control or wield it.”

“That doesn’t matter at this point. Most magic creatures have no ability to control their powers at your age. What matters is you have the ability to do such terrible and wonderful things. It is your potential that makes you so special.”

We stopped walking and stood a moment on top of a mountain of sand. I leaned over, propped my hands on my knees and breathed deeply several times. La'baba stood tall and appeared to be in no distress at all.

“It’s also what makes you very dangerous.”

I licked my dry lips several times with a sticky tongue. La'baba closed one hand in a fist before me and opened it to reveal a vial full of water. She handed it to me and I drank it greedily. Once I had finished, the vial disintegrated into sand. I watched the grains blow out of my hand in the wind and join the others on the mound. I hardly knew what to think, I hadn't experienced much that was dangerous, let alone being such.

“How can I be dangerous?”

She pursed her lips as if mulling over her thought a moment. “You will not only have the ability to control magic creatures, but you also threaten the existence of Tantum City.”

I hadn't considered this.

The city was run by robots, Autocarts, generators and humanoids and Virtual Reality. How would they maintain their order if I destroyed their power grid?

“But, I don't want to cause harm. I don't want to be a threat.”

“I'm afraid you don't have much choice. You have little control over your powers enough as it is and even if you chose not to exercise them, one day there are many who would take advantage of your vulnerability. It does not matter if you intend good or evil, it is your potential that makes you a threat.”

I didn't fully understand what she meant at the time, but it wouldn't be long before I realized what she meant. It was not what I actually did that mattered. Anyone

with power has a choice to make, they either fight to survive or are eliminated as a potential threat.

“Will you train me then?” I asked.

“I cannot. I have no knowledge of your magic. Even if I did, your powers will far exceed my own. But, I am confident you will learn in time. Perhaps you will even have the good fortune to find favor with your kin one day and they will teach you.”

“I do not want to meet my kin. They left me in the city, in a virtual prison for thirteen years. I don’t want to know them.”

“Perhaps you should consider someone other than yourself,” La’baba said, her tone was nearer to that of a growl. My face grew hot.

“And what would you do?”

“I’d realize my potential for great power, develop it, and use it to bring peace again to both the magic and non-magic worlds.”

“You would not. Perhaps you’ve forgotten what it’s like to be my age,” I said. “I’m not going to be what you think I should be. I will never bring peace and quite honestly have no desire to. I just want to be free from all the constraints everyone’s putting on me right now so I can live as I please.”

“And how will you manage that?”

“I’ll pack up my things and leave. I’ll go far away, beyond the city, and make a new beginning, away from society and people who would dictate my life.”

Looking back I know these declarations were juvenile. It’s to La’baba’s credit that she had enough restraint to not laugh in my face.

“Even if you succeed in this plan, the city’s reach extends beyond its borders. They’ll still perceive you as a threat that could return. They’ll send out drones to search for you.”

“Then I’ll find a way to take down the drones too.”

“What about the Wilderness Dwellers? What if you should come across them? Or worse, if they come across you?”

“Enough! I’m done with all this speculation. I’m a free person and I’ll do as I please.”

La’baba grew quiet and looked out across the sand now glowing pink.

“Fair enough,” she said and turned away. She walked back to the hut without another word in reply.

I kept my distance and trailed behind her.

CHAPTER 15

INTERVIEW WITH ALICE

LOCATION: IN THE FIELD REPAIRING HER FENCE, THE NEW TANTUM CITY

YEAR: 221 P. E. (POST EPIDEMIC)

Of course I thought it was strange. But for all my inability to explain what happened, I never thought he was taken away by some magical being. I didn't waste much time thinking about it either. I figured he'd found some secret compartment to hide in and I'd ask him about it later. Escaping the school was risky and I knew I had limited time. I fully expected we'd get caught on our return. I had no plan for return and any option we had was sure to end in us getting caught and doled consequences, but I didn't tell James that. I exited the alleyway the same way I'd entered and started my walk in the direction I was sure to find my next target. I had words to say to someone while I had the chance and *he* would hear them. It had been two years since they first sent me to the detention center to receive my punishment and then sent me to live at the Boarding School.

