

THE DOGS DAY

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This is a preview of The Dog's Day, an up-and-coming novel by storyteller Alec Mustafayev. The following document contains the first six chapters of the book. Any feedback will be greatly appreciated!

<https://forms.gle/D4jwKeFXbMLvm8bS6>

CW:

Language, violence, gory scenes

[CHAPTER 1]

She covertly slid the phone beneath her notes. It was the newest model, having just been released as the last election cycle wrapped itself up. She ran her fingers through her lengthy hair, gently covering the wireless earbuds she wore as much as she could. She stared at the professor, a tinge of guilt in her expression, testing whether or not he would notice. With a professor like this, anyone would hope, for the sake of their dignity, that he would not see. I hoped for her sake as well. With how she dressed that day, she had quickly drawn my attention away from the class. Perhaps, today, I would find it within me to introduce myself after the lecture.

“Christina, would you happen to have the answer?” I flinched slightly, like a mortal confronted by a Sphinx.

“I’m sorry, could you repeat the question?” I asked.

“Yes, of course. I must apologize. The fresh coat of paint on these walls must have been far too eye-catching for me to hold your attention,” the professor said with a smirk. I felt that he was enjoying this far too much. “So, Christina, would you care to explain to the class the definition of rational egoism.” He looked at me with the expectation that I wouldn’t be able to answer written on his face.

“Rational egoism?” I began. Admittedly, it took a moment before I was able to remember my notes. “Rational egoism is the principle that an action is only rational if it maximizes one’s self-interest. That’s it, right?”

“You’ve done a good job memorizing your notes, Miss Dagher. When you go on to using what I’ve taught you to participate in the economy on your own, how, for example, would you put this knowledge to use?”

“I don’t think I would use it much at all, actually,” I said, immediately regretting it. To present what sounded like a challenge to his curriculum, and to do so in his classroom, I had invited disaster upon myself.

“You wouldn’t use it?” he repeated condescendingly, “Do you recall my curriculum on how the second Domestic Depression was ended?”

“Yes,” I said, “DD2 mainly ended thanks to President Leaser L. Sky passing the ‘Right to Choose’ act, which transitioned responsibility of most public programs to private companies. That act created enough new jobs for the number of employed Americans to surge to an all-time high, ultimately ending the depression.”

“Exactly!” the professor passionately and somewhat loudly exclaimed, “He replaced the failing altruistic institutions of this nation, and converted them into companies motivated by their own

self-interest to succeed. In the end, they helped other people by giving them jobs anyway. But it was their motive for profit that led to the great economic boom! How could you turn down results like those?"

"Well..." I began.

My mind drifted to my previous, sleepless night when I had stayed awake far past when was wise, and during which I stumbled upon a quote from Sun Tzu on the internet.

"If fighting is sure to result in victory, then you must fight... if fighting will not result in victory, then you must not fight...."

If only I had listened, I wouldn't have heard a gradually increasing amount of smothered laughter from the other students as I attempted to defend an idea I lacked the knowledge to protect.

"I guess I don't know what to say to that," I said, admitting defeat.

"Yes, I wonder why that is," he snapped back. He had to rub it in, didn't he? I even noticed a few laughs from the girl who had caught my attention earlier. So much for that introduction I was considering.

Such was the way in the class of Professor Rooney. He was well studied in his craft, but a light reading of his curriculum clarified his biases; Biases which now led me to a walk of shame as class was dismissed.

I was thankful for the breeze to finally hit my face as I stepped out of the building. A mist was faintly illuminated by the dim sunlight, which hardly shone through the blanket grey clouds which covered the sky.

Fortunately, there were only a few more classes this semester. That reminded me! Wrapping up my second year of community college, I needed to finish my final selection for which University I would end up attending, and more importantly, my major. Currently, Environmental Policy seemed like an ideal choice. Not only was it my result on an aptitude test, but it also concerned several subjects I had been interested in leading up to this point. Even so, there was no telling the satisfaction such a career would ultimately bring me. It was a stressful decision to make. My parents had worked very hard to put what little they had towards my college tuition. They hardly got me through community college, and the fees would only rise when my next semester began. There wouldn't be any money for me to play around with to give me the chance to switch majors later on. Having to handle this appeared to result in my anxiety getting the best of me, again and again. It was so easy to put it off, to tell myself I'd do it tomorrow. I could have easily done it last night while the Sun Tzu article waited in another tab. Instead, it always seemed like my imperative was to find something benign to hold my attention until it came time for class the next day.

As I neared the campus' edge, I began to look around. Where was she? I had met my now-roommate Christy over a year ago after we were paired up in a group project in our physics class. She and I quickly became great friends. We appeared odd together. Although we had a lot in common, we couldn't have looked more different. I had brown skin, brown eyes, a small mouth, and short black hair. My usual attire consisted of a random selection from one of my many punk band hoodies, accompanied by whatever pair of jeans I owned that hadn't found its way into the laundry basket yet. It didn't help that I was also taller than most of the girls at the college. If my hoodie of choice on a particular day was baggy enough, I could expect somebody to mistakenly refer to me as "sir" or something of the sort.

On the other hand, Christy had long blonde hair that went well past her shoulders, shining blue eyes, bright white skin, and an even brighter smile that she would flash at me as I looked down at her. She was a head shorter than me. Often, Christy liked to show off in her style of dress. Be it casual wear, a dress on a day she planned to look extra good on, or the type of outfit she wore on a special night out, Christy could take even the most benign clothing and incorporate it into an outfit that would leave her appearing nothing short of glowing. Never did I think that the simple circumstances I found myself in at the time would snowball into something so much greater.

A firm hand snapped me out of thoughts as it placed itself upon my shoulder from behind and met it with a tight grip.

"Y'know, I think you and I are destined to do this forever," I heard as the hand gripped tighter.

"Are we now?" I shot back confidently, "You'll be in a padded cell forever!" I turned around.

"Maybe we could share one," Christy said.

I smiled a bit, but it quickly faded. Christy took notice as we began our walk home.

"You look a little different, Christina? Are you doing okay?" Christy asked, leaning forward to get a better look at my face.

"Yeah, everything's fine with me," I said. In truth, my last class still weighed on me a bit. Hopefully, by the time we were home, I'd feel better enough to make it less noticeable.

"You're coming back from Economics, aren't you? You always have such a long face when you step out of that classroom."

Was that true? If so, it was something I hadn't even realized myself.

"The professor and I...." I began. I hated opening up this way. "We have our differences."

The human tongue has no bones. Maybe that's why it could be so easy to twist the things it says into truth without opening up too much.

"Alright, alright, alright, you don't have to put your guard up so much. I'll stop prying for details," said Christy. As we continued walking, she began to quieten, descending into thought.

My head bobbed slightly as I walked with my eyes locked to the ground. Designated to the sidewalk area closer to the street, I looked over at the garbage that lined the sides of the road, almost decoratively. Waves of crumpled and bent corporate labels covered the thick trash. We passed a storm drain stuffed with garbage, upon which last night's light rainfall gathered into a deep static puddle.

Shadows raced along the ground, obscuring the sunlight in small areas, as drones flew all above us, delivering mail and packages from home to home. Faint buzzing emanating from the sky had become harder and harder to escape from in recent years, especially in a place like Washington D.C.

"How about..." Christy began. Dismissing her thought, she continued to ponder silently. Only a few moments later, she let out a gasp, as though the thought that had just come to her had instead struck her head physically. "How about we pull out that old PS5 my brother let me have!" she said excitedly, "It should still have his old games on it! At least, it should have the ones he downloaded."

"Hmm..." I really did need to wrap up my university applications. I also needed to finish updating my work resume the second we got home. Even though it was unwise to postpone these to another day, quality time with Christy tonight did sound very appealing. "Isn't that console almost as old as me? I was never really into that older stuff."

"Why not?" she asked, "What's the difference between this and the arcade where you play all the time?"

"I'm just not really into mashing buttons. Going to a Virtual Arcade... It's completely different! Whatever game I play, it's like I'm really there, really experiencing everything that's happening. Also, I go to the arcade 'all the time?' I wish! You know school's kept me from going there since last semester!"

I paused for a moment. Wow. I had hardly realized so much time had passed. I'd bet my skills had gotten rusty. Hopefully, I could still put up a good competition when the golden opportunity to visit again finally presented itself to me.

"Nope, I think you're exaggerating how different they are," Christy spouted with a smirk. To be particular, it was *that* smirk. At times, she indeed found the most excellent amusement in pushing the buttons of others, simply for the sake of it.

Zoning out of the conversation a bit, I began to notice the people passing by us. I was surprised at how difficult it was to distinguish men from other men and women from other women with the way they dressed. This was a common dilemma I found myself facing in recent years.

A pair who looked to be husband and wife passed us, delivering Christy and me a piercing glare. With the way Christy was dressed, judgment from those around us was sure to come like clockwork. The level of openness both of us had in our conversation didn't help. Living in such a world was hard to get used to. A lot had changed in my twenty short years of life.

Lest they be looked down on, men were expected to wear dress slacks or chinos alongside a button-down or polo shirt. A dress shirt with khaki pants may be a more favorable outfit, depending on the man's profession. A nice belt and dress shoes were almost always a safe bet.

Women, on the contrary, were preferred to dress in pencil skirts or work dresses. The only hope at blocking out an upward breeze would be to wear dress pants and a collared shirt, along with a prayer to not be asked to change into the former options by one's employer.

At the very least, one was expected to dress monotonously, as I often did to fit in. An excess in expression could serve as a wrench thrown into the necessary functions of the workplace, around which such expectations were built. Since the economic depression of the last several years had come to a close, the workplace rose to be a far greater priority in the common person's mind.

The way Christy dressed was bordering on acceptability as well. With each step we took, the decorative zippers which covered her shoes gave off a light metallic clank. I didn't know how she did it. I was often terrified to speak out of turn, let alone make such unnecessary noise. Further considering her bright pink top and blue jeans, I was surprised no one had stopped to yell at us. If that did happen, however, Christy would likely smile and, without acknowledging them, let us continue on our walk. I admired that about her.

Emotionally, I hadn't been well lately. Despite this, Christy could always make me feel better. I had a crush on her, but from what I could gather, there was no point in keeping my fingers crossed for it to go anywhere. She would tell me about different boys she was interested in, so my attraction went unspoken and unexplored. I hoped we would be talking one day, and she would mention a hot girl in her algebra class, or a cute woman sitting by her in the library. I had just about lost hope by this point.

Although I had separated myself from my Muslim family's morals on the subject for over half of my life by this point, the chains of religion rooted deep in my brain still subconsciously told me that my sexuality was in some way wrong.

"Maybe you could give the Virtual Arcade a try," I said, "I'm sure you'd like it!"

"No, thank you!" she quickly replied, "Maybe you think it's fun to experience being shot at realistically, but for some strange reason, I don't think I want strangers pointing guns at me today."

"They're not all combat, Christy!" I defended, "Maybe you could give the farming simulator a try."

"Sweating under the hot sun, tired as all hell? That doesn't sound fun." she said, "But doing that in a video game? It's tempting."

"Christy," I said in a much deeper tone. She won. She pushed my buttons like I was some kind of machine, and she knew it.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry, I'll cut it out," she said through laughter, "I'm sure the place is more fun than that. Who knows? Maybe I really will give it a try soon."

"If we could plan it right, I'd love to go there with you soon," I said, "but not too soon. If we paid for both of us now, we wouldn't be able to make this month's rent."

With that, our conversation quickly extinguished into silence. I shouldn't have brought it up so casually. Christy's spending problem had caused more than one scare. It was a sore subject to bring up.

Soon, we began to near an internet cafe, on which Christy's eyes were locked.

"So, we'll catch up tonight, right Christina?" Christy asked.

"Uh, yeah," I said.

With that and a quick goodbye, she hurriedly ran over to the cafe and entered. I was left to walk the last few blocks back to our apartment myself.

