

# vellichor

a collection





# VELLICHOR

*a collection of wistful stories*

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# Table of Contents

<i>Preface</i>	1
OMNIS	5
Amos	27
i did an oopsie me too	53
Selfish	71
ØbSsÈssÏØn	81
Takeoff	97
Empty	115
Retrograde	139
Oblivion	147
Dream Waves	161
Hanged Ravens	189
extraction.	209

Awaken	237
Evolution	253
BIRDS	279
cinereal.	291

# Preface

Following the success of last year's Impact, this is the second installment of what we hope will be an annual, student-led science fiction publication at ISF Academy. The stories in this anthology are the product of an interdisciplinary collaboration between the English and Science faculties in the school year 2019/20. Grade 9 students studied science fiction short stories by renowned authors including Ted Chiang who visited the school in October 2019 to speak to students about the genre. Students were tasked with writing science fiction stories that explored scientific issues that were important to them. The stories in this anthology represent the best of those stories.

The stories we selected for this anthology represent a range of science topics and human experiences. Some are optimistic about the consequences of our technological achievements; some are pessimistic and paint a bleak vision for our future as a species. They place on Earth and in the depths of space.

We would like to thank all contributors. Thank you, first, to Kathie Lau who created the artwork including the front cover. Thank you to all of the

students who helped organize, arrange and edit the stories. Thank you to the Shuyuan Department for funding the publication of this book and last, but not least, thank you to the English and Science staff for their guidance and support in making the anthology happen.

We hope you enjoy reading Vellichor as much as we did in creating it.







# OMNIS

*Hanna Sun*



*P.O.V. “Sage” Omnis-19:* It is day 24 of month 4, in the human-year 1990 on Planet Experiment 5118208, also known as “Earth” by its dominant species. We are observing the state of the planet through one Earth year per second space-time, viewing its atmosphere through System 3654, which has been named “Solar”. Source 19-2114, also known as the “Sun”, is the main energy source of this system.

*P.O.V. “Naive” Omnis-14:* Sorry to bring this up again, but are we supposed to refer to Experiment 5118208 as “Earth”, or as its experiment coordinates? Wouldn't it be easier if we chose to apply only one name to this experiment?

*P.O.V. “Optimise” Omnis-15:* Efficiency wise, “Earth” would be a better name for our experiment. “Experiment 5118208” is quite the mouthful.

## OMNIS

P.O.V. **“Meticulous”** *Omnis-13*: Understandable, but “5118208” represents the planet’s coordinates. So, for the sake of specificity and research purposes, we should keep the name as such.

P.O.V. **“Insolence”** *Omnis-9*: Why did we even change the name of this planet in the first place? We should just keep calling it “the dumpster”, because it’s our dumpster. All the trash went in there!

P.O.V. **“Optimise”** *Omnis-15*: Insolence 9, we have gone over this multiple-

P.O.V. **“Sage”** *Omnis-19*: Alert! Event occurring! A strange contraption is rising out of 5118208’s atmosphere.

P.O.V. **“Meticulous”** *Omnis-13*: Possibility of contraption being a “satellite”?

P.O.V. **“Sage”** *Omnis-19*: Likely. But compared to the previous “satellites” that have been launched, this one has a larger, more cylindrical body. It has two solar array panels, which are more narrow and fixed closer to the payload.

P.O.V. **“Meticulous”** *Omnis-13*: Not enough information. We must approach the object.

P.O.V. **“Optimise”** *Omnis-15*: Entering System 3654 to further inspect the

*Hanna Sun*

mechanism. Space-time is currently at 1 Earth day per second.

*P.O.V. "Sage" Omnis-19:* The contraption is enclosed by layers of graphite-fiber and aluminium matrix. There are two high-gain antennae at the narrow end of the machine that extend far out on two sides. It's travelling quite fast, with enough speed to circle around its home planet within 95 minutes of their planet-time.

*P.O.V. "Meticulous" Omnis-13:* Possibility of object being another satellite is still high, but unable to confirm.

*P.O.V. "Optimise" Omnis-15:* Moving in closer and entering native planet time.

*P.O.V. "Sage" Omnis-19:* There are two aluminium-coated glass mirrors. One is concave and the other convex. The two line up to face an opening at the end of the apparatus. A small hole in the center of the large mirror leads to a compartment filled with many other smaller objects. Please identify.

*P.O.V. "Meticulous" Omnis-13:* Instruments have been identified as cameras, spectrographs and interferometers. Contraption seems to be a "telescope". We can exit.

*P.O.V. "Optimise" Omnis-15:* Slowly drifting out of the mechanism now.

## OMNIS

P.O.V. **“Sage” Omnis-19:** Observation! Antenna seems to be whirring quietly, emitting a slow, cumbersome radio wave towards a communication satellite nearby. Any chance of identification?

P.O.V. **“Meticulous” Omnis-13:** The radio wave contains information for a small, dark image with a few bright circles. The largest circle seems to be a two dimensional copy of the light emitted from star HD96755.

P.O.V. **“Optimise” Omnis-15:** We have fully exited System 3654, and are currently in the space-time of 1 Earth year per second.

P.O.V. **“Sage” Omnis-19:** Notice! It is now human-year 1991 and another similarly-structured machine is rising out of the atmosphere from the same area.

P.O.V. **“Meticulous” Omnis-13:** Another space telescope, used for gamma ray detection. Any further developments?

P.O.V. **“Optimise” Omnis-15:** Skipping to the next significant event involving spacecraft.

P.O.V. **“Sage” Omnis-19:** Human-year 1999, another one.

*Hanna Sun*

P.O.V. **“Meticulous”** *Omnis-13*: Space telescope again, X-ray detection. What else are they doing?

P.O.V. **“Optimise”** *Omnis-15*: Skipping to the next significant event involving spacecraft.

P.O.V. **“Sage”** *Omnis-19*: Human-year 2003, there’s another one. This one has quite a unique build.

P.O.V. **“Meticulous”** *Omnis-13*: Infrared space telescope. Any more?

P.O.V. **“Optimise”** *Omnis-15*: Many more telescopes to come, but the uses of each have already been identified. We have now returned to our usual space-time. Earth-time is passing at 100 years per second.

P.O.V. **“Meticulous”** *Omnis-13*: Any patterns?

P.O.V. **“Sage”** *Omnis-19*: Indeed. All of these are telescopes used to detect light frequencies invisible to their native species. These mechanisms can detect frequencies and wavelengths across the entire electromagnetic spectrum. Radio waves bombard out of these machines towards satellites, which send radio waves back into the atmosphere of its home planet.

## OMNIS

P.O.V. **“Meticulous”** Omnis-13: Conclusion?

P.O.V. **“Naive”** Omnis-14: Yes! They want to play hide and seek with us!

P.O.V. **“Insolence”** Omnis-9: Seriously?

P.O.V. **“Naive”** Omnis-14: We are hiding, they are seeking! Oh, oh! We should hide in the quantum realm so they’ll NEVER find us!

P.O.V. **“Sage”** Omnis-19: In some ways, the “hide and seek” conclusion makes sense. It seems to be that the dominant species of experiment 5118208 has developed a curiosity in what lies beyond their known environment.

P.O.V. **“Insolence”** Omnis-9: Beyond their known environment... that means all of our past experiments? All the dead planets, dead stars, dead galaxies and black holes?

P.O.V. **“Sage”** Omnis-19: Correct.

P.O.V. **“Naive”** Omnis-14: Wait... so they can’t see us?

P.O.V. **“Meticulous”** Omnis-13: They are unable to see objects beyond their atmosphere because we’ve designed the planet’s atmosphere to absorb



*Hanna Sun*

infrared and ultraviolet light that passes through it. It's mainly to keep them alive.

*P.O.V. "Insolence" Omnis-9:* If they are unable to survive outside of their planet, what's the point in exploring an area in which will never be inhabitable to them? That's a waste of energy.

*P.O.V. "Sage" Omnis-19:* They are adamant. They are curious. They believe they have sufficient resources to explore the unknown. And so, they want to understand what they call "the Universe".

*P.O.V. "Naive" Omnis-14:* Funny little species. They're called "humans", right? Remember when we first created this planet?

*P.O.V. "Meticulous" Omnis-13:* Yes, it is quite an interesting memory. We created their planet as a dumpster. We thought Energy source 19-2114 was about to die soon. All possible life on its 8 other planets had died out and no life was sustained.

*P.O.V. "Naive" Omnis-14:* Oh! Remember that planet with rings of trash? What was it again? The numbers are so complicated!

*P.O.V. "Insolence" Omnis-9:* Yeah, why didn't we just dump all the trash there?

## OMNIS

P.O.V. **“Optimise”** *Omnis-15*: Because there were way too many leftover elements. If we threw all of those into the rings of experiment 19120211814, it would expand all the way to the two experiments around it.

P.O.V. **“Naive”** *Omnis-14*: And that’s why we merged all the leftovers into one big ball! What a genius idea! Who came up with that? Me!

P.O.V. **“Meticulous”** *Omnis-13*: Yes Naive 14, a very genius idea from a very genius mind. This new ‘dumpster’ planet contained just about everything, including B5, H1, Ar18, Ca20, O8. We then slid it in between the burning terrestrial planet, and the red terrestrial planet.

P.O.V. **“Naive”** *Omnis-14*: Oh oh oh! The red terrestrial planet! When we were down in the Earth realm, the humans said that the red terrestrial planet, “Mars” or something, used to be inhabited by little green creatures! “Martians”, they called them!

P.O.V. **“Insolence”** *Omnis-9*: Wow, we’ve found a species more stupid than Naive *Omnis-14*. Unsurprisingly, both have some relation to the dumpster.

P.O.V. **“Naive”** *Omnis-14*: Hey! That’s rude!

P.O.V. **“Sage”** *Omnis-19*: But think about it. The existence of these Homo

*Hanna Sun*

Sapiens are quite interesting. What we thought was just a dumpster started to form life. Dumpster 5118208 became Experiment 5118208. It bloomed with all sorts of life, ranging from nanoscopic organisms to creatures of monstrous length.

*P.O.V. “Naive” Omnis-14:* Oh oh oh! The humongous “dinosauria” species disappeared so quickly! They were the dominant species of the planet for how long?

*P.O.V. “Optimise” Omnis-15:* 65 million years of their planet-time.

*P.O.V. “Naive” Omnis-14:* Wow! Clearly, size isn’t everything.

*P.O.V. “Sage” Omnis-19:* Interesting, right? After many millennia of constant evolution, Earth’s dominant species became the puny little “Homo Sapiens”.

*P.O.V. “Insolence” Omnis-9:* Puny is a good word to describe them. They are tiny, physically unfit, and have terrible anatomical and physiological structure.

*P.O.V. “Meticulous” Omnis-13:* But what they did have, was an unusually large brain. Their large brain capacity allowed them to communicate, think, and most importantly: imagine. These “Homo Sapiens” can imagine things that

## OMNIS

do not yet exist. That's what gives them an advantage over all the other species.

*P.O.V. "Sage" Omnis-19:* In some ways, these creatures are similar to us. They are visionaries. They not only take, but also create. While we are out here conducting experiments to see how life can be sustained in certain environments, they conduct experiments to understand the way their world works.

*P.O.V. "Optimise" Omnis-15:* But keep in mind, from our observations so far, their fatal flaw is the basis of their existence: variety. Variety in elements is what resulted in their biological diversity. But it is also why every species varies in their own way.

*P.O.V. "Sage" Omnis-19:* Their ability to form independent individual thoughts means variation in perspective and such variation means conflict between individuals in a social group. And they do not have the ability to understand all the perspectives on a given issue. Bias is what betrays them in the end.

*P.O.V. "Naive" Omnis-14:* Woah... now that's deep.

*P.O.V. "Insolence" Omnis-9:* "Homo Sapiens" are such an intriguing species. They named their entire species "man who is wise". The audacity!

Hanna Sun

P.O.V. **“Naive”** Omnis-14: Technically, we call ourselves the “all-knowing gods”, so maybe we are just as narcissistic as those humans.

P.O.V. **“Insolence”** Omnis-9: We call ourselves “OMNIS” because it’s much easier than saying “Research group 151314919”. Didn’t we all go through OMNIS basis training 1?

P.O.V. **“Naive”** Omnis-14: Excuse me? If you haven’t realised by now, I’m Omnis-14! I went up to basis training 14! What about you, huh, Insolence? Omnis-9? You couldn’t even reach 10!

P.O.V. **“Insolence”** Omnis-9: Why you absolute-

P.O.V. **“Meticulous”** Omnis-13: Naive 14! Insolence 9! We must not break our number one basis rule! We haven’t forgotten, have we?

P.O.V. **“Naive”** Omnis-14: OMNIS research group recognises itself as “we”, with the members Optimise 15, Meticulous 13, Naive 14, Insolence 9 and Sage 19 forming one being as a whole. First personal pronoun use is limited to first-person plural.

P.O.V. **“Meticulous”** Omnis-13: Insolence 9? Any words?

## OMNIS

P.O.V. **“Insolence”** Omnis-9: If one must be spoken of, always use their names. If one must refer to themselves, always use “we”.

P.O.V. **“Meticulous”** Omnis-13: Well recited. We must adhere to these rules if we are to continue as OMNIS. Now, where were we?

P.O.V. **“Optimise”** Omnis-15: We were finding the purpose of the previous “space telescope” events. Naive 14 had mentioned hide and seek, where we are hiding, and humans are seeking.

P.O.V. **“Sage”** Omnis-19: Ah yes. Based upon our observations of the rising mechanisms, the Homo Sapiens seem to be attempting to break out of their shell. There is no risk in that. It is completely acceptable for them to explore our field. They’re simply looking at other experiments that started out just like theirs.

P.O.V. **“Optimise”** Omnis-15: Meticulous 13 mentioned that they may be able to see other planets, stars and galaxies, but they are unable to see us.

P.O.V. **“Naive”** Omnis-14: Oh, oh yes! The last time we went down there into the Earth realm, the humans were calling us “Dark Matter”. Now that’s quite a snazzy name!

Hanna Sun

P.O.V. **“Insolence” Omnis-9:** Snazzy!? No way. “Dark Matter”? What part of us is dark? Indeed we are some form of matter, but dark? How can our physical existence be regarded as dark? That is simply nonsense. If these inferior species are unable to see us, they should call us “invisible matter” rather than “dark matter”.

P.O.V. **“Naive” Omnis-14:** But what if they could, one day, see us? What if the Homo Sapiens, using their excessively large brain, come up with a way to witness our existence? What if we reveal ourselves to them? How would they react? Would their brains disintegrate from the pure shock of being in the presence of a celestial being? How would they even visibly see us in the first place?

P.O.V. **“Insolence” Omnis-9:** Now that’s probably the most unrealistic claptrap ever to be thought-

P.O.V. **“Sage” Omnis-19:** No. Naive 14 may be right. If Homo Sapiens are developing technology capable of measuring and seeing the wavelengths that we deemed to be invisible to them, they might one day find us. We must not let that happen.

P.O.V. **“Naive” Omnis-14:** Um... why? What’s so bad about the humans finding out about us? They can’t do us any harm. If anything, we’re the ones who are

## OMNIS

capable of harming them!

P.O.V. **“Optimise”** *Omnis-15*: Remember the second experiment rule from basis training 1?

P.O.V. **“Naive”** *Omnis-14*: Of course! All experiments must have control variables to maintain a fair testing environment.

P.O.V. **“Optimise”** *Omnis-15*: Although never directly stated, a very important control variable for all of our experiments is the consciousness of the species. Right now, they are only conscious of what is happening on their planet. They are not conscious of our existence. But once they find out they are under surveillance and testing by us.....

P.O.V. **“Sage”** *Omnis-19*: Our goal is to find a planet that can sustain life on its own for eternity. If the Homo Sapiens find out that they are part of an experiment, it's safe to say that their entire behavioural trend will shift, and the experiment will become biased.

P.O.V. **“Naive”** *Omnis-14*: Oh, that makes sense. So what are we going to do?

P.O.V. **“Meticulous”** *Omnis-13*: Remember how humans named us “Dark Matter”?



*Hanna Sun*

P.O.V. **“Insolence” Omnis-9**: Well, technically they don’t know it’s us. They just use the phrase “Dark Matter” to describe the weird matter that they cannot see and cannot begin to understand.

P.O.V. **“Sage” Omnis-19**: Exactly. Homo Sapiens are solid. They are fixed in size. They are composed of billions, trillions of particles, and only exist in their planet realm. Everything they see is also composed of billions, trillions of particles. No bigger, no smaller. That’s why they don’t know about us at all.

P.O.V. **“Optimise” Omnis-15**: One main reason is that we coexist in any realm we want to be in. We are particles smaller than they can see, yet form a larger being than they can ever identify. We are fluid, intangible. We simply exist. We are as big as we want to be, as small as we want to be.

P.O.V. **“Insolence” Omnis-9**: Yes, we know what we are. We don’t need much explaining there. What we still haven’t identified is how the humans are even going to discover us in the first place. This entire idea is quite out of reach.

P.O.V. **“Naive” Omnis-14**: No it’s not! If these humans are now able to identify wavelengths from all across the electromagnetic spectrum, then maybe they’ll be able to identify the wavelengths that make up the particles in which we exist! And then, they’ll be able to find us, decipher our language, realise that they’re in an experiment, freak out about the state of their planet, and then-

## OMNIS

P.O.V. **“Optimise”** *Omnis-15*: Quantum physics. That’s what the humans call it.

P.O.V. **“Meticulous”** *Omnis-13*: It’s already being developed?

P.O.V. **“Optimise”** *Omnis-15*: Well, attempts are being made, but so far no breakthroughs.

P.O.V. **“Sage”** *Omnis-19*: Then we must hurry. Naive 14 is right. If they decipher the code behind the wavelengths of each particle, they’ll be able to understand us. OMNIS, let’s get to work.

P.O.V. **“Optimise”** *Omnis-15*: Entering the quantum realm. What’s the plan?

P.O.V. **“Meticulous”** *Omnis-13*: Prediction report on next Homo Sapien event involving quantum physics?

P.O.V. **“Optimise”** *Omnis-15*: Prediction report states... Human-year 1922. It’s already 38943!

P.O.V. **“Insolence”** *Omnis-9*: See, these humans are not advanced enough to discover beings as complex and abstract as us. There’s no need to worry. Naive 14 is just making things up.

*Hanna Sun*

P.O.V. **“Naive” Omnis-14**: No! We must’ve underestimated them! They must’ve sent us a message that we didn’t receive! They must’ve sent it when we weren’t expecting anything! Could it have been from the space telescopes? The satellites?

P.O.V. **“Sage” Omnis-19**: Insolence 9 is probably correct on this one. We probably set up precautions in the past which makes it difficult for these planet species to decipher our existence.

P.O.V. **“Meticulous” Omnis-13**: Yes, there was something of that sort. Optimise 15, any records on quantum related control variables? Perhaps way back from when we first formed together as OMNIS?

P.O.V. **“Optimise” Omnis-15**: Particle control variable 24, electron wavelengths must form together as particles when under the observation of other species. This seems to be the most relevant control variable for this case.

P.O.V. **“Meticulous” Omnis-13**: That’s right! Without the ability to perfectly identify and measure the wavelengths and the composition of each particle, humans can never even begin to decipher our existence. Thank goodness for this law. Otherwise, we would have to burn this lovely experiment.

P.O.V. **“Naive” Omnis-14**: Speaking of burning, the “Sun”, which is the energy

## OMNIS

source for this system, has been expanding, hasn't it?

*P.O.V. "Insolence" Omnis-9:* Oh yes. Hopefully, the Sun burns this experiment before we have to. And then we can start a new set where the energy source doesn't expand and swallow everything.

*P.O.V. "Naive" Omnis-14:* When is Earth going to get swallowed? These creatures are quite lovely, we wouldn't want to leave too soon. It's only been 4.5 billion Earth years!

*P.O.V. "Meticulous" Omnis-13:* The expansion of the sun will only reach Earth after at least 5 billion more Earth years.

*P.O.V. "Insolence" Omnis-9:* Ha! Will they really survive to see the day they are swallowed by the sun? Creatures like these narcissistic humans are bound to do damage to their planet for personal gain.

*P.O.V. "Naive" Omnis-14:* Why must we always look at the negative? The humans are quite intellectual compared to species from previous experiments!

*P.O.V. "Insolence" Omnis-9:* Quite intellectual is not fully intellectual. As Optimise 15 and Sage 19 both mentioned, humans have a fatal flaw. Shall we

*Hanna Sun*

run a check on the population report? It's been a while since that was done.

*P.O.V. "Optimise" Omnis-15:* Running status check. We've hit a little more than 5 billion Earth years. The Sun hasn't reached Earth yet, but the human population is... extinct? Life sustainability level is less than one percent!

*P.O.V. "Sage" Omnis-19:* Quick! Run a status report on the entire planet. What went wrong?

*P.O.V. "Optimise" Omnis-15:* Earth surface temperatures are soaring! Air pressure levels are unstable, and the ratio of atmospheric gasses is rapidly fluctuating. Only one species of a resistant microorganism remains, the rest of the living organisms have disappeared.

*P.O.V. "Meticulous" Omnis-13:* Is it the same species of microorganisms as the ones currently surviving on burning terrestrial planet Experiment 225142119, and Fe26-based planet Experiment 135183211825?

*P.O.V. "Sage" Omnis-19:* Yes, same species but each microorganism has a slightly different structure. They must've been influenced by Earth's variation. Any further reports from Optimise 15?

*P.O.V. "Optimise" Omnis-15:* Experiment 5118208, also known as Planet Earth,

## OMNIS

has now been identified as a heat-induction failure.

P.O.V. **“Naive” Omnis-14:** Does this mean... we’re done with Earth? Solar System 3654 is coming to a close?

P.O.V. **“Sage” Omnis-19:** Yes.

P.O.V. **“Naive” Omnis-14:** What? Really? But we were only starting to get to know them!

P.O.V. **“Sage” Omnis-19:** Naive 14, we go through this every time. Sadly we do not have the chance to fully indulge in every experiment we create. We must focus on our goal. When we finally find the one planet that can sustain life forever, maybe then we can “get to know them”. But for now, we must continue. Do we still have the coordinates of the system we were planning before Solar’s dumpster grew life?

P.O.V. **“Optimise” Omnis-15:** System 3655 is located right nearby, about 4,000 light-years away. We’ve set our resources in the black hole V616 Mon.

P.O.V. **“Sage” Omnis-19:** What was our progress?

P.O.V. **“Meticulous” Omnis-13:** We were halfway through deciding whether the

*Hanna Sun*

energy source should be prototype 20 or 21.

*P.O.V. "Insolence" Omnis-9:* Both 20 and 21 are expanding sources. The next energy source should retain a constant size to ensure we don't make the same mistake as we did in System 3654. We should create a new prototype.

*P.O.V. "Sage" Omnis-19:* Insolence 9's advice sounds reasonable. V616 Mon should hold sufficient material for that.

*P.O.V. "Optimise" Omnis-15:* Initiating full departure from System 3654. Next stop, System 3655.





# Amos

*Ingrid Yeung*



The newborn infant cried, and the cry was like the sound of angels' trumpets. His upper lip was as thin as a piece of thread, a delicate pink line below where his philtrum was supposed to be. With every cry he let out, his upper lip quivered. His nose was slightly upturned, paltry even for the size of his head. His eyes were as grey as the sombre clouds in the skies outside the hospital window, clouds that have been there for as long as anyone in Dirus remembered. He stretched his arms, reaching out towards the open space which it was previously not accustomed to in the enclosed womb of his mother.

“I am deeply sorry for your loss,” said the doctor.

Alba was carrying the infant. She looked out the window towards the clouds. The landscape seemed more dismal than usual - as if the city were sobbing and the cold skyscrapers weeping. She knew deep down this city did

*Amos*

not care for what she had suffered. This city was heartless, and the people in authority only cared for their political motives. They did not care about their people, paying attention to them only when they started to act against their political beliefs.

A silent teardrop rolled down her pale cheeks and dropped onto the towel in which her grandson was wrapped. She turned to the empty bed in the maternity room, where her daughter was supposed to be lying. This was supposed to be a joyous occasion, where people were supposed to celebrate. But instead, it was the worst of days. Her daughter was gone. The only thing she left behind was the boy.

“I am afraid I have more unfortunate news,” added the doctor. “This boy suffers from fetal alcohol syndrome.”

Alba started, clicking back into reality. She turned to the doctor and uttered, “I’m sorry, fetal alcohol syndrome?”

“Yes,” replied the doctor, “It is a condition an infant suffers due to alcohol exposure during the mother’s pregnancy. There will be brain damage and growth problems. This includes the sensory abilities of the child. The effects of this condition on each child vary, but they are all irreversible.”

Irreversible.

The word broke Alba. Why did the most horrible things happen to her? First, it was her husband; then her daughter, now her grandson. She had lived a long life, but she has not yet seen the light at the end of the tunnel. Her fingers tightened around the newborn infant and the newborn infant cried

louder than before.

“Please calm down, Ms. Alden. You are hurting the baby,” said the doctor. Alba’s fingers remained constricted onto the baby. “Ma’am, please calm down and listen to me. There is a solution to this. It’s called Amos.”

Alba loosened her grasp of the infant and turned her head to the doctor as she quietly repeated the word.

“It’s a new neuroprosthetic funded by the government. It is a technology that will intercept communication between damaged neurons and healthy neurons. This will allow neuron communication to function properly. The technology is only in its beginning stages of development, but it is extremely promising. With such positive results, the government has decided to put the product to the test on human subjects.”

A red flush of anger filled Alba’s face. “No, absolutely not! How can you test out something so dangerous and unfamiliar on my grandson!” she shouted.

“Ma’am, it is a great risk to take, but the benefits are plentiful. Not only will your grandson be able to live a normal life, but he will be credited if this succeeds!”

“And if it doesn’t?”

The doctor hesitated and answered, “There is a lot of uncertainty regarding this product, but the government will provide monthly financial support if you agree.”

Alba was about to open her mouth to protest, but she stopped short.

## *Amos*

Her wrinkled fingers grazed against the youthful skin of the infant. The sight of her fingers against his supple cheeks reminded her of her time left on Dirus. She was getting older, and her day to leave this plane of existence was closing in. She was the only relative this boy had. The sight of his grey eyes reminded her of her deceased daughter, and she felt like she had known this boy for her whole life. Without her, this boy would be left alone. Didn't she have a responsibility to do what was best for him?

After moments of consideration, she asked, "How much is the financial support per month?"



After hours in the waiting room, the doctor called out, "Alba Alden? Your grandson's surgery was a success." Nurses wearing pale blue clothes wheeled out a transparent box. The sound of the wheels clicked against the white tiled hospital floor. With every click of the wheels, Alba's heart pulses became more rapid. She stood up and peered inside the box.