After I left the alley, I walked up and along various streets, feeling my way in the direction I needed to go. I didn't pay attention to street names, but I knew landmarks. Much of the architecture in our city looked the same, but I always knew which ones were government buildings. It wasn't so much that they stood taller than the rest as much as they were more elaborate. High columned roofs; friezes chiseled in the form of heroic

figures and animals and fruit; looming flights of stairs giving climbers time to reflect; all leading to heavy bronze beaten doors that slam behind you. I found one such building -- the councilman's chambers. Visiting such places had never been in my experience before. All governmental persons I'd ever known came to my father's house.

I ascended the marble stairs and in through the bronze doors. I stared out into a large interior courtyard. A dome ceiling hovered above. The sounds of leaping water smacking against the basin of a fountain echoed in that hollow place. It wasn't what I'd expected. There were no cameras watching me and no humanoids waiting to drag me away. At the very least I expected there to be a secretary of some sort. My first impressions of this government building were, not only did there appear to be no regulation of their affairs, but there didn't appear to be any affairs to regulate at all.

I walked into the courtyard, passing several empty hallways as though the building was centipede-like in its structure. At the end of the courtyard there were two large oak doors. Something on the other side thudded against it and then a roar of deep throated laughter. One of the doors opened abruptly and two disheveled men came stumbling out, each one attempting to stabilize the other. I could see through the open door that there were several other men, equally as disheveled on the other side. The door closed again, leaving me outside with the two men; one groping along the tiled floor and the other holding onto a beam for support.

"They're drunk, Alice," a voice said.

I turned around to face the man I came for.

"How did you know it was me?" I asked him.

A knowing smile spread across Corbin's face.

“Your red hair is unmistakable.”

One of the drunk men let out a shriek of laughter. I was hot with irritation.

“Is this what you do all day then? Get drunk?”

“Do I look drunk?” He asked coolly.

No, he didn't. He probably was the only sober one among them. I ignored his question and dove in head first.

“I have something to say to you,” I said stepping forward.

“Funny, I was thinking the same thing.”

“Can't imagine you'd have anything to say that would interest me.”

“You underestimate me,” he said and moved closer to me.

“No, I underestimated you once. I'll never make that mistake again.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“You set me up to take the fall. I've been trying for years to figure out why.”

“But you still haven't discovered the reason yet.”

“Don't worry, I will.”

“No, you won't,” he said, leaning in close to me.

“Really, and why is that?”

“Because nothing happened.”

I took a step back.

“Liar! I know what I experienced.”

“Yes, what you experienced is your own destructive behavior causing consequences.”

“You're the one who made me do those things!”

“I didn’t make you do anything -- you chose to act dishonestly,” he said and took another step toward me.

“You made me believe --”

“Alice, stop and think of what you’re saying. Are you suggesting that I had the ability to persuade you to do those things?”

“Yes!”

“What proof do you have?”

I didn’t answer, my mind buzzed in confusion. His face told me he was in total denial and I started to question if I misremembered things.

“Did I give you money?”

“No.”

“Did I promise any other compensation?”

“No.”

“It’s sad really. You’re so convinced you’re faultless in all this and you’re so desperate to blame others that you’ve actually convinced yourself of this lie. You want to believe you’re a victim so much that you embellish your memories and leave out the details that make you guilty. You can’t face the truth -- it’s your fault.”

I thought back and ran several other versions of the story through my head. The details were starting to warp and I couldn’t be sure which version was true anymore.

“You shouldn’t have come, Alice. Don’t make things worse for yourself.”

I couldn’t speak. My jaw felt rubbery and my voice uncontrollable. I lost feeling in my feet and thought perhaps they’d melted into the floor.

“If you go back to the school now, on your own, I won’t report you.”

He said it like he was doing me a favor, and somehow I felt he was doing just that.

“Thank--you--” I said.

He reached out and stroked my head, tucking loose strands behind my ear. I swallowed hard and regained feeling in my feet. I turned to go, but was caught by a gentle tug on my forearm. Corbin’s fingers coiled around the tender flesh.

“You and your friend should be careful,” he said.

“I don’t--”

“Sure you do. You can’t trust James. He’s not what you think. He’s dangerous. If you want to keep your path free of trouble, stay away from him.”

“But, how did you know?”

“We’re aware of everything that happens in our city.”

“Then why didn’t you send the orderlies after me?”

“Everyone needs to be under the illusion they have free will. See how I still look out for you?”

He let go of my arm and I jerked, not even realizing I was pulling away. My stomach ached and my head spun. Nothing made sense. I didn’t trust Corbin, but he convinced me again that I should be grateful for him. As I left the building I scolded myself, *Alice, you idiot! What made you thank him?*