Finally arriving at home-sweet-home, I was left alone with my thoughts. Being alone with one's thoughts is something many people enjoy, but it persisted as something that I dreaded. As I unlocked the door, the sound in my mind of my mother's voice telling me to get my university applications done grew louder and louder. I could hear her angry voice echoing in my eardrums.

I felt my neck stiffen as I ascended the stairs. I wondered why I had felt different today as I reached around massaged my back. There was a strange tension in my chest, which only seemed to be getting worse. I took my shoes off and slid them to the side as I shut the door to our apartment. Turning, I walked directly to the kitchen, feeling drained from today's lecture.

Recovering a bag of coffee grounds from one of our few cabinets, I cursed myself for not remembering to head to the store. I had planned to buy a coffee grinder along with some whole beans on my way home. It wasn't by much, but whole bean coffee was a bit cheaper and said to give a harder kick. I was beginning to feel like there weren't enough hours in the day for me to meet all of my responsibilities if I wanted to shut my eyes for more than a few short hours at night. Knowing it was near-certainly unwise, pushing myself with two to three cups of coffee a day made my routine feel like a manageable enough regimen. Even so, I worried how long I would be able to keep it up. Sending the process into motion once again, I started the machine.

The last month, on the one hand, had been nicer to me, as I had not been to work, leaving a chunk of my daily life under my own jurisdiction. On the other hand, most of that time was spent

furiously seeking a replacement job. Having searched each corner of the internet I could grasp, and having sent my resume to several places to no avail, I was surprised that I hadn't yet ripped the last of the hair from my scalp.

I had enough money saved to cover my rent for the first of the coming month, but I needed to find a job before the end of the month if I wanted to continue living here.

The blue of the sky was beginning to burn with gold as the sun went to rest. Its orange glow cast itself through the window, interrupted only by the blinders, which divided the solid beam into many rays. I looked at them, attempting to briefly admire the light, as I did whenever I happened to be in the kitchen at this time. It felt off, however. It was about as easy to appreciate the view as it would be to focus on the events of a movie while having an active conversation. Something pulled me away from the immediate moment.

Being raised a Muslim brought the comfort of my friends and family who have passed on were in eternal paradise, and that I would one day see them again. Separating myself from my faith, for my own sake, it seemed as though it had taken it far too long to occur to me to change my expectations. Somehow, it felt like a lost opportunity.

I felt my sock soak up liquid like a sponge. I reflexively took a few steps back as I looked down for the source. I didn't realize the coffee had overflowed and started to drip onto the floor.

"Shit."

I lept towards the coffee maker, taking care to avoid landing in the puddle I had created as I shut it off.

"Shit," I repeated as I ran to grab paper towels before I marked the floor. As I kneeled, cleaning the floor, the sun's rays ascended slowly, away from me and towards the ceiling.

"Shit. Shit. Shit," I said, scrubbing vigorously. In the back of my mind, I planned to bring my coffee to my room after making sure there was no stain on the floor. I had to focus on filling out a good amount of job applications before I turned in for the night. With enough luck, finishing quickly enough could mean a spare hour or two to cash in on the quality time Christy had offered me earlier.

With the mess cleaned and my coffee in hand, I exhaled slowly as I walked to the garbage bin, tossing out the coffee-soaked towels.

I swung open the door to my room, letting the light from the common room outside flood in. The room was relatively small, like a walk-in closet in a petite mansion. My bed, a thin one-person mattress, stood against the left side of the wall, barely squeezing in to give room for the opening door. I took off my soaked sock and tossed it aside to land where it may. The added water weight gave it a hardly audible thud upon landing. Repeating the process with my dry and quiet sock, I headed to my computer, which stood against the wall to the right on the far end of the room (which was not very far.) As I began sending out job applications, a process that required

very little thought, I began to think of my grandmother. She had gifted me the computer and so many other devices I now used so many years ago.

The death of my grandparents combined with my atheism brought about the dreadful realization of my mortality and the mortality of everyone around me. While my family imagined the image of my grandparents in heaven, I imagined where they were; 6 feet underground, rotting to the bone. I couldn't help but envy the others.

After only a few minutes behind the screen, which burned my eyes slightly, I began to the discomfort in my heart growing even louder. I tried to ignore it, but it seemed to only get stronger by the moment. I decided it was best to migrate to the bed, at least for a few minutes.

The knowledge that I would have to feel the same pain I felt with my grandparents again and again in my life. The thought of my consciousness ceasing one day brought about intense dread. They always boiled to the surface at times like these. I laid down flat on my bed, clutching my chest and breathing heavily, almost in anticipation. The thought of my father in a coffin came into my mind. I rolled onto my right side as I realized this would one day come to pass, and grabbed the sheets tightly while inhaling sharply. I imagined my brother, the last surviving member of our family, at my funeral, knowing that it was only a matter of decades. I felt like I was suffocating. More and more such thoughts flooded into my brain, with no way for me to stop them. If only I could stop them. If only I could escape the inevitable.

I don't know how long it lasted or precisely what triggered it, but sooner or later, the time came when the panic finally showed me its mercy and subsided.

I sat up on my bed, catching my breath and feeling the sweat cool on my skin from the autumn breeze. Truly, it seemed that it was over, at least for now.

I was sick of this happening. At this point, it was daily. I couldn't even enjoy life like I used to. Once, I looked forward to moving out and getting my own place, where I made the rules, except for the ones about rent and noise. I couldn't even bring myself to get my own pet out of fear that it would one day die, leaving me to suffer the fallout. I couldn't even-

"Heya, Christina," Christy said, sticking her head through my doorway, and sending me into a shock in the process.

"Oh, hey," I said, getting up.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," said Christy, entering my room with a giggle, carrying her laptop in her arms.

"How was the cafe?" I asked.

"I decided to catch up on some studying with a friend," she said.

"Which friend?" I said, giving her a look. That look always got to her. She knew that I knew.

“Okay, I’m sorry. Please don’t be mad.”

We all have our vices, but with our means, a financial one was the worst kind. Christy had been an over-spender for as long as I’d known her. I eventually learned how to deal with it. Since our Sophomore year had started, however, it was looking like living as roommates might become unsustainable. With how easy it had become to gamble on the internet, going as far as to take more than half of in-person casinos in the country out of business, it had only taken Christy a few weeks of trying it out to become hopelessly addicted. It was likely that we would have to cut out our Internet next month to pay the rent at her rate. I knew she wanted to stop, but at this point, I was beginning to question if it was worth another try.

“Don’t worry. I’m not mad. How much did you bet?”

“I lost two hundred and fifty.” Said Christy.

“Oh god!” I said as I put a hand to my forehead. I had hoped she went easy on it this time. I didn’t want to go as far as to look for a new roommate, but at this point, I may as well have started planning out the best route to a coffee shop for me to do my online homework in.

“You said you wouldn’t get mad!” Said Christy.

“Well, can you at least still cover the rent?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Christy. I let out a breath of relief. “Maybe.” I sucked it back in.

“Maybe?!” I demanded.

“You said you wouldn’t get mad!” Christy shot back.

“I’m not mad!” I let out, my tone contradicting my claim.

We both stayed silent for a moment.

“Okay, we can still fix this,” I said as we calmed down, both taking deep breaths.

“Okay,” said Christy, pausing for a moment to swallow, “Do you have any ideas?”

“First off, do you know who got your money?”

“Not really,” said Christy, her eyes far waterier than usual. Walking to the end of the short room, she put her laptop down on my desk. The laptop case had about a dozen stickers, which I was pretty sure she hadn’t altered since her Freshman year of high school. The most prominent of them was of a pixelated unicorn vomiting a rainbow. I didn’t find it nearly as amusing as I usually did at the moment.

Opening her laptop, she got to work. Looking at her face, I could see her eyes darting around the screen, her face and surroundings being bombarded by different shades of white, blue, and red lights.

After about ten seconds, she stopped, standing up.

"That's him!" she said, pointing to the social profile of the person she lost to.

"B Adams," I read aloud as I brought my face closer to the screen. To be exact, his profile name was typed as "B_._Adams."

"Actually, now that I'm taking a good look at this page, I'm thinking you could help me get my money back."

"Well, you're right. It'll be hard to talk him into giving us back at least *some* of the money either way, but the two of us would probably do a better job swaying him if we work together."

"Let's just call that Plan B," Christy said, lowering her finger to the 'My Interests' portion of his profile.

"Virtual combat?" I read aloud.

Christy smiled at me.

"No," I said.

"Come on! You love doing this anyway."

"Exactly! That's why I don't want to get in trouble for betting on a game!"

"But you said it yourself! No one ever gets caught."

"Usually! No one *usually* gets caught! I might be the one unlucky person who does. Not to mention we still need to pay for me to enter the game."

Christy thought for a few seconds.

"What if I do all your homework for a week?" she asked.

"No."

"A month."

"Stop"

"The rest of the school year! Just please do this!"

"You know what?" I said, "How about you figure out those overdue Economics assignments I still need to turn in? Whether I win or lose, you save my grade."

It was a satisfying deal. Christy ran up to me, closing the few meters that separated us, and hugged me tightly.

"Thank you! Thank you so much, Christina!" she said.

"O-Of course," I said, hugging her back, "That's what best friends are for."

It was important that I showed her leniency, not only because I genuinely thought she deserved it, but also because, next month, I may end up being the one to come to her for help with such a conundrum.

"I can start your homework right now," said Christy after a long hug came to an end, "but I'm sure you'll need to explain a few things for me to get started."

"Don't worry, I'll explain everything when I get back from settling the bet," I said.

Taking notice of something, Christy looked at the bed over my shoulder.

"Why are your covers so messy?" she asked.

"I forgot to make my bed this morning." I lied.

[CHAPTER 2]

I parked my car outside the nearest internet cafe. If memory served right, it was the same one Christy had been to earlier. Moonlight illuminated my hand as I reached towards the armrest, enveloping it with a grayscale appearance. Glancing at the parking lot through my peripherals, I saw only asphalt. No other car would be here at this hour.

The fact that I had a car of my own at all was a miracle. My parents had pooled their money and surprised me with it as a birthday present back in January. It was a definite drain to pay the insurance premium every month. Still, the newly discovered freedom of mobility left me with little room to complain.

Thankfully, connecting to the cafe's wifi wasn't an issue, even after it had been closed for hours. Thank God it was closed. The thought of, rather than communicating online, confronting this man in person inside the cafe seemed not only humiliating, but also brought intense discomfort to my stomach.

I leaned back in my car chair as I lifted my phone from the armrest. The world of betting and hardball was not one I belonged to. I had to prepare myself to handle this well. I was ready to message him, but how would I even begin? I considered approaching the matter aggressively and declaring the challenge at hand right off the bat. Overcome with nerves, I recited what I wanted to say in my head, over and over. Screwing this up might spell the end to the internet connection Christy and I paid for. I knew what that meant: No more funny videos to watch in bed when my time would be better spent sleeping. A price that high was simply one I wasn't willing to pay. Working up the courage, I began typing.

"I heard you've won big off of one of my friends. I want the money back." I messaged my hopefully soon-to-be opponent, quickly regretting it. It may have appeared too angry. What reason would he have to respond, anyway?

"I win big off of a lot of people. How much did your friend lose?" He wrote back.

I couldn't believe it. The guy actually replied! Not knowing what else to say, I simply declared the amount that was lost.

"\$250."

"Oh, her? Easiest \$250 of my life."

It was actually working! I was in awe. Even so, with a statement like "Easiest \$250 of my life," I had to prepare myself for this guy to be a piece of work.

"So, how do you feel about a bet on virtual combat?"

“You’re on. Win, and you get it all back. Lose, and it’s another \$250. Sound good?”

I was left astonished. He had actually agreed to it! I didn’t even expect him to acknowledge the first message! Even so, it’s typically not a good idea to quit while you’re ahead.

“Just \$250? How do you feel about bringing it up a bit to \$500?”

“That’s a decent chunk to put on the line. I’ll need the odds tipped in my favor before I agree to that.”