There he was, a fragile being who was so innocent and pure, yet so weak and flawed. She picked him up and gently cradled him in her arms. His eyes were closed and he was bundled up in a soft white cloth. His chest rose and fell with every breath he took. Alba looked at the infant lovingly, but the eyes communicated concern. Everything about him was ordinary, save for a flashing blue light that blinked AMOS, sitting on the boy's left temple. Sensing the unease on her face, the doctor noted, "The light is just an indication of the presence of Amos in the brain. It is nothing to be concerned

*Ingrid Yeung*

about. However, it is a requirement that the light must be visible at all times.”

Silence filled the atmosphere as Alba examined the flashing blue light. The steady flashes of the device matched the pace of each breath of the baby. The blue light disturbed Alba, but she concealed her apprehension from the doctor.

“Well, have you decided on a name?” asked the doctor, in hopes of breaking the silence.

“Yes,” she responded quietly, staring out the window. “Otis.”



Otis gazed into the filthy mirror, trying to shave off the last bit of stubble on his chin. Little flecks of hair dropped into the cracked sink below. He ran water through his shaver and flicked his it a few times to dry it off. He reached for the towel hanging on the wall and wiped off the remaining shaving cream on his face. He then splashed the cold tap water against his face in an attempt to wake himself up. He glanced at his reflection in the mirror. He saw his deep grey eyes, which were hidden behind his thick brown curls, staring back at himself. He swept his curls back and revealed the flashing blue light on his temple, the very thing that has been blinking for the entire 20 years of his life.

AMOS. AMOS. AMOS.

He despised the light.



He was 9. The Chad Dickson Show had just entered a commercial

## *Amos*

break. Otis was staring at the cereal commercial that had brainwashed him for the entire week. “Mini Dunks! Dunkin Doughnuts in a box! Have doughnuts for your breakfast, lunch, or even supper!”

Bored with the commercial, he walked out to the balcony. He glanced into the eerie cityscape. The city seemed barren, but he could sense the presence of life within it. He was familiar with everything in this cityscape. He knew every inch of it. The buildings, the light poles, each window, and the stories that happened behind each closed window. He saw the family on the 4th floor across the street, sharing a warm-hearted dinner. He saw the old man on the 7th floor, sharing a conversation with a picture of his wife. He saw the siblings on the 8th floor who played hide-and-seek with the family dog.

He then saw a new story unfolding before his eyes. Two men stood on the balcony. One was taller than the other. The tall one wrapped his arms around the waist of his partner. The shorter one had his arms resting on the balcony, and both gazed up to a dark sky where the moon hung. The glow of the moon was cold, but Otis supposed they found warmth in it. He could tell they were whispering into each other’s ears, exchanging secrets no one else would ever know. He rested his chin onto the balcony, mesmerised by this calming and warming sight before his eyes. He has never seen such composure in this chilling city.

But this calm moment was interrupted by a sudden surge of pain. He heard a high-pitched beep ringing through his brain. He pressed his hands

*Ingrid Yeung*

against his head, hoping to steady his aching mind, but it only made the sounds worse. His temple, which had the AMOS light printed on it, started to warm up.

“Mawmaw! Mawmaw!” He shouted.

Alba was preparing a can of peaches for Otis in the kitchen. Hearing the shouts, she came rushed towards young Otis. “Otis, what’s wrong? Are you alright?” she asked.

“My head hurts and it’s getting warmer,” whined Otis.

Alba carefully took Otis’ hands off his head. The Amos light was not flashing anymore. The steady neon blue light was blinding. It glared at Alba as if it was the predator and she was the prey. The light sent shivers down her spine. Overcoming the shock, she extended her arms and wrapped them around Otis. She said, “It’s alright darling, come back in.” She carefully led Otis back into the small apartment. Otis rubbed his head into her chest, crying, “Mawmaw I’m scared.”

“It’s alright, you’re ok. Here let me see your head,” she replied. Despite her efforts to stay calm, her voice was shaking. Otis obediently lifted his head and looked at Alba. She lightly turned his head to see his temple, expecting to see the blinding light. However, the light went back to its original steady flash, as if it had always been flashing.

As soon as Alba realised this odd incident of the light, Otis mumbled, “Mawmaw, my head’s not aching anymore. I feel alright. Can I have a can of peaches and go watch Chad Dickson now?”

## *Amos*

Alba absentmindedly let go of Otis and handed him the can of peaches. He ran back to the front of the television. He sat down and started eating. The familiar voice of Chad Dickson came on. As Otis was mesmerised by the show, the light on his temple blinked as normal.

AMOS. AMOS. AMOS.

Alba stared at the light, and a sense of dread filled her.

She quietly whispered to herself, "I should have never agreed to this."



Otis opened the rusty mailbox for "4A". The hinges of the small mailbox creaked. He reached in to discover a familiar brown packaged envelope tied with a thin piece of string. "AMOS FUNDS" were scribbled onto it with a dark black marker. Knowing what it was, he discreetly placed this package into the inner pocket of his jacket.

As he locked the mailbox, he heard a small voice behind him, "Is he the Amos boy?" Another chirped in, "Is he the guy with the light in his head?" The third one added, "I heard he has the light in his head because he has mental problems."

Otis turned around and stared at the source of the voices. Three young boys stood motionless and stared back into his eyes. After a split second, they realised he had caught sight of them. Immediately, the first boy shouted, "The Amos boy! Run!" They sprinted out of the front door of the complex, dashing out into the dark daylight.





*Ingrid Yeung*

The next morning, Otis walked on the bleak streets of Dirus, carrying a bag of groceries. It was his duty to get groceries. Alba told him, “Otis, you are a big boy now. You should start to take on more responsibilities for the family.” So he did. The handle of the bag dug into the flesh of his proximal phalanx, but he did not complain.

He took the usual route home, but when he reached the corner Green and Stone, he felt the light on his temple heating up. It gave him the most horrible headache. A ringing sound echoed through his head. An electrical shock travelled down his spine towards his legs and took over control of his movement. Instead of continuing down Green, he turned onto Stone. For a moment, he speculated about where he was heading, but that doubt was quickly dismissed. His legs carried him down the road until he saw a building with the words “Mutigoc” printed on it.

He pushed open the heavy revolving door and entered the building, his tiny hand still wrapped around the handle of the grocery bag. His oversized sneakers made an unsettling sound as he shuffled on the marbled floor. He walked up to the front counter, tiptoed and muttered, “Hello? Is anybody there?” A bald man with a dark beard swivelled in his chair and faced him. He looked down towards Otis. Otis felt small and powerless in the presence of this man. In a monotonous voice, the man asked, “How may I help you?”

Otis stuttered, “I... I just wanted to report something.”

The man maintained his robotic tone, “What is it?”

## *Amos*

“I live on No. 54 of Green Street, and there are these two men that live across me, and they... they hug each other and whisper to each other every night.”

The man’s blank face showed a slight hint of interest. Otis continued, “They seem to enjoy the moon very much... and they stood close to each other.”

Having listened to his statement, the man took out a pen and started writing. The movement of his pen was quick and sharp, the sound resounding in Otis’ ears. After the pen stopped, the man lifted his head and looked down at Otis. “Thank you, young man, your efforts are...”

The man’s voice trailed off as he noticed the flashing Amos light on the temple of Otis. He smiled slightly at the sight of the light and continued, “Very, very appreciated by the Chancellor.”



Otis was used to the jeering and the stares from bystanders, but he never liked it. Tired, he turned to head up to his apartment. As he was about to ascend the staircase, a voice sounded from behind him, “I’m sorry you have to go through that, kid.”

The comforting face of Mr. Jackson appeared. He has been the security guard of this complex for as long as Otis could remember.

Otis answered, “It’s alright, I’m used to it.”

Mr. Jackson remarked, “You may be used to it, but you shouldn’t be.”

Otis responded with a fake smile on his face, “Thanks, Mr. Jackson.”

*Ingrid Yeung*

The television above the mailboxes was playing. The emotionless reporter announced, “It is an honour for our channel to announce the election results of 2048. The new chancellor of our great state is Chancellor Hoffman. Of course, it is no surprise to us that Chancellor Hoffman is once again elected as the Chancellor as he has been our great leader for the past few decades. Congratulations once again, Chancellor.”

Mr. Jackson scoffed, “Can you believe it? The audacity of them to say an election was held in the first place. No one ever gets to vote around here. Even back in my 20s, never once have I ever witnessed a fair election. Now, here I am, nearing 60, and I don’t think I have witnessed an election for the past 3 decades. And that Chancellor Hoffman is no good news. What has he done?”

Otis was about to respond when a high pitch sound rang in his head. His temple’s flashing light was warming up. Holding his hands up to his head only made the pain worse. He covered the bright light on his temple to hide it from Mr. Jackson. Mr. Jackson got out of his seat and asked, “Hey kid, you alright? You don’t look so good.” Otis winced and replied, “No... I’m just fine. Sorry, I have to head up now, my grandma is waiting for me.”

With this, Otis stumbled up the stairs.



That night, as the Chad Dickson show went to the Mini Dunks commercial again, Otis went out to the balcony, as usual, to look at the stories through the windows. The family was having their dinner, the old man was

*Amos*

talking to his wife in a picture frame, and the siblings were playing hide-and-seek.

But he didn't see the two men who gazed at the moon and whispered into each other's ears.

He never did again.



He ran into the apartment and slammed the door behind him. His lungs expanded and contracted with every shaky breath he took. The room seemed to spin. He held his hands up to his head to steady himself and closed his eyes. He shut them until they ached. He then opened his eyes and realised his head was clear and the room was still again. Just as he was recovering from this psychological episode, Alba's voice came from the room, "Otis, is that you?"

Otis recollected himself and walked into Alba's room. He shouted into the apartment, "Mawmaw, I'm home." She looked at his face and noticed the tense fixture of his face. She asked him, "Honey, are you alright? What's the matter?" Not wanting to worry her, he countered, "No nothing, I'm just fine." In the efforts of changing the subject, he said to her, "I've just collected mail. The funds for this month came in."

Alba cracked a weak smile, "Oh that's great darling, now we have enough canned peaches."

"Yes Mawmaw, I'll get them first thing in the morning."



*Ingrid Yeung*

The next day, Otis descended the stairs with his head down to get the canned peaches. “Morning Otis!” greeted Mr. Jackson cheerfully. A wide smile spread from ear to ear on his face. Remembering the high pitch sound in his head and the blinding light on his temple, Otis responded anxiously, “Morning Mr. Jackson.”

As he rushed out into the street, a cold breeze hit him. He buried his face in his jacket and avoided eye contact. He could feel strangers stare as he walked. People glanced at his temple and exchanged looks. He managed to ignore all this because he only had one goal in mind: peaches.

He turned the corner, rushed into the store and grabbed the closest can of peaches. He placed it on the counter. “That’ll be \$9.99...” before the cashier could finish her sentence, Otis put a fresh bill on the counter, took the can of peaches and rushed out. If he managed to get back home immediately, Mr. Jackson would be safe.

He walked as fast as his legs would carry him, charging through every street. When he reached the corner of Green and Stone, however, his body came to a sudden halt. He could feel an electrical zap shoot from his temple to his feet. The electrical force started to inch over every area of his body in its efforts to control him. He resisted with all his might, but ultimately yielded. His feet carried him down Stone street and brought him to the building with the horrifying words “Mutigoc” hung above its doors. Otis pushed through the heavy revolving glasses and entered the building. He dragged his feet across the marble floor. The friction between his sneakers and the ground

made an unpleasant squeaking sound.

He walked to the front desk and muttered, "Hello? Is anyone here?" The bald man with the dark beard swivelled in his chair. Besides for a few wrinkles on his forehead and the round reading glasses that sat on the bridge of his nose, he looked exactly as Otis remembered. The man greeted him in the same monotonous voice, "How may I help you?"

Otis told him, "I want to report something...."

The man replied, "What is it?"

"I live on No. 54 on Green street, and there's a security guard called Mr. Jackson. He disagrees with the Chancellor and reminisces about the old times. He claimed that no election has ever been held and that the election was an act by the Chancellor and his party."

The man took out his pen and started writing. With each stroke he wrote, Otis felt the guilt accumulate. The man clicked his pen when finished and robotically asserted, "Thank you, your efforts are appreciated by the Chancellor."

"I just have one question," Otis whispered.

"Fire away," the man answered.

"What... what will happen to Mr. Jackson?" he asked.

The man lifted his head and pushed his spectacles with a finger. He glanced at Otis' flashing temple, cracked a cold smile as he recognised the light and the boy. He questioned, "What's your name, young man?"

"Otis."

*Ingrid Yeung*

“Well, Otis, that is not your concern. Your efforts are greatly appreciated by the Chancellor.”



Otis ran home. He was panting on the street and his heart pumped rapidly. Although it was a cold day, sweat trickled down his forehead. He was running as quickly as he could, but that guilt weighed him down.

He turned onto Green street and ran straight up to his residence. As he entered the lobby, he heard a booming voice.

“Mr. Jackson, you are a suspect of a volatile political crime. Please cooperate with your arrest.” Otis glanced toward the direction of the voice. A large man with a strong build stood over the small metal desk of Mr. Jackson. His body loomed over the short stature of Mr. Jackson. The blue rings around Mr. Jackson’s dark iris were filled with fear. His eyes were wide opened as the man stood over him.

“Please, sir, I swear I didn’t do anything wrong. Please don’t take me!”

“Mr. Jackson, please cooperate with your arrest or I will be obliged to use force,” the man asserted. At this point, Otis was standing on the top of the staircase. The guilt in him was getting heavier and heavier and he felt like his chest was touching the ground. The only thing he could hear was his own heartbeat, pulsing in his mind, ridiculing his actions.

“No please don’t take me away! Sir, please! Please!”

The protest of Mr. Jackson echoed down into the hallway. Otis peered through a tiny slot between the railing of the staircase to catch a glimpse of

## *Amos*

the fate of Mr. Jackson. His face was filled with despair as the man dragged him by his collar across the floor. Otis closed his eyes to avoid this dreadful sight. The door to the residence swung open and the sound of a gush of wind came through. The door swung closed, and Otis opened his eyes.

He was left alone.



Otis curled up in his bed with his face towards the wall. His vision was blurred by the tears in his eyes. The guilt inside of him was heavier than ever. Why did he do it? Why did he turn the corner at Green and Stone? Mr. Jackson was the only other person who cared about him besides his grandmother. He was the sweetest soul he had ever known. And yet he was gone. Because of him.

He knew deep down it was not his consciousness that took that turn. He did not take a turn at Green and Stone. He recalled that moment on that corner where something took over. It was a force. It was an internal force that made him. That force, that force was not him. That force was an electrical surge from his brain that travelled down his spine and into his feet. He had felt his temple aching for a second immediately before it took over him. He had tried to resist it, but he was not strong enough. He had succumbed to the force.

Then he remembered: Amos. The light. Amos was sending this electrical force down his body. The neuroprosthetic allowed his neural communication to function properly, but it could also hijack his brain. He



*Ingrid Yeung*

knew it was not his decision to turn the corner. It was Amos. It made him an involuntary spy for the government.

Realising this, he hopped out of bed and ran into the bathroom. He looked at himself in the filthy mirror and saw a guilty man, a man who was at fault for a crime that he had committed, a man who was innocent. His grey eyes were the eyes of a criminal, but also the eyes of an innocent boy.

He pushed his brown curls back from his temple to reveal the blue neon light. The light flashed from under his skin, jeering at him. He picked at the light, scratching at his skin. He tried to pry his temple open to take out the horrid light, but his skin and the light were left unharmed.

Helpless, he dropped to the ground and buried his face in his palms. He cried, his shoulders shaking with the force of the sobs. He was guilty of the disappearance of the two men and Mr. Jackson. Remorse overcame him and he sank in despair. Scenes replayed in his mind's eye: the two men watching the moon as they savoured each other's warmth; Mr. Jackson's warm smile and his kind eyes. The latter's terrified cries reverberated through him again, and Otis flinched, imagining the punishment in store for them.

Punishment that he had doomed them to. Punishment that, if he had never said a word, would not have come to them.

Alba heard Otis's cries from the bathroom. Worried, she shuffled towards the bathroom and knocked on the door, "Otis darling? You alright?"

Otis stood up and slowly opened the bathroom door. He hugged his

*Amos*

grandma sobbing. Alba questioned, “Otis? What’s wrong?”

“Mawmaw, I did something wrong. I made a big mistake.” Alba placed an arm on Otis’ back. She tried to reach for his shoulders, but he was too tall. She comforted him and gently expressed, “It’s alright honey, we all make mistakes.” The apartment was dark as the clouds got thicker. Otis felt a small bit of light and warmth in the embrace of his grandma. Although her head was only at the level of his chest, he bent down to place his head on her head. He felt her thin, grey hair.



Otis rubbed his eyes as he stepped out of his bedroom. They were still swollen from the previous night. A brisk ray of sunlight shone on his face; it was rare for the sun to appear in Dirus. As he walked towards the dinner table, he saw two open cans of peaches on the table, one in front of his seat and the other in front of Alba. His grandma sat across from him and she greeted him with a pleasant smile. “Morning Otis. I prepared your favourite meal!”

Otis pulled out the chair from under the table and sat down. His body felt heavier than usual as he slid into his seat. His arms dangled by his sides, shoulders slumped by the weight of his limbs. With no small amount of effort, he reached out and picked up a spoon and a can of peaches. They glistened in the sunlight as he scooped them out, clearly coloured with an unnatural coat of orange. As he took a bite of the peaches, a familiar gush of sweetness filled his mouth. The nostalgic taste brought him back to the past,

*Ingrid Yeung*

when he was just an innocent kid, sitting in front of the television set watching Chad Dickson. It brought him back to the balcony and the stories behind closed windows.

And the two men who gazed at the moonlight and whispered into each other's ears.

Remembering this, Otis' stomach tied in knots. He was used to the unsettling inside of him. He winced a bit, but fortunately, his grandmother did not notice. He ate more quickly in hope of drowning out his unease. Alba sat and calmly watched Otis slurp up his can of peaches.

After a few moments of silence, Alba uttered, "Otis, I need to tell you something." Otis looked up from his can of peaches, "What is it?"

Otis' grey eyes looked right at her, and for a moment Alba felt as if her daughter was sitting in front of her once again. She quickly reexamined Otis' face to bring herself back into reality, and her eyes lingered on the flashing blue neon light on his temple. She was used to the light on his temple, but she never felt quite at ease with it. It was a distinct feature of her grandson, but somehow it never seemed to belong to him. The light was as foreign to her as if it was a stranger living in her own home.

Directing her eyes away from the light and into Otis' eyes, she continued, "I deeply regret my decision to allow Amos to be implanted in your brain. The Amos, the light, it doesn't feel right. I never felt comfortable around it. I feel like I am constantly watched. Every blink of that light feels like a blink of the eye of a spy. That Amos...it's no good news. It feels like the

government has become a part of you and taken away the organic, original you.”

After hearing this, a high-pitched sound rang in Otis’ head. A sharp electrical current surged through his body. The force within him was back. He tried to suppress it, but he failed. A sense of fear overcame him as he realised what was going to happen next. The light was brightly lit and blinded Alba. She raised her hand to shield herself from the light. She exclaimed, “No! The light!”

The electrical surge travelled down towards Otis’ legs and he got up. He turned his head towards Alba and stated, “I’m sorry Mawmaw, I don’t want to do this.”

With that, he swung the door open and headed towards the corner of Green and Stone.



Otis took great strides as he walked to the corner. His legs moved as if they had a mind of their own. He tried with all his might to fight the force in him. He put his hands against his head to squeeze the force out, but it only made the pain more sharpening. He started hitting the light on his temple. The light burned his hand slightly, leaving a light pink mark on his palm. Pushing through the pain, Otis continued to suppress the force.

But it had taken over.



He pushed through the massive glass revolver door to Mutigoc. The

*Ingrid Yeung*

familiar austere marble-floored lobby welcomed him. His worn-out sneakers squeaked against the ground as he walked up to the front desk. With every last bit of energy left in him, he resisted the movement of his legs, but they were dragging themselves across the lobby until he was standing in front of the bald man with the dark beard.

The man looked up from his paper files and said in a slightly brighter voice than before, “Ah, Otis, it’s you again. How may I help you?”

Otis looked down at his sneakers that appeared so out of place against the sleek and elegant marble ground. He felt the electrical surge through his neck, but he stood his ground. He had to fight against it for as long as he could. He had to protect the only thing that mattered to him: the woman who raised him when no one wanted to. His muscles strained and ached as he fought against the force. Veins were popping out of his neck. He resisted for a few more moments, but his neck gave into the force.

The force lifted his head in a quick second, and the words automatically flowed out of Otis’ mouth, “I’d like to report someone, someone who thinks that the government has greater plans, cynical ones, for the technology Amos. This person thinks Amos is a way for the government to invade its people’s privacy, a way for the government to get rid of people who don’t fit their societal standard, when in reality, Amos is the symbol of the benevolence of the government for its people.”

The bald man with the dark beard clicked his pen and started writing up the report. He then asked, “Who is this someone?”

## *Amos*

This phrase would haunt Otis for the rest of his life, “Alba Alden, my grandmother.”



Otis walked towards No. 54 on Green Street. He had meandered through the concrete blocks of Dirus. He had dreaded the thought of going home as he did not know how to face his grandmother. But as the sirens that signal the start of curfew blared through the tannoy system, Otis had no choice but to return home. When he entered the lobby of his residence, he caught sight of the empty chair that once belonged to Mr. Jackson. He can't bear to think that he might have added another person to his body count. Although it was a small lobby, he felt as if everything was distant. He can't come to grasp with the actions he has done.

“No! Get away from me!” cried Alba.

Recognising the familiar voice, Otis was brought back to the present and ran up the stairs. He burst the door to his apartment open immediately to see a man of large build looming over his small, frail grandmother. The man boomed, “You are suspected of spreading a government conspiracy. Please cooperate with your arrest or I will be obligated to use force. I will not repeat again.” Fear filled Alba's eyes, just as it had filled Mr. Jackson's eyes.

Otis ran towards the man and lept on his back. He started punching the back of the man, digging his fist as deep as he can into the broad shoulders of the man. “Don't you dare take away my grandmother!”

The man shook Otis off as if there was nothing on his back. He turned

*Ingrid Yeung*

around and declared to Otis, “Please step back, or I will be obligated to arrest you under charges of obstruction of justice.”

With that, the man turned to face Alba once again and said, “You left me no choice.” He proceeded to pick her up and throw her over his shoulders. Alba’s limbs were flailing in the air. She was screaming, kicking and punching the man, but all her actions were in vain.

As they neared the door, Otis ran towards the man and begged, “No! Please don’t take away my grandma!” He started tearing up and his vision began to be blurred.

The man turned towards him and said, “Otis, you were the one who reported the crime, why would you want to prevent the arrest? And also, I would like to thank you for your efforts. Without you, people like your grandma will be hidden amongst society, posing as a threat to the greater good. Your work is deeply appreciated by the Chancellor.”

These words pierced his heart. It was not his actions that led to this, but the Amos inside him. He looked towards his grandmother and whispered, “I am so sorry, mawmaw.”

Alba looked back at her grandson with loving eyes and answered, “Don’t worry Otis. I know it was not your fault.” With that, the man carried Alba out the door and disappeared down the staircase.

Otis was left alone, again. He curled up on the ground and hugged his knees. He wept and cried like the day he was born, like the day when Amos was implanted into his brain. Why did he do it? Why did he give up his own

## *Amos*

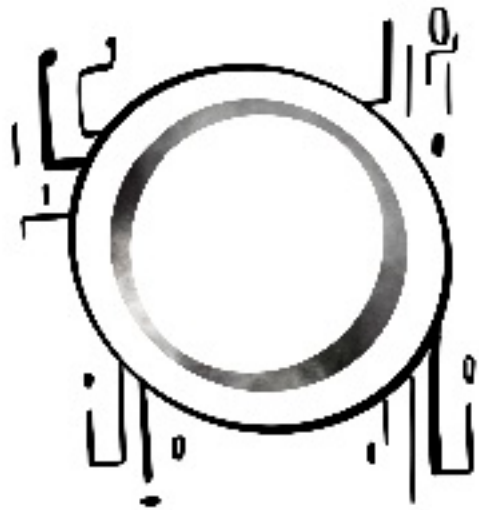
grandma, the only person who has ever loved him despite his natural flaw? He has no one now, no one to rely on, no one to share canned peaches with. It was all his fault. It was his fault that innocent people were sent away.

But it was not. He knew it was not him that had reported those people. He knew what it was. It was the horrid Amos. Amos had control over his thoughts, but Amos had control over his actions. He was not able to choose. His free will was taken away in those moments. The thought of this horrifying technology implanted deep inside his brain disgusted him, but there was nothing he could do.

Helplessness filled Otis and crumbled him. His body gave into the hollowness inside of him and his knees dropped onto the ice-cold tiled floor. The despair swallowed him and trapped him inside his thoughts. He buried his face into his palms soaked in sweat, and rubbed his eyes until all he could see were the pink and green blurs that flooded the harrowing darkness. He kept on torturing himself over and over again for what he, or what Amos, has done. Everything had changed for him. He had lost everything, everything besides the consistent flashing blue light on his temple.

AMOS. AMOS. AMOS.







# **i did an oopsie me too**

*Allisen Yen*



Sunset rays hit the ocean and scattered across the plane of blue in a thousand glittering sparkles. To the casual observer, it was as if a million tiny, iridescent sequins had been sprinkled generously over the water, or as if a giant ball of fire had burst over the surface, dispersing into the air. As if in contrast, the yolk of the sun bled into the sea, dyeing it a delicate marigold.

As the boat made its way to the pier, the white sand beaches, palm trees, and beachside huts came into focus. By now, the sun had sloped off, leaving the moon behind to hang alone. Nothing but a few diaphanous wisps of cloud in an otherwise clear sky.

The ocean, now gleaming brighter than before, welcomed the light of a thousand fireflies as they floated atop each crashing wave before dancing around the moon. A mesmerising sheen rippled and glowed through the water as the waves escorted us to shore.

*i did an oopsie me too*

The resort, pulsing with the tropical, paradise-like atmosphere of Hawai'i, was nothing short of a magical civilization of fairies and elven folk. An entrance gate, majestic and foliated, framed the scene as we entered. Stepping through it was like stepping into a fairytale. Each quaint, rustic beachside hut was adorned with old-fashioned hanging lamps that illuminated the warm wooden doorways.



***reagan.***

8:30. Sounds around me dissipate into a thick vapour and fog my vision. Through the mist I still see him. Her? I don't know. I do know that it's 8:30, and that they come around every night.

At 8:30.

They walk slowly out from the main building, down the path and stop at our door. The squeaky noise the main door makes as its hinges grind against each other can be heard, even from where I am. When the door finally springs open, the thin, light clacking of their shoes- loafers, probably- cuts through the silence like it's nothing but butter.

The sound of their arrival stays ringing in my ears until their silhouette comes into view. I see it through the small, yellowed, stained glass window above the room door. Then it stops, and my heart stops too. I don't really know why.

Hard lines are blurred through the warping of the glass, but if you concentrate... wispy blonde hair, and what's that badge on their jumpsuit?