“Tipped in your favor? How do you want me to do that?”

“Well, for one, you could pay me in cash. Aside from that, I’ll see if I think of anything else.”

“Cash is more than fine by me. Where do you want to do this?”

“Good Hope Road?”

“That works. I should be there a bit after 10.”

“Waiting now. Ask for Adams at the front desk.”

Excitedly, I backed my car out of the parking lot. Getting on the road, the gleam of the orange-tinted street lights passed over me one by one. I thought about the fact that I was about to meet someone who, from the way he spoke, seemed to make such bets for a living. I believed in my skill at the game, but this man had more confidence than I could ever picture having in myself. If I lost, five hundred down the drain would mean saying goodbye to a few luxuries for the next several months, and of course, stopping by to visit my parents for an “extra” free meal considerably more often.

The short drive was regrettable. I had hardly any time to prepare myself. Parking my car in the lot, I looked up at the arcade. It was a massive building, brightly lit up by the LED lights, which covered about half of its rectangular exterior. This was where I would experience the thrill of winning big, which Christy so often chased, or the feeling of a great failure, which Christy was more often met with.

Anxiously, I stepped outside and began my pilgrimage. Various scents attacked my senses as I began my trek, implying various activities throughout the crowded parking lot. The background noise of indistinguishable chatter from all directions was ever-present. This was my first time coming here so late. I hoped my latent desire for sleep would not interfere with my abilities once the game started. I lamented not having finished the coffee on my desk before leaving the house. I decided that, no matter what happened, I could look forward to enjoying it as a picker-upper the following morning.

I navigated through the cars and past the people who lingered near them. The way many were dressed would be unthinkable in broad daylight, when criticism would be rampant.

Unfortunately, by the morning, most of the people here would have already switched gears, ready to jump at the opportunity to scrutinize any stranger's style of dress.

I raised my hand slightly as I approached the front doors, ready to push the door open. Moments before I arrived at it, a group of friends, my age or younger, came barreling through the doors. I momentarily worried the glass may shatter as the boy at the front of the pack swung it open by ramming himself into it. I felt a bit envious of the friends. It had been over a year, maybe two, since I had enjoyed an occasion such as theirs. They were drunk, or perhaps stoned, or maybe a bit of both. With the swirl of scents in the air, there was no telling the particular one they gave off. Perhaps they could simply release their individuality without the need for additional lubrication.

Walking through the doors, I inhaled deeply, the familiar smell of the place filling me with nostalgia. It hadn't been very long since I was last here, but even so, being back so much sooner than I had expected was intensely gleeful.

With a hint of a confident march in my walk, I approached the front desk.

"Hi! How can I help you?" the receptionist asked.

"There should be an active game I'm part of," I said, "Is there an Adams here?"

"Yes, his game is ready to start. It's just waiting on one player."

I reached for my wallet, ready to pay.

"Oh, he already covered your payment," said the receptionist.

"Oh," I said as my brain took a moment to calculate my body's next move. I awkwardly maneuvered my hands from my pocket back to my sides as I straightened my slightly hunched back. Adams' gesture was much obliged, though I suppose it didn't make much difference as the amount being betted on far exceeded the entry fee. If I were to consider my free entry luck, then I prayed it would continue. Collecting myself, I showed her my wrist, which she ink-stamped.

"Enjoy!" she said with a genuine smile. I felt surprised at the positive emotion she filled me with. It was good to see that, despite likely having been here for hours, checking in countless people, some of whom undoubtedly gave her a hard time, she was still able to maintain her spirit.

"Thank you," I said after a hardly noticeable pause, heading off to room 13.

I walked right through the automatic door, a solid metal door which slid upwards to open, upon which the number "13" was written in a thick black font. I hardly thought as I went through it. Only after passing through was I struck with a sudden cocktail of feelings. Guilt, nervousness, and excitement all flooded my system. There were strict rules against betting on the outcome of any Virtual Arcade game. If I were caught, I might never be allowed within the doors of a Virtual

Arcade again. Even so, it shouldn't be too difficult to bypass. There was no way I would agree to travel off the premises with a man I didn't know. After the game, I was sure meeting in the alleyway behind the building was more than agreeable. I squeezed the cash in my pocket, perhaps for the last time. It was almost like a hug.

Among six racks, only one held the equipment I needed to wear to immerse myself in the game. Grabbing a vest, I put it on with ease, adding a slight heaviness to my body. I slipped the necessary gloves onto my hands and switched my shoes with the ones provided by the arcade. Excitement was quickly becoming my primary emotion.

Before I donned the virtual-reality mask, and watched as a unique world became my new reality, I was to choose my weapons. I was permitted to carry two weapons of my choice, one small and one large. Using a small tablet just outside the doors to the game room, I sifted through my options; pistol and rifle, a knife and shotgun, or several other possibilities. Now was not the time to experiment. A lot was on the line. I grabbed my usual choice, which was exactly what I was used to: An automatic pistol and a shotgun. With one final deep breath, I put the headset over my face and headed into the room.

A bright light engulfed all that I could see as I went through the doors. When I first played, all those years back in high school when these arcades first appeared, this moment scared me. Now, the light was shining only a beacon of support. Whatever the outcome of this battle was, I was prepared to accept it.

The brightness ceased abruptly, leaving in its place a breathtaking view. It was 2200. About a hundred years or so prior, nuclear arms destroyed the Earth. In the ruins, within the war-torn library I now stood in, a battle would occur between fellow descendants of survivors. Through a gaping hole in the wall, which in reality was the solid wall of the arcade, I saw rising smoke from various points in the distance. I could smell it.

"All players present. Initiating team deathmatch mode." said a booming disembodied voice.

"Team deathmatch?" I said to myself, "I thought that this would be a one-on-one fight." Quickly, I realized this was what B Adams meant by "tipping the odds in his favor."

The interface showed that I was playing alone on the blue team against the red team of 5. My heart started beating faster. I was filled with anxiety. My knees were shaking. This was not like before, however. This was a thrill I had been craving. This felt good. I was ready to kick ass. With that, the battle kicked off!

A man with an assault rifle ran into view and began firing at me. I ran to hide underneath a desk, my nearest possible cover. Running at full speed, I dropped myself, sliding to safety against the floor, but not before a bullet scraped my arm. My total health points dropped to 93%.

I sat under the crumbling desk, considering my next option. Was I really going to be eliminated this early? If my health points dropped to 0%, even once, the game was over, and 500 dollars were going down the drain. I could try running out, keeping the five others away with rapid

gunfire from my automatic pistol, but that posed too much of a risk given what was on the line for the game. A grenade would be helpful at this moment, if I had only thought to equip one before the start of the game.

I sat under the desk, as any noise from the five pairs of footsteps beginning to surround me was drowned out by the distant cries, crashes, and calamity of the environment. Keeping my hand pressed flatly against the floor, I could feel the vibrations of each and every one of them. When they were close enough, it would be time.

The sound of a shotgun being cocked echoed from beneath the desk. The five players all came to a halt simultaneously. They weren't quite sure what to do.

Seizing this moment of confusion, I lept out, getting on top of the desk, and threw my shotgun directly into the faces of two men to my left, who stumbled backward, unable to fire for the instant. The same could not be said for the remaining three to my right. Pulling out the automatic pistol as quickly as possible, I grimaced, seeing my health point had dropped to 85% in just about a second. With another step, I lept off the desk, shooting blindly at the men behind me as I continued to flee. They returned fire.

Getting to an old yet decently solid bookshelf to my right, I hid behind it, pressing my back into it. My health points had dropped to 36%. With what I had just pulled off, each percentage point above zero was a blessing. Frantically, one of the men began to call out.

"Hey, Ja-" was all that escaped his mouth, in a desperate scream, before an explosion deafened all other noise.

I took a moment to examine my finger, the grenade pin I pulled from the man I bumped into still around it. I grinned as I discarded it.

Leaping out of cover not a moment too late, I took an instant to observe my surroundings. The man whose pin I had pulled was killed in the explosion. His body lay on the floor, a few feet away from where he had stood. In reality, he was likely exiting the room at this moment, frustrated at being eliminated so unexpectedly. Meanwhile, the two men I had thrown off balance with the shotgun began to regain their firing positions. The two others I exchanged fire with had been blown back onto the ground, flat on their backs. One of their health points sat at 47%, while the other's sat at 53%. I fired away at the former one, eliminating him after several seconds. I turned my attention to the latter one, just as he sat up, having managed to draw and point his pistol at me. With one shot, my health points dropped to 24%. I fled to the bookshelves on the opposite side of the room. As I ran, I fired at the two stumbling men, now just about ready to fight again. By the time I got to cover, their health points were 91% and 86%.

I stood between two sets of bookshelves, my head whiplashing from one end to the other. Spending even one second with my back turned to an enemy almost certainly meant a loss on my end.

Hearing two feet leap behind me, I turned my head around and saw one of the men at whom I had tossed my shotgun. He held that very shotgun, now pointing it at me. I swung my arm, rushing to turn my pistol in his direction, but speed was not on my side. He pulled down on the trigger as he pointed the double-barrel at my abdomen, toothily smiling ear to ear.

Rather than a loud burst of shells, the shotgun released only a meek click. I hadn't really cocked the shotgun beneath that desk. I had taken all of the ammunition out of the gun. At the range he stood at, I executed a direct shot to the head without difficulty. He was eliminated.

Before his body had even hit the ground, there was more company behind me. I grabbed his hand, pulling his body up as I circled around him. In reality, I wasn't really grabbing anything, though the gloves I wore undoubtedly made it feel like I was. The body shook viciously as the man fired into it with a powerful rifle, attempting to hit me. One bullet, passing between the body's legs, struck one of my own. My health points dropped to 14%. Shit.

Peering my head out from over the shoulder, I saw the final two players standing just past where the bookshelves ended. Tossing the body aside, I grabbed the shotgun from the ground, reloading it with the shells still on my person. I was shot again, my health points dropping to 8%.

Without wasting a moment, I slit forward on my stomach, aiming for the chest of the man in front of me with very specific intent. Closing the distance sufficiently, I fired. It took only one shot to eliminate him. Not only that, but the blood, among other things from his wound, sprayed upwards from his back, directly into the face of the man behind him. Now was my chance.

The blinded man began firing erratically in all directions, using an automatic rifle. In just a moment, he would point it at me, and I would be eliminated myself. That would have been the case if I had decided to go for what seemed like an easy kill once I blinded him. After shooting the man in front of him, I fled backward, back into cover.

The man attempted to clear his vision, which was difficult when touching your soaked face only resulted in your hand coming into contact with a virtual reality headset. With my health points as low as they were, I didn't dare confront him directly. Observing him from a distance, I only waited for the perfect moment.

After a moment, the man's eyesight cleared automatically. He looked around, ensuring his surroundings, as he found himself alone between two tall bookshelves. Once I saw this, I wasted no time putting myself in a similar position, just a few shelves down. Hearing my echoing steps as I ran, he began to rush out of cover after me, but he wouldn't make it in time.

I kicked against the nearest bookshelf in his direction as hard as I could. Like dominos, they fell just quickly enough, each producing a louder crash than the last. Only a few seconds later, he was met with the bookshelf closest to him barreling down directly onto his head. Just as it made contact, time began to slow before finally coming to a pause.

The whole room was engulfed in a shining bright light once more. My weapons disappeared from my hands, the environment dissipated around me, and in a few moments, I was back in 2030 in a blank white room.

I was ecstatically proud of myself. I had single-handedly beaten five opponents in a gunfight, and I had doubled the money Christy had lost.

“Yeah!” I yelled out, shooting my fist into the air as I walked out of the room to change.

“Does paying in the back work for you?” I texted B Adams with only one of my hands ungloved.

“Yes, be here soon,” he shot back in only a few seconds.

I walked around to the back of the arcade, a narrow space between buildings. I walked towards a gathering of four men, all wearing similar orange clothing.

“So, are you gonna pay up?” I asked, still riding the high of my victory.

“Do you know who we are?” one of the men asked me.

“Some guys who just became five-hundred bucks poorer,” I shot back.

The man’s eyes began to dart between me and the alley directly behind me.

“You took out Brandon pretty quick with that grenade,” he said, “You didn’t even get to see his knife skills.”

This statement confused me slightly. Why would he bring that up, of all things? I was just about to make another boastful comment, which would have solidified my self-ego boosting, when someone behind me clapped their hand over my mouth.

I could feel the adrenaline rush through my body instantly. I tried to wrestle my way out of their grip. I had to fight!

Suddenly, my strength began depleting. I couldn’t get any force into my arms, and the mobility of my thrashing legs started to become smaller and smaller. At the same time, a sharp pain grew in my side, becoming more and more unbearable by the moment as I felt it go deeper. Soon, I couldn’t fight at all anymore.

I looked down and saw a hand gripping a knife’s handle. From the handle, my eyes followed the knife up to where the blade should be, only to find that it largely obscured. The blade was stuck deep inside of me. My blood was flowing out of the wound, wetting the knife, as well as the man’s hand and grey sleeve. As more and more poured out onto the handle and my clothes, my strength began to wither proportionally. Initially, I felt terror. These men were killing me, and there was nothing I could do!

It was becoming difficult to move, and I was starting to feel colder. I could hardly make a fist with my hands. They refused to shut. I tried to free myself, moving away from the blade as I tried to get my legs to listen to me.

The knife began to lower, creating a longer and longer gash down my side. Suddenly, the blade stopped, having hit an object too hard to cut: my pelvic bone. I involuntarily let out a strange, throaty noise. I frantically felt at the wound, feeling a wet downpour.

I coughed very hard as he pulled the knife out from me, leaving me stumbling momentarily before my face met a brick wall. I felt a metallic, syrup-like liquid in my mouth. Looking to the ground, I spit it out. Though most of what I could see was blackness, I was eventually able to make out the color of the puddle I stood in. It was a deep crimson.

My vision started to fade irrecoverably. Unable to keep my eyes open any longer, they shut on their own. I didn't want to die. I wasn't ready. Even so, I felt my face hit the ground as my balance left me as well. I was only 20, and I still had my life ahead of me, or rather, I would have. I should have! I felt hands reach into my pockets, pulling out any object they stumbled upon.

My family. Shit. I didn't even want to think about that. Mom. Dad. Sam. He was only ten years old. How would he be able to understand what happened to his sister? Should he? And my parents... I just hoped that, for Sam, they could pull through. I heard the sound of several sets of footsteps running away.

The world around me, its sounds now beginning to fade as well, started to feel less and less real. Why was I so willing to come here? I just wanted a distraction. I should have stayed home, submitted my University application, and gotten Christy's spending under control. Christy... Where would she go from here? I never even got to tell Christy how I felt about her. Why did anything from my life matter if it could be extinguished with so little effort, and so little significance?.

What would Christy say after I died? What would anyone say? Would she move on quickly, or still cry for me years later? Which was preferable? Should I even consider it? I didn't want her to feel the pain of my loss. I didn't want to be forgotten either! Damn it. I asked myself, "What am I to do now?" The answer is that there was nothing to do, nothing but to be swallowed by oblivion.

[CHAPTER 3]

Or was there?

“Are you sure she’s the one?” I heard a woman’s voice ask, “She has no training at all.”

“She is highly skilled with firearms, which makes her an excellent candidate if she accepts the mission,” said a man in a gravelly voice, “As for the training, we can sort that out as time goes on. There’s only so much time for us to work with. Either way, it’s too late to go back now.”

I could clearly hear the footsteps of two people walking around me. I tried to open my eyes to no avail. Even so, my eyes raced beneath my eyelids, still hoping to catch even a glimpse of their surroundings.

“What a wonder!” the man exclaimed, “Alex, it appears your work has been a full success!”

“Really? Should I...” the woman said as I heard her come closer to me, “Should I open her eyes?”

“Go ahead,” said the man.

I felt cold fingers make contact with my eyelids and slide them open. My vision cleared as I saw the woman take a step back.

She was young and Hispanic-looking. Her glasses slightly displaced her otherwise perfectly straight black hair, which seemed to wrap itself tightly around her head, extending just short of her shoulders. She wore a white button-up with a black dress visible under her collar.

To her right stood a tall, somewhat pale man in a black dress suit. He was older than her, with near-jet black hair, which had the slightest hint of brown. He looked up at me in fascination with his serene-colored eyes. Though seemingly far too young, the hair around his sideburns was visibly greying. Though straight, his puffy hair poked outwards, reminding me of a sheep. His skin, too, appeared a bit wrinkled.

“Marvelous work,” said the man.

“Let’s head to the observation room. We can’t be sure this is a complete success yet,” said the woman. Somehow, she looked familiar, as though I had seen her face somewhere before. The man, too, brought about a vague familiarity.

My eyes darted to the right as natural light began to flood into the room. The wall had opened up, revealing a corridor behind it, with windows through which the sunset shone. The woman exited through the opening. The man started to follow, but quickly turned around and went back towards me.

"Everything is going to be okay," the man said, "In a moment, I'll get you walking out and about. Hang on, okay?"

"Tyler, I can't start running the tests with you in there," I heard the woman's voice say over a loudspeaker.

"I'm coming!" the man shouted as he made a swift exit.

The opening in the wall sealed as soon as he left, with no clear way to reopen it. I was left alone, paralyzed, trying to understand where I was. This didn't make sense. I should have died from that stab wound. I felt myself die! Was this all a dream I was having as I bled out in the alley? Even if I had survived, I would be in a hospital bed, not wherever this was.

This place was an empty, windowless room with light blue padded walls, forming a square. Among the ceiling padding were circular LED lights, distributed along in rows of three, their light reflecting off of the white tiled floor. My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the loudspeaker turning back on.

"Do not be alarmed," said the man over the loudspeaker, "We are going to have you complete a series of tests. I am about to give you the ability to move. All I ask is that you do what I say. The faster you do, the faster we can both be on our way."

As he said this, I felt the tension all over my body disappear. The sudden push of gravity, coupled with my unreadiness to stand, caused me to fall to my knees. I immediately looked down. My entire body from the neck down was covered in a black jumpsuit. Grabbing at the area where I had been stabbed, I was surprised at there being no sign of a wound ever having been there. I pinched the fabric covering me.

"Please refrain from tampering with your clothes," said the woman over the loudspeaker.

The sound of a door sliding open in front of me drew my eyes up to it.

"Please proceed into the room in front of you," said the man.

If it meant figuring where I was, I was going to do it. I stood up and walked to the next room. The wall slid closed behind me once I walked through it.

A square black metal table was in the room, big enough to seat someone on each side, with just one small red marble on it. A red X was marked on the metal floor in duct tape, and a garbage bin was deliberately placed a few feet away from it. "Now listen to my instructions and follow them precisely," said Tyler. "I want you to take the marble on the table, stand on the **X**, and throw the marble into the bin."

"Why do you want me to do this? Who are you? Why are you keeping me here?" is what I would have asked, but upon opening my mouth, I found that no sound would come out.

"It's best that you don't try to speak right now." Alex chimed in. "Please just do what we tell you for now, and we will be explain everything."

I didn't have a choice, so I did the only thing I could and obliged. With the marble in my hand, I centered my stance on top of the **X** and concentrated on the bin.

I was never a math genius, which is why I was understandably surprised when dozens of calculations, graphs, and equations began streaming through my mind. I couldn't believe what was becoming apparent to me. Somehow, I had become capable of mathematically calculating the exact arc I would like to form by throwing the marble. Doing this, I could easily deduce how to best pitch the marble to have it land in the bin and execute the throw flawlessly. Somehow, I could even understand that I was capable of this, despite never having done it before.

From sight alone, I was able to tell that the bin was about 3 yards from me. It was strange that I thought of it in yards, as I rarely use that unit of measurement. Anyways, 3 yards is equivalent to 9 feet, so if I calculated how to throw the ball using a parabola, I could use each unit on the x and y axes to represent one foot. With that in mind, I could use the formula $Ax^2 + Bx + C$ to calculate the marble's path, knowing that the top of the bin is located at (1, 9) and my hand at (4, 0), where the ball leaves my underhand throw. I set A equal to -0.037, B equal to 0, and C equal to 4. The final formula came out to $-0.037x^2 + 0x + 4$ $\{0 \leq x \leq 9\}$. I reeled my hand back as I looked directly at the bin and threw the marble. It hit the rim audibly and proceeded to fall inside perfectly.

Another wall slid open.

"Please continue into the next room," said Tyler.

With no other options, I slowly walked through the opening, which closed behind me as soon as I passed through.

In the center of this room stood a similar black metal table to the one in the last. However, this table was much smaller. Only one foot long in length and width, it appeared. From its center erected a square pole, which extended up into the ceiling. It seemed that this pole was placed to hold still an object suspended around where my chest was. If I didn't know better, I would say that the thing being held was an iron skillet, minus the handle.

"What I'm about to say may seem a bizarre request," said the woman, coming back on over the loudspeaker. "I can see you've noticed the disk being held in place by that table and pole. You may be hesitant, but I ask that you reach out and strike the disk with your full force."

I touched the disk with my fingers. Even through the jumpsuit which covered my hand, I could feel the cold metal it was made of. Strike it with my full force? Was she insane? My knuckles would shatter on impact!

“Don’t hesitate,” said the man, “I assure you, no harm will befall your hand as a result of hitting it. In fact, I think you’ll be quite pleased with the outcome. We’re almost done here. The sooner we finish this, the sooner you can be discharged.”

What he was telling me made absolutely no sense, given everything I knew. Then again, neither did just about anything that was going on right now. After being stabbed, I was walking around and interacting with my environment without issue, and I would be discharged soon. Christy must be so worried. She might have even called my parents. I hope Sam isn’t scared for me. Regardless, after what happened that night, all I wanted was to know I hadn’t lost them. If getting to that moment meant a broken hand, it was nothing in comparison to what I’d been through.

I reeled back my hand and, with a cry, launched my fist towards the disk in front of me. I instinctively shut my eyes and turned my head as my fist flew through the air, preparing to receive a massive shock of pain. My eyes, instead, shot open as I heard the sound of a loud crash. Turning my head back towards the disk, I saw something which once again made me believe that I was dreaming. My fist, somehow, had passed cleanly through it. With a piece from its center lying on the ground a few feet away, the disk itself rested on my forearm, stuck through the hole in its center. Looking down, I saw that the table had fallen over from my strike, the pole that stuck out of it having disconnected on impact. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. I would feel afraid were it not for the fact that this newfound strength appeared to serve a huge benefit. Frankly, I didn’t know how to feel. I took the disk off of my arm alongside the pole it came with, throwing them on the ground. What the hell did these people do to me? As incredible as these superhuman abilities were, why had I gained them after being stabbed?

Showing basic politeness, I kneeled over to pick the table back up. Strangely, its underside was reflective, almost as much as a mirror. As I put my arms around the table’s sides, getting ready to lift, I saw something in the reflection. It looked like a creature, moving around in bizarre inhuman ways. Quickly, I shot my head around to look behind me. I was ready for a fight, but was met only with the padded walls I was getting used to. Confused, I turned my attention back to the table. Within seconds, as realization set in, the underside of that table unveiled a truth I would have never chosen to uncover.

What I saw in my reflection was not human; it looked like an amalgamation of scrap metal. It took me a few seconds to grasp that I was looking at myself. I looked like some kind of machine. My face was put together with metal parts, and my eyes looked like camera lenses. If I were able to scream, I would have. I began gasping for air and convulsing on the floor. I wanted to stop this. I wanted to die. Whatever it was that I found myself in, it was too much to be able to live with.

Tyler and Alex rushed into the room and helped me up. Alex took a syringe filled with clear liquid and injected it into my head. I’m thankful for whatever it was. As soon as it entered my brain, I began to relax. For a moment, it felt like everything was okay. I fell into slumber.