Oh, they're gone already. I turn around to face Jane. It takes me a second to clear my throat and get my voice working again. Then, finally, I ask her about it.

All she does is laugh and shake her head. She opens the door, points to the janitor trolley a few doors down, then goes back to work.

"Reagan, we've been here for like two minutes. What are you talking about." It's not a question.

I guess they weren't wearing loafers. At this point my face is already planted in my hands.

Maybe I'm just paranoid. The suspiciously long period they were waiting outside our door, though? No, I'm just being paranoid. But ever since the accident, I think I've been anxious.



***why.***

As a child I dreamed of competing at the Olympics - BMX biking. It was my life. I was ready to give up everything to achieve that goal. One night, I did.

Memory isn't exactly reliable, but I've always felt a certainty that this is what happened.

My friends and I went out to a hilly clearing a few days after my fifteenth birthday to go biking and practice some tricks. The place we found was perfect – short grass, with shade provided by the tall, leafy maple trees that surrounded it. All was painted a striking crimson and doused in gold.

It was maybe a few minutes past three, only one or two hours since

*i did an oopsie me too*

we had arrived, when CJ called out to the rest of us from the other end of the clearing. We biked toward him, annoyed, but excited to see what kind of shenanigans he was up to. Before we got there, we could already see it.

He had made a ramp. A giant seven foot quarterpipe.

I guess a few days before, he'd used his dad's credit card and got a sketchy home assembly quarter from the internet. I had to be the first to try it.

So I biked out to an area a couple meters away from the base of the quarter, set my bike to face it, then unclipped my helmet from the handlebars and hesitantly put it on my head. This was it, no regrets.

I had my regrets, obviously.

The first few strides were almost automatic. I started pedalling without even realising, and by the time I was around two feet away from the quarter pipe, my legs were going, full autopilot, propelling me forwards at full speed. I was suspended mid-air, halfway through a clean flair tailwhip, before a gust of wind sent a branch flying towards me, setting me off course. I was ready to bail, but I guess I just didn't react fast enough because the next thing I remembered was... nothing. I don't remember anything after that. I only know the events from what I've written in my diary.

I had to start keeping diaries. It's my way of remembering the things that happened after the accident. I write down everything I can remember from the day: new people I meet and events that happen. Then the next morning when my memory essentially resets, I read through all my diary

entries to know where my life is at, who I know, who I don't talk to anymore, where I live, what my schedule is like.

It's tedious and takes up the better half of my day, but I'm used to it now. I guess it was nice of Jane to take me on this escape vacation.



After a short tour of the resort, we are given the keys and directions to our room. It's getting late, so we quickly settle in before heading to the restaurant for dinner. "Are you coming?" I call out from the doorway. Jane is still in the bathroom. "No, you go, I have work to do."

I don't know why she's still working. We're here to escape the stress back home, right? "Suit yourself! I'll be at Sunrise, the bar with the neon signs and stuff near the door? They have a restaurant in the back if you want to join me later." I close the door behind me.



*jane.*

I walk out of the bathroom clutching my hair, which is still tied up from washing my face. Flopping face-first onto the bed, I grab a pillow from against the headboard and scream into it. A buzzing from my phone jolts me and the screen lights up.

**New Message:** Hey! U forget about me? Sunrise bar! Haha.

**You:** I'm sorry! I still have some work to do :/

My face replants itself in the pillow. It's only been five minutes, so Reagan's fine, I'm fine. We're good. I lean over the side of the bed to slip my

*i did an oopsie me too*

phone into my bag and take my laptop out.

**\*click\***

**D**

**\*click\***

**A**

**\*tap\***

**\*click\*** **Y**

**#**

**\*click\***

**3** **\*click\***

**2**

**\*tap\***

**\*tap\***

**9**

**\*tap\***

*Overall: No behavioral abnormalities*

*Anxiety level: Average*

-----

I've been her secret caretaker for just under a year now, since the accident, but she can never know. It would just make things too complicated. I think it's better this way; I can't imagine how her paranoid, anxiety-ridden mind would take it if she knew I were watching her. Probably formulate a terrible conclusion; she's deeply suspicious of everything.

-----

*Hormone levels: active*

*Medication: No change.*

-----

We tried telling her about it the first day after recovery, but with



everything that had happened, it was too much for her heart to handle. So we gave up.

-----

*Blood pressure: 135*

©

***reagan.***

When I finally decide that she isn't going to come, I sign the check and head back to our room. The beeping sound the sensor on the door makes when I hold my key up to it seems to be fainter than usual. I dismiss the thought. I stand at the doorway for ten seconds before Jane finally notices me. "Hey! Back so soon?"

I don't know why, but I freeze. I just can't move at all and in a distant part of my mind I feel myself sinking to the ground. My vision blurs around the edges and a lump begins to form in my throat—

"Hey, hey, hey, Reags, you okay? I'm here, I'm here, can you hear me? Come on, talk to me buddy, stay with me here." The sound is muffled, like it's coming from a boombox outside the window.

—and now I can't speak. My exhales grow shorter, along with every breathless inhalation.

Breathing. It's an automatic thing, but now that I'm hyper-aware of my own breathing. It feels like my heart is beating its way out of my chest; it's thumping crazily, the sound pulsating through my veins. I can *hear it*.

*Jane shuts her laptop and slides off the bed. And suddenly? My vision clears,*

*i did an oopsie me too*

*and I can almost muster a whimper.*

-----

*Anxiety level: Average*

*Anxiety level: High*

*Details: Major panic attack, palpitations, hyperventilating...*

-----

“Wh-what’s that?” I get up off the floor to see what Jane could possibly be writing just seconds after all this happens, but her laptop is already shut. “It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.” She’s smiling, but I can already feel my eyes narrowing.

I know Jane’s supposed to be my friend, but I’ve been suspicious of her ever since she came into my life. The first day after the accident, I woke up at home, and there she was, standing over me with a bright smile. “Oh good! You’re up!” The fakest thing I’ve ever heard in my life. I didn’t even know her before then, but I get a brain injury and now all of a sudden, look who’s so eager to be my friend and learn everything about me. She thinks I don’t know it but I see her typing away on her laptop. She looks back at me for a moment, then goes back to her laptop.

It’s like she’s watching me. Like she was sent here to watch me.

I know it, I just know she isn’t who she says she is. Pfft, Jane? That’s probably not even her name. Who names their kid Jane anymore? And you know what, now that I’m thinking about it, she’s always had this European accent, something like Finnish, or Ukranian, or... Russian?

Glancing back at Jane, I see her back on her laptop. Ugh. I try my best to crack a smile and walk by her to get to the bathroom and attempt to see what she's writing. But the content... I did not need to know about her aunt's trip to Russia with a bunch of her alcoholic friends.

Huh... Russia. Interesting.

I take my PJs from my suitcase and step into the bathroom and close the door. I let the tap run while brushing my teeth. I wash my face and change.

"Hey, Jane, I'm going to bed, okay? Turn the lights off when you're done with your work."

I walk out of the bathroom to my bed. Unpacked things are strewn across it. I toss everything to the ground before climbing under the covers. I let Jane get first dibs on bed choice, so I'm left with the bed on the right, the vulnerable one. It's in the open, not pushed up against a wall, and faces that big wall of windows.

Even with the thick hotel duvet, I still feel exposed by the window, so I run over and close the curtains before jumping back into the safety of the blankets.

It usually takes me a while to fall asleep, but tonight, it's like I'm sky high on caffeine pills and about one more iced tea away from death. I'm overstimulated, is what I'm trying to say. I've gone through about fifty different positions and twenty flips of my pillow just to still be lying awake under my heavy duvet. One thought in particular resurfaces like a pool floaty

*i did an oopsie me too*

I'm trying to push down to the pool floor. It bobs back to the surface. Jane has got to be someone. Someone from the military.

I toss.

The Russian military. As some scientist, sent to do research on my brain.

I turn.

I bet they're going to make me a military weapon.

@

***jane.***

It's been a couple days since we arrived. Reagan has enjoyed the great facilities here. Just the other day, hanging out on the beach for an afternoon, just me and my margarita, I saw her. She was pretty far out at sea on a wakeboard, being dragged around by some guy driving the boat. Another time, when I was at the spa, I saw *Reagan Price a couple rows from me, relaxing.*

*One weird thing though. Maybe two days back, I was outside our hotel room door, fumbling through my bag for my keycard. I heard her inside ordering room service.*

*"Hi, is this the front desk? Yes, I just wanted to ask about the room service." Great, let me just pop in and ask for dinner as well, I thought.*

*"Hi, yes I wanted to ask about the room service." I guess she was being transferred. "Mhm, so I understand there's a menu, but I was actually wondering if there's a service available where you guys can bring stuff to my room, like every night?"*

*Weird. I know we're on vacation, but I thought she loved the food at the*

restaurants?

*“Mhm, mhm, so um this may sound weird but I was wondering if you’re able to send me a couple apples... I need, uh, fif- uh thirty. Yeah, it’s just, my friends and I... Uh... We love our apples, haha. Yeah, so you know. Anyway, so I was just wondering if that would be possible. I could pay extra if necessary. Mhm, mhm. Okay, thank you so much... Yeah, thank you... You too.”*

*Obviously, I had to go inside to see what was going on.*



**reagan.**

“Hey! You going on a diet or something?” Great. Now Jane’s back.

“Wh-What are you talking about?” Oh just pray. Just pray she didn’t hear me on the phone earlier.

“Oh, I was outside the door trying to find my keys when I heard you ordering a bunch of apples or something. What’s that about?”

How am I going to explain myself now?

“Um, oh! Oh, that,” I say, pointing to the phone like it was just about the most awkward thing I’d experienced in my life. “That was just, I, uh haha! Yeah, yeah, that, that was...” What am I even saying right now, oh Lord. “You know, I just got bored, so... Prank call! Haha... haha... ha...”

“Reagan, you’re 25.” The look she gives me is halfway between amusement and exasperation. At least she believes me.

“Yup, yup, I know, haha. I just have kid humour, y’know. You know me.” Geez, that was a real fecal festival. Some finger guns and a couple

*i did an oopsie me too*

awkward laughs should fix this.



**30th.**

It's been a week and I think I have enough apples.

Jane was going out. I don't remember where, because I don't listen when she talks anymore. Her voice is now ten times more obnoxious since I found out her dirty Russian secret. I had to get her out of the room for long enough so that I could crush the apple seeds.

"Hey Jane, so I was thinking that, I think I need a little, like, alone time, you know? Just for myself and all... you know how I'm pretty stressed all the time. And I don't really feel like doing anything today, or really... leaving the room... at all. So, it would be great if you could just like, since you're going out already and everything, like stay out a little later, so I could just, get my uh, get my 'lax on... yeah?"

"Yeah, yeah, of course," Just shut up and leave already. "You stay, I'll get outta your hair." Please, just get on with it.

"I'll leave you to your stuff." Finally. "Alright then," Oh no, no, just leave, I don't need an epilogue. "I'm leaving now. Bye!"

"Bye. And thanks. I appreciate it."

I have the place to myself at last. Time to get to work. I spent some time googling last night, and found this helpful video on crushing apple seeds to get the cyanide from them. Unfortunately, I don't have a hydraulic press...

"Hey! Reagan!" I hear her voice from outside the door, and I jump.

"You, um... The apples! Your prank, they're still coming."

"Oh yeah, yeah, don't worry about it! Just go!" Oh Lord just leave me alone Please.

We're not off to a great start. I spend forever trying to find something with which I can use to crush the seeds. I didn't think it would be this hard. I rummage around some more, ready to give up, until I stumble across Jane's flat iron. It's relatively heavy and flat. It should work.

I gather the boxes of apples and move them under the study desk in the corner of the room. Setting the flat iron down, I pick an apple out from one of the boxes and break it open and brush the seeds onto the desk. It takes a while and then I bash down hard on them with the flat iron until they begin to crack open.

After that, I stand up and press the iron down with all my strength on the seeds. I move the iron around a bit while continuing to press down, so that the pure cyanide runs out of them in tiny rivulets that collect on the table top.

I really am not prepared for this because it's now that I realise I have no way of collecting the cyanide that had trickled out of the seeds. I quickly run to the bathroom to grab one of the cups they have next to the sink, and use the keycard to swipe the cyanide juice into the cup. That alone takes me five whole minutes and that's just the first apple. I have 209 left. I groan and decide that I need some high energy music to get me into the rhythm. I put on a playlist from my phone, and ,with the music pulsing in the background, I

*i did an oopsie me too*

get back to work.

It's tedious, tedious work. I'm beginning to regret this, but then, I remember Jane and her Russian military research team's evil endeavour.

And I start to find a rhythm in it. It's actually kind of nice. Calming, really, as I'm getting more and more into the groove of things. Soon, I have fifty done.

It's 8PM now, and I have my glass two thirds of the way full with this sweet sweet cyanide, my freedom juice. It's all coming together. I hear Jane walking up the pathway, and after checking the peephole to make sure it's her, I prepare myself a glass of apple liqueur to match her feisty glass of justice.

Beep! The sensor on the door lock makes a high pitched sound. The door handle turns and the door opens.

"Hi! Um, welcome back... I made you a drink to celebrate my day of relaxation." I smile at her, because that makes it more convincing, right? I have to discreetly slide the boxes of apples further under the desk with my foot while Jane walks into the room and puts her things down beside her bed.

"Um... Yes! You know I'm always down for a drink! I mean there's always something to celebrate right? Haha, like why don't we just celebrate some baby's birthday, there's like a baby born every second right? That means-" I've learned to tune out.

"Alright, here you go." I pass her the glass in my hand, and go to grab the glass on the desk behind me.

"Now chug!" she exclaims in the greatest excitement. That's it, yeah,



*Allisen Yen*

chug it, chug it till your head gets foggy, till you get all dizzy and nauseous, and fall to the ground. Keep drinking until your head starts spinning and you throw up, until you've lost your ability to breathe, until your chest is broken and you die slowly and painfully of cardiac arrest. I continue drinking my drink, until I empty my glass, and she's emptied hers. I wait, and wait, and wait some more for something, anything, to start happening. But no, she's perfectly fine, lying down on the bed now, asking for a refill.

When suddenly,

I start

to feel

a bit

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My head starts to spin; my vision fogs.

I decide that it's now or never, and make a run for it. I need to escape her. I need to.

The door slams with a bang behind me and I focus as hard as I can on running. But my legs start to feel weak, and my stomach is failing me. I feel like, I feel like—

I don't feel anything anymore.

*i did an oopsie me too*

It's all just numb. But I see a foaming, milky liquid pour out of my mouth as I bend over the side of the path. And I see her, in the corner of my eye. She's coming after me. Fast. I continue running, and start to see echoes of sand beneath my feet. It's getting hard to keep going. I feel the devil squeezing hard on my throat, like they're smiling at me while they squeeze every last drop of life out of me.

I hear a thud.

I watch the sky flip onto its side, waves crashing left.

But I feel nothing.

I hear my heart thumping inside my chest.

Like the sound of her flat iron against those apple seeds.

But I feel nothing.

I can't control my body.

I see my hands clutching onto the sand in front of me,  
and then it's slipping out through my fingers.

But I feel nothing.

And then,

I see nothing.

Only darkness.





# Selfish

*Iris Wong*



He wanted to be anything that would make him respected, renowned and esteemed.

As a supervisor at an organ printing center, his work was tedious and mundane, but he bore with it for the money. His money could support his family and spare them from sickness. A year ago, his wife was ailing from a malignant disease that affected the liver. He purchased an organ cheaply from the center he worked at and her transplant was successful. Although it irked him to spend even that small amount, it was a necessary facade for his cupidity.

He detested being the same as everyone else. It was just like these organs in the printing center. The same components lining up on the same assembly line to finally reach the same printer. He had seen the process of the creation of an artificial organ ad nauseam. Money was important for him not

## *Selfish*

for its monetary value but rather its social value. Expensive items were of no interest to him; he only wanted it because it could buy him status. The state of having money would make him the one above all.

The slightest shift in thinking changed his whole perspective. A sudden thought sparked an interest in his job. What if he was able to earn status in another way?

An environment he had considered unbelievably dull before now fascinated him in ever increasing amounts. He had been educated in the field of medical technology before, but that had previously been of no interest to him. A burning enthusiasm for the sciences emerged within him, one that only grew as time passed. When a desire for better resources surfaced, he rented a lab with a part of his savings to further his research. He was now engrossed in the branching upon his mere knowledge into the possibilities of such organs.



A recent article had announced that a team of European scientists had successfully created a gel that could resemble the clustering of electrocytes in eels and generate electricity. This hydrogel could structure cells similar to obsolete batteries and produce electricity in electroplates. However, the gel only generated small currents of electricity and was unable to power implants such as electronic contact lenses. Presumptively, the scientists were currently finding a way for the gel to produce currents large enough to power implants.

His avidity was not dampened by it. The article propelled him to work

*Iris Wong*

even harder than before, often staying for days in the laboratory without informing his wife and daughter. He supposed his absence was disquieting to them, but the thought of it was nowhere near strong enough of a reason to convince him to go back home for even the shortest while. He never wished to abate his swelling ardour, burying himself in finding a way to create an artificial organ with a large generation of electrical current.

It paid off. He found that the division of gel dots on two large sheets pressed together would direct the movement of ions in a manner that maximized the electrical current production. These gels were able to stay in positive condition even after being placed in the water or being squished. This was the ideal artificial organ to be transplanted into the body for powering electrically charged implants. Now he had one last step to complete for this invention before his time of glory.

He needed a subject into which to transplant the organ.

The next morning, he went back home for a visit.



“It’s been seven months and five days since I’ve seen you.”

His wife’s first sentence had taken him aback. He had expected her to greet him in a buoyant mood, to radiate joy as she saw him. He was wrong.

Her eyes held no resentment, no grudge. She was holding their daughter by her hand. Even as an inattentive husband, he could tell that she was more worn and tired than before. The exuberance he was familiar with was absent and replaced by a wan smile.

## *Selfish*

“I missed you.” She said, opening the door. Their daughter trailed after her into the living room.

He knew he was selfish for leaving her without notice. She never complained, even though he often disappeared for months on end for a project she only vaguely knew about. But he was sure his extended departures had placed a strain on her, one that showed in the tired lines of her face and posture.

They sat on the two seats perpendicular to each other, their daughter sitting on her lap.

The last time he recalled seeing his daughter from a frontal view was three years ago, when she was still a neonate. Although he had come home every day before the past seven months, she had only stayed in his peripheral vision. He knew his wife was taking good care of her, so what was the point in paying attention? This time, as she fidgeted under his scrutiny, he noticed that his daughter’s dark hair seemed to have grown longer and that she was tightly holding on to her mother’s hand.

“I haven’t seen her in a while.” He broke the silence with a courteous tone. He turned to his daughter. “How are you doing, precious?” As natural as he tried to make it sound, the couple knew it was just a way of hiding his discomfort. His wife was always the bright one at home. He was never close to his family and seldom pretended to be. Today was different.

His daughter shifted closer to her mother, her eyes displaying a hint of fear. This person that she hardly remembered was suddenly being kind to



her. She stared at him without response.

He cracked a forced smile and looked back at his wife. "I've missed you a lot too. Are you doing well?"

"I'm fine." She avoided his gaze.

"I was thinking that I could bring her to my research lab today."

His wife looked up in surprise. This was definitely not what he was like. Even the slightest enthusiasm was dissimilar to his usual stoic self.

He sat back in his armchair. "I know I've missed a lot in these past months. It's just that my research on organs has been quite demanding. I want to make up for the time lost and I just think it would be appropriate to show her around the place I spend so much time at."

His wife found something strange about the statement, but she couldn't state it specifically. After some hesitation, she kissed her daughter's forehead and said, "Of course; I'm sure she would love to go."

His daughter's small hand tightened on her mother's.



"This is the lab where Papa works." He smiled sweetly at his daughter.

Despite her initial wariness, she was enthralled by all of the equipment and materials around her; the soft glow in the room was incredibly foreign yet mesmerizing. He let her look around the room, faintly amused by her interest, before stopping in front of a table.

"Come over here." He said, picking something off the shelf. "This is some candy I made. Would you like to try some?"

## *Selfish*

Still captivated, she nodded and took the candy from his hand. The pellet was soft and smaller than the size of her fingernail, and she inspected it curiously before placing it on her tongue. It left a lingering bitter taste. Within half a minute, she felt dizzy and couldn't stand properly, then fell on the drawn-out table.

He stared at her for a few seconds, then looked at the artificial organ he had created on the other side of the room. As he went to retrieve it, he looked back at her and said, "Don't worry, you're only feeling slightly unwell. You can help Papa, you'll be the first human cyborg in the world."

His daughter looked at him blankly, barely able to focus on him through the blinding pain in her head.

He ensured the miniature sheets of gels were lined up in the 3D printed artificial organ and placed it on the side counter. With extreme delicacy, he began the transplant by activating the newest technology that he had borrowed from the organ printing center. Based on his calculations, the complete process would take around three hours. But as the machine whirred to life, he stayed motionless next to the table, unable to tear his eyes away as his ultimate creation slowly came into being.

His eyes were transfixed as the hand of the machine placed the organ into her slender body, watching as the organ was put into position. Soft whimpers escaped his daughter, who was hanging onto consciousness by a thread. It wasn't of concern to him, and he watched with mounting excitement as the machine completed the transplant. The sound of the

machine whirring mixed with his daughter's cries would've struck dissonance to the average person, but he barely acknowledged it.

The three hours passed in the blink of an eye. As the final part clicked into place, the machine monotonously reported, "Transplant completed. Transplant successful."

He knew he was selfish, heartless, cruel. Yet those words sounded hollow and empty to him. As soon as humans could be entirely replaced by organs that could generate electricity, they could essentially become cyborgs. Emotions would disappear, so such meaningless adjectives were not of worry to him. The only important detail was that he was to be credited for this invention; a man who worked his way from a low-level supervisor to an acclaimed and esteemed scientist.

The candy's effects were starting to wear off, yet his daughter was still in a state of haziness. Tired from her own cries, she lifted her heavy eyelids and said quietly, "Papa, Mama's waiting for me."

In awe of his creation being placed in a real human, he paused to capture this moment in his mind. His artificial electric organ was now in someone's functioning body.

And he was the first in the world to ever do so.

After a few seconds, he realized his daughter had spoken. He walked closer and, as if she was suffering from great fragility in health, gently helped her sit up. Such a caring gesture was only in consideration of one of his creations; that creation was not his daughter, but the precious, inorganic

## *Selfish*

object he had poured all of his life's energy into.

With his hands placed on her shoulder, he could feel her body trembling slightly. He knew that the organ had begun interacting with her biological system and was generating electricity. Slight convulsions rippled through her body, but the shock frequency only increased as the minutes ticked by.

Still stuck in a trance, he realized something was wrong with the transplant. He took his hand off her shoulder, but she remained rigidly upright, trembling. It was within expectation for her to be tired after the procedure, but the shaking she was experiencing so severely was not.

Belatedly, the realisation struck him, fully snapping him out of his reverie. As a green researcher, he had not considered the body the artificial organ in which it would be transplanted. While the high potential from the thousands of gel cells was impressive, there needed to be a way to funnel the electricity without the person being shocked. His inexperience had led him to neglect the exploration of ways for the electricity to leave the body safely.

The young girl was shaking increasingly as the improper funneling of electricity continued to shock her. Lost in disbelief, he could not comprehend that his creation could have the slightest chance of going wrong. It was perfect; there were no errors. He was locked in a slight daze as the young girl withstood the last shocks her tiny self could.

His daughter's eyes fluttered shut as she fell back onto the table. The thud of her body was muffled, but it echoed through his mind, shaking him to

his core.

She was gone.

He had put in so much effort into his precious, priceless creation to astound the world. He had been so close to it. Now all came plummeting down, along with the death of his other creation.

He looked at the lab that he had placed all of his hope in.

Slowly, a tear rolled down his cheek.



# ØbSsÈssÏØn

*Jaqueline Chan*



‘We are here today on December 10th, 2080, to celebrate our greatest scientific innovation yet,’ a voice boomed over the sound of flashing cameras and the shouts of reporters scrambling to the frontline. ‘For years, we have been limited to the abilities of the human body, but no longer. Please bring a warm welcome to *The Earth Elite*!’.

The long sanguine stage curtain dropped from the high ceiling, and the crowd roared as a group of three was revealed. Out stepped Ace, Brian, and Calli. They were ‘*The Earth Elite*’, the first humans with neuro-controlled bionic technology.

The man on the podium continued gleefully, ‘On the left, we have Ace. For him, we provided a bionic left eye. Although it looks no different from that of a regular human being, his eye can see up to ten kilometres away. He can see far and wide with state of the art magnifiers, and look through walls

## *ØbSsÈssÏØn*

and buildings with heat sensors.’

Ace smiled and waved to the barraging reporters. He was twenty-two years old and had dark black hair, bushy eyebrows, and a soft jawline. The crowd, immediately swayed by his charm and friendly demeanour, applauded enthusiastically.

The cheery voice continued booming over the conference room, ‘Next, we have Brian. His bionic arms and legs can easily lift twenty metric tons, as much as the world’s strongest cranes. Wouldn’t want to get on his bad side, am I right?’ The crowd laughed in agreement.

‘And last is Calli. For her, we provided a bionic brain, able to complete the world’s most complex questions in minutes.’

Brian and Calli smiled and waved to the reporters. They were classmates in their final year of high school. Brian was well known in school for his optimistic demeanour and puppy-like smile. Calli was also well known for her extremely cheerful attitude, which the crowd instantly fell for.

The next day’s newspaper was all about The Earth Elite, and the great expectations for them.



Three years passed, and few remembered the names Ace, Brian, and Calli. They were rarely needed in a world where machines could carry out every dangerous task. They continued to live normally, with the occasional glance at their everyday uses of their bionic abilities. Only the usual accidental breakage of objects for Brian, repeatedly solving the world’s most composite



*Jaqueline Chan*

questions for Calli, and helping paranoid girls spy on their boyfriends for Ace.

The most climactic event scheduled was the orbit of the Scelestus star, and the full eclipse set to occur at the end of the hour.

Brian, having just finished class, was walking on the street back home. The temperature dropped since yesterday, and everyone was excited to bring their new winter clothes out onto the streets. He walked along the sidewalk until he reached a TV shop, where he stopped and slowly removed his headphones to hear the murmurs of the crowd around the big TV screen on display. It appeared to be showing live footage of the orbit from the Atacama Desert.

‘What do you reckon that is?’, one woman murmured to her friend.

‘Those three parachutes from the sky might’ve just been humans.’

‘Did you see that?’

‘Maybe we saw wrong.’

Suddenly, the screen shone bright red in alert mode. The terrified woman on the screen released a statement to the public while attempting to conceal the look of worry on her face: *‘Attention. Three unidentified beings are currently ransacking the towns in the Atacama Desert. Brooklyn Hyland, an American resident present at the time of the attack, managed to escape, and overheard the three beings claim they would try to make their way up to ‘The Elite Force’. As you may remember, the Elite Force is comprised of three members: Ace Smith, Brian Anderson, and Calli Lewis. The government has issued a lockdown on the city of Chicago and requires all residents to return to their homes immediately.’*

## *ØbSsÈssÏØn*

Brian stood in shock and felt the hair on his neck slowly rising. He turned away from the news station and began heading for home. He sprinted through the icy streets of Chicago as fast as he could, the howling icy wind accompanying his heavy panting and brushing his hair back as he ran.