[CHAPTER 4]

“...shouldn’t be too much longer now. It’s never taken more than...”

“Shh! Look!”

Was any of that real? Was it all just a horrible nightmare?

As I opened my eyes, the outline of the ceiling began to become clear. It didn't look like the outline of my bedroom ceiling. I had become so used to that specific sight that the unfamiliarity sent me into a jolt. I felt my feet hit against the floor as the shock passed through my body. I reached down to feel what was beneath me. I was sitting in a wooden chair. As I lowered my head, I was met with yet another unexpected sight. The man and woman from before were sitting side-by-side in their own chairs in front of me. The memories began to flood back.

The image of my reflection was burned into my memory. With some sort of cry escaping me, I rushingly looked at my hands and was relieved to see that they were human.

Though seemingly unrealistic, those events must have really happened. The people I saw during the test were now sitting right in front of me.

"Can you try to speak now?" the woman asked.

Finally, I could demand to hear some well-deserved answers.

"What's going on?" I shouted.

I gasped, the sound of which further solidified what I thought I had heard. I put my hand to my throat. The voice that came out of my mouth was not my own. I looked back down at my hands. Though the room was poorly illuminated, I knew something was off. The color of my skin looked brighter, and the shape of my hands was undoubtedly different. As I leaned forward to look at them better, I felt something graze the back of my neck. Reaching to feel it, I realized it was hair. It was my hair; My long hair, which went past my shoulders, and down to the center of my back. I pulled it, feeling it tug at my scalp.

"This is... "

"Please relax," said the woman, "We just..."

"This is impossible! I never let it grow this long!"

"Christina, this is a lot to accept, so I need you to..." she attempted again.

"What the hell did you do?" I yelled desperately, standing up.

Again, it was all wrong. I looked around the room; an office, decorated with wall rugs, patterned with red and gold. The way I felt my body move and my weight shift all told me that something was off. I looked to the dark wooden door. If it was around the same size as most other doors I've seen, my eye-level was undoubtedly a few inches lower than it normally would be.

I looked down at my body, and what I saw was unrecognizable. I wore a grey jacket, with black sweatpants, and white sneakers, none of which I recalled owning. That, however, touched on the least of my concerns. My height, my build, my shape, my skin, and just about any other trait one could point to had changed.

"What the hell did you..." I began to scream again.

"If you'd like to know, you'll sit down and allow Alex to explain," the man said calmly, yet firmly. I sat, still in terror. Truly, I didn't want to know, but like being unable to look away from a terrible car accident, I couldn't find it within me to deny the information.

"Please, tell me what's happening," I pleaded quietly. I could hardly find the strength with which to speak.

"When you were stabbed in the alleyway, your body was killed from the injury," said Alex. Seeing as I was clearly alive, the statement appeared untrue on its face, but recalling the experience personally, I did not doubt her for a second. I couldn't describe what I felt as I sat in that chair other than to ask you to recall the feeling of losing everything, if you have felt it before. "About four days ago, a Virtual Arcade employee who stepped out to smoke found you. You were delirious, frantically begging him for help, but by that point, you had lost so much blood that it was already too late to help you. The ambulance knew you would be dead on arrival at the hospital, but before they gave up on you, Tyler quickly caught wind of your attack and stepped in." She motioned to the man, Tyler, sitting beside her. "He had you taken to Walter Reed hospital, where I was in charge of operating on you. Before your brain shut down completely, it was saved and transplanted into a bionic body. It was the first time we had personally attempted such a procedure on a human being. You proved that such a procedure is possible for us to perform effectively and reliably with our technology, meaning that we can now save lives even if an individual's body is beyond the point of no return. After the tests, you were briefly operated on once again to possess an ordinary human appearance."

"What?" was the only word I could bring myself to say. Everything she had just said made perfect sense, but even so, there did not seem to exist a reasonable, appropriate response to what I had been told, nor an action that I could take based on the information.

Alex reached into a purse lying on the floor by her seat, took out a small mirror.

"Are you ready?" she asked. I nodded before I had even realized it.

She held the mirror in front of me. The girl I saw where my reflection should have been stared into my eyes, and I stared into hers. Her jaw dropped in shock. I could tell from her expression

that Alex felt a great deal of sorrow on my behalf. She would have used this moment to console me, were it not for her professionalism and the importance of what she had to tell me.

"From now on," the man began, "you will no longer be Christina Dagher. Your new identity is 23-year-old Jaklyn Lionheart. You'll have to be under my supervision for some time, which I suspect will be quite short."

I looked back at my hands. I felt the air around me flow between them. I could feel how much longer they were than the hands that were truly mine. Where would I go from here? Would everyone I know just believe I was dead? What kind of life could I lead now that I had been changed into someone else?

I closed my eyes for a moment and caught my breath. First and foremost, I needed to figure out what my first step going from here would be. I put a mental effort into repeating Tyler's words in my head. I had barely interpreted them the first time he had said them.

"What do you mean 'new identity?'" I asked. Conceptualizing everything I was being told was becoming difficult.

"The technology used to save your life is of military origin," said Tyler, "Its primary use is to enhance the performance of soldiers in battle. Thanks to the impressive work of Alex, it can now even go as far as being a life-saving medical procedure. I hate to say it, but such information cannot be shared freely among the general population carelessly."

"Wait, do you mean..." I stuttered out, "What about my friends and my family? Can I still see them?"

Tyler lowered his eyes, exhaling deeply. As he opened them, I could see my reflection in them.

"There is no easy way to say this."

He didn't need to elaborate further. I already knew the answer.

"But why?" I asked, nearly shouting as I began to rise from my seat again.

"You must understand, it is not because I do not wish for you to see them," Tyler said in a slightly raised tone. In a moment, he took a deep breath and relaxed. "The technology which makes up your body is incredibly unique, so much so that any knowledge of it, even to others here at the secret service, puts not only the three of us at risk, but also anyone who may find out about it. By seeing your family, you would be putting them in danger. Perhaps, when any potential threats to our safety are eliminated, we can assess the matter again. For now, it is best if things go on with you and your family apart."

"What did you just say?" I demanded.

"I refuse to keep you from your loved ones if I can help it," said Tyler, "I will do everything in my power to..."

"No! What 'potential threats' are you talking about? You're not slimy enough to slide that past me!"

Setting his visible frustration aside, Tyler began.

"Do you know who Ryan Machiavelli is?" he asked.

"Ryan Machiavelli? The name sounds familiar," I said.

I could hardly put a name to the face. I could barely remember anything about this 'Ryan' aside from the fact that he was in some way a public figure, probably. Past that, it was beyond me.

Tyler didn't respond for a moment. His mannerisms changed as a new look washed over his face. It felt like a complicated subject for him to talk about. Quickly, however, and with a deep inhale, he collected himself and proceeded forward.

"He is my brother," said Tyler, as I began to suspect that his expression was a look of remorse.

Now, seeing them in such detail, I suddenly realized why they looked so familiar.

Ryan Machiavelli was well-known as a pioneer of military technology, even playing a hand in the success of the Virtual Arcade phenomena. Though the details of most of his projects were never revealed, the profits he amassed selling his work to the military shot him up to among the ranks of the richest men in the country, with prospects of him perhaps becoming the richest in the world at a relatively young age.

His brother Tyler, the man who sat before me, was head of the secret service. He rarely came out and spoke to the public, but I did occasionally hear his name in passing and catch glimpses of his face on television and around the internet.

The woman, Alex Forastera, was awarded the George Washington University Bionics Award upon her graduation. She successfully created the first bionic limb, an arm, which could replace every function of the original limb. The award was handed to her by the former amputee who received the limb, using the limb itself.

As I sat before them now, only one question weighed on my mind.

"Why the hell would you want me of all people?"

Tyler leaned back somewhat at hearing this.

"First of all, you should show me some respect as I am the one who chose to save your life," said Tyler, ensuring he leaned forward closer than he had been before. "Rest assured, I will

inform you as well as I would inform my project assistant, Alex. Let me begin with why I chose you. It was because of your skill."

"My skill? Why would you care about any of my skills?"

"Don't interrupt, please," Tyler paused. "I chose you thanks to your skill and the timing of your death. The virtual combat arcades were auctioning their players' personal information off to the highest bidders. I was looking to find a skilled player in Washington DC, one who could complete an important mission for the service of their country. This mission cannot be completed without the help of at least one bionic body soldier. When I saw your skill in the virtual arena, I was blown away. You were among the top ten best players in DC, and just about in the top hundred nationally. As I was deciding which of these people I would ideally contact for this mission, I suddenly got the news that you turned up dead not far away. Thankfully, your brain was still functional and unharmed. I didn't waste a moment having you sent to Walter Reed. I had the life-saving procedure performed on you, which is why you're lucky enough to be sitting here with us now."

"So you think that because I'm good at some game, I'm skilled enough to become a secret agent? Do you even hear yourself?"

"The conditions in virtual combat are very realistic," said Alex. "That, of course, does not take Health points into consideration, which allow players to be shot several times before being defeated when their points run out. Your bionic body was reinforced to accommodate this, to an extent. Your reaction speed has been enhanced to the point that you can deflect bullets with a single punch. There is a limit, as your left hand will be badly damaged after deflecting a single bullet, while your right can sustain proper functionality until deflecting two."

"What?" I shouted, "Me, deflecting bullets? That's..."

Suddenly, an object was hurtling towards my face. I didn't have enough time to see what it was. Instinctively, I slapped it out of the way before it hit me.

"...impossible!" I finished. I let out a gasp. Looking to the wall to my right, I saw a pen cap with its clip lodged in the wall. Was it propelled into it by my strike?

"You better believe it!" said Tyler with a slight smirk. He had danced around the truth for long enough. If nothing else, I was walking out of here with proper answers.

"So you saved my life using this bionic body, and now in return, you're going to force me to do something in return?" I demanded.

"Force? No. No one is or will force you to do a single thing?"

"Tyler, you know I want to know what the hell is going on. Tell me."

"Jaklyn Lionheart," he began, "You are free to walk out of here right now and conduct yourself as you please. It won't be taken as a personal slight against myself, nor against Doctor Forastera. You owe us nothing. In fact, we will leave you with a decent sum of money, a place to stay, and hell, even a car, to get your life back in order. However, I will tell you this: If you leave now, and this mission is not completed by someone else, then there will be very little time for you to enjoy getting back to your normal life. If my brother succeeds in his plans, your safety especially cannot be guaranteed. It is quite likely that Ryan will come after you if he learns of the technology you're made of."

"I believe I know far better than you how dangerous it is out there," I said, "How do you expect me to do anything about it? I'm a college student who likes going to the arcade! Can't you just get a few cops or soldiers together?"

"Jaklyn... Is it alright if I call you Jaklyn?" Tyler asked.

I paused.

"Sure," I said, wanting the precise opposite.

"Jaklyn, there is no one else who *can* do this mission. The choice is yours, but many people are at stake if you refuse. Standard military training is an incredibly effective tool for leading an army. To command a legion, to see the results so many people can produce together, is an incredible example of human ingenuity. However, it is not a suitable method for a mission like this. We need an intelligent, quick-thinking, independent mind, and you are perfect for that role. If you do not perform such a duty, I fear we will not be able to find someone who will."

"What could be so important that you would go through all this trouble?" I asked.

"The air you breathe. The ground you walk on. With the weapon my brother is creating, it may go beyond even something I may relay to you." said Tyler, "I don't know how to begin to say this, but the most difficult decision of my life is upon me. My brother must now be treated as an enemy."

I backed into my chair. Even Alex looked somewhat shocked at his blunt disclosure. What was this man on about? The vagueness with which he spoke led my distress to turn into rage.

"An enemy that you need to send *me* after? As if enough terrible things haven't been said yet. An enemy? What the hell do you want me to do? Kill him? Do you expect me to do it because you can't bring yourself to, or is the man so strong you need to send a machine after him to take him down?"

Tyler took another deep breath, then stood up slightly from his chair. Gaining more mobility, he undid the single button from his suit jacket.

"What are you doing?" I demanded.

Fully standing up, he began to silently, one by one, undo each button on his white button-up.

"What the hell are you doing?" I insisted.

Alex looked on as well. She looked as though she had seen him do this at least once before.

Halfway through unbuttoning, he sat back down and looked at me. His expression carried no shame or embarrassment at exposing himself.

"As I said," he began, "this decision is the most difficult of my life. If I had seen the road he was going down earlier, this could have all been avoided. He was obsessed with his own supremacy, hurting anyone he needed to achieve it. Our family suffered because of him. I tried to do something to change it. I tried to talk it out with him, but he wouldn't listen to me. Instead, he gave me this."

My gaze lowered from Tyler's eyes to his chest. He pulled his clothes aside, revealing his right shoulder. As the light in the dimly lit office illuminated him, I saw a mal-pigmented light dot on his skin. It was a deep red at its core, gradually lightening in color towards its edges, with its very ends more closely resembling a shade of dark pink. Whatever resulted in its presence, the scar was the work of a painful stab to his chest. As he pulled back his shirt further, he revealed another, and another, and another. His right shoulder and chest were covered in identical scars.

"I had barely gotten a word out," Tyler continued, "I don't know where he developed such a savage side, but it became clear to me from that day forth that his mind... His mind isn't working right. Of course, I kept what I had endured to myself, but I never looked at him the same way. Our father was on his deathbed in the other room, for Christ's sake!"

Quietly and with sadness in his expression, Tyler took a brief moment to conceal his exposed body.

"He's creating something different now. I don't know what it is, but having kept an eye on most of his company's purchases, I think his next work is very unlike most traditional weaponry. In some way, it involves the human body."

"You mean, just like..." I began.

"Jaklyn, I want you to imagine what your kind of power; the power to break through metal with your bare hands, can be used to do in the wrong hands.

I nodded. As frustrating as my circumstance was, Tyler was clearly onto something. My best bet now was to work with him, and learn more about what was going on. If what he told me was true, I didn't have a choice. I'd be safer against Ryan with him than on my own.

"I can agree to let you keep an eye on me if you can agree to be there when I need to deal with Ryan," I declared, albeit timidly.

“Jaklyn,” Alex said, “I have one last thing to ask of you.”

“Yes?” I asked. She stood up briefly, walking to a desk behind her. Reaching into a drawer, she removed a small, indigo case, from which she drew a small object too far away for me to see. Momentarily, she placed the empty case back into the drawer, shutting it and returning to her seat.

“May I see your palm?” she requested.

I extended it to her. In it, she placed a small, green chip. Upon closer inspection, it looked to have tiny, metal points affixed to it in deliberate locations, not unlike a computer motherboard.

“What is this?” I asked.

“A pill,” she replied. “Well, a pill for the type of body you now have. Swallowing it should be no more challenging than an ordinary pill. It will probably go down even easier than one.”

Reluctantly, I did as she asked. It was met with a surprise unique from any other I had experienced. Using a different throat than the one I had possessed for my entire life, it startled me too, for the first time, to experience the inside of my body feeling different. Having used the same throat to swallow for my entire life, it had never occurred to me that swallowing could feel any different than it always had.

Interrupted by a buzzing sensation in my head, I remembered something, or perhaps realized it. There may not even exist a word to label it, but suddenly, I knew the location of my home, Jaklyn’s home, a home I had never been to. I knew it as well as I knew the location of the apartment I shared with Christy. It was not something I needed to recollect; it was simply a piece of information that I remembered without trying.

“What...” I began, “What just happened?”

“The information you just learned was contained on the chip you ate. Keep this in mind, because it could be helpful later: Your body can copy over any information contained on a device, allowing you to use it as needed. Swallowing an ordinary flash drive or piece of a hard drive disk would have the same result. You may even be able to replicate the abilities of certain technologies you eat, to an extent. You could build these up and make yourself much stronger over time.

I had a thousand questions about all that I had heard. Despite this, one question burned the brightest. I needed to know.

“Well,” said Tyler, “the last thing to discuss is the upcoming funeral.”

I must have shown some sign of fear upon hearing the word “funeral,” given that Tyler did not elaborate past that point. After a few seconds of silence, Alex spoke up.

"Listen, Jaklyn, I understand that we're not giving you much choice here, but you have the freedom to make this decision. Attending the funeral could help you accept your new life and move on, but it will be hard seeing yourself like that and your family mourning you. Do you want to go to the funeral?"

"Yes," I said, "I'll go."

[CHAPTER 5]

I could still remember the day my brother Samuel was born. I was only eight years old.

He was so young, and he wanted to be just like me at his age. At first, it annoyed me when he would bug me to spend time with him. Once, I had simply thought of him as an adorable, immature little kid. While that was true, the more I capitulated to his demands of spending time together, the more I started to see more and more of the things we had in common. Soon, I found myself forgetting that he was less than half my age and still had so little experience with the world. Our differences had become meaningless.

But now, he would have to come face-to-face with death for the first time in his life. The loss of an individual under my family's faith was not just regarded as a loss to the family but also to our whole religious community. With how many days had passed, they were all well aware of what had happened by now. From my closest friends and family to people I could hardly remember, everyone shared the burden to some extent.

I thought about the last time I visited home. I did not once speak to Sam, even though I could have. It was not fair for me to blame myself. I was busy with work that day, and I was only dropping in for a few minutes to use Dad's air pump to fill my flat tire. Even so, the memory served as just another needle in my heart. If only I had found ways to spend more time with him. By the time he's my age, he might hardly even remember me.

From picking out the dress I would wear, which was ankle-length and black, with a square neckline, going down to my knees, to deciding between wearing flats or heels, every step was difficult to get through, especially in a stranger's skin. After a short conversation with Alex, I chose flats, as the new shape and weight of my body would make it hard to balance myself in heels so soon, not to mention I had little experience wearing them in the first place. The tasks themselves were not remarkably different from those I performed on a typical morning. Still, I was left perpetually troubled, to say the least, knowing that the progression of each further eroded the delay that stood between myself and the service.

I was surprised the funeral hadn't taken place earlier. It was not uncommon in my community for the deceased to be buried within a day or two of their death. Though, as I further considered the thought, I recalled the necessary rituals to be completed before the burial could take place. Considering the very unexpected circumstances, it stood to reason that they could not be done until now.

As I drew closer to the mosque, my dread grew proportionally. All reason said that something like this should be impossible. I couldn't even imagine what I was about to see. What would people say about me? Would there be a lot of people? Would it be nearly empty?

It felt natural that I would approach my family as soon as I arrived. After all, they knew me; the reaction would be natural. When in the presence of those you love, you can't imagine coming to

them and not being acknowledged, but that's precisely what would happen. Nobody would recognize me. I would have to be prepared for that. Arriving at the doors I was well acquainted with, I donned a grey head covering, being sure to conceal all of my hair; a hassle which, at this point, was the least of my concerns. With a final deep breath entering these unfamiliar lungs, I entered, wanting nothing more than to rush back out as soon as I did.

The familiar mosque was a well-decorated sanctuary. As I entered the prayer room, removing my shoes, I observed the wide-open walls, white enough to reflect light, obscured only by the minimal pillars which supported the structure. I thought of all the experiences I had in this place, which stretched back almost as far as I could remember.

More people filled the room than I had seen in several years. At the farthest end of the room were the men, who knelt on the floor, facing opposite of me, towards Mecca. Most wore matching grey clothes, though their hats were strikingly diverse. The women were isolated from them, not far from where I stood, kneeling just the same in their section of the room. Each of them wore a hair covering at the very least, though some covered their bodies entirely. Most wore black. Kneeling on the floor between the two groups, perhaps unsure which to gravitate to, was my brother Sam. I nearly dropped to my knees at the sight of him as I went to sit with the other women.

The sound of Ṣalāt al-Janāzah engulfed the room.

Although I recognized the prayer, I had never bothered to memorize it myself. During the last funeral I had been to, for my paternal grandfather, I had simply mimicked the mouth movements of those around me. It had been three years since I lost my last surviving grandparent. Since then, I had spoken so little Arabic that I could not even effectively recall how to move my mouth correctly, so trying to lip-sync to the prayers would be futile.

Raising my head, I put my courage into looking at what lay on the floor at the end of the room.

My body's preparation began with the eyes and mouth being shut, if they were not already. The body was then to be cleaned, and, as I did not have a spouse, this task fell to a female family member, which would almost undoubtedly be my mother. The thought of her seeing me that way, with that wound, made me sick. While cleaning my corpse, scripture required her to clean the upper right side of my body, where the stab wound was, followed by the upper left, followed by the lower right, and finishing with the lower left. She also needed to repeat this process an odd number of times, continuing until my body was thoroughly cleaned. It was no process I wished upon her to go through.

As I watched it lay there, I felt nothing. No desire to go back and do things differently, nor to persevere and move forward, nor even to do nothing and wither away in my own misery. There was nothing special about the body. It looked no different than any other I had seen on such an occasion. My life had ended when I was stabbed in that alleyway, and I felt nothing in the way of moving on with it. I only wished I hadn't forcibly been pulled from my grave.

The noise of an audible snuffle bounced off of the walls, drawing my gaze back downwards. My eyes were once again on Sam. Not a moment later, he jolted just enough for it to be visible, releasing with it another repressed cry. I instinctively reached for my chest before stopping myself, as the feeling of a needle piercing my heart took hold once again. I couldn't take my gaze off of him. I wanted to do something. I wanted to turn his head away, or cover his eyes, but I was a stranger. I could do no such thing. Another cry escaped him, sending another needle barreling into my chest. I fought every urge to not run to him and wrap my arms around him right there. His tense body then appeared to loosen, as though he had calmed down. Just when he seemed to have relaxed, he fell forward, catching himself with his hands as I watched tears drip onto the red carpet from his face as a long, pain-filled noise escaped him.

Sam turned, walking on his knees towards me. His arms were outstretched, as though simply looking for an embrace. His tear-filled eyes were locked on mine. Even if, to him, he was seeking the comfort of a complete stranger, for a moment, I felt every needle in my heart withdraw itself, knowing I would be able to hug my brother again, perhaps for the last time. As I leaned forward slightly, ready to receive him, he turned his gaze, and went right past me. He did not acknowledge me at all. Twice the amount of needles burrowed into my heart once again, penetrating twice as deep.

I turned my head, and saw the woman Sam had hugged. It was my mother. I knew not if tradition permitted this, but I did not expect to see anyone object to this. I only wished I could join them. Turning back around, it took almost no time to recognize my father. Even looking at him from behind several men, hardly able to see his features with his back turned, I knew that of all the men there, my father would be the only one to wear a grey hat, matching his grey clothes to the point of being sewn from the same fabric.

He did not make a noise. He did not move. He did not even waver slightly. Before him on the ground laid all that he had worked to bring to prosperity for twenty years, reduced to a tradition and burial.

This was the last time I would see any of them. We were strangers outside of this occasion, and that fact would never change. Even if I were to explain, on what planet would an ordinary family believe that their daughter survived her own murder in the body of a machine?

As the words of the prayer circled around my head, dizzying my mind, I felt a drop of water on my hand. I looked down at my hand, seeing the drop begin to descend further, as another one took its place only a moment later, with more running down my face as they poured from my eyes. Even this feeling, of the minute differences of my face and hands, served as a reminder of what I had been forced into. I did not know whether my tears were urged on by the difficulty of the situation, or by the pain I felt from the pincushion I had felt my heart become, but the total weight of what had happened hit me.

I was dead. It was irreversible, even with my mind still functioning as it did now. I was dead to my family, friends, and community. What difference did my consciousness still being around make? Christina had perished. This is exactly what I had feared.