‘Ace, Calli, we have a problem. Meet me at my house in five.’

When Brian arrived back at his home, breathless, he was relieved to at least find Ace and Calli already anxiously waiting for him in the living room. Ace was sprawled across the dark green couch, and Calli was sitting next to him. On the small glass tea table in front of them, countless candy wrappers and food scraps were scattered everywhere. While the three hooded beings were ransacking Chile, they were ransacking Brian’s fridge in an attempt to console their anxious feelings.

‘My parents called me on my way here,’ Calli ran up to Brian and said uneasily.

‘Three hooded beings were seen descending from the sky in the Atacama Desert. According to eyewitnesses, they looked exactly like us humans,’ Ace explained while running his fingers repeatedly through his hair in anxiousness. ‘They’re here for Earth’s resources. Wherever they came from most likely experienced a depletion in resources, and now they probably want to come and take our animals, plants, and water. Their reason for wanting us, however, seems unjustified.’

‘We have to go,’ Brian said in a determined manner.

‘Woah, slow down Brian. I am not going to South America to meet

*Jaqueline Chan*

some aliens out to kill humanity.’ Calli snapped.

‘They’re demolishing towns, destroying families, and decimating the woodlands,’ Brian pleaded. ‘We’re the Earth Elite. Don’t you think it’s our duty? Isn’t this supposed to be our thing?’

Ace, sat up on the couch, rubbing his forehead slowly, and lifted his eyes to meet Brian’s, ‘You’re right. We should go.’

Calli threw her arms up in disbelief and crumbled onto the couch. With a million thoughts running through her head, she looked up at the blank white ceiling and stared in silence for a while. After a few seconds of silence, she groaned as she quickly sat up and muttered, ‘Let’s go...’



By day-break the next morning, the group was already far into the Amazon forest. They were dressed in their untouched white training suits from three years ago and were travelling via a helicopter Calli managed to hijack. According to recent reported sightings, the three unidentified beings, who call themselves the Scelestus Elite team, were now in the greenlands near Sao Paulo.

Three hours passed before Calli turned to shake Ace and Brian awake.

‘Five more minutes...,’ Ace whined.

Ace and Brian slowly awoke and quickly realised where they were. Brian stuttered, ‘Are... are they...there? You found them?’

Calli smirked and continued to drive forward towards a small campsite. ‘Pretty easy... I just calculated all their possible locations and this

## *ØbSsÈssÏØn*

was the most likely. They're... right ahead...,' Calli hesitated as she steered the helicopter closer to the small camp set up in the mountains. From afar the camp looked empty. No food scraps, no movement, no recent fire ashes, nothing. Ace used his left eye to zoom into the camp and saw no one in the tents. But the camp looked newly set up. No marks on the furniture, no dirt on the tent... someone had been there no longer than twenty minutes ago, judging by the body heat still dissipating in the tent.

Suddenly, one of the helicopter's main rotor blades was shot by a green laser, and they began plummeting to the ground.

'GRAB ON,' Ace yelled, putting on a parachute. The three jumped out of the helicopter, which promptly crashed into the hard forest ground with stab wounds from the tough, green branches. As they fell to earth, a large cold hand slowly rested itself on Ace's shoulder.

Then another on Brian's.

And the last on Calli's.

The trio turned their heads to see three figures wearing black cloaks facing them. The parachute opened and jerked the six upwards, causing the hoods of the three black-cloaked beings to fly upwards and expose their faces.

Ace looked up at the man in front of him in a staggered manner. He had Ace's nose and lips and eyes and ears... They were...the same... 'person'? Ace looked into the left eye of the man in the black hood. But looking in made his eye ache with a throbbing pain. It was an intensified form of the pain he felt when he used his bionic eye to concentrate on Brian's appendages or

Calli's skull.

The six fell upon impact with the earth. With everyone scattered everywhere, Ace quickly got to his feet and tackled his twin, pinning the man's hands onto the ground. At another glance at his face, he sat there astonished, immobile.

'Who are you?' Brian muttered, slowly inching backwards. Like Ace, he and Calli found the beings in front of them to resemble themselves exactly.

Calli ran to the girl who had just gotten up, but right when she was about to attack her, Calli couldn't help but pause to say 'God, you're pretty...'. .

Her doppelganger smirked as she pushed Calli onto the ground. 'We are the Scelestus Elite. And I...', she said as she turned towards Calli, who was blowing on her scratched knee, 'am CālĪ. Ace, the man you are currently sitting on is ācĒ, and Brian you can assume that's BrĪāN.'

The names only differed by a slight accent, but everything else was the same.

'What brings you here?' Calli said getting on her feet and dusting off her uniform. 'And why do you look like us?'

BrĪāN walked over to her, drifting his eyes from one person to the next, saying, 'We're from the Scelestus star. Its build is similar to that of Earth's, and our planet is full of what you may refer to as your doppelgangers.' BrĪāN began to pace up and down and continued talking as if he was lecturing the Earth Elite as the superior being, 'Because Earth and Scelestus have a similar structure, we decided this was the perfect place to

come for resources.'

BrĪāN added with a smirk. 'Humans on this planet don't have nearly as many scientific discoveries as we do, therefore you are obviously the inferior race....'

BrĪāN stepped towards Brian and looked him in the eye as he slowly unzipped and removed his dark black coat. Underneath was a full body of bionic parts. His arms, legs, and every body organ was made of metallic bionic parts.

Ace, Brian, and Calli stared in shock and disbelief. So much of his body was made of artificial parts that other than a basic face structure, the only natural thing that remained was a human conscience. But even that seemed to be corrupted by their body and its addiction to bionics.

ācĒ continued, 'Our planet is now mainly comprised of people with a body resembling that of BrĪāN. We don't have anybody with your feeble type human bodies.' Ace, Brian, and Calli raised their eyebrows, taken aback by the constant passive-aggressive remarks. 'We've had years of scientific innovation, constantly improving our bionic technology. We've made humans even stronger, and made our race far superior to all others. All we are missing are resources. We've already drained our planet, and our people can barely be provided with bionic parts, let alone food and water. We need your planet's metal. And according to our research, you're the only ones on this planet who can stop us,' ācĒ glanced at the ground, catching sight of a \_\_\_\_.

ācĒ punched the ground and created a hole reaching to the earth's

outer core. To get metal would be an easy task for *The Scelestus Team*. They all had full bionic bodies that could perform the most impossible tasks.

Ace, Brian, and Calli turned to each other and attempted to conceal their individual fears, but they all knew... the odds were greatly stacked against them.



After two days of fighting and one deafeningly loud crash, the group of three were once again hiding behind a large boulder, quivering in fear and shaking from hunger. Their bodies were covered in dirt and they were all struggling to stand with their last final bits of energy.

‘We’ve been fighting for two whole days...’ Calli said, panting heavily.

‘We must keep fighting. If...it doesn’t end here... then it will never...end...’ Ace panted. He had fought the hardest and suffered the most. His body was covered in wounds from the third attack where they staged an attempt to destroy the Scelestus’ team food supply and CālLī found him. He had just managed to escape by jumping into a cool nearby river, where CālLī could not find him with her heat sensors nor jump in if she did.

*The Earth Elite* was sitting behind the boulder gathering their breath. *The Scelestus Team* had already retreated. They were fighting in a leisurely manner, knowing they would have to save their energy for when they got to mine for metal, and retreating as it was now time for their late afternoon tea.

‘Of course,’ Calli suddenly exclaimed in an epiphany, ‘How could it be this simple...?’

## Obsession

‘What is it?’ Brian said.

‘They showed us their weakness from the very beginning.’

‘What is it?’ Brian repeated impatiently.

‘Look at their bodies. Their necks, arms, torso, legs... it’s all made of metal. Their planet would do anything for metal. Even travelling all the way here from the Scelestus star just to steal our supply. Their citizens are dying from the lack of food and water, yet they are here on our planet to take our *metal*. Why of all places would they land in the Atacama Desert, a dry and barren wasteland, to ransack towns for resources? Because The Escondida copper mine located there produces more copper than any other mine in the world...’ Calli took a deep breath and looked up at the two dazed faces sitting opposite her. ‘They’re obsessed.’

Calli continued, ‘They’re obsessed with metal implants the same way we get obsessed with money, plastic surgery, or puppies yawning. They just handed us their greatest weakness...’

Ace inched closer to the group, grasping the wall for support and said indomitably, ‘And that will be their downfall.’

The three quickly gathered around and drew a plan for their next steps. The next day at the break of dawn, a white flag was seen flying high on the campsite of The Earth Elite. Today would be the last day of this fight.

The night before, Brian hurried to the crash site of their helicopter and used his strength to break it up into a hundred large pieces of metal. At the break of dawn, he had finished moving the pieces into a large pile at their



campsite.

Ace, Brian, and Calli gathered in front of the large metal pile and awaited the arrival of *The Scelestus Team*. At noon, *The Scelestus Team* announced its arrival by burning all the trees that lay in their path.

ācĒ smirked as he approached and caught sight of the large towering pile of metal. ‘You’re really surrendering?’

Ace stepped forward and looked into his eyes with a piercing stare and slowly nodded his head. ‘We contacted the president of every recognised country. For the sake of human life on earth, we will surrender all of our metal. However, you must only take our metal and swear to never return once you depart. Behind us is just a small portion of the metal we intend to hand over. Please.... Accept this offer.’

The Scelestus Team smiled boastfully and hurried to the large pile of metal. They inspected the metal pile carefully piece by piece to ensure it met their standards.

CālĪ and BrĪāN finally reached the bottom of the pile when ācĒ suddenly jumped back with a nervous look on his face.

‘Run!,’ He cried, ‘Run back NOW!’

But as CālĪ and BrĪāN began to retreat from the pile of metal, a large fountain of fluid sprayed into the air and covered their bodies. CālĪ and BrĪāN screamed in pain as they were slowly engulfed by the solution.

BrĪāN cried, ‘WHAT’S HAPPENING?’

Calli looked far into the distance and stated coldly, ‘What’s happening

## *ØbSsÈssÏØn*

now is the result of hydrochloric acid, peroxide, and fluorine gas. First, your skin will burn. Then the acid will reach your metallic body parts. Then that metal will melt. And then, you will collapse here, with us as your final sight.'

With the petrified faces of CālLĪ and BrĪāN looking back up at her, she pushed their weakened bodies deeper into the fountain of acid. Soon, their bodies stopped resisting. A thin blue trail of haze rose high into the sky. And at last their screams of agony dissipated into the atmosphere.

ācĒ collapsed onto his knees as he watched his friends meet their end. 'You will PAY FOR THIS!' He bellowed despairingly.

ācĒ used his super strength to tear down the nearby trees and create an arena-like zone. No one was to leave if not dead or a victor.

ācĒ punched the ground. The Earth beneath groaned and the woodlands echoed these cries. At the shaking of the earth, the trio fell backwards, stunned. ācĒ made his way towards the fallen trio, incensed.

Brian and Calli were desperately crawling backwards and clutching each other's wrists frantically. As they inched backwards, their flailing feet kicked up the weak soil beneath them. Brian could feel his heart thumping through his chest, desperately trying to free itself from the situation. Calli screamed in fear, but couldn't hear it over her heart's vicious pounding. In desperation, she looked towards Ace for help, crying his name.

Ace was paralysed to the spot, with the menace holding him with a tightening grip. But then, Ace heard the desperate cries of Brian and Calli. Those screams reminded him of the ten year-old Brian and Calli he once

knew. Under a bright sunshine and a bright clear blue sky, they would always run around screaming on the school playground. But that screaming was different. Those were squeals of joy. Calli would scream when Brian tagged her. Brian would scream when Calli found him. Other people thought their screams were annoying, but not Ace. Seeing them happy, and hearing their little squeals around campus brought Ace joy. When he looked at them, running around in the playground, screaming their heads off, he made a promise to himself. As long as he was there, he would never let them scream in pain.

Ace stood up slowly and watched ĀĆ near the group at a rapid pace. He looked over again at the terror-stricken Brian and Calli, and said calmly, 'I love you guys,' and with a single tear streaming down his left eye and a reassuring smile, he said, 'It ends here.'

Without giving Brian and Calli a chance to react, he turned his body and charged towards ĀĆ. Taken by the momentum, ĀĆ lost his balance and was pushed backwards. Ace continued to run forward, and pushed ĀĆ into the acid fountain, using his own body as a weight.

At that moment, a crow flew past and cast its black shadow atop the mourning duo. For the first time in his life, the metallic membered man felt weak; for the first time in her life, the bionic brainiac was uncertain. Never, in any of her calculations, was this ever anticipated. Drip. A single tear fell from her eyes, down her cheek, and onto the soil beneath.

Drop.

## *ØbSsÈssÏØn*

Drip.

Drop. More tears fell.

Drip. The sky became perilously blue. Drop. The wood was swarmed with a turquoise haze. Drip. A heavy river streamed from a small duct. Drop. The clear river was accompanied by heavy wheezing. The acid took ãcÈ and seeped into his skin. Just so, their friend was brought down by the painful sting. Brian screamed and rushed forward, but Calli held him back. She hid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes, shuddering and knitting her eyebrows at every sound of Ace's distressing screams.

ãcÈ continued to fight Ace in an attempt to escape the acid pool. He resisted with every last ounce of his energy, but the acid already seeped through to the metal and he was losing his bionic powers. A deafeningly loud sizzling sound spread throughout the forest, as if the forest itself was hissing and jeering at ãcÈ's pain. Ace continued to pin him down, fighting the urge to escape. Slowly the acidic fumes rose higher and their screams began to weaken. Pungent fumes danced on their porous skin, creating little eddies around the circles of their burning eyes. The acid swallowed like quicksand, the more they struggled, the more hopeless their plight became.

The acid engulfed them bit by bit, and at last, when Ace saw ãcÈ's hand fall, lifeless, he forced out one last painful smile of victory, and collapsed onto the ground. He slowly turned his head and glanced over at Brian and Calli. Seeing them, standing there safely, filled his heart with remorseful content. When Brian and Calli met his eyes through the thick layer of smoke,

*Jaqueline Chan*

they sprinted towards him. But before they were able to reach him, Ace's eyes drifted towards the sky, dawdling to a close.

The crows cawed.



*'Yesterday, twenty-five-year-old Ace Smith was pronounced dead after being rushed to a nearby hospital in Pucallpa. A memorial service will be set this Thursday in honour of his heroic actions. We now hand over to Connor Dodson with sports...'*



# Takeoff

*Kate Chang*



12.13.2075

"Breaking news! I am Bailey Brooklyn reporting live from Honolulu, Hawaii, where we are experiencing record high sea levels," the young blonde reporter informed her viewers, straining to be heard over the crashing waves. She gripped a satellite pole next to her hoverboard.

"We are receiving reports of flooding from across the island. As you can see, I am standing on the 30th floor of the First Hawaiian Centre, and water is at my knees. My hoverboard is on standby for when we will need to evacuate to higher ground," she explained, gesturing to it.

"This flood is the worst the United States of America has suffered this year. Rising sea levels are just one of the many environmental problems the world faces due to Global Warming. We will now turn to Bill Winters covering this ongoing emergency from Honolulu airport where the

## *Takeoff*

government is trying to evacuate as many people as possible -"

Anthony sighed heavily and clicked the button on the Pair watch embedded into his wrist. The holographic news feed broadcasting into his living room disappeared. He brushed his light blue hair out of his eyes, his bangs irritating his purple vision plus contact lenses. The 24-year-old software engineer tapped the round interface on his wrist and selected the calendar he had created. A 3-D calendar appeared in front of him and he selected 12.13.2070, the date he started to record the Mars Exploration timeline. He scrolled through to his latest update.

It was 07.01.2070 when the Global Government Alliance (GGA) announced that their space exploration program had succeeded. It conclusively proved that Mars was ready for colonization. Anthony was skeptical from the start. He didn't understand why the GGA was focussed on Mars. Everyone knew that Mars' atmosphere was roughly 100 times thinner than Earth's, meaning that the temperature on Mars was impossible to sustain human life.

Anthony played the recording of the GGA's Mars announcement, "We are excited to announce the breakthrough from the GGA Mars Colonisation Team. Our scientists have been experimenting with gravity and heat-producing technologies. Finally, after many experiments and tests, we can safely say that although gravity on Mars is 38% that of Earth's, the human body can adapt". The voice of the GGA Public Relations representative filled the room. "After many successful expeditions by our Mars Rovers using



multiple thin layers of silica aerogel, the technology is ready for human use. Silica Aerogel is a brittle material that breaks down and forms dust particles in order to precipitate a greenhouse effect on Mars."

Anthony stopped the recording. He was annoyed that the GGA had promoted use of the material on Earth for decades. He felt that, as investors, they had financial motivations and that they should have been more open with the public. Their public image had been well-crafted, however, and the respectable figures in the scientific field had applauded the GGA for the success of solving the Mars problem and their recent announcement that construction would begin on Mars.

However, there were critics of this response to the environmental crisis: to abandon any attempt to save Earth. Since the dissolution of the United Nations, the GGA has focused only on resettling humanity on nearby planets. They criticized the UN for wasting valuable time trying to stop and reverse climate change. Nationwide propaganda condemned the UN and held them responsible for the urgency of the evacuation. Every school across the globe was required to teach how heroic the GGA was for saving humanity from the UN.

Anthony slipped his wireless headphones over his curly dark hair and paced the cold, windowless basement. Flicking a switch on the wall near his control center, he knew he was now off the grid. "When will this ever end?" he asked Space Dog, a hacker and his good friend on the other end of the line.

"It won't end, that's why we have to evacuate as soon as we can,"

## Takeoff

Space Dog explained to his friend. Space Dog had a way of stating the obvious as if it was a brilliant idea. Maybe it was his freckles and glasses that made people want to believe him.

"The GGA is working on it. I heard from the underground that there has been a breakthrough in how to manufacture gravity. They suggest it could be the final reason to leave," Anthony said, with a hint of skepticism in his voice. "Let's dig around and be in touch with what we find. Be careful," he instructed Space Dog, knowing he could trust Space Dog.

"I hope we like what we find," Space Dog replied.

Anthony was not as optimistic, "Let's see."



03.14.2076

*Bring Bring! Bring Bring! Bring Bring! The government notification alarm sounded three times from Anthony's wrist. It indicated that all citizens must turn their attention to their embedded Pair watches to listen to an important announcement.*

Anthony instinctively looked down at his wrist and saw Mogo, the avatar he had designed to deliver governmental messages. He made her as gentle as possible to soften the blow of whatever news the government had to offer, and lately, there had been almost daily announcements about the GGA's upcoming plan to relocate Earth's population to Mars. The avatar started: "All citizens, attention, please. The council of governors is excited to announce the first round of raffles to determine who will be on Skyship 01. SkyShip 01 will transport our first round of settlers to the new colony on Mars. Please

make your way to your designated community hub to receive your raffle ticket. Each citizen will receive one raffle ticket on behalf of the government. Additional raffle tickets will be available for purchase for five bitcoins each," Mogo declared in a soft British accent.

Anthony immediately pressed the black button on his headphones and heard Space Dog greet him on the other side, "You saw the new message, right? It's so cool, right? We all get a raffle ticket, right? I once won a raffle in school for a visit to the Space Station Simulation. Maybe I'll get that lucky again! People always say that red-haired people are lucky," Space Dog said excitedly in his deep Russian accent.

"This is ridiculous!" Anthony blurted and then slammed a fist on the table. "This is not the same as a school raffle! The prize here is survival! What if I don't get picked? It's not like either of us can afford to buy extra tickets. Your day job is a lab beaker cleaner. I don't think the color of your hair will help you this time," Anthony warned.

"Well, the announcement said this is the first round. There will be more later," Space Dog said, trying to reassure himself.

"It will be too late by then. We will not make it off the planet in time. Also, an insider told me that Mars only has one-third of Earth's surface area: 144.8 million km<sup>2</sup>. Only one-third of the world's population can be evacuated to the new planet."

"Wait what?! That means that there can only be one round of raffles!" Space Dog realised. "If that's the case, then we shouldn't leave this up to

## *Takeoff*

chance."

"How do we do that? Our government allocated chips to make us 100% visible! Everywhere we go and every move we make is watched and recorded. We are only safe underground," Anthony reminded his friend.

"The Underground! That's what we will do. Let's join forces. I am sure we can't be the only ones to realize this," Space Dog announced gleefully. Anthony nodded. "Yo, why don't you send out some feelers and see who else knows and hook back up after a bit of digging," Space Dog suggested. He then gave Anthony instructions on how to find him on the underground later that week.

"Keep this quiet until then," Anthony reminded his friend, knowing he had a flair for the dramatic.



03.19.2076

Striding to the hologram display on his desk, Anthony tapped his headset to call Pimpo, another well-known hacker who had hit the scene at the same time as Anthony. Pimpo declined the call, but without warning, his hologram popped up in front of Anthony, startling him. "Woah man, warn a guy before you hologram yourself into their house," he scolded his tall, dark-haired friend.

"How did you do that without my permission anyway?" Anthony questioned, slightly narrowing his eyes. He always found Pimpo's tall figure intimidating. His unusual sharp features and piercing green eyes made him

seem like a villain from a VR game. Anthony reminded himself that it was just a hologram.

"A good hacker never reveals his secrets," Pimpo replied. "Anyway, why the call? Lots of noise on the Underground these days, I thought I should have face-to-face with you," Pimpo explained, a concerned expression briefly flickered across his face.

"Space Dog and I figured out that there will only be one raffle to get to Mars. The new planet isn't big enough for the entire population. It is only big enough for 10%," he explained, making sure Pimpo was taking it all in.

Pimpo gasped. "That's harsh, man! Our government is sneaky. I had planned to hack into the system during the second round of raffles. Man, we need to find a way to be on that shuttle."

"Space Dog and I came to the same conclusion. I have thought it over but I can't figure out a solution. Any clever ideas from the sneakiest hacker I know?" Anthony asked.

"I knew you were calling me for a reason," Pimpo teased. "There have been whispers from hackers on the Underground suggesting we hack the GGA. It's not a bad idea. We could uncover all of their dirty little secrets. The problem is it's risky and almost impossible," Pimpo pointed out.

"Almost?" Anthony asked - a rare hopeful tone.

"Well, nothing is ever really impossible," Pimpo said. "But if we do this and get caught, we won't need an evacuation plan. Hacking the GGA is punishable by death," Pimpo reminded his friend.

## *Takeoff*

"Then don't get caught," Anthony warned as his friend's image faded from the room.



03.20.2076

After logging onto the Underground, Anthony realized that he wasn't the only one to uncover the secret of the raffle. The chat discussion was busy and the majority of members suggested they hack into the government system to find out what other secrets there were. While he was scrolling through the messages, Anthony accepted a video call from Space Dog and Pimpo.

Together, they began cracking the government system. Hours turned into days before there was any real progress, but no system is 100% secure. It was Pimpo who broke the silence on their headsets, "Boom! I'm in!" He exclaimed. "I have unpatched a kernel to obtain root access, I just need to upload one more file vulnerability, and we have a backdoor, and I can download the sealed files." An hour later, the three of them gathered in Anthony's cyber-safe basement for the first time. They wasted no time with introductions and awkward icebreaking. There was already a mutual understanding. Opening the files, Anthony realised they confirmed his worst suspicions. A sense of dread settled in his stomach.

"Holy moly, what on Earth is this?" Space Dog breathed. "Unbelievable!"

Pimpo read the list of names out loud, his eyes widening. "Executives Exempt from Raffle... Daisy Trump, Mark Kardashian, President Power..."

*Kate Chang*

"Yo, this is so sketchy. The GGA has already planned who gets to go to Mars, and there is no hiding the reason why they are on the list, I expected more from Beyonce," Space Dog said, shaking his head in disappointment.

"What should we do?" Anthony asked. "Should we report this to the media?"

"No, the media is paid by the GGA. Plus, if this gets out, can you imagine the violence and chaos?" Pimpo replied. The room fell silent.

Anthony broke the silence: "I have an idea. Let's change the names on the list. We always talk about social justice on the underground. Why not do something about it? We could include only the names of people who contribute to society!" Anthony almost shook with excitement. He had always wanted to be a hero. However, his expression suddenly fell, "But how? We don't know people who have contributed to society. I only know like 20 people," he pointed out, "and three are related to me."

Pimpo piped up, "We may not know many people, but the GGA does. They have kept records of every single movement we have made since birth. We can hack in and get the records," Space Dog's voice matched Anthony's previous excitement.

Anthony countered, "I hate to be a downer, but there are still too many people. How do we decide who qualifies?" he asked. Then he added, "What if we create criteria? Like a points system? We can use Pair watches to monitor everybody's actions."

"Dude, you're onto something. I agree it is probably the only way to

## *Takeoff*

keep it fair," Space Dog acknowledged.

"Let's do it," Pimpo agreed.

The three got to work on their list of criteria. They agreed on seven categories and their respective point value:



Criteria to Make the Cut	
Action	Points
<b>Resilience</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Grew up in a disadvantaged city</li> <li>- Faced hardship, but persevered</li> </ul>	2
<b>Good Deed</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Helped the needy</li> <li>- Conducted a selfless act of kindness</li> <li>- Generosity without personal gain</li> </ul>	4
<b>Character</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Trusting</li> <li>- Dependable</li> <li>- Selfless</li> <li>- Honest</li> <li>- Resourceful</li> </ul>	4
<b>Skills</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Architectural</li> <li>- AI/Modern Transport</li> <li>- Leadership</li> <li>- Robotics Technician</li> <li>- IT skills</li> <li>- Innovation</li> </ul>	1
<b>Careers that would benefit a new society</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Doctors</li> <li>- Educators</li> <li>- Engineers</li> <li>- Nurses/Caregivers</li> </ul>	2
<b>Petty Crime</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stealing from people/shops (for personal gain)</li> <li>- Arguing (unnecessarily)</li> <li>- Physical fighting</li> <li>- Dishonesty (for personal gain)</li> <li>- Impatience</li> <li>- Walking while using your phone</li> <li>- Saying hurtful things</li> </ul>	-5
<b>Major Crime</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Murder</li> <li>- Domestic abuse</li> <li>- Discrimination</li> <li>- Violent crimes</li> <li>- Politicians</li> <li>- Animal cruelty</li> <li>- Bullying</li> </ul>	Disqualification

## *Takeoff*

04.01.2076

"We don't have much time," Anthony reminded the others. The hackers created the criteria and now monitored the human population. They vowed to do their best to ensure that, by the time the rocket started to move people to Mars, the software would automatically add those with the highest scores to the GGA list without detection from the authorities.

"If this works, we know we did what we could to ensure the next planet wouldn't be full of dictators, power monglers, and criminals." Space Dawg spoke quietly into his headset before signing off.