I knew I could not last inside. I swiftly stood up and headed towards the exit, turning my back to the room as I put my shoes on to hide my face. With a hint of a march in my walk, I went through the doors as quickly as I could without sprinting, pulling my headscarf off as I went through the door. The various noises of the city around me assaulted my ears, sharply contrasting the near-silence inside. I wondered how long it would take for the needles planted in my chest to finally rip my heart open. The world around me continued to move on without change. The cars drove by as always. The mosque doors opened and closed.

I jolted as a person next to me put their hand on my back, bringing about a warm familiarity.

I tried to hold my tears back at first, for the sake of the kind stranger behind me, but that quickly stopped being an option. I started to cry with no anchor. I wanted to hide it. My face quickly fell into my hands, in which tears began to pool. I had always hated for anyone to see me cry.

"Hey, are you okay?" said a familiar voice. No. This couldn't be happening

I wiped away my tears frantically. With a hard sniff, I looked up at her. As my vision cleared, I knew more and more certainly that my ears weren't playing tricks on me. When she removed her gold headscarf, it removed all doubt. It was Christy.

"I-I'll be okay soon," I said, trying to lean against the wall casually. Quickly, however, I knew I could not refuse this embrace.

"Try to breathe, okay?" said Christy as we hugged. I could tell that she wanted to cry, too. Just for now, she was holding it together for the sake of comforting those around her. I did not have the strength she did as my tears began to pass through their blockage.

"Look at me, look at me, look at me," Christy said as she let go and held my face. My tears began to flow freely again, "What's your name?" she quickly asked to distract me.

"Chri..." I began. Shit. "Jaklyn," I said, at last collecting myself, somehow.

"You can't keep things bottled up. You need to talk about them if you want to move past them," said Christy. When my anxiety would get bad enough to the point that she noticed, she would say the same thing, verbatim. "Forget this and talk to me for a bit. How did you know Christina?"

"We went to high school together." I lied. Damn it. At a time like this, lying to my best friend, and lying to such an extent, was the last thing I wanted to do.

"Christina and I were roommates," said Christy as I, feeling a momentary relaxation, listened casually. "We met in college. We..." She paused to collect herself. "We used to do so much together." After a long pause, she started to smile, then let out a small laugh. "I just realized I have no clue who I'll hang out with from now on. I bet she'd tease me for that."

We were interrupted. The doors opened again, this time bringing many more through them. My body was being carried out by my father, and behind him, by our neighbor, also a work

colleague of my father's and a regular guest in our home. It was at this point that the wrapped body, my body, was to be taken to the cemetery. The time in which I followed the group to the cemetery came and went without prominence. As all attendees gathered around the burial site, I located Christy in the crowd and stood side-by-side with her as my father and five other men lowered my body into the grave. The sight was almost too much to bear.

"I know this is hard, but you don't have to go through it alone," said Christy, "We can get through this together. I want to see you again, Jaklyn."

"You mean as friends?" I asked.

"Yeah. What do you think of it?"

"I would love to," I said, "I could call you later."

Perhaps, if it were not for that conversation, I wouldn't have made it through the rest of the funeral.

The last of the dirt was shoveled into the grave and patted down.

"Goodbye, Christina," Christy said quietly.

"Goodbye, Christina," I quietly croaked.

[CHAPTER 6]

The first thing that hit me was the smell of paint. This was my new apartment. This is where I would be living for the foreseeable future.

I felt lightheaded. Kicking off my flats, not caring where they landed, I wavered slightly as I walked past the amenities already provided on my arrival. New, polished drawers obscured much of the newly painted, bright white walls. Walking past an opened door, I saw a stranger standing inside from the corner of my eye. Doing a double-take, I realized that I was simply staring into the bathroom mirror, into the reflection of the stranger I had become.

I approached the bathroom and went inside, closing the door behind me. The sight of the reflection was agonizing. I felt a deep emptiness in my stomach. My very being was a constant reminder of all that I had lost. I wanted to look away from the mirror, but my eyes were locked. I hated the sight of myself. Not a moment had gone by since I learned of the truth that I hadn't felt a deep pain within myself, and I could with confidence doubt that such a moment would ever come.

A toothbrush lay on the sink counter. Next to it, an unopened toothpaste bottle. Next to it, a pair of scissors. I grabbed the scissors before returning my gaze to the mirror. With any luck, despite not having an organic body, perhaps sticking it in my throat would end up being what it takes to end this like it should have ended in the alley. I could pretend this was all a dream, and that I really had died when that knife went into my side. What difference would it make anyway? I was already dead to everyone else. This person, "Jaklyn," didn't have any friends, or anyone to go back to. Nobody would miss her. What would a few moments of suffering, as I suffocated through severing the passage for air to reach my lungs, be in comparison to a lifetime of living in such agony.

I held the blade's tip against my throat. If I were to simply strike the end of it towards myself, the beginning of the end would be upon me. In just a few minutes, if not faster, I would no longer have to concern myself with any of this.

My face was, except for a bit of tension, expressionless. Before the end of the century, I'd be dead anyway. What purpose did I have to stick around until then?

As I came closer to delivering that final strike, my eyes closed themselves. I could feel my face scrunching up. As my left hand gripped the scissors, it started to tremble. My right hand, now a fist, was in the perfect position to strike it.

Hesitation kicked in with full force, and I dropped the scissors, stepping back and gasping. I must've stood that way for nearly a minute without realizing I held my breath the entire time. I took deep gasps, my chest rising and falling, appearing in my peripheral vision with each rise before disappearing like the sun behind the horizon. With a final deep breath, my breathing returned, mostly, to normal.

If oblivion were the step I should take to find peace, then that step would remain available for me to take at any moment. The scissors would remain on the counter. Perhaps, testing the waters of a new life would be underway before the decision of bringing things to their final end could be made appropriately.

I took a deep breath as I began to feel some form of relief for the first time since this had all started. Stepping outside of the bathroom, I took a further look around. The apartment was spacious. The front door led to a broad and lengthy living room. To the right, a large television rested upon a brown drawer with dark green handles, which matched the others in all but its much shorter height. The television pointed towards a pretty couch. Its dark green color matched the handles, with a white, red polka-dotted cloth on each armrest.

To the left of this couch was the door which led to the bathroom.

To the left of the television, an empty doorway led to a small but stunning kitchen, with a consistently colored dark green tiled countertop, and a metal refrigerator that let out a gentle buzz. The countertop turned to form a corner alongside the walls. A cutting board on the end farthest from me was on it, which met the fridge at its edge. Directly to its left stood a brand new toaster oven. On the end closest to me lay a large bowl. It was filled with spices of all sorts of variety, too many for me to list or even bother to look through anytime soon. Underneath the counter on the farther end was an oven. Above and in parallel to the counter was cabinet after cabinet, interrupted only by the microwave directly above the toaster oven.

Back in the living room, through a set of wooden, golden-handled sliding doors, was a beautiful bedroom. It had a fluffy white blanket neatly tucked over a queen-sized bed, which stood against the wall to the right. Against the wall on the left stood a tall wardrobe, whose wood design and dark green handles matched the drawers in the rest of the apartment. On the opposite end of the bedroom, through a sliding glass door, was a balcony that overlooked what remained of the LeDroit Park architecture.

With the physical and emotional exhaustion I had endured, the bed looked more comfortable than ever. With my last memory of that night being sloppily pulling my dress and heels off and tossing them aside to fall where they may, I couldn't even remember getting into bed. Before I knew it, I was in a dreamless sleep.

In what felt like no time at all, an unignorable buzz pulled me out of the comfort of my subconscious. The sunlight beaming upon my eyelids brought me past the point of simply drifting off once again. I opened my eyes and sat up, looking around for the source of the noise, I saw a cell phone lying on the nightstand next to my bed, a cell phone. I hadn't noticed it there before. Squinting my eyes, not yet used to the light, to inspect it more closely, I could make out the name written on it. "Tyler."

"H-hello?" I said, groggily answering as I wiped my eyes with my arm.

"Jaklyn, hi!" he said, forcing a bit of cheer into his voice, "How was... How was the funeral?"

“Oh...” I began. It felt as though I had been snapped into the horrible reality I occupied even more roughly than before. “The place where they had it... It was really pretty.”

“I see,” he said, taking on a more diplomatic tone, “Well, as I’m sure you know, there are a few more things we need to discuss. I hope you’ll be able to make yourself available for a meeting within a few hours at the latest.”

“Oh, sure,” I said with a slight yawn as I stood up, just about managing to get my eyes to stay open by that point. “Would it be at that same place? That...” I paused to let out a loud yawn, “That glass building?”

“Yes. That would be the location of our secret service headquarters.”

“Okay, sure. I’ll start driving there in...” I paused for a moment. As my brain finally turned on, I began to recall the fact that I no longer had access to any of my belongings, including my car.

“What is the issue?” Tyler asked, confused.

“Well, how am I supposed to get there? Will Alex drive me around like she did yesterday?” I asked.

“Oh, yes, of course! My apologies,” said Tyler, “Check the top drawer by your bed, beneath where I left this phone.”

Walking over, I felt an odd sensation as I bent down to open the drawer. Being a good amount shorter than I had been before, as well as having a somewhat different figure, it was an incredibly odd sensation to experience even certain ordinary movements differently.

Inside of the drawer was a car chip. A recently invented replacement to the common car key, it was a fancier alternative.

“Well? What do you think?” Tyler asked, hoping for a pleasant reaction.

“Thank you!” I said, reciprocating in the happiest voice I could muster. “Where is the ca...”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Tyler butted in, “Have you ever used a car chip before?”

“No, I haven’t,” I said.

“Oh! Well if you want to light the car up to see where it is, you can do it by swiping your finger across the chip in any direction. It’s in the parking lot, by the way.”

“Thanks,” I said, stepping forward to get a look at the lot from the balcony. Swiping my finger as I was told, I saw a dark red coupé’s headlight flash on and off briefly.

“Well, get here soon, Jaklyn. I’ll be waiting,” Tyler said.

Getting all the proper goodbyes out of the way, the phone call came to a close.

Needing to get dressed, I walked over to the wardrobe. I opened both doors. The mirror inside brought me face to face with my new reflection once again. I looked myself up and down and came to a decision.

I had always been afraid to dress the way I wanted. Fading into the background was always my *modus operandi*. It took me until the age of 20 to even cut my hair the way I wanted. If I was going to live in this body, I might as well do what I wanted to do with my original, but likely never would have. Rather than wearing the first thing I saw when I looked through my clothes, or choosing what was most comfortable, I would dress to pull off the eye-catching appearance I always wished I had.

A wide assortment of tops, pants, shoes, and any other accessories I may have needed, were left at my disposal in the wardrobe. I could pull off countless styles with this assortment. I resorted to taking all the clothes out of the wardrobe, and devoted a fair bit of time to looking over all of them. After careful consideration, I settled on my ideal appearance for that day. I put on blue jeans, a white shirt, a red and black checkered flannel over it, and a pair of skate shoes.

There were a few things I wanted to do before I headed over to see Tyler. With that being the case, I headed over to the fridge and swung it open. A few things were already inside; a gallon of milk, a carton of eggs, unopened ham, and a few already prepared sandwiches wrapped in plastic. Perfect! Grabbing a sandwich, I headed for the parking lot, ready to hit the road. In a sense, I was doing so for the very first time in my life!

With their business threatened by the introduction of more efficient and less polluting electric cars, producers of the original gas-powered cars turned to an aesthetic appeal to regain sales. Along with all newer models being designed with visually stimulating interiors, often complete with neon lights and reflective chrome-colored upholstery, they opted to replace the long-standing car key with the car chip. Serving the same function, the faces of the square chip, programmed not unlike a cell phone touch screen, could be personalized to only activate a car when used by certain sets of fingerprints, putting a limit to the possibility of theft.

The car I was given was quite beautiful. It felt great sitting in it for the first time.

I still hadn't accepted my new self, so I wanted to feel closer to my old body. I had already changed my style of outfits, so I might as well go a bit farther with my appearance change before I went to meet Tyler. I drove off.

I had fewer fingers than the number of times I had been downtown. For most of my life, I simply stuck to where I ended up by default. I woke up, went to school, returned home, and repeated the cycle until the weekend, when I wouldn't go anywhere unless my parents decided I would. Then, they suggested I attend community college to get my associate's degree, then choose my university major afterwards. Come to think of it, that was probably why the "choice" part of picking my major was so difficult.

As the suburban homes around me heightened in scarcity, I knew I was in downtown when the buildings around me were made of more glass than anything else. If they could, the architects of this part of the city would not use a single other material. I didn't know the precise location, but I knew I would find it in this part of the city. You could find just about any kind of establishment here.

And, with quicker speed than I expected, I found what I had been looking for. I drove into the parking lot of the barbershop and parked right next to the door. I was fortunate to arrive when I did. There was not another car to speak of, so the hassle of waiting in line was completely avoided on my part.

As I was deep in the city, my ears were filled with the familiar, almost comforting sound of delivery drones flying above me.

The one-floor, rectangular building, was made chiefly of glass, with any other materials being colored in red and white.

Entering, I approached the barber, a young man with dirty-blond hair, and looked up at him. Out of all the new things about my body, height was the one that threw me off the most. Rather than looking at him facing forward, I had to tilt my head upwards, as though I were several years younger again.

He hid his cell phone behind the desk as he used it, hoping nobody would notice. The sound of my entering immediately drew his attention towards me.

"Oh, hey, babe! What can I do for you?" he asked as I approached the front desk.

"Babe?" I repeated, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, no worries, I call everyone that," the man assured, "Are you looking to get fixed up for a good night out?"

"No, not today," I said, "I just need something quick and simple."

"Well, if you ever *do* want a good night out, you can come and see me here," he said with a grin, "I can make it worth your while."

"Sure! I'll ask my girlfriend about where she'd like to go later and get back to you," I lied. His natural grin vanished in a heartbeat, though he forced his expression into a smile to make it less apparent.

"Well, I..." he started, "What kind of cut are you looking for today?"

"Can you please cut my hair so it won't go past here?" I asked the barber, pointing to the place where the back of my head met my neck."

"You sure, babe? Not many girls have hair like that. Maybe you'd ought to keep it. It's gorgeous."

"I'm sure," I said.

"Alright then. I can get it done for you in just a few minutes. That'll be \$35,"

Taking out the new phone Tyler had given me, I was sure I could find what I was looking for.

"Here you go, babe," I said in a sarcastic tone. With a tap of my phone against the register, the haircut was ready to go, and Tyler was paying for it. He wouldn't mind.

I walked over and sat on the nearest stool. The barber laid a cloth over my body and tied it around the back of my neck.

"Hold still." He said as he took a lock from the left side of my head, stretching it out as he opened the scissor blades around it.

"Ow!" I yelled as he snipped my hair, causing him to retract his hand.

"Did I cut some of your skin?" he asked, sounding worried.

I felt around the area.

"No." I said, very confused.

"Hmm. I must've scraped you. Not sure how that happened. I'll be more careful."

He continued with the cut. As he cut through the next lock of hair, it felt as though he was cutting off a piece of my body, like a finger or an arm.. I groaned with my mouth closed. Maybe, if I tried hard enough, I'd be able to sit through the haircut all the way.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

No. I couldn't. It hurt too much.

"I'm sorry, I can't do this," I said, standing up and taking the cloth off. Without turning back, I headed for the exit.

"Hey, did I pull on it or something?" he called after me.

I didn't turn.

"I... I'm sorry I called you babe!" he called, a bit louder to account for my now greater distance from him.

I reached the door, pushing it open.

"Well, your girlfriend would have thought you looked ugly with that haircut anyway!" he yelled.

Sitting down in the car once again, I touched what little of my hair had been cut. How bizarre. I could feel pain in my hair?

Despite all the questions this brought about, I already had enough piled onto me to concern myself with these. Defeated, I left for where I was expected to be.

I eventually arrived at the building Tyler had led me to. If ever there was a better example of the glass-themed architecture that had taken hold in downtown, it was the secret service headquarters. It looked like three buildings merged into one. There was a tall football-shaped tower of glass built into the building whose point stuck out of the wall to the left of the entrance. Just above the front doors was the number 950, with the three characters spaced far apart.

As I passed through the front doors, I quickly noticed, and was noticed by, Tyler, who leaned against a large oval-shaped front desk right directly in front of the entrance.

"It's very nice to welcome you again, Jaklyn!" he said in a jolly mood.

"Yes, thanks," I said awkwardly.

"Well, there's no sense staying down here. Please come to my office." he said.

He began walking, and I followed behind him to the elevator.

"Will it be the same office that... the office that I woke up in yesterday?" I asked.

"Yes, and it's right up here," Tyler said, stepping inside as the elevator doors slid open.

There was a light, consistent buzz that the elevator emitted as we began our ascent. Tyler turned his head to face me.

"Alex is already waiting for us there," he said. With a ding, the doors opened onto the 6th floor, which, like Tyler's office, looked like a mansion's living room. Finished with a red carpet, it was filled with cubicles, made from Shedua, nearly black-colored wood.

"I just need to grab a few things, and I'll meet you at home, alright Carl?" said a tall, dark-skinned man as he stepped inside through the stairwell door. I watched from afar.

"Alright, Doug. Don't take too long!" said a teenage boy who followed him behind and, from his appearance, appeared to be his younger brother, or some other relative.

"Hey-ya Gale!" the older man said to a coworker of his as he headed into the office.

"Hey, good to see you!" Gale said. He seemed not to have expected the greeting, as he stood up almost robotically from his cubicle, revealing his fluffy black hair, pale skin, and dark green jacket.

"Douglas, you're heading out so soon?" Tyler asked as we walked in the opposite direction.

"Yeah," Douglas said, "I scheduled taking today as a half-day a few weeks ago,"

"Well, just don't let it become a habit. We've got lots of work to do," said Tyler as we passed in front of a young Asian man, typing loudly as he sat behind his computer screen, "Not to mention, I wouldn't want you to become a Sambo to me."

"O- kay," Douglas said with a confused expression.

"What's a Sambo?" I asked.

"Oh, don't worry about it," said Tyler "it's a lot to explain. You can get good work done with Douglas; just make sure you always give him specific instructions if you want something done." As he wrapped up his sentence, he arrived at his office door. He held it open, gesturing with his other hand for me to go in first.

"I... I'll make sure I do that," I said to Tyler, walking past him.

With a hardly audible creak, Tyler shut the door behind us. Alex sat in a chair, her legs crossed, reading from a tablet. She looked up as I came inside.

"Ah, good to see you again, Jaklyn. How have you been feeling? Better than yesterday?"

"I guess so," I replied, "I'm taking it one day at a time."

"That's good," said Alex as I sat down in front of her, "Believe me when I say it only gets better from here. You haven't had any issues in mobility, have you?"

"No," I said, "I've been able to move around just fine."

"Now, we have something very important and very difficult to discuss," said Tyler, putting the previous conversation to a close. "From what I have been able to gather thus far, Ryan is attempting to build something that can be called nothing short of a super-weapon."

Alex developed a concerned look on her face.

"He isn't going forward with replicating our technology like he did before, is he?" Alex asked with audible distress in her voice.

"He is," said Tyler, "and it appears he's finally mastered the craft. The types of weapons he produces are his own variations on the same technology used to create you, Jaklyn."

"The same technology?" I repeated, "So, there are more people who have bionic bodies like me?"

“Well, yes,” said Alex, turning to me, “There is one that I know of, but...” she turned to Tyler, “Ryan? He’s able to create them too?”

“In short, yes. However, if the information I’ve received is correct, his capabilities far exceed anything our current technology can manage.”

“What does that mean? What is he able to do?” Alex demanded.

“Both of you, listen. This is a very long story, but it is vital for you all to understand if you want any chance of stopping him. Please, tell me when you are both ready to listen.”

I took a deep breath. From how Tyler spoke of his brother, it sounded as though Ryan wasn’t well mentally. Apparently, countless lives were at stake. If that was true, I couldn’t forgive myself if I could have stopped whatever Ryan was trying to do. For now, I’d have to put my personal interests aside for another day. I took a deep breath to prepare myself.

“I’m ready,” I said, about a second after Tyler finished speaking.

“Alex?” Tyler asked as she remained in silence. She had closed her eyes, taking a moment to be alone in her own mind.

“I need to know,” she said, “Please, tell me.”

“In our youth,” Tyler began, “my brother Ryan wasn’t ordinary. His intelligence and analytical personality made it difficult for him to make friends. He was able to live with this burden, as his interests gave his life a purpose. He was always tinkering with electronic parts he got his hands on, making little machines to show off. Now and again, he’d figure out how to give one of his toys functioning wheels. I often joined him, but even as a child, seven years younger than me, my creations always paled in comparison to his. I remember the first time I got a wheel to spin on my own, it had been a whole year since Ryan and I had taken up the hobby together. I was always proud of the path of accomplishment my brother was headed down, I began to grow concerned. He gradually developed an obsession with a single concept: Supremacy. When he couldn’t win at things fairly, he resorted to taking what he didn’t deserve by force. Our parents tried to discipline him, but it was to no avail. Ultimately, his mindset is what led him to where he is today; the middleman between the military and the companies who make weapons for them. He actually isn’t a member of either. He took our family’s money and used it to make friends in high places. That’s what allows him to get his foot in the door and insert himself into countless deals between the two. He has nearly full security clearance. He could stroll into the White House if he wanted to.”

“That’s not too much more than the public knows about him,” said Alex, “This is important, Tyler! What is his weapon?”

“His robotics passion was a game-changer when he began joining in on meetings.” Tyler continued, “The types of technology he has produced and will continue to produce grant ordinary people the ability to perform superhuman feats, not unlike the technology that saved

your life, Jaklyn. He's made a fortune selling it to the military since he first got his foot in the door. If the story ended there, I'd be proud of my brother's accomplishments, but it doesn't. There are a lot of questions to ask on whether or not his innovations are for better or worse. That isn't the reason I'm telling you all this. Ryan Machiavelli is an inventor of weaponry. He sells it for a living, but also keeps a lot for himself. This normally wouldn't be a concern, were it not for his sudden, great involvement with politics. Currently, he is one of America's top lobbyists. A huge portion of the president's income this year is from Ryan's lobbying. If you've watched any news lately, even a little, you'd know how badly the President is in debt. He's not in a position to forfeit being paid by Ryan, so he's been forced to allow Ryan's desires into law. Most of Ryan's desires, however, are for the benefit of his company, and his weaponry. Even this, despite being morally grey, I could look past. The amount that his government lobbying has helped his business is so extreme, you might call me a liar if I told you the exact figures. He now has an incredible stream of money, which he is putting towards *something*. What exactly that is, no one knows, but we can use the records I've been able to dig up to get an idea. Almost all of the things his business has purchased are meant to be used in the human body. Many of the purchases are surgical tools, and some are even biological samples, like human skin or blood. Even Alex and I could not access biological samples! Whatever weapon he is constructing currently, he refuses to inform the military of its details, let alone sell it to them. The money he has poured into his project has made his wealth drop by hundreds of millions, yet he doesn't appear to be seeking any profit to account for the loss. All of this slowly led me to a more and more sickening realization. Whatever this weapon is, he plans to use it for himself. With the amount of power this weapon will have, there may be no one able to stand in his way to stop him. That is why I need you, Jaklyn, to help me figure out what he is creating, and stop Ryan before he completes it."

"Hundreds of millions on just one bionic body?" Alex asked, visibly confused, "Do you think he's assembling an army?"

"No, it doesn't seem that way," said Tyler, "From the intelligence I've gathered, he appears to largely be working on a single piece of equipment to be used in a bionic body, with very little work in the way of making a complete bionic body."

"Nobody creates a weapon like that one and doesn't plan on using it," I said, "What is he planning to do?"

Tyler turned to face me, the look in his eyes even more serious than before.

"I hope to God we don't find out."