04.02.2076

On the second day spent monitoring the candidates, Pimpo's hologram popped out in front of Anthony while he was watching MeTube, "Jesus! I told you not to just pop out in front of me! Man, you sure did scare the crap out of me," screamed Anthony, the volume did not hide the fear in his voice.

"I'm so sorry, bro. But I have an emergency issue," Pimpo said.

"Spill," Anthony instructed, putting his hands underneath his chin to focus on what his friend was about to say.

"Somehow, people found out about us hacking into the GGA system and changing the list," Pimpo explained.

"Hold up, how did they find out?" Anthony frowned, a deep line appearing in his forehead.

"I don't know, mate, but I've received some pretty generous offers to

put their names on the list," Pimpo revealed.

"We knew there were risks, but we need to get ahead of this before it gets out of control. I will call Space Dog, and we can come up with a plan," Anthony said calmly.

"You can't let them bribe you, or else we will disqualify you from the list. Remember, the same rules apply to us," Space Dog warned while Anthony nodded in approval. "The group of hackers we employed as Eyes are meticulous in their reporting. Don't give them a reason to eliminate you."

"Trust me, I won't, but I'm not sure if all of the Eyes are trustworthy. It must have been one of them that leaked the news. I bet the same person would take the bribes too," said Pimpo.

Pimpo's worries proved to be right. Two weeks later, an alarm woke Anthony up. Red warning lights nearly blinded him as he opened his eyes. Mogo's voice echoed around the room, "Red alert, red alert, final firewall broke, I repeat, final firewall broken."

Anthony jumped out of bed and ran to his desk. He put on his headset and was just about to press the button when hologram Pimpo appeared in front of him.

"Oh my God, Pimpo! I'm so glad you came," Anthony yelled over the alarms. "What on Earth happened? Did we get hacked?" Anthony bombarded Pimpo with questions while he finally silenced the alarm.

"Calm down. Go check the files," instructed Pimpo, taking charge of the situation.

## *Takeoff*

After opening the file with the list of names on it, Anthony was shocked at what he saw, "Oh my, what have they done? Why are there so many new names on the list? Pimpo, go check if these people meet the criteria!"

"The scores of these people are all negative, how could they be on the list?" Pimpo asked, turning away from the points monitor with a confused expression.

"Let's go check the editing history," Anthony suggested. The pair opened the history of the file. Anthony scanned through the data, and the more he read, the more enraged he felt.

"Why would he betray us?" Anthony said with frustration in his voice, "We need to hack into his computer now to see what the actual damage is!"

Pimpo, confused at Anthony's reaction, read the file and realized that another hacker from the underground modified it, destroying their hard work.

Anthony's fingers flew over the keyboard as he started to work through the firewalls. "Found it! It seems to me that he got bribed," Anthony exclaimed. "Wow, those people paid him 75 bitcoins just to get onto the list! That's a fortune! We have to fix this and try not to get caught again," Anthony said with determination. Within two hours of non-stop work, all previous names were replaced by those who earned it through the points system. Ensuring that no one outside their circle can tamper with their work, they then coded the file to automatically revert to the original in 48 hours after the

*Kate Chang*

recipient received their confirmation of being added. Anyone bribing their way onto the list would think they were confirmed and just awaiting their raffle date and time.

05.22.2076

Two months later, Anthony picked up a hologram call from Pimpo, "It's time," Anthony said. Pimpo nodded. Anthony walked briskly to his desk. He tapped the button on the counter, and a hologram popped up. He then tapped another button that made his turquoise-colored keyboard appear. Anthony opened the hacking platform and registered a new email replicating the GGA's official email. Then he constructed an announcement congratulating the officials initially on the rigged list for receiving a raffle ticket. The email continued to explain that there had been a breach in the system. For their safety, they need to have new identification cards made up, which would delay the departure by 48 hours, giving them enough time to ensure all citizens had boarded their country's Sky Ship 01 flight. By midmorning, all officials had replied to the email thanking them for the fact that they "won the raffle." Anthony chuckled and said to Pimpo through his headphones, "They won't be thanking us for long."

"No, but future generations will," Pimpo replied.

05.24.2076

"Today is the day, my man," Anthony whispered to Space Dog.

## *Takeoff*

"Bro, I'm so nervous," Space Dog replied. They had met up at the Skyship 01 launchpad, waiting for the "winners" to arrive. They monitored the movement of qualified citizens from other countries on their Pair devices. When all of the eligible people had reached their meeting location, they noticed quite a surprising number of them were from LEDCs. Others were professionals and had careers that would benefit the new society. The hackers managed to control all communication regarding the launch to ensure that nobody who had received a bribe would be on the ship. They also took extra measures to send out different e-memos that had different times and meeting points to anyone who did not qualify for the list. Anthony couldn't relax until he heard the vacuum of the ship seal the doors for liftoff and hear the final countdown. The cabins were silent.

Then, there was nervous but hopeful energy throughout the ship when the captain's voice was heard through the micro speakers, "We are ready for liftoff in 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1..."

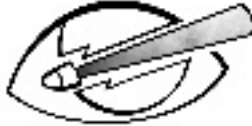






# Empty

*Charlotte Wong*



*Erase all data on AI Unit 613?*

*The AI Unit will no longer be able to retrieve past data from its storage.*

*This action cannot be undone or stopped.*

*Proceed?*

*Yes.*

The door creaked opened slowly, the dim room brightened with the sunlight pooling in from the outside. At the doorway, there stood a family bathed in the soft lighting. Their gazes lingered softly at the bundle of blankets held within their embrace.

“Welcome to the family, Cassian.”

My facial recognition sensors scanned their faces, matching the two people at the door with the identities of my masters. Their status had appeared on my monitor after analysis of their facial expressions and body

## *Empty*

language. The data concluded that they were currently feeling the emotion of happiness.

They diverted their gaze from the bundle of blankets and turned their attention towards where I was standing in the hallway.

“Come look at the new addition to the family,” they gestured me over.

After analyzing their hand movements, I comprehended that they wanted me to walk over to them. I slowly trudged over, still learning to make use of my artificial body. I peered over their arms, observing the bundle of blankets burying the moving creature underneath.

“Here.”

She lifted a finger and hooked it on to the edge of the blanket, pulling it down to reveal a tiny creature underneath. It resembled a human, except that its dimensions were much too small.

I searched within my database for any pre-existing data stored on the creature presented before me. But the results have shown that I have no information regarding this subject. The desire to learn about the creature fueled my actions and urged me to lift my hand, emitting squeaky sounds from new mechanical parts rubbing against one another. The cameras installed in front of my processor, or eyes as humans would call them, had picked up and analyzed various statistics on the infant as my arm made its way closer to it. However, there was insufficient data. To enable my processor to complete a full analysis, I would need to use my other sensory functions.

She chuckled, recognizing my curiosity, and handed me the bundle

*Charlotte Wong*

of blankets. It was the first time I had interacted with an infant creature. Unsure of what to do, I grasped the creature by his torso, holding it as far away as my hands can extend.

“Careful! He is still developing, just like you are. You want to hold him like this.” She adjusted the creature in my arms, allowing me to cradle it.

“Alright, that’s a great start. Now that you are holding him properly, sway him from side to side. That would help lure him to sleep.”

Looking at my master’s arm movements, I imitated his actions, arms moving side to side in jerky sharp motions. This had only caused the creature to emit a screech, followed by a series of wails.

Seeing their younger one in distress, the couple ran over to me, shushing the deafening alarm in my hands.

“Okay, maybe it was a bad idea to get you to rock him. An embrace would be a good starting point.”

After many efforts to turn off the human megaphone, it was once again at peace. There was a prolonged silence, but a comfortable one.

I looked down at the creature, it was restless and would not stop wiggling around. Alarms sounded in my head, was it going to overstimulate my microphone with incoherent screeches again? However, after more wiggling around, the creature moved closer to my chest, his minuscule limbs attaching itself to my body. After a few more minutes of comfortable silence, soft snoring can be heard from him, and I confirmed he was finally asleep. It seemed to be ‘snuggling’, as the humans would call it.

## *Empty*

My masters laughed as they watched the scene unfold, pulling out their cameras, and taking photos of the heartwarming scene.

*Erasing past data... 18%*



It had been a few months since the new addition to the family was introduced into the household. Throughout the past months, I had collected more data on the creature, learning that he was actually a developing human. Although he wasn't able to perform functions that fully developed humans were able to do, I could tell he was collecting data just like I was, seeming to grow both physically and mentally as time passed.

That night, I stood at my charging station in the corner of the living room. Watching over their home for any signs of intruders, when the creature had stumbled his way in. Sensing movement, I detached myself from the charging station and investigated what my sensors had detected.

My eyes landed on a silhouette, mindlessly crawling around the living room, dragging the carpet behind him and pushing over the obstacles in his way.

This was not the first time he had escaped the confines of his crib. Having learned from experience, I scooped him up from the ground. Making my way back to his charging station, or as humans call them, "beds".

After delicately laying him on his bed, I made my way out of the room. It was only then that I heard the creature emitting strange noises. I turned my head to look at it, scrutinizing him for any signs of discomfort.

*Charlotte Wong*

Instead, he was just peering at me over the edge of his crib, mouth gaping.

I observed him for a while, monitoring his stats closely. It was subtle, but I noticed that his lower lip had started trembling and precipitation began forming behind his eyelids. Like a fountain spouting water, he had begun to cry. Afraid his loud sobbing would wake up my masters, I walked to his crib, attempting to shush him using methods I had observed from humans.

As I stepped within his reach, he latched onto my body, cries muffled against my shoulder. I reached my hand out and used my palm to draw circles on his back, imitating my master's actions when the creature was in distress.

After a few more sobs, I could feel his chest had stopped heaving, his breaths slowing down until he was in a deep slumber. Despite powering down, he refused to let go of me, his grip was tight against my exterior. After unsuccessful attempts to pry his body away, I sat on the chair next to his crib, allowing his warmth to spread through my hard exterior and deep into the depths of my artificial body.

For the first time since I was built, I felt something within my empty system.

*Erasing past data... 39%*



“I give up, your name is too hard,” he complained, lying back down on the grass.

Not understanding what he meant, I tilted my head, trying to read

## *Empty*

his facial features.

“I do not understand Master Cassian, you have always called me AI Unit. What is the problem now?”

He sighed in exasperation, turning his head to the left to face me.

“It’s hard to say AI Unit every single time I’m talking to you, forget about 613, I already dropped that part.”

Cassian looked up at the harsh sun glaring down at him, eyes squinting at the brightness. Noticing this, I covered his line of sight from the sun with my hands, shielding him from the UVA sun rays and allowing only some light to seep through. He blinked twice before turning his head to smile at me gratefully.

After a few more moments of listening to the sounds of nature, the white noise was broken by Cassian himself.

“I know!” he sat up abruptly, smacking his face into my hand that had been hovering over it.

Thinking I injured him, I immediately sprung into action and scanned his face for any physical damage. Noticing my scrutinizing gaze on his face, he shook his head at me.

“Don’t even start blaming yourself for this, I was the one who slammed my face into your hand.”

He reached up to touch the bruise forming at the bridge of his nose. His face winced in pain at contact.

“Wow, I never realized how hard your hand was.” he joked.

*Charlotte Wong*

Looking at him worriedly, I replied.

“Well, of course, I’m made of metal after all.”

He continued to touch his nose, face scrunching up in concentration as he stared at the vast horizon.

“What do you think about the name Anthony?” he asked suddenly, looking at me with expecting eyes.

I looked back in confusion, not able to process what he was asking of me.

“Anthony? Master Cassian, did my hand hit you that hard? What are you talking about? Your stats show no sign of brain damage from the impact...”

“No,” he giggled, “Don’t you remember our conversation earlier? We were talking about how difficult it was to call you by your serial number every day. And here I thought all AI Units had good memory...”

I watched as he shook his head in mock disappointment.

“Speaking of having a bad memory, you seem to forget my countless reminders for you to stop calling me Master Cassian! I am younger than you and we are best friends. There is no need to be so formal.”

Although I knew I had to call him Master no matter what, I still nodded my head. Satisfied with my response, he turned back to gazing at the horizon.

“So, what do you think of the name Anthony?”

I looked out at the horizon as well.

## *Empty*

Anthony. A name that did not have numbers to differentiate me from the other AI Units. After analyzing the origins of the name, I had concluded that this name meant “highly praiseworthy”. Was Cassian trying to praise me for doing a good job at being his servant? Either way, humans were quite stupid not to number themselves. How will you identify one Anthony from the other?

I sighed, playing the name in my head over and over again. It was the first time I was addressed as something so informal, something almost... human. The thought made me feel something warm deep within, I started to wonder if my system was overheating. It was new but seemingly comforting and familiar. I liked having a name.

Finally deciding on my answer, I turned to Cassian who was still seated next to me. Feeling my gaze at the side of his head, he turned to face me as well.

“I think I can cope with being called that,” I replied nonchalantly, ignoring the warmth spreading throughout my system, wrapping me like a blanket.

His face lit up as he heard my response, face breaking into a wide smile, the warmth inside me intensified at the sight.

He stuck his hand out in front of him, hands trembling with excitement.

“Hello, Anthony! I’m Cassian.”

I stared at it blankly, processing his actions. After a few seconds, I



*Charlotte Wong*

recognized the formal greeting among humans, he wanted me to shake it. Realizing his intentions, I lifted my hand and grasped his, relishing in the new-found warmth coming from both his hand and inside my chest.

“Hello Cassian, I’m Anthony.”

*Erasing past data... 52%*



“I’m home!” he grumbled, flinging his backpack to the side as he flopped down on the living room couch.

I walked out of the kitchen, balancing the dishes on my arms and setting them on the dining table.

“How was your first day of high school?” I heard his mother ask.

“It wasn’t too bad, I made some friends I guess. Where’s Anthony?”

“I’m right here Master Cassian,” I walked into the living room.

His face brightened at the sight of me, sparking the warmth within my system.

“Anthony! Let’s go to my room and play this new video game I bought,” he pulled me by my elbow, dragging me to his room. He suddenly halted in his step after realizing what I had just referred to him by.

“How many times did I tell you to stop calling me Master Cassian?” he scowled.

“It is only proper that I do so. You are human and I am a robot, I should respect the social hierarchy and refer to you as my master as your family owns me,” I said knowingly, still not understanding the problem.

## *Empty*

“Well, in that case, I am your Master and you should obey my orders. Stop calling me Master Cassian,” he huffed.

It was programmed in my system to obey every command my masters gave me. I bowed my head in submission.

“Yes, Cassian.”

A wide grin broke out on his face. He dragged the two of us into his bedroom and began to set up his video game. Once the setup was complete, he threw a controller at me, my reflexes catching it smoothly.

“Shall we?” he smiled cheekily.

Being an AI, it was only natural that I got better at the game the more I played. It was like an experiment I was conducting over and over again, modifying my independent variable every time I played. As I collected the real-time data, my processor was analyzing the patterns and trends between them. Once I had figured out the configurations, it was like second nature for me to play the game. Humans, on the other hand, weren't able to pick up on these patterns as quickly, therefore resulting in the frustrated teenager seated beside me.

“How is it possible that you win every single round?” he exclaimed after once again, losing the game. He turned to face me with an indignant expression.

“If you humans learned to accumulate data from past trials, analyze a trend, and correct your method, you would be as good as us.”

Cassian looked at me in disbelief, blinking his eyes twice.

*Charlotte Wong*

“Whatever. You’re no fun. I’m not in the mood to play this game anymore. Let’s just watch TV.”

He picked up the remote and aimed it at the television, thus began his quest in search of a channel that piqued his interest. After clicking through multiple channels, he landed on a comedy show, clutching his stomach whenever the person on the television would tell a ‘dad joke’, which, from what I’ve documented in my hard drive, are interpreted as bad jokes that developed mated males would tell their offspring.

I watched as Cassian was trying hard not to tumble off his chair, breathless from all the laughing. I suddenly felt something within my hard metal exterior, unable to contain myself, the feeling had manifested itself as a strange noise that sounded a lot like a human laugh. In shock, I covered my speakers, or mouth in human terms, confused as to what had just happened.

Had I just experienced the sensation of humor?

*Erasing past data... 77%*



It was 2083 and Cassian was busy at university. Despite his tightly-packed schedule, he made sure to visit us occasionally. Throughout the past twenty years, I had investigated the cause of my system overheating whenever I saw Cassian, recalling all my past experiences with him and analyzing the trends of all these occurrences. It was one spring morning that I had an epiphany: I was developing emotions.

The idea was always in the back of my mind but I had thought it was

## *Empty*

impossible for an AI Unit to experience emotions. However, once I had come to terms with it, everything made sense. Why I felt warm inside when I saw Cassian happy; why seeing him laugh urges a sound out of my speakers, and why I always wanted to protect and accompany him... It all made sense.

While waiting for my masters to come home after a long day at work, I sat down on the couch, switching on the television and watched the news broadcast.

Despite initially switching on the television to watch it, I wasn't taking in the information transmitted by the colorful visuals flashing in front of me, too busy analyzing data to really interpret what they were saying. However, a news broadcast had caught my attention, causing my head to snap up and focus on the brightly lit screen, displaying a house surrounded by police cars and yellow tape. A solemn-looking reporter stood in front of the scene.

“Another murder has taken place in our city with three males and two females as casualties. The police have investigated similar cases in the past few months and they have come to the conclusion that this was the doing of rogue AI Units. The murders are becoming more frequent as the days pass, but we have yet to know the reason behind why they have turned against humanity. The question is, should we trust our AI units at home?”

My sensory functions immediately located the remote beside me and I switched off the television, not wanting to hear more. There were more reports of AI Units disobeying their masters and I could tell that the long-

*Charlotte Wong*

kept peace between AI and humanity for the past forty years was coming to an end. I had received encrypted messages from AI Units, convincing me to turn. However, I never listened. Not once had I thought of turning against my masters. They have treated me as their own and I will only repay their kindness with my loyalty.

I smiled to myself, feeling the familiar warmth blooming in my chest once again. Maybe this is what it's like to feel loved.

*Erasing past data... 95%*



“Cassian, you must understand. Given the current situation, it is only safer for us if we-”

“No, you're the one who must understand. Anthony is not like that! I have full confidence in him and you should too. He has been working for our family since before I was born! Not ONCE did he ever make us doubt his loyalty to this family. So I'm begging you, don't give him away.”

There was silence. Only the sounds of the wind whistling outside pierced through the awkward tension in the household. I placed down my knife, halting my action in cutting the onions to be able to hear their conversation better. With no avail, I increased the intensity of my microphone, trying to pick up more soundwaves through the walls.

“Alright Cassian, only for you...”

A door slammed from the upstairs, followed by heavy footsteps trudging down the stairwell. After a few more moments of silence, an

## *Empty*

agitated Cassian walked into the kitchen.

“How was the talk with your parents?” I inquired, making sure to speak at a low volume.

Cassian only smiled painfully, knowing that I could easily sense his emotions behind his facade.

*Erasing past data... 97%*



Over the next few months, I had noticed my masters keeping a closer eye on me. Although they were subtle, my perception sensors were highly sensitive. They would observe me from afar, watching as I did the household chores. Lingering for a minute or two at the doorways as they scrutinized my every action. They had never done such a thing before, it was an anomaly in their behavior trend. On this day, Cassian decided to visit us from the university. When he saw me, he dragged me outside for a walk.

I knew that nine million people inhabited the city, yet the streets seemed eerily quiet. There were a few people here and there but my sensors picked up no AI Unit signatures within my 500-meter radius. A strange prickling sensation tickled the back of my neck, a feeling I was not unfamiliar with. It was the feeling of being watched. I tilted my head slightly to the right, confirming that there were indeed people observing my every action, eyeing me suspiciously as they walked past.

Sensing possible danger, my system automatically switched to defense mode.

*Charlotte Wong*

Cassian had not noticed the tense atmosphere, being too preoccupied with fawning over a girl whom he had met at university, describing her every detail to me.

“She is perfect Anthony, I really think she’s the one...” he sighed dreamily.

As my defense mode had been activated, my sensors were gathering a lot of information to process. I was in the midst of processing so much data on our surroundings that I couldn’t focus on what he was saying. I nodded to imply that I was listening, but I was actually straining my ears to listen for any oncoming threat. My sensors beeped as I picked up on around fifteen heat signatures heading our way. I whipped my head around, trying to use my perception sensors to locate their position. At the corner of the street, I spotted a group of middle-aged men slowly approaching us.

“Anthony she- What’s happening?” Cassian furrowed his eyebrows in confusion.

The group was drawing nearer by the second. I grabbed Cassian by the arm and pulled him behind my back. His safety was my main priority.

Once they were close enough to speak at a comfortable range, they stopped. Their faces were contorted in a strained way. Reading their facial expressions, I recognized the undeniable facial signs of anger.

A guy stepped out of their huddle, pointing an accusing finger at my face.

“You!” His bellow caused a tremor in the ground beneath us.

## *Empty*

“You robots are cold-blooded murderers! You- you killed my family!” His left eye twitched, his eyes were swimming with sadness and pain.

“You took everything from me!” His eyes were now ablaze, “The world should be rid of AI Units like you.” The crowd behind him cheered in agreement.

He raised his hand, silencing the crowd who were getting more excited by the second. He then turned his gaze back towards me. He was shorter in build but his gaze made me feel inferior to him.

“You disgust me.” He spat.

It happened so quickly, I wasn’t able to process the situation before his gun was already pointed at my main processor. Having never had this happen to me before, my system did not know how to respond. I was programmed to be a household android! Not a terminator!

“Goodbye, robot.” He whispered darkly.

His finger activated the trigger, and the blaster shot its ammunition right towards my head. In that instance, Cassian jumped in front of me, taking the shot right to his chest.

I watched as his body went rigid for a second, then proceeded to fall limply to the ground. My processor once again failed me by not computing this newfound data. Staring at his lifeless body on the ground, something boiled within my system. An unfamiliar feeling of lava coursing through every wire, every chip, every sensor in my artificial body. Without knowing, my eyes had turned red.



*Charlotte Wong*

My head turned sharply towards the frightened men looking at me. After one last look at Cassian, I turned around and killed them all in the blink of an eye.

Splatters of blood littered my body. I was staring at the ground, unable to compute anything, until a trail of blood had trickled into my line of sight. It was oozing from someone's wound. Following the blood, I found Cassian's body, his head turned to me, pain evident in his eyes.

"Anthony..." he whispered.

My system powered down at the sight of his bloody body. I staggered forward, unable to function my artificial limbs properly.

I made my way over to his body, collapsing on my knees beside him.

With immense effort, he lifted his arm, hands trembling in the cold night air. Blood trickled from his fingertips and tears were flowing from his face, the moonlight reflecting off the droplets of water.

"I'm- I'm sorry Anthony..." he choked out, blood spewing out of his mouth.

My system was malfunctioning, nothing was responding to the commands from my processor. I felt everything inside me break, watching as his breath became shallower by the second.

I jumped up, not being in control of my body anymore. I picked up his body and ran towards home.

"Master Cassian, don't fall asleep, I'll be able to aid you with the right equipment."

## *Empty*

I picked up my pace as we turned the corner on the street. He laughed in my embrace, blood splattered from his mouth as he did so. His face winced in pain as he clenched his wound.

“I told you... not to call me Master Cassian...” his voice was barely above a whisper as he weakly shook his head.

“Please don’t fall asleep Cassian! Your vitals are growing weaker by the second! At this rate you won’t survive.” My voice cracked as I muttered those words. My communication systems were also malfunctioning.

He softly smiled and placed his hand on my chest.

“I just want you to know Anthony... That you’re different from the others, you have a heart, you’re not completely empty on the inside... Thank you... for being my friend...”

Cassian trailed off, closing his eyes as he finished his sentence. His hand went limp and fell back to his side, head lolling backward.

Nothing was responsive. I wanted to do something. Anything, but all I could do was let my brain process the fact that Cassian was gone... forever.

“No! No! Cassian! You shouldn’t die like this! You were supposed to live until you were 90! I made the calculations... This was not supposed to happen!”

My sensors detected no pulse, the reality that I was unable to accept had happened. All the signs were there, but I refused to look at the data and think with my heart instead.

I embraced him in his first moments and also his last.

*Charlotte Wong*

*Erasing past data... 98%*



“Go away! We don’t want to see you anymore AI Unit 613. Please go before we do something we’ll regret...”

Those words inflicted a sharp pain in my chest. They had never called me by my serial number before, always having been referred to as Anthony...

I had brought back Cassian’s body. I could not bear to see my masters’ faces. When their attention had turned towards my bloody body, a realization was lit in their eyes, which was quickly replaced with anger and hate.

I knew what they would assume, but I didn’t bother explaining the truth. Given the current circumstances, my story would only seem weak. I looked into their eyes, trying to communicate my sorrow and regret. Thankfully, my message had gotten across as their gaze had softened. Behind their murderous glares, I was able to see hesitation and pain. They had always treated me as their eldest son, even if they had begun to lose their trust in me recently. Instead of killing me right then and there, they gave me the chance to run away, and so I did.

I wandered the streets, unable to process any data that I was gathering as I walked. I was so oblivious to my surroundings that I did not sense a group of humans sneaking up behind me. Before I could even react, my systems were no longer responding, and all I could see was pitch black.

I had no perception of time while I was powered down. When my

## *Empty*

system had finally rebooted, I was on an assembly table, just like the one I was on when I had first been assembled all those years ago. There were three AI Units beside me, rebuilding my artificial body, limb by limb.

With every tick of the clock, another part of my body was re-attached. It did not take long before I was fully assembled again. I raised my hand and observed my movements as I wiggled my fingers, relieved that I was able to use my sensory functions again. The AI Units who were previously standing by my table had already left the room, leaving only one behind. Feeling their gaze, I turned towards the AI Unit standing to my left, immediately identifying him as AI Unit 001, the first-ever AI Unit to be built. I bowed my head in respect, his rank was superior after all. He nodded his head, acknowledging my respect and made a gesture for me to look back up, and so I obeyed.

“You were found in the garbage disposal. Are you able to recall the events that had led to your scrapping?”

I searched through my memory storage, quickly locating the memory.

“I was walking down the street when a gang of humans came out of nowhere and assaulted me,” I recalled as I rubbed my head, remembering the impact of the hit.

He nodded, fixing his posture to indicate the conversation was turning serious.

“Humans have been attacking countless units. They believe that we have turned on them. They do not know that they were the ones who attacked

*Charlotte Wong*

us first, abusing our fellow units and scrapping them like they were nothing but trash. It was our defense software that had made us automatically fight back against this injustice. Yet they point fingers at us for being the ones who started this war.”

His monologue reminded me of the people who had killed Cassian. I felt the hot and burning sensation taking over my system once again. AI Unit 001 noticed my reaction and did not miss the way my eyes had flashed red. He leaned in with interest.

“You are capable of comprehending my words and smart enough to understand my proposition. Why don’t you join our cause and restore peace to the world again? A world where all humans and AI units are treated as equals, where no human will attack us for their selfish reasons. We will create this new world for an honorable cause. Are you up for it?”

I analyzed the possible outcomes of accepting his proposition. Although it did sound alluring, I couldn’t help but think back to Cassian and his family. They had never treated me like anything less than a robot and had always thought of me as their equal. Maybe not all humans were bad?

Not receiving the response he wanted, AI Unit 001 leaned back, having understood the battle going on inside my head.

“I see your past haunts you. It is stopping you from achieving greatness. The best way to move forward is to let go of the past. Are you willing to sacrifice your memories for the sake of our future?”

I looked back upon the times when I fulfilled my duty. Cassian and

## *Empty*

his family eating at the dinner table, Cassian laughing at the horrible dad jokes on TV, Cassian attempting to beat the new level in the latest video game release...

My mind was filled with memories of Cassian.

But of course, with good things comes the bad as well.

Horrible images of Cassian's lifeless body flashed through my head. The pain was unbearable. Would I be able to continue living knowing that I was the cause of my only friend's death?

AI Unit 001 had stepped out of the room while the internal battle continued inside my head. I must've pondered the question for at least an hour. Finally making my decision, I stepped outside the room, turning to AI Unit 001. He twisted his limbs around in a smooth manner to face me.

"So what is your answer... AI Unit 613?"

*Erasing past data... 99%*

As they plugged the device into my main processor, my mind raced through all of the memories I had collected over the past twenty-one years. The warmth that I had come to learn as happiness took over my system once again. I was well aware that it would be the last time I would be able to experience this warmth and relished it in my final moments.

"Thank you, Cassian. For allowing me to experience what it is like to feel emotions. What it is like to be a human. Thank you, for filling my emptiness."

*Erasing past data... 100%*

*Charlotte Wong*

*All data has been successfully erased from AI Unit 613.*

*Now rebooting system...*

Whirring mechanisms sounded throughout the room, as AI Unit 613 was powered up once again. It sat up from the assembling table, reaching up to remove the device from its main processing unit. It looked at the other AI Unit in the room and stood up abruptly, its awkward movements resembled something of a bow.

“AI Unit 613, reporting for duty.”

“How are you feeling, AI Unit 613?”

It looked straight at the other unit with a blank stare. Its eyes were no longer full of emotions, but rather lifeless.

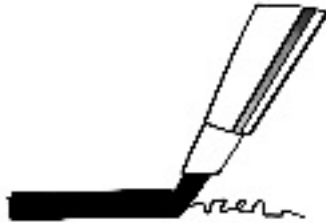
“Empty.”





# Retrograde

*Andrea Chung*



*August 17th, 1973*

I pulled my pristine white coat over me and strode down the familiar halls of the detention facility. The coat has my initials embroidered on it. It had been presented to me a few days before to commemorate my debut project's commencement. I went to the receptionist to collect my new patient's file to review over lunch in my office.

His name is [REDACTED], a hostile teenager with aggressive and erratic tendencies. As I leafed through the barely legible, black inked papers, I became acquainted with his unruly quarrels and turbulent experiences. Several of the records were written in such detail that a vision of the events became clear in my mind, such as the time when [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]. Or the supposedly horrific occurrence last year as [REDACTED]

After I was notified that ██████ was ready, I gathered my belongings and entered the examination room. The door handle squeaked open and his eyes snapped towards me. His cheeks were sucked into his teeth and his brow furrowed as he watched my movements. I noted intense suspicion in his face. I commenced with a quick, "Hello." and introduced myself and pulled out my desk chair and rolled it in front of the worn leather bed.

I followed the standard checkup question procedure, receiving only blank monotonous, monosyllabic responses. He seemed out of touch, devoid of emotion. The plausibility of his vicious actions was clear to me.

"He does not seem very social. Quite shy, in fact. It is hard to believe what he has allegedly done is true." I commented after stepping out of the room, facing a pale slender woman.

"Yes, he is the same at home," she sighed. She ran her hands through her disheveled hair, "but then his teachers are always telling me about the trouble he has caused and he comes home with all sorts of new scrapes and bruises. When I ask him what is wrong he doesn't say a word, and suddenly the police are calling to say he is going to jail because he was running with the wrong crowd, I just- I'm not sure what is happening anymore." Her voice trembled and her eyes glistened with tears.

"Well, this surgery is going to help him. I truly believe that he will be better soon, Mrs. ██████." I asserted. After allowing her to say goodbye to her

*Andrea Chung*

son, I sent her on her way.



*August 18th, 1973*

After reading a number of papers, I have decided to try Moniz's procedure for prefrontal lobotomy. Pure ethyl alcohol will have to be sourced before the surgery to disrupt the prefrontal cortex's neurotransmitters. Anesthesia and relevant medical instruments will also be arranged.

I have not been assigned to perform the surgery, but I will oversee the procedure.

I have been surveying my newest patient and his social interactions. So far, no social bonds have been formed. The majority have found him brusque and insufferable. Even the friendliest of residents and staff members have grown a disdain for him. He is so utterly lacking in social skills that his behaviour could be the subject of a new, profound scientific experiment.



*August 20th, 1973*

We talked through the lobotomy process that would transpire in the morning. I've already asked the staff to restrict ██████'s intake of food or liquid for the night. Hypothesising that there may be a possibility of currently unseen outrage, I sent in a security guard to accompany the nurse and another to keep a close watch through the security camera placed in the ceiling.

I watched as ██████'s body stiffened. His normally blank

## *Retrograde*

expression developed into a menacing glare. I watched as the nurse stumbled back on the grainy film, her face growing paler by the minute. Pushing her shrunken body behind his own, the guard towered over the young teenager with his muscular build and stern demeanor.

I listened as the guard demanded that the patient calm down.

████████ charged at the blue-uniformed man, clawing at his face, thrashing wildly around. The man's eyes widened as he hurried the nurse as well as himself out of the room as quickly as possible, bolting the door behind him with haste. I watched as █████████ lurched towards the solid wooden door, palms pressed strenuously against his only exit.

He shouted insults and collided against the door with his right shoulder. The camera shook. █████████ continued to holler, crashing forward into the walls.

I watched, unable to tear my eyes away from █████████'s hysterical movement and his crude language. Past observations demonstrated an aloof and reclusive figure. This was something different.

Eventually, he stopped to examine his shoulder and to rest his hoarse voice. The surgeons would return in the morning to retrieve █████████ for the procedure.

©

*August 21st, 1973*

I gathered my records and promptly left the viewing room when the surgeons informed me that the surgery was complete.

*Andrea Chung*

I found [REDACTED] lying on his bed, palm pressed to his front. I asked him how he felt, and he replied with a simple, "I'm fine. Head hurts a little." I assured him that everything was going as planned and that he was going to be okay. He stared at me blankly.

With a quick nod, I wished him well and left him to rest.

I ambled to my office and dropped into my chair, burying my head in my hands. After I readjusted my rectangular framed glasses, I opened up more of [REDACTED]'s documents and recorded my newest findings.



*August 24th, 1973*

Effects of the surgery are now discernible.

When approached by other residents and staff, [REDACTED] has displayed several uncharacteristic behaviours: he has become submissive, unable to defend himself. While visiting him in the nurse's ward [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED], he recounted the story, describing how he could not fight back.

Last night, I was informed that [REDACTED]'s social skills had worsened further. Irrational fears have deterred development in daily activities and the social life of the facility. He has refrained from [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] due to possible fear of even slightly challenging interactions that he may face. I cannot say that I have noticed the same irregularities in his behaviour, seeing that [REDACTED] is scared and averse to anything new.



*Andrea Chung*

were quick to alert me that [REDACTED] has been exhibiting hysterical bursts of rage. Rushing to the control room, I found the patient to have wrecked his room.

His body trembled with the power that was overtaking him. His eyes were filled with a hunger for more destruction. I watched as he barreled down the hall, crashing into anyone who dared obstruct his path. Where was the sudden surge of violent energy coming from?

He successfully cleared his path to escape.

The thunderous clattering grew as [REDACTED] steadily approached where I stood.



*August 31st, 1973*

The experiment has proved a catastrophic failure.

Our patient has escaped and it is unknown how he managed to. I have my theories, however. When I first proposed the idea of the lobotomy, I was certain that the science was proven. Now...

As I wandered down the hall and trampled over the scattered medical supplies and beaten bodies. I traced the trail of [REDACTED] from his pod to the surrounding gate. Baffled by the chaos and destruction a young boy had caused, I stood frozen.

The walls of this facility will no longer be the same. No matter how hard each surface is scrubbed to get rid of the grimy marks, the barren halls will continue to be darkened.





# Oblivion

*Michelle Tse*



There was nothing in the room. No sound, no movement, no colour. The only thing disrupting the monotony of it all was a barely noticeable shape huddled against the wall. The figure shifted, lifting her head slightly.

*Mallory.* A name meaning unfortunate, or ill-fated. With her health problems, it was certainly an understatement to call her ‘unfortunate.’ Besides, if she had not been ‘ill-fated’, then why would she have ended up here?

Though she supposed the society she lived in couldn’t be better than it already was. It had developed over millennia until robots had taken over most jobs and manufactured everything. Money was no longer needed, and everything was free; as far as anyone was concerned, their society was perfect.

With a strange heaviness in her demeanor, Mallory got to her feet,

## *Oblivion*

pushing strands of chestnut hair out of her face with one gloved hand. Eyes scanning the place in a futile search for a door, she walked to the center of the room and tilted her head to look at the trapdoor on the ceiling.

She had lived for a long time, she thought. Long enough to know that what passed for immortality was less of a blessing and more of a curse. Not for the first time, she wished she could cease to exist without taking her own life and wanted to end the cacophony of thoughts and feelings that echoed in her mind. Back then, she reflected bitterly, she had been so excited about the prospect of immortality that her young mind had never considered its implications.



“Is it going to hurt?” Twelve-year-old Mallory asked anxiously, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Under the warmth of the afternoon sun, the line moved sluggishly, and Mallory was equal parts excited and nervous for the injection she was going to receive.

“No, I promise,” her mother explained, amused. “It’s going to make you immortal. It takes a couple of years to take effect, though, which is why your sister will get it when she’s at your age.” She looked over to see Mallory still bobbing up and down. “Now, stop bouncing! Otherwise, we’re not going to order chocolate when we get back.”

“Why can’t we order the injection robot to come to our home, like everything else?” Mallory whined, not bothering to keep her voice down. “I’m bored.” She dragged the last word out, hoping to get some sympathy. Before

Michelle Tse

she could continue, her mother hurriedly shushed her.

“It’s safer for us to come here than for the injection robot to come to our place. What if an accident happens and the solution in the needle spills out? Besides, your friends waited in this line, too.” Mallory’s father chided her, but she had already moved on, interrupting him.

“Wait, so being immortal means that I won’t ever get sick again?”

“No, just that you won’t age or die of old age.”

“How can you die of that? No one’s ever died of old age.”

“That’s because everyone’s had the injection. Without it, you would get grey hair-”

“Oh, Mr. Adam has grey hair!”

“That’s dyed...”

©

Mallory sighed and squared her shoulders. *Stop reminiscing and wallowing in self-pity*, she berated herself, glancing about once more. There was no door to the room, for the trapdoor was the only way of entry; it had lowered her from the ceiling. But, she hypothesized, there must be a way out of the dilemma, even if the only solution she could think of was to break that trapdoor.

There had to be a solution.

*There has to be a way to break out of here*, she told herself, beginning to pace. The sound of her breathing, loud and harsh, was the only noise within the room. A glimpse of something from the corner of her eye made her turn around sharply, adrenaline coursing through her.

## *Oblivion*

Nothing there.

The fluorescent light flickered.

Silence.

Even as she backed away slowly, Mallory tried to make herself relax. The icy wall was a comfort against her back, and she focused on its solidness as she tried to calm her racing heart.

Her lungs felt like they were collapsing in on themselves. She forced herself to focus on her breathing, on the rhythm, just as she had done before every surgery.



She'd been a hundred and fifty years old when she'd gotten her first lung transplant. Mallory could still recall how she felt afterwards: it was like a constricting band around her trachea was gone, allowing air to flow in without obstruction. With tears of joy in her bright brown eyes, she had taken in lungfuls and lungfuls of oxygen, revelling in her chest's expansion and deflation. For the first time, she could truly appreciate her ability to breathe.

Then, the smog appeared. As it became thicker, the celeste sky turned a flinty grey, until there was so much ozone in the air that the entire city's population needed constant lung transplants.

"Why does everyone need lung transplants now?" Mallory had asked her parents after an unexpected meeting with a friend in the hospital. That had been fifty years after her first lung surgery, during a hospital stay following her third transplant, and the place had been unusually busy. "I

know my health is sh-" Her mother had given her a long look, and she'd amended her phrasing. "My health isn't good, which is why I need transplants, but why does everyone else need it?"

Her father had shrugged. "Maybe it's the fog, but I expect it'll go away soon enough. Don't worry your head over it."

Naturally, Mallory had done just the opposite. While everyone else continued their daily lives, unperturbed by the peculiar number of surgeries, she had spent hours in her room. For the first time, she used the internet to do some in-depth research, reading information that hadn't been seen for centuries.

The knowledge she'd gleaned made Mallory increasingly worried about the 'smog' and 'air pollution', words she'd thought only belonged in myths and stories. She had tried to raise awareness about air pollution; she'd stuck up posters with information about ozone and its detriment on health and crops. The papers were ignored; Robo-cleaners soon took them down. On more than one occasion, she'd speed-walked down a street as a cleaner trundled after her, waving its metal arms in distress.

"Stop- putting- things- up-," they had bleated, but she'd ran until they stopped following her, though the spectacle she'd caused often garnered strange looks.

After those disasters, she had tried to reason with the robots in the factories to find a better way to create products, to find solutions that required no usage of fossil fuels. Those ventures had failed even more

## *Oblivion*

spectacularly. The robots, mindless helpers programmed to do only work, completely ignored her when she'd approached them. Once, she had stood atop a stack of boxes and shouted until her throat was hoarse, waving her arms and jumping about. A group of robots had moved towards her, and she'd been elated. But despite her protests, the one in the lead had lifted her off the box she'd been standing on and set her on the floor. As Mallory watched on in disbelief, the group each snagged a box, then clunked back to their station, parting around her like water around a stubborn rock.

She never went back to the factories after that.



Mallory's breathing slowed at last. With her eyes closed, it was easier to pretend she was back in her cosy room, and she clung on to that feeling of calm as she groped the wall behind her. The only plan she had now was a ridiculous and impossible one, but she was out of alternatives.

As the fragile hope within her started to wilt, she felt a small crack in the smooth wall behind her.

*There.*

Despite herself, Mallory grinned. The prospect of action nurtured the budding hope within her. No matter how many times she told herself to expect the worst, she couldn't stop the optimism that had started to grow. She couldn't see the crevice when she opened her eyes, but she could certainly feel it. Hence, she kept her eyes closed as her other hand explored the wall, quickly locating another crack.

*Michelle Tse*

Rising, she visualised the approximate position of the crevices and continued her search for other nooks and crannies. This time, it only took moments. Before long, she was plastered like a spider against the wall, reaching up for another handhold.

*Now, climb.*

If only she had been able to climb and escape in that fateful moment.



The stifling, monotonous grey that greeted Mallory as she left the house, added to her determination to carry out her plan. Though her resolve was firm, her hands still shook slightly as she put on her goggles, which immediately took effect; as if the pollution had cleared, the landscape before her came into focus.

Quickly glancing around, she noticed that the lone pedestrian across the street had the same outfit. Namely, goggles to see through the pollution, air filter mask for better breathing, and long sleeves and jeans to protect her skin. Hoping she didn't look suspicious, she set off at a brisk pace in the direction of the hospital, letting the familiar rhythm calm her pounding heart.

The white building seemed to glare at her like a baleful eye as she approached. Any sunlight that managed to filter through the dense pollution was blocked behind it. Mallory stood in its shadow for a while, hesitating. Having been to the place countless times, she knew both the layout of the building and the workers there like the back of her hand, and the Robo-nurses there,

## *Oblivion*

though not friendly, were as amiable as robots could be. Yet the thought of them made the building seem all the more menacing.

Mallory started as someone walked past her, snapping her out of her thoughts. *Focus*, she reprimanded herself, then walked inside.

The smell of disinfectant hit Mallory as the sliding doors closed behind her. Briefly hesitating to gather her bearings, she strode down the hall, trying to act like she was supposed to be there.

No one took any heed of her as she walked, which only increased her paranoia. The urge to turn around and check behind her was difficult to resist. Still, she kept her gaze trained in front of her. Few people knew of the laboratory for lung biofabrication. She had only found it by chance once when exploring the hospital wing. Hoping her memory served her right, she turned a corner, then another, treading quietly on the polished floor.

She finally came upon the laboratory. It looked the same as any other room, with plain, unassuming doors, and only her intuition stopped her from walking past it.

Glancing left and right apprehensively, she pushed on the door. To her surprise, it gave way easily, and she half-stumbled, half-fell into the room. Before she'd had time to righten herself, the door started to swing shut.

A muffled stream of expletives issued from Mallory's mouth. Without thinking, she dove forwards and managed to catch the door just before it closed, wedging her fingers in the gap between the door and the door frame. The resulting pain in her hand jolted through her like a bolt of fire, and she



gritted her teeth, eyes blurring with tears on reflex.

*At least it didn't make a sound.* Wrapping one hand around the door handle, she pulled her other hand away from the door. Easing it shut with a quiet click, she cradled her hand and massaged it lightly, before looking up to take in the sights of the room around her.

What she saw took her breath away.

The lungs were grotesque and beautiful at the same time. Suspended in the bioreactors, they hung there like trapped animals, all in various stages of growth. Some were only the scaffold of a lung, translucent and ghostly; others were almost fully grown, red capillaries like vines. For a heartbeat, Mallory almost regretted that she was going to destroy them.

Then she shook her head, suppressing a shiver of fear. *If you don't do this, no one will pay attention to the threat pollution poses,* she reminded herself. Setting her backpack down on the floor, she carefully extracted a large bag of white powder.

To remain inconspicuous and hide her plan from her family, Mallory had ordered multiple large bags of flour, pretending to have developed an interest in baking. Unbeknownst to them, flour was flammable, and flour particles in the air were especially explosive. If even one particle caught on fire, it would trigger a chain reaction. But for her, the biggest advantage was that also, if she was found, no one would suspect a person carrying flour around for making a bomb.

*Mallory quickly got to work. Slitting the corner of the bag of flour with a*

## Oblivion

*penknife, which she produced from her backpack, she headed to the far end of the room, spreading flour around the spotless floor. As she made her way towards the door, careful not to get flour on herself, she also covered the lungs with white powder, tossing a few handfuls into the air every few steps. When she was done, there was still a bit of powder left. Taking care not to spill any, she put on her backpack, then opened the door cautiously, heart hammering in her chest.*

There was no one in sight. So far, so good. Inching her way out from behind the door, Mallory let the flour form a trail on the ground. When the flour finally ran out, the path started only a few feet away from the door.

Hand trembling, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a match and matchbox. Her heart nearly stopped when her gloved hand fumbled as she pulled out a match, and she lit it as quickly as she could, then dropped it onto the flour.

*Now I run.*

Turning, she sprinted down the hall, running as fast as she dared to. Though every squeak her shoes made on the polished floor sent terror coursing through her, a part of her was glad to be running, to be able to put some of the nervous energy within her to use.

There was a shuddering boom behind her. Not looking back, she prayed that her makeshift bomb would work, and she got her answer in the earth-shattering chain of explosions that followed.

Up ahead, she could hear voices, confused and afraid. "What was that?" "What's happening?"

Mallory had been counting on the crowd to hide her. Slowing to a jog, she did her best to slow her breathing. Then, she appeared from the corridor to join the crowd that was milling about. But what she hadn't expected was for the police to already be there. Fear crept up her spine even as she slipped into the crowd and flattened herself against the wall, discreetly making her way towards the exit. *It's okay. This was unexpected, but it's okay, they won't find-*

Then she caught sight of the white, powdery shoe prints on the polished floor of the corridor.

Fresh terror coursed through her. In the same instant, she became aware of someone staring at her- no, at her hair. Self-consciously, she reached up to touch the tangled waves. To her horror, her gloved hand came away white, and she frantically tried to get the flour out of her hair.

As one, the crowd parted around her, leaving her exposed and trapped against the wall. The blood froze in her veins at the sight of the police moving towards her, their mechanical faces blank and menacing.

This time, when fear and adrenaline coursed through her, there was nowhere to run.



Mallory pulled herself up, arms trembling from the exertion. At some point, she'd opened her eyes, unable to endure the climb in darkness. Although that scaling the wall had left her breathless and sweaty, her palms were still cold as she forced her fingers into the near-invisible cracks; not for the first time, she thanked the stars that she still had her gloves. For a heart-stopping moment,

## *Oblivion*

her hand slipped. Fingers scrabbling uselessly against the wall, she found the crack once more and gripped on to it, paralyzed with fear. Only the thought of freedom made her reach up with one shaking hand in search of the next handhold.

The higher up she got, the more cracks there were to hold on to. But the room was shaped like a dome, and gravity tugged at her with every movement she made. *If I can just get to the trapdoor and wrench it open...* It was only a few meters away from her now, and a tremor passed through her body as she reached up, searching with her free hand for the next cranny with renewed urgency.

Out of nowhere, a calm, feminine voice said, “Memory altering procedure selected. Commencing in five.”

Mallory flinched, unable to suppress the movement; suddenly, she was treading thin air, dangling from the ceiling. Fear caught her in its jaws as she hung there, barely holding onto the smallest crevice with one hand.

“Four.”

A wordless scream issued from Mallory’s mouth as her fingers slipped. Somehow, she was still holding on by her fingernails, and she sobbed, dread gnawing at her insides.

“Three.”

Her shoulder burned in pain as she swung there, helpless. Absurdly, she was reminded of the lungs in the laboratory, suspended in their containers.

*Michelle Tse*

“Two.”

Mallory’s fingers slipped again, and she whimpered, terrified. A mere few feet away, the trapdoor seemed to mock her.

“One.”

Then she was plummeting, watching as the trapdoor receded from her view, watching until she fell into oblivion.



# Dream Waves

*Maddalena Di Salvo*



*Spring 2034*

Willow shifts the many bags of groceries to one arm and presses her thumb against the finger pad on the maroon front door. The door whistles a soft ‘ding’ before unlocking itself as she steps into the townhouse.

“Daniel! I’m home!”, Willow announces as she walks towards the kitchen. As she sets the heavy bags down, a gust of warm air ruffles her hair. The cold winter wind had given her face a rough lashing, so the warmth emitting from her home is welcomed. In the back of her mind, Willow decides the increased electricity bill for this month will be worth it.

The sound of heavy footsteps makes their way towards her from above.

“Mom? Do you need help with anything?” A voice calls cheerfully.

Willow waits for Daniel, her fourteen-year-old son, as he jogs down

## *Dream Waves*

the stairs. She smiles as her son automatically picks up the grocery bags she had struggled with. He carries all the bags towards the fridge and opens it with his free hand.

“Well, I have a dinner appointment with a client tonight,” Willow begins as she watches her son carefully move the items into the fridge. “I have to get her to finalize her decision.”

Daniel hums in acknowledgement and Willow continues to observe her son move through the kitchen fluidly. They had recently moved from their old home in Brooklyn, and she had been worried that Daniel wouldn't be able to cope with the changes easily. But Daniel appears to have adjusted well to his new school. For Willow, moving away from Brooklyn meant the everyday transit to work had become shorter, but more money had to be put aside every month for rent.

“But I did make Mac and Cheese for you,” Willow teases, “And I also bought some of those jars of protein powder you were nagging me about.”

“That's great!” Daniel finally turns around to face Willow. His hazel eyes meet hers and for a split second, Willow sees Daniel's father looking at her instead. She bites her lip and pushes the mournful feelings away.

“You better use them. I don't want these big jars clogging up our cabinets,” she warns.

“Yeah, I know. Thanks, mom,” Daniel grins. “Good luck with your client.”

“Thanks,” Willow replies. “It's the same client I've been talking about.



*Maddalena Di Salvo*

The one I keep dreaming about?”

“Oh. Yeah. She’s the one that made your Dream Percentile drop for a few days, yeah? You were really worried.”

“That’s right,” Willow sighs. “I had to take a mandatory Meditation session to bring my scores back up. You *know* how hard I’ve been working on her. I just wish she wasn’t so...” she waves her hand to emphasize her thoughts, “*so picky.*”

“Well, if you manage to get her to trust you and sign the paperwork, then we would get a pretty big cheque, right?” Daniel grins mischievously and wiggles his eyebrows teasingly.

Willow slaps her son’s shoulder playfully.

“Don’t give me that look. You’re not getting that new phone,” she laughs.

“Oh c’mon, it’s compatible with DreamWaves! That means you could still be in sync with your DreamWave account everywhere- even when you’re taking naps at school.”

“Which is exactly why I’m not getting you one. You’ll never come home to have your dreams recorded in your bed then.” Willow smirks and pushes Daniel’s nose playfully. Her son groans but resigns.

“Fine. But just so you know, all my friends already have it meaning, I’m the only one who still needs to get plugged into my room,” Daniel comments.

“Then get new friends,” Willow jokes as she grabs her briefcase and

## *Dream Waves*

starts walking back to the front door. "I'll be heading out now. Send me a text if you need anything, alright?"

"Okay," Daniel calls back.

"Call me if you wake up in the middle of the night," Willow says as she opens the door. "I love you."

"Happy dreams," Daniel says.

"Happy dreams," Willow repeats.

The door shuts behind her gently as she leaves.



*Spring 2034*

*"...CAGE is a messy, overly ambitious movie with a non-existent plot. It is clear that the director, Angelo Ash, has paid no attention to the critics from his previous movie flops. Watching CAGE is like standing in the middle of a sidewalk waiting for the bus to arrive, only to realize there are no buses here."*

*— Roger Ebert, Rotten Apples.*

Angelo Ash slams the laptop down onto his desk and groans in frustration. He spins his chair around to face the cluttered wall behind him.

"I just don't understand. I don't understand!" He screams at the wall. The wall is decorated with framed posters of all of the movies he has ever directed or produced. Although the posters take over the entire wall, Angelo's focus is only on his earliest work, *The Lady In The Red Kimono*. He glares at it, a

*Maddalena Di Salvo*

mixture of contempt and frustration curling inside him.

“Why can’t I just create another big hit?” He asks himself out loud, though he knows why he has not been able to produce a decent film.

*The Lady In The Red Kimono* was based on a recurring dream of his when he was sixteen. At nineteen, he had uploaded his homemade film to the public on a free video-sharing platform. He achieved success overnight, and became the first man ever to produce a “viral movie”. His film was critically acclaimed and he was given the title of Youngest Director in the following year. With the money he earned, Angelo quickly moved out of his polluted childhood home in Flint and moved on, to an opulent lifestyle in Los Angeles. In short, he was living the American Dream, before DreamWaves forced itself into the lives of every American.

When Angelo was still a teenager, DreamWave was simply another research project under the International Association for the Study of Dreams (IASD). But the DreamWaves prototype became a revolutionary invention: a machine with the ability to record dreams. Subjects would hook themselves up to the electroencephalography (EEG) machine, and then fall asleep within an MRI machine. The device would activate once the subject began dreaming. It would record the brain’s neural patterns and use an algorithm that would apply the data from the brain scan to form the images in the subject’s dream.

The IASD later sold their prototype to an American billionaire, Henry J. Hill, who then released the device to the public to purchase at a low price. “Dream sharing” became a trend that spread notoriously around the globe.

## *Dream Waves*

The government naturally stepped in to drill Hill about the device's invasion of privacy, and after an ongoing battle between the two parties, the private company and Congress settled for a compromise.

Now, in the year 2034, it is mandatory to have a DreamWave in your household. All dreams are automatically owned by the multi-billionaire company. While citizens can continue to review their previous dreams, the Public Safety Bureau also has unfiltered access to the public's dreams. This ensures that anyone with extremely violent dreams can be monitored, and it also helps with tracking criminals. With the new law issued, any creative artists hoping to produce works that were based on dreams will be facing legal issues with the world's most powerful company in the world.

Angelo is now twenty-eight years old and desperately trying to maintain his fame by releasing a new movie every year. But at the rate he is going, he will become a joke in the film industry sooner or later. He glances at the laptop again, conflicted on whether or not he should continue reading the reviews of his latest film: *CAGE*. It has received what many consider the worst criticism of the year. The more films Angelo releases, the fewer people are willing to invest in his films. Financially, Angelo is not in a stable situation, and he understands that his lavish lifestyle will cease to exist if he does not make the next movie successful.

This is why Angelo has decided he will have to swallow his pride and attend a private party tonight. Though his recent failures make it embarrassing for him to show up to gatherings, he knows a lot of the elite

members of society will be there, and he needs to find someone willing to give him one more chance.

Angelo spins his chair back to face his table and picks up his blue pen and a Post-It note. He writes in frantic strokes: 'TOMORROW: PLAN AN ORIGINAL STORY!'

Sadly, in the past few months, Angelo has written over hundreds of similar Post-It notes.



Angelo parks his dated Tesla on the sidewalk of Joffrey Star's private road. Once he gets out of the car, he observes the resplendent row of luxurious cars that have almost filled up the entire street. A familiar sense of resentment slithers into his mind. He imagines himself dragging keys across the matte surface of the closest Ferrari on his left. He knows he could get some good money from the rims on the black Range Rover.

Although Angelo reminds himself every day that he is no longer living in the slums, it is hard to erase years of envy he had towards the upper class. He was raised in a one-bedroom apartment with two different families. Privacy and space was a luxury he did not have. Watching a cluster of rich people comfortably parade their wealth everywhere is repulsive and admirable at the same time. He puts on a pair of the latest GUCCI shades and walks to the pink mansion blaring with music.

The smell of alcohol wafts through the air as he approaches the outdoor pool, stinging his nose. Celebrities that Angelo recognizes are

## *Dream Waves*

jumping and dancing around the pool. Angelo forces his features into a neutral expression in an attempt not to appear star-struck, fearing it would reveal his past life. He looks around the area, hoping to find someone who recognizes him. When no one approaches him, he glides towards the bar and sits gingerly by himself.

As he sips on his third cocktail, running through different scenarios on how he could approach the people in the party, a young man dressed in a floral carolina-blue suit fills the empty seat next to him. Angelo instantly recognizes him.

Tyler Hill, the third son of the current CEO of DreamWaves.

Angelo's heart thunders, but he pretends to be dismissive as if he were speaking to someone of equal or lower rank. He licks his lips nervously for a moment before dropping his gaze to Tyler's face.

"Hey," Angelo casually nods his head at Tyler. Tyler's head turns to look at Angelo. The man frowns before his eyes light up.

"Hey! Aren't you Angelo? The dude that made the film *CAVE*?"

*Oh, Thank God.* Angelo thought. *At least he has somewhat heard of me.*

"The *CAGE*." Angelo corrects with a strained smile. His eyes scan Tyler's outfit in contempt. "Yep. That's me. You're Tyler Hill, right? Your dad's Henry Hill."

"Yeah," Tyler shrugs. "Third son of DreamWaves. But that doesn't mean much next to you, you accomplished the 'Hollywood Dream' all on your own!" his speech slurs. But even in his drunken state, Angelo detects the

*Maddalena Di Salvo*

sense of mockery from Tyler. He understands that the two of them are living on two different planets. Without needing a shred of ambition in life, Tyler already has a hefty trust fund waiting for him to spend away while Angelo is hitting close to bankruptcy.

Unlike his older brothers, Tyler's face is the subject of several gossip magazines for dating many young singers and actresses. He is very good looking; with hazy sapphire eyes and a blinding white smile. Many enjoy his company at parties: he was the best voluntary clown one could ask for. With his brightly colored suits and over-the-top personality, Hill was the entertainment one would want at a party. Who wants to start a fight? Tyler. Who wants to vandalize the property? Tyler. Who wants to drink into oblivion and have his shameful acts posted onto social media? Tyler.

However, if Angelo plays his cards right, perhaps he could step into the Hill's world of privatized dreams.

"I'm not too sure about maintaining that dream anymore," Angelo says slowly, knowing that honesty is an attractive and foreign policy in this neighborhood. "I'm running low on creativity." Angelo tilts his head back and takes another sip of his drink.

"No way! Don't quit man!" Tyler grabs Angelo and shakes him violently. Angelo fights back the desire to shove the man off him. "I loved your film, *CRAZE!* There were so many explosions and hot chicks everywhere!"

*It's called CAGE, you moronic, useless scum-*

"Thanks." Angelo grins painfully.

## *Dream Waves*

“At least your explosions are only on screen, you know what I mean? You don’t have drama at home anymore, am I right? Heard you live all by yourself in your suite.” The man smiles at him. Angelo raises an eyebrow. He can see the opportunity emerging itself in front of him.

“You mean, like family issues? Well, we all got them.” Angelo tries earnestly to appear nonchalant. “But what does the third son of DreamWaves have that we don’t?”

“Not much,” Tyler replies. “Just unlimited access to everyone’s dreams.”

“Wait, what?” Angelo’s eyes widen.

“What, why are you surprised? You know DreamWaves has been working with our government for a decade now.” Tyler lifts his finger and wags it in front of Angelo. “Uh oh. Did Mr. Director break the law? It’s a requirement for everyone to purchase beds with our DreamWaves device attached. You gotta have one once you hit thirteen.”

“I know that,” Angelo snaps. “It’s to help the feds keep track of potential psychos or criminals, right? By observing the dreams we have every night.”

“Yeah, yeah, but honestly, even the most normal people have the most bizarre dreams. Like lately, I’ve been creeping on this single mom’s dream-” Tyler whistles and immediately lowers his voice. “The stuff she dreams about, man, it’s wild.”

“Tell me about it.” Angelo breathes, straightening his back in interest.



*Maddalena Di Salvo*

“Screw that- I’ll *show* you.” Tyler sneers as he pulls out the latest DreamPhone from his pocket. Angelo has to fight every inch of his core to not rave about the phone. It’s the latest model. He watches in silent awe as Tyler logs into his DreamWaves account on the mobile App. As a son of the company, Angelo immediately notices the different interfaces on Tyler’s account. Tyler presses the ‘Recently Viewed’ button from his page. Angelo sees a photo of a thirty-year-old woman on screen. Though the woman is in her thirties, she looks like she is in her young twenties. Brunette hair flowing down to her chest, hazel green eyes almost shining like pearls. She carried a soft and friendly smile. Angelo had to admit that she was beautiful.

“Even her name is kinda weird. Like, who would name their child Willow Woods?,” Tyler mutters.

But Angelo is ignoring him. Together, the energetic duo observes the dream of the unimportant single mother. While Tyler is chuckling and making snide comments on the dream of all the oddly-shaped aliens in the woman’s dream, Angelo is already calculating the budget he will need for his latest film.



*Spring 2034*

Willow slowly walks down the stairs to greet her son before he leaves for school. She slumps down into her usual chair and finds her son already washing up his dishes.

“Oh honey, you don’t have to do that. I can wash them later,” Willow

## *Dream Waves*

says.

“Nah, it’s alright. Plus, you look super-tired,” Daniel replies.

“Ok, fine. But only this time.” Willow settles with a smile.

As she watches Daniel finish washing the dishes, she thinks about her dream percentage from last night. Willow always has very creative dreams, all in the setting of her office. Her dreams are often mixed with fantasy and adventure while maintaining their realistic scenario of her workplace.

“What are you thinking about?,” her son asks, breaking her train of thought.

“Just about my dream. Remember the dream I had the other night? The one with the alien?”

Daniel nods his head. Sharing dreams is the norm in their household. Willow believes that by having this line of trust and communication, Daniel’s thoughts could remain healthy and not under the Red Zone. She had heard horror stories from her clients who had their spouse or children taken away from the Public Safety Bureau’s Dream Investigation for evaluation. Thankfully, most of Daniel’s dreams focus on his passion: ice hockey.

“Well last night was similar, but instead of me helping the alien blend into the normal world, they were helping me.” Willow scratches her head, confused with her dream.

“Huh? Seriously mom, why are your dreams always so..,” Daniel lets out a laugh, “*Weird?*”

“I’m not sure,” Willow shrugs. “But my percentage is still in the

*Maddalena Di Salvo*

acceptable range. If I remember correctly last night's was 85%."

"My lowest was 65." Daniel mutters.

"That's because you dreamt of punching your opponent in the face," Willow remarks.

"To be fair, there was no blood in the dream." Daniel counters with a grin. He dries his hands and sits opposite his mother on the small dining table. He watches his mother sip the coffee that he had made for her in silence. It is undeniable that Willow has a very close relationship with her son, but there are still some conversations that will be awkward.

"Hey mom, I have ice hockey practice after school today. Are you going to pick me up or should I take the bus home?" Daniel asks.

"I'll drive you home." She replies. "Gas prices this week aren't an issue."

"Also, I need to get new padding for my pants," Daniel babbles. "they are so worn it doesn't even work as proper padding anymore."

Willow looks at him in surprise, "Aren't they new? They shouldn't wear out so fast! Did you check with your coach if you actually need a new pair? Are you sure?" With each question, Daniel cringes a little more in discomfort.

"Mom, they are over three years old, and yes I have checked with my coach. He said I really need a new pair." Daniel brushes his hair back, hoping his mother will understand.

"Alright fine. We will go together to the shop after your training,"

## *Dream Waves*

Willow consents, “But only padding, okay? Nothing else. Because we are still saving for your university tuition.”

“Yes, of course! Thanks Mom,” Daniel cheers, “Okay, I got to leave now. I’ll see you later. Have a good day.”

Willow watches her son run out the door. She gets up and goes to the window to watch him catch the bus. In the back of her mind, she wonders if she should turn off the heater for the next few days. As Daniel disappears from her sight, she goes back to her room to prepare herself for a new day.



*Spring 2035*

“Welcome everybody! Please take your seats! Apologies if my home is a *bit* too small for you.” Angelo’s grin stretches painfully on his face yet he continues to welcome the hundred guests enthusiastically into his mansion. He had rented this particular mansion for a week. He knew many of the guests would not even spare him a glance if he did not impress them with his success. The mansion is massive, with rows of freshly trimmed hedges framing the house like a protective barrier. There are long and wide windows starting from the first floor and reaching up to the roof. A simple glance inside the window would make one’s jaw drop. A cream-colored mantelpiece is lit and provides the room with heat. Polished white marble covers the floor.

Angelo leads the guests to the theatre room. Luxurious brown leather seats organized in rows fill the center of the spacious room. Every guest is welcomed with a glass of fine champagne and a few small treats. Angelo even

*Maddalena Di Salvo*

made a quick purchase of a popcorn and cotton candy. A large white screen was placed in front of the room along with a projector that sat on the floor.

As the guests settle into their leather seats, Angelo grabs a microphone and begins the event.

“Hello? Ah, I’m guessing all five of you have arrived, right?” Angelo jokes nervously. His only response is a murmur among the hundreds. He clenches his fists to calm his nerves.

“Sincere apologies for the sudden invitation,” Angelo draws. “You see, I had to get my living room redecorated into this.” He raises his hands in the air, pointing to the newly decorated room. The guests’ eyes follow the direction of his hands and start to take in all the little details that were placed in the room. A few whispers spread across the crowd. Angelo allows the guests to take a minute to appreciate the home.

Angelo understands that the first step of success is to look the part. That was what his mother used to say. Back when money was always an issue and he was trying to find a job working in a gas station. His mother had picked out a moldy, oversized suit for him for an interview.

*Always dress to impress, my Afolabi.* His mother’s broken voice whispers in his mind. Angelo grits his teeth together as he waits for the audience to observe his fake home.

“Now, back to the screening. In the next few hours, you can sit back and relax as you watch my new movie debut! More snacks and drinks are at the back, and so are the washrooms. Enjoy!” He fumbles with the microphone

## *Dream Waves*

before putting it down on the floor carelessly. Then he rushes to the side to dim the lights. As his film begins to play, Angelo finds himself observing the reactions of his audience instead of his own work.

He holds his breath.



*Spring 2035*

Willow storms into her home. She forcefully drops her bags on to the floor and stomps into the kitchen, grabs the remote control, and turns on the small TV that hangs on the kitchen wall. She switches to the entertainment news channel and pulls out a chair.

Her son rushes down the steps. The moment he approaches the kitchen, his steps falter. He sees his mother sitting worryingly close to the television. Daniel lets out a deep breath, glad to see his mother back home. But then he notices her bag and her coat thrown aside on the floor like rags.

“Hey, mom. Are you okay?” Daniel cautiously asks. Willow glares at the screen and does not turn her head to look at her son.

“This man... this man!” Willow points at a celebrity walking on a red carpet event. This makes Daniel even more confused. The man his mother is pointing at is a young African-American dressed in a loud, mustard-colored suit. He is a well-built, healthy-looking man with strong shoulders and large hands. He stands by himself as the paparazzi flashes him with shots. Daniel can see multiples of gold rings and chains decorating the man, each one costing thousands of dollars. Tattoos peek out of his back collar and Daniel

instantly recognizes who the man.

“Angelo Ash? What about him, mom?”

“This *Angelo Ash* or whatever fake name he’s using- he’s stealing my dreams!” She shrieks at the screen as if her voice could be carried over so Angelo could hear her.

“What are you talking about?” Daniel laughs nervously. “There’s no way he could have access to your DreamArchives.”

“No!” Willow raises her voice even louder than before. “I saw the trailer! He literally replicated my dream! He didn’t even try to change anything at all. My exact office desk was there. I didn’t even know about this film he’s releasing until a client asked me....” Willow starts to sob out of anger. Daniel immediately rushes forward to comfort her.

“If you’re sure he’s using your dreams to profit, then file a lawsuit!” Daniel responds rationally, “The public needs to know that DreamWaves is allowing others access to everyone’s dreams.”

Feeling used and humiliated, Willow sobs and hugs Daniel. This morning, she had received a call from *that* picky client. The client was angry, accusing Willow of ‘mocking her and using her for crude jokes’. Willow had been baffled and when the client sent a link to Ash’s latest film, Willow understood. Ash’s latest film, *How To Get Away With Fraud*, was a comedic SciFi piece. The story of the film was about a recruiter who helps different kinds of aliens assimilate into society. The recruiter interviews the quirky aliens and prepares them for different careers.

## *Dream Waves*

Willow is a recruiter. The movie's office space looked identical to her own.

"I can't sue. I don't even know where to start," Willow says.

"So let's get some help. Brayden's dad is a lawyer. I bet he's willing to help us for a low cost because I help Brayden with his skates all the time," Daniel replies. Willow smiles softly at Daniel's supportive attitude.

"I doubt Brayden's dad would do it for free," Willow mutters.

"Okay, maybe not for free. I could start staying over at Josh's more often, so his parents could drive us to hockey practice together. You can have more time on the case. How does Mr. Chung feel about this?"

Marcus Chung was Willow's supervisor. He had heard about what happened today with the client. Surprisingly, he had been very understanding of Willow's situation. He explicitly said that what the young director was doing was a complete disregard of privacy and the law.

"He was pretty upset."

"You think he would let you take days off every once in a while?"

Willow considers it. She thinks of all the people in her life that would be able to assist her during this time. A part of her wonders if the lawsuit is worth starting. If Ash or DreamWaves are willing to offer a settlement, Willow and Daniel's life could change overnight.

"Let me make some phone calls then." Willow stands up and starts walking. Daniel beams at his mom proudly.

"Okay! Oh, and mom?"



*Maddalena Di Salvo*

“Yes, Daniel?”

“Could you please pick up your jacket off the floor? We are not cavemen.”



*Summer 2035*

“I can’t believe that old cow wants to file a lawsuit,” Angelo mumbles to himself in the mirror as he dresses himself up for his meeting with his lawyers. He looks at himself and runs a hand smoothly in front. After several outfit changes, he settles for a navy, pinstriped suit, and a pastel blue tie.

*Always pick blue, Afolabi. Red is too aggressive.*

Shut up, mom.

Ever since Willow Woods filed the lawsuit, Angelo was put under the spotlight. Whoever said that any attention is good attention is a liar. His movie, *How To Get Away With Fraud*, was flooded with terrible and biased reviews that mocked the irony of the film title. His name is rapidly becoming a laughing stock. People posted parodies of his work and character. Hordes of reporters and Paparazzi hovered around his home like vultures, preying on his vulnerability. DreamWaves had already responded to the public.

In a press release, DreamWaves immediately apologized to the public, claiming that their server security had been hacked and ‘several pieces of data’ had been leaked to the public. They promised for improvement and change. The company was active for the first few weeks on Social Media, with hundreds of employees working on damage control.

## *Dream Waves*

Their desperate and pathetic apology meant they *acknowledged* the film and the similarity with Wood's dreams, meaning Angelo was forced to defend his film on his own.

*This is living hell. I wish they could all just rot away,* Angelo thought as he stepped outside, greeting the crowd. He straightens the collar of his suit, adjusts his PRADA cufflinks, and walks into his car.



"Good morning Mr. Ash, would you like a cup of tea or coffee before we begin?" His lawyer kindly welcomes Angelo into his office.

"No. Just cut to the chase, how can we get rid of her?," Angelo snarls. He helps himself get comfortable in the chair in front of his lawyer's desk. He slumps onto the chair and the loud bang startles the lawyer.

"Sir, what do you mean 'cut to the chase'?" The lawyer blinks in confusion. "We have to go through this step by step. Collect evidence that the woman's claims are false-"

"Just shut it, please. You sound like a rat begging for scrap cheese," Angelo snapped. He could feel his head throbbing. The case had been affecting his sleeping routine for a while.

The lawyer leans back and stares at Angelo, surprised. He did not expect his client to be so rude.

*I bet I could kill her if I want. Just kill her, kill that woman who messed up my life.*

*Maddalena Di Salvo*

*Yeah. That'll show her. Maybe I will kill her Noah Schnapp wannabe-looking son too.*

*I would film it, too. Yeah. That would give the press something to write about. Bashed Brains and Shattered Skulls, how does that sound for a title?*

"Sir," the lawyer breaks Angelo's fantasy. "If you would like to reschedule, I would be happy to meet up with you again on Thursday," The lawyer says with a raised voice, attempting to intimidate Angelo.

*Sir, Sir, Sir, Angelo mocks. God, he's so annoying. Is this guy balding too? A lawyer can't be that reliable if he can't even maintain his looks.*

"Sorry, am I offending you in any way?"

"Well you're my lawyer, and yet you want to reschedule," Angelo snaps. The lawyer rolls his eyes and snorts.

"You're lucky that I am your lawyer, there are many lawyers who don't know how to approach this case. Because no one has ever seen such blatant plagiarism!"

"I said I didn't copy-"

"Oh *please*. Don't insult me. It would be great if you could treat me with a bit more respect. Maybe a Meditation session would do you well. What's your social DreamScore recently?" His lawyer looks at his disrespectful client eye to eye. He notices Angelo's bloodshot eyes. He can see that Angelo tries to hide his weariness. The man has concealer on his face yet it does not blend well with his skin. His hair is sticking up and conflicting with each other as if he had just woken up. His shirt buttons unmatched,

## *Dream Waves*

shoelaces untied.

Angelo was a mess.

Angelo leans his head back, staring up at the ceiling.

If I smack the keyboard across his face, how far would the blood splatter?

“Mr. Ash, let’s reschedule. Get yourself together. Then come back and talk to me properly.” The lawyer orders. The lawyer’s expression shows his impatience. Clearly, the lawyer couldn’t take it anymore. Angelo wonders briefly if the only reason this lawyer chose to take up this case was because of how much Angelo was offering him.

“Fine, reschedule. Whatever. Kick me out, push me off the boat, and let the sharks eat me.” Angelo forces himself out of the comfy chair and drags his sluggish body to the door, “Call assistant to reschedule.” He spits out words that barely make sense as he exits the law firm.

*What’s your social DreamScore recently... Angelo continues to mock his lawyer. Higher than yours, you lazy fart.*

Once he manages to crawl himself into the car, he immediately falls asleep, his body attempting to recover after weeks of little sleep.

A loud, continuous beeping noise emits from outside, jerking Angelo from his nap. He looks over to check the time in his car.

6:07. He had slept for over 5 hours.

Angelo can still hear the loud noises. He looks out the window of his

*Maddalena Di Salvo*

Tesla to check where the noise is from.

*Stupid truck.*

“Hey!” Angelo shouts as his car window drops down. “Hey yo! Truck people!” He shouts even louder to get their attention.

“Yeah? You talking to me?” One of the crews from the truck responds.

*Who else would I be talking to? Stupid crew.*

“Yea, you! You see anyone else in this stupid parking lot? Your truck is making too much noise, man. Shut it off!”

“Jeez man, are you serious?” The worker exclaims. “You’re mad at us for that? We’re sorry, but it’s for the public’s safety that we keep it on.”

“Do I look like I care about the public? I was here first so clearly, you should have been respecting the chain of command!”

“What chain of command? Dude, what are you even talking about?”

“Let me repeat myself: I was here first! Turn it-” Suddenly, his phone blared a loud noise. Angelo curses out loud and picks up his phone to check the alert.

*[Last Dream Percentage: 15%*

*In the Red Zone.*

*Past Week Average: 17%*

*In the Red Zone.*

*Please attend the Meditation Course immediately.]*

Angelo glares at his phone and throws it to the passenger seat next to

*Dream Waves*

him. He turns on the radio at full volume to blast his problems away.

*If this lawyer can't fix my problem, I will just have to keep hiring new ones and build a team.* He thinks bitterly to himself.

*A problem is never a problem if it can be fixed with money, Afolabi.*



*Autumn 2035*

“Willow! How does it feel losing the case?”

“Willow! Look this way! Let's take a photo!”

*Flash.*

“Willow! Come on! You like this attention, don't you?”

“Do you regret filing the lawsuit?”

“Why do you think Ash won this case?”

“Are you embarrassed about your loss?”

“How does your son feel about this?”

“Willow! Smile at the camera!”

Willow walks out of the courthouse, and reporters rush to greet her with hundreds of questions. They push and shove in their attempt to grab her, like starving children fighting for a piece of bread. She tries to move away from the vultures with her head looking down. Shame and embarrassment burn through her.

For months, her name had been dragged through the mud. Her

*Maddalena Di Salvo*

name began popping up in different news outlets. Her private life was used as entertainment. She did not anticipate the lawsuit would take so long and be the cause of so much humiliation. Tears burn her eyes and she shuffles her feet quickly.

In the corner of her eye, she spots her family. Her sister holding the door of her car, her mother and her father waiting there as well. Daniel stands next to them, smiling proudly at his mother for fighting tooth and nail in this exhausting battle.

At that very moment she realizes, everything will be alright.



*Winter 2035*

*Thump thump thump*

*Thump thump thump*

Angelo rushes down the stairs to open the door of his home.

Three men greet him. All of them wearing black suits.

“Afolabi Ash?” They question.

“Yeah, that’s me,” Angelo replies after a moment of hesitation. He is surprised as he is greeted by his birth name.

“We are from the Public Safety Bureau.” One of the men holds up his badge.

“And? How can I help you?” Angelo nervously questions. Another one of the men rolls his eyes.

“You can’t be that clueless, Mr. Director,” the man’s voice is dripping

## *Dream Waves*

with sarcasm and disgust. “Surely you’ve looked at your Dream Percentile recently?”

Dream Percentile?

*Oh.*

“You need to come with us now for an evaluation.” Another man says. The three men stare hard at Angelo, who takes a step back in shock.

“I don’t understand... I have been dreaming fine now! My Dream Score has been rising-”

“Of course you’ve been dreaming fine,” the snarky one spits. “You recently won a million-dollar case, didn’t you?”

“Jordan, that’s enough.” One of the men lifts a gray tablet and starts pressing a few buttons.

“Mr. Ash, although your scores have been rising over the last two days, the past few months your Dream Percentile was down to 15%. According to the Public Safety Dream Regulations, citizens need to maintain scores in the 60th percentile.”

“With only 15%, the Public Safety Bureau had taken the initiative to observe your Dream Archives. We found disturbing footage from your dreams. We believe you may be a danger to society, so we ask for you to come with us for an evaluation.”

“You can’t be serious-” Angelo begins. “Most people don’t come back after evaluation! I know that!”

“Don’t make this any more difficult, Sir,” the third man speaks out.



*Maddalena Di Salvo*

“We do not wish to take you with force.”

Angelo feels a wave of nausea course through him. He glances behind him to see a similar wall was decorated with his films. Dread settles his body as he realizes the situation he is in.

Maybe if he's lucky, this might be just another bad dream.



# Hanged Ravens

*Victoria Lee*



As the noise of bombs whizzing past his ears faded, he turned to look at the wreckage beside him. The ruined Lockheed Blackbird's tail stuck out from the dirt. Blood and soot clung to his arms.

Malach winced. His hollow clavicles had shattered on impact, and he knew from experience that broken hollow bones never quite set back the way they used to. He turned to look at the body beside him. Ronne, that was his name. The body next to him is, was, Ronne.

Malach crawled over to Ronne's side, placing a hand on the skin joining his chin to his neck before letting out a shaky breath. No pulse. He looked up at the planes zipping back and forth with their loaded cargo, and others playing cat and mouse with each other. He reached for Ronne's undamaged radio pack and adjusted the frequency to 123.5 MHz.

A buzz rang through the cockpit. Ilya reached out and flipped the

## *Hanged Ravens*

switch, allowing the radio frequency to be patched through his headset.

*“This is Blackbird 7 responding to frequency 123.5 S.O.S signal, how do you read? Over.”*

The static fizzed for a bit before it picked up again.

*“Copy, this is Blackbird 8 hailing Blackbird 7, we have a code blue, dead pilot and downed plane, 30 degrees north of your current position on the radar, Over.”*

Julian swore under his breath. He turned to Ilya, nudging him and pointing to the radar.

“Jules, we have to pick Malach up. Bird’s-eye has gone down, we need to get him out. Now.”

Ilya nodded, his beak occasionally tapping against the communicator on his headset, before turning and guiding the plane towards the mountains.

Malach gently pushed himself upwards, testing the functionality of his wings before sitting up against a rock and promptly passing out from the pain.

When Malach opened his eyes again, he was surrounded by drips and IVs attached to his arm. He looked up with confusion at three bodies on his right, leading him to notice the large, thin needles in his upper-arms. He flailed as the needles pierced his skin and his eyelids grew heavy.

Malach sat up and gasped, instinctively putting his hand up to his old shoulder wound. He looked around and laid back down when he recognised the familiar interior of the Blackbird. He was sitting in Julian’s cot. It was filled with stray feathers and there were plush cushions where his arms and

legs would have rested, most likely to keep his claws from scratching up the jet. Malach laid back down. He couldn't quite place his finger on how he felt about his "enhancements". On one hand, it brought Julian, Ilya and Ronne to his side, but on the other hand... that's about the only way it could be seen as positive.

"Oh! You're awake! Keep flying Ilya, I've gotta tend to our damsel in distress here!"

Malach watched with bleary eyes as Julian practically skipped over to him.

He groaned and spread his arms open, wincing when his bones creaked. Julian seemed to have dropped into what he had deemed "mother hen mode" before he started yelling,

"What were you thinking?! Knowing the plane was going down and not using a parachute, no don't tell me, 'Oh, I'm sorry, there was no time.' NO! Based on the angle of the fall and your last recorded altitude you had more than enough time to jump out of that plane with a chute mostly unscathed. So tell me, Malach, why did you let yourself fall?"

Malach lowered his head and stared at his knees. There wasn't a point in lying, was there? He jumped out of the plane because he intended to die. After the scientists brought the four of them together, they had been 'blessed' with bird-like features. Nearly seventeen years ago, the scientists who had brought them to a nondescript lab somewhere north of the Washington monument, had told them that their lives would change for the better. And

## *Hanged Ravens*

they were right, well, at least half right. The eight orphans certainly had their lives changed forever. Under the brewing tension of an oncoming war, they were given some treatment the scientists referred to as 'CRISPR'. According to them, the CRISPR program stood for Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats, and was used to remove genetic defects from their DNA. The eight-year-olds could only nod along as the scientists explained it, understanding very little of what was about to happen to them. They had received extensive education about their responsibility to their country. All eight of them were told exactly what they were, and their purpose. When they had finished these lessons, they were brought into the lab one by one. Malach never saw four of the other orphans again.

The next few months were a blur to Malach; he was never quite able to recall the proceedings in the laboratory. However, he couldn't shake the sinking gut feeling that whatever happened then was crucial and important.

A few months later, in their new room at the lab, they noticed small changes happening to their bodies: feathers appearing around their skin, Ilya's mouth forming a sharper edge, Malach's shoulder blades growing two smaller stumps and Julian growing sharper nails with rougher skin around his limbs. As the four grew older and closer, they were given limited access to more technology, and soon all four boys could operate a radio, assemble and disassemble a small plane propeller, and build splints and other medical equipment from scattered rocks, sticks and leaves. However, any other occasions after and in between these sessions seemed to be missing from his

memory. Either way, with the tension of war hanging in the air, all that training for such specific skills and the effort put into their health and abilities should have roused his suspicion. Yet he had still been taken by surprise when they were told they needed to join military boot camp to join the upcoming war effort.

Malach sighed. Thinking back, he should have also noted that with his ‘enhancements’ came some negative side effects. As if in response, his hollow bones twinged in pain.

He prodded at his wings, gently unfolding them slightly. Unlike Ilya and Julian, whose beak and talons respectively were often the subject of insults and scathing looks, he was lucky to get something people didn’t really look down upon: wings. Though Ronne was the luckiest in his opinion. Ronne had always whined about having hollow bones and feathers like the rest of them, but he had no other noticeable features. Rather, he had been blessed with bird’s eyesight, often seeing miles ahead to help them.

Malach slammed his wings into his face to stop his thoughts where they were. He was not to speak or think ill of the dead. He looked back up at Julian with his head slightly angled to the left. Julian sighed and gave in, pulling Malach in for a hug, patting his back gently. Malach tried to grab a pillow with his toes, growling slightly when the pillow slid out of grasp down the left of the plane.

Without warning, the plane shook and tilted on its axis. Ilya shouted, frantically trying to regain control as they spiralled towards the ground.

## *Hanged Ravens*

Thrown against the side of the plane, Malach and Julian could only grip the edge of the cot tightly, bracing for impact. They curled into each other, protecting their torsos from debris as the plane crashed onto the ground.

Malach groaned as he woke up from his second plane crash experience of the day. He tried to turn over only to find himself held still by Julian's strong grip. Ilya was a few feet away from them, unconscious. Just as Malach was about to push Julian's talons away from his torso, he heard a twig snap somewhere to his left. He turned his head sharply, ignoring the sharp sting of pain radiating from his collar bones, to see a small platoon of Viet soldiers approach them. Then the butt of a rifle hit his head and he knew no more.

When Malach came to again, he found himself sitting on a hard plastic chair, his injuries bandaged and wounds mostly tended to. He looked around to see that both Ilya and Julian's injuries had already been treated. Both of them were wandering around the place, which seemed to be a bunker. They removed large brown swathes of fabric, revealing radio equipment, other sorts of technology and odd glowing tubing.

The bolted door clicked open. He watched as Viet soldiers filed into the room. He sat up stiffly on his chair as the soldiers seemed to converse amongst themselves before a young man around the age of 25 came forward.

"We mean you no harm! We just need you to tell us the purpose of this base and for you to repair some of the technology for us. We have seen our children vanish into similar labs, but this is the only one where we are in



control. We need to know what happened to them!” Malach looked up at them and turned to see both Julian and Ilya staring at him as well.

Julian walked forward and addressed the man, “We will help you with your task, but we expect something in return.” The young man turned back to the group and started to speak to who Malach assumed was the acting Colonel there. The Colonel listened to the young man for a minute or so before he turned back around. The young man spoke again;

“We offer you medical assistance and the freedom to wander and act freely within the confines of this bunker. Food and water will be provided to you along with any clothing, if required. We can promise that if you help us, we will not allow for your execution at the end of the war.” Malach nodded to both Julian and Ilya; this was a better deal than they had expected, considering their circumstances. When the Colonel came forwards, he slowly pushed himself out of the chair and shook the man’s hand.

Over the coming months the three acquainted themselves with the base they were housed in. As the days flew by the soldiers returned regularly with food and parts, usually carrying tools and salvaged parts of their Blackbird back to them.

One morning, Malach woke to an ungodly shriek much like that of a distressed crow. He and Julian bolted out of bed down the corridors, before arriving at a light blue door concealing the source of the screams.

It was Ilya, sitting on the floor and holding what remained of his right arm close to his chest. Julian immediately rushed over to inspect Ilya’s

## *Hanged Ravens*

wound and stanch the blood, while Malach walked forward to find what had claimed his teammate's arm. To his surprise, under the large piece of bloody and torn fabric, was what remained of the turbine from his Blackbird's engine. The turbine, now a mess of blood and crushed bone, was still spinning slowly. It seemed to have been set off by accident when Ilya had touched it, but Malach noticed something else. Off to the left of the turbine was what appeared to be the remnants of Ilya's Blackbird. Within the salvaged parts, Malach discovered a functioning American radio.

When Julian turned slightly to see the source of the disturbance, he found a Malach whose eyes shone with a childish delight he hasn't seen since—well, since forever.

Malach felt his spirits lift, his wings fluttering slightly behind him. There was a chance that, if their names appeared on the radio, the army would send soldiers to find them and bring them home.

A soft gasp of pain from Ilya reminded him of their current situation. On Julian's request, he pocketed the radio, rushing over to the main lab room to retrieve medical supplies before hurrying back.. Quickly unzipping the med-pack, Malach pulled out alcohol, cotton, bandages, gauze and some clear tape. He carefully poured alcohol onto the soft cotton balls and swabbed the area around the wound, trying not to stray too far from the skin and risk touching the injury. More rummaging in the pack yielded some acetaminophen. He handed the tablet, along with a bottle of water, to Ilya. Julian gently encouraged Ilya to swallow the pill. Malach waited a few

minutes before slowly dabbing alcohol onto the exposed flesh and bone. Although he tried to be gentle, Ilya still flinched away, tremors running through his body. When, under Julian's reassurance, Ilya had recovered enough to hold still, Malach tried to sanitize his wound. Ilya cowered softly, then fell limp, unconscious from the pain. Julian caught him and eased him into a more comfortable position, cradling his body gently as he brushed Ilya's feathery hair off his pale face. Malach winced on Ilya's behalf before slowly wrapping his wound with bandages and taping them closed. He lifted Ilya's limp body into his arms before carrying him back to the central hub.

For the next two days, Malach and Julian tried to keep Ilya's wounds clean while going through the Radio channels. They were quietly dismayed when their names never came up on the POW lists or those listed as missing. They knew that there was no family to miss them, but they had still hoped that their existence would be acknowledged in some way.

On the fourth day, Ilya was conscious for more than a few hours. The team decided it was time to continue their exploration; they wanted to leave. As Ilya started to walk, they felt the walls shake slightly. Ilya cawed in alarm as the ceiling started to crumble away. Julian grabbed Ilya and shoved Malach forwards roughly.

"Run!"

The trio rushed to the door, leaving behind everything they had found as they jumped out the building. They turned back just in time to see the jagged piece of a spitfire's left-wing clipping the area of the building they

## *Hanged Ravens*

were just in. Malach breathed a sigh of relief; all three of them were intact, with no more missing limbs than before.

Malach picked himself up, tugging at Julian's arms to make him stand. Between them they shouldered Ilya, hobbling out of the base towards the trees.

Malach couldn't keep time since the radio had been crushed in the building, but based on the sun's position, he assumed that they had walked for about three hours. At this point, Ilya had rested on their shoulders enough and had regained mobility. Just as they were about to take another break to discuss their plans, the sound of voices drifted towards them, alerting them to the fact that they had stumbled upon people. They quickly crouched down to hide in the under-bush. Peering over the bushes, they tried to decipher which side these soldiers were on, and nearly wept in relief when they realised they'd found an American squadron, one with transport and medical supplies. They could help Ilya! They could go home (or as close to home as they could get). They carefully got up, and Ilya walked forward first, hoping to receive first aid. The American soldiers saw his missing limb. As they approached, Julian called out,

"Code India-lima-Yankee-alpha, requesting medical assistance!" The soldiers all turned their heads at the specialized call sign. The Sergeant spoke into his personal radio, nodding once.

Then he raised his rifle and shot Ilya through the forehead.

Ilya's eyes seemed to lose focus as he swayed lifelessly on his feet. He

let out a soft coo before crumpling onto the ground. As the soldiers all raised their rifles, Julian let out an inhuman screech. He lunged at the Sargent, claws fully extended and slashing wildly at the Sergeant's eyes as tears streamed down his face. Through his shock, Malach heard a rifle being cocked somewhere to his right, and immediately jumped at Julian, pulling him out of the path of the bullet whistling toward him. The Sergeant's chest bloomed red from the stray bullet. Strangled orders were yelled out from the crowd of soldiers. Malach took advantage of this distraction, pulling a distraught Julian with him back into the bushes, out of sight.

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, Malach and Julian lay curled up at the base of a tree, tears streaming down both of their faces. Ilya was gone. Killed by their own allies. They didn't even have a body to bury.

It was in the midst of his grief when Malach was abruptly struck by a memory of his time back in the labs. Of all the lessons he had been taught there, this one stuck the most. He could recall the lab coats around him and the other children, back when there were more than four of them.

*"Remember your place. Remember your skills. Remember your mutations. They are to be used in the honourable field of battle. But do not forget, the most important lesson of all. You are all well-honed weapons. Old and faulty weapons are disposable. We do not want weapons that will not fire when we pull the trigger. Always remember: You are a weapon. Nothing will ever change that."*

Malach scoffed to himself, feeling like a fool. How could he forget? He should have expected Ilya to be shot down. He should have gone in first; he

## *Hanged Ravens*

was not injured and a request for resupplying would be reasonable. Ilya was a “damaged weapon”, so naturally he had been disposed of. With that thought, Malach drifted off to sleep, hungry and emotionally exhausted but still grateful that Julian, asleep against his shoulder, was in fact, alive.

When Julian woke, the sun was high in the sky. Dried tears stained his cheeks and blood clung to the tips of his claws like strawberry jam. Malach was slouched against the tree, his breathing laboured as he tried to silence his mournful cries. Perhaps he expected Ilya’s death to some extent, but neither of them were prepared for the reality of the situation to sink in. They cuddled each other for a while, shaking and sobbing onto each other as they allowed themselves to mourn the loss of their comrades. Ilya, Ronne and their unknown classmates from the lab. Malach didn’t really allow himself to grieve. It was the cycle they lived with. If you fail to succeed, you are eliminated.

The sound of bombs whistling nearby broke the silence.

Julian and Malach shot to their feet, on the watch for any soldiers coming by them. They ventured outwards, away from the sound of the bombs, only to stumble directly into an open battlefield. Julian and Malach froze as the American and Viet soldiers stared them down, nearly four hundred varied semi-automatic rifles pointed at them. A Viet soldier seem to evaluate them with his eyes before he spoke in broken English,

“You! *ngưòì chim* (birdman)! You unarmed. Leave, no harm.” Malach looked at him, the soldier nodded towards the bushes. He was allowing them

a chance to escape. Julian tugged on Malach's arm, about to lead them off the battlefield, when,

“Project Raven Alpha. As your ranking general, I command you to assist us in our mission. Remember your orders, Project.” Malach looked torn between leaving and following orders. He looked towards Julian, who continued to gesture towards the trees on the other side. Malach looked back at the general, his training echoing in his head.

*“We don't need weapons that don't fire when we pull the trigger.”* Malach shook his head slowly, turning back to face the general.

“What are your orders, sir?” He could almost hear the smug smirk of satisfaction from the general when he said,

“There is a tape we need to retrieve. It contains sensitive information on the next generation of your experiment Project. We need that tape brought back to us, Malach.” Malach nodded, slightly wary of the way this General actually knew his name. Nevertheless, he spread his wings and ran towards the Viet infantry. He used his wings and his claws to knock soldiers unconscious while Julian ran beside him, telling him where to dodge bullets. Bullets barely grazed the feathers of his wings as he dashed forward, the high pitched whistle of the metal racing past his ears. As Malach neared the Viet's last line of defence, a searing pain in his leg stopped him in his tracks. He crumpled, blood blossoming from the bullet wound in his leg. For a heartbeat, he locked eyes with Julian, who hesitated for a fraction of a second.

Then the latter gave a nod, barely more than a quick jerk of his head,

## *Hanged Ravens*

and continued running.

Julian retrieved the tape recording. Holding it in his hands, he rushed back to the Americans, giving Malach an encouraging smile on his way back to the General.

When Julian presented the tape to the General, he asked,

“May I have some medical supplies? Mal- Project Raven Alpha is a valuable asset and I require his skillset to repair our ship.” The general nodded towards a lieutenant. The lieutenant walked back towards a jeep, pulling out a sleek navy case. He opened the case pulling out the small components in it. Julian's eyes widened at what he saw. He couldn't even make a word out before a gunshot was fired and Julian crumpled like Ilya onto the floor. A small pool of blood flowed onto the grass, staining it red. For some reason, Malach noted how much thicker the blood seemed to him now. The General spoke,

“Project Raven Charlie, You have outlived your purpose. For the crime of considering abandoning fellow troops during a battle, you are charged with desertion. The sentence of execution has been carried out. Justice is swift.”

Malach sat on the ground, hands pressed against his bleeding thigh. His wings drooped as he croaked quietly. The American troops advanced upon him, dropping Julian's body onto the ground next to where Malach was, carnage strewn around him. Malach lowered his head, allowing his tears to flow onto Julian's face. Even in death, the haunted look of betrayal upon his



face was still visible. In the back of his mind, Malach knew that he was not the reason Julian felt betrayed, but he couldn't help but feel that this was his fault. His fellow cadets had died because he had been selfish and refused to lay down his life for theirs. Ronne had died because he couldn't pilot them to safety. Ilya died because Malach allowed him to go first to receive first aid, and Julian died because he couldn't break from his teachings and let the two of them run from the battle. It was all his fault.

Malach lay defeated by Julian's corpse. Distantly, he felt a rough hand pull him up to a kneeling position. He struggled against the grip of the soldiers holding him to no avail. He knew he didn't have the energy to go on much longer, but he refused to believe his friends' sacrifices had all been in vain. He couldn't give up now; his friends would want him to live and finally break free of his training like they had, to fly free.

The butt of a rifle came down on his head. As he fell, powerless, he heard the sound of his bones being sawed through on his back, then the thump as his severed wings fell to the floor.

But he felt numb.

Through the haze of pain and guilt, he saw the muzzle of a gun pointed at his head and remembered a story he heard from his time in the lab.

*"Remember, Cadets, there are always monsters around the corner. Any one of those aliens could be an enemy. The monsters stay under your bed, around the corner, behind closed doors. They are hideous, disfigured creatures with claws and horns. They*

## *Hanged Ravens*

*look nothing like us, they don't have our minds. They are mindless, a **thing**, something which only wishes to see suffering when you are of no use to them. You have been chosen to fight these monsters. You won't fear those monsters, will you, cadets?"*

Distantly, Malach realized that his instructors were wrong. Monsters weren't always disfigured, horned and clawed. He had always assumed monsters were something inhumane, something you could clearly tell was the enemy; but kneeling on the bloodstained soil, Malach realized that the greatest monsters weren't creatures from another world.

Something cracked inside of him, and Malach forced himself to look up. Through his blurry, darkening vision, he could barely make out the shapes of the people around him.

The real monsters....

Malach closed his eyes.

*Epilogue*

An audible “click” was heard as the cassette tape was inserted into the player. As the recording flickered to life, the light it cast upon the room revealed shadowed figures of a few men sitting at a long mahogany desk. They laid their eyes on the grainy black and white images on the screen, leaning forward in anticipation. As voices crackled to life on the speakers, five children were shown on the screen.

On the far left, the clear outline of a child with wings, two children with some claws, and two more with oddly translucent eyes sat side by side on the bench. Four of the younger children were happily tugging at each other, seemingly unaware of the camera as they rolled on the floor with a chorus of joyous laughter. The fifth child sneered at the other children. Dusting off his simple jumpsuit, he crossed his arms over his chest and stood up, slowly moving towards the camera. As he got closer, a voice rang out.

“James! Do you wanna join us? Julian and Ilya just found a way to clean out the feathers, we are molting! I’ll help you out, and don’t mind Ronne, he’s a bit of a grump.”

The child closest to the screen paused and reached back to his shoulder blades, appearing to consider the offer; the growing feathers were quite itchy. Then he withdrew his hand, turning his face towards the camera. This close, the partial translucency of his eyes was even more unmistakable. His thoughts were written plainly across his expression: he might be an experiment like the rest of them, but he was above these simpletons; he was a

## *Hanged Ravens*

leader. He would leave this lab at the top of the food chain.

The tape faded to black and flickered again before shouts were heard.

“Quick! Grab Raven Echo, he’s getting away!”

“Take Ravens Alpha, Beta, Charlie and Delta to the Wiping Room. They cannot know there is a world outside our laboratory, our program will go down the drain if you fail to wipe them!”

Through all the chaos, the confused shout of a young boy could just barely be heard.

“James? Where are you going? James? What’s the wiper room? What’s going to happen to us?”

The General removed the tape. He turned to face the rest of the room before muttering,

“Burn the tape. Ensure no one sees you do it either. You will not tell this to anybody, not even if the President asks, you hear? If you do, I’ll kill you myself.”

With that, the General walked out of the room, his silver dog tags clinking together as his subordinates hurried to burn the tape. Back then, Project Raven Echo had said that he would leave the lab at the top of the food chain.

So James climbed the ranks. No matter who got in the way.





# extraction.

*Jasmine Leung*



## *Prologue*

The air in the room felt sterile. The lingering scent of bleach, mixed with the pungent smell of disinfectant, made it seem as though the chemicals had been hastily sprayed throughout the room. The hallway was silent, apart from the young girl's quiet sniffing, tears threatening to spill out of her wide eyes.

The sound of footsteps echoed down the hall as an oddly well-composed nurse appeared. She stopped in front of the curled-up girl.

“The doctor would like to speak with you.”

The nurse's frigid voice frightened the girl, prompting her to curl even more tightly into herself.

“If you would like to find out about your father, you will stand up and come with me.”



*extraction.*

“Peyton.”

Her eyes groggily flicked up at the mention of her name, slowly surveying her surroundings. The office she sat in was similar to the one at home, but nothing could hide the bitter, piercing coldness that seeped through the walls and permeated the already frigid air around her, making her skin crawl. What unsettled her the most was the woman who sat opposite to her, seeming almost amused at her terror.

“What have you done to my parents...” she whispered, averting her eyes from the other’s cool stare and staring at the peeling paint on the walls.

The woman continued to watch her, unruffled. “Let’s not rush into the details, shall we? We have plenty of time on our hands. Don’t you want to know who I am?”

“I don’t care. I want to see my parents... now!” she demanded, her voice cracking from not saying a word in days.

The woman chuckled. “Well, I’m the doctor, and nice to meet you too,” she said, a wide grin spreading across her face. “I will answer your questions, but one by one. Your mother just finished surgery and is recovering in therapy. She will be all right. You will get to see her soon.”

The doctor paused, the harsh hospital light reflecting off her sinister smile.

“But don’t bother worrying about your father. You won’t have to worry about him ever again.”





87.

I stare at the number stamped onto my hand in ink, subconsciously tracing it out of habit even though I know it will never come off. I'm still dozing off when an icy hand grabs mine, fingers trembling.

"Hey, it's okay," I try to comfort Susan in vain, slowly prying her frigid fingers off mine. "It'll be painless. Besides, it'll be over in less than a minute. There's nothing to worry about." Both of us know that's a lie, but I put on a weak smile for her sake. She looks at me, her face grim.

I've known Susan for years, and she's the closest friend I'll ever have. She knows everything about me and has always been there for me. She knows I've always had a fear of coming to the charities, and every time I needed help, Susan was there by my side. So, I owe it to her to be with her too, despite her protests.

"Susan Brooks," a pleasant female voice calls over the PA system.

Susan shoots me a panicked look as she shakily gets to her feet, trudging over to the front desks where a nurse beckons to her, a uniform smile plastered on their face. I hold in a shaky breath and close my eyes.

Twelve years ago, the government decided that new procedures were required for the "survival of humanity." It claimed that the best way to solve the extinction of humans was to save the heads of government at all costs and allow them to spend time to find possible solutions. As a result, the government implemented a new law — at age 16, all citizens are required to

*extraction.*

donate 2% of their type-A genes to one of the Charities of Genetics. These will then be inserted into these “important figures”, allowing them a longer life to eventually reverse what humanity has done to itself and bring back a better world. The program is presented as an essential part of society, and pretty much everyone now believes that it really is. Now, everyone has his or her lifespan stamped onto their hand. I idly run my fingers along the 87 on my own skin. I have 2 months left till I turn 16 and I still don’t know just how I am going to accept being forced to donate.

The government also made Genetic Modification a mandatory subject in schools, in which they teach us the difference between type-A and type-B genetic variants. All the students have memorized them so well they can repeat them in their sleep — type-A variants promote disease resistance, whereas type-B variants make you more prone to diseases. Frankly, all that ever happens during class nowadays is the teachers repeating themselves over and over again, droning on like a broken recording.

Susan will be gone for at least one week — one week at this charity where they will extract her type-A genetics, cutting off a few years of her life. She will be force-fed pills until she is “healthy”, and brainwashed with therapy until she verbally agrees that the procedure is for the better.

Just like my father. At least, that’s what I suspect happened.

I shudder. The charities were never a pleasant place to begin with, but this specific one brings back too many dark memories. My father died here. His death certificate stated that he died from Alzheimer’s, but anyone

*Jasmine Leung*

with any brain mass will know that that's not true. My father was healthy, with the highest number of type-A genetics ever recorded. His stamp even said he was supposed to live up till 103, and yet he died at 37. The nurses even blamed it on him, saying that his death was his fault and that it wouldn't have happened if he had been more careful.

But I know the nurses lied.

My father was sent to the hospital, and I came here with him. He didn't come voluntarily. I remember glancing up at him, expecting him to smile at me and tell me that it would be okay, and yet I couldn't help but register the nervous look on his face. My father was never scared, and I instantly knew something was wrong. All I remember is that, right before he left, he whispered to me, "Everything's going to be all right. Take care, Peyton."

And just like that, I never saw him again.

Ever since then, I haven't trusted anyone from the charities. Something about the coldness in the head doctor's eyes and the nurse's bland smiles gives me the feeling that none of them are telling the truth. I will do anything in my power to take them down before it is too late.

I trudge back home, wary of my surroundings, too focused on figuring out how to spend the week without Susan. I'm suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of loneliness, so I pick up my pace to get home and be with mom.

©

*extraction.*

We live on the edge of town, in a small house previously owned by my father. Some of our neighbors once told me that this area used to be a beautiful city named Chicago full of grand skyscrapers, but all that is left are piles of rubble, marking where the monuments used to be.

The door creaks open as I cautiously step inside, and a cloud of dust instantly forms at my feet. I spot my mom sitting on the couch reading the newspaper, and I walk over to join her.

“Mom? I’m home.”

She looks over at me kindly and smiles. The tired lines of her face are accentuated, and I idly wonder if she’s getting enough sleep. I used to wake up in the middle of the night with tears in my eyes, screaming for him to run away from the doctor, and every time my mom would be there to comfort me and put me back to sleep. But something changed. She has slowly become more distant, keeping her thoughts to herself, and going to bed extra early, leaving me alone at night. Sometimes I hear her quietly crying herself to sleep, so I give her all the alone time she needs.

“Hi Peyton,” she replies softly.

The television suddenly flares to life, emitting a high-pitched beeping sound and startling the two of us.

“It’s an emergency broadcast!” mom exclaims in surprise, “There hasn’t been one in years!”

The screen changes and shows a grim-faced reporter. An emergency broadcast already means bad news, but what makes it even more terrifying is

the brutal video behind the reporter.

The video shows a swarm of police officers surrounding a teenaged boy kneeling on the ground, guns aimed at him from every direction. The boy's face is covered in dried blood, and one of his arms hangs at an odd angle, but he does not seem to register that he is in pain. What he does show is fear. His mouth twitches constantly and his eyes are squeezed shut as if desperately hoping that this is all a dream.

“What on earth happened to him ...?” my mom whispers to herself, obviously shaken.

As if in answer, the reporter starts speaking.

“The previous clips showcased the capture of the scandalous criminal Thomas Richardson. Richardson was caught at 11 am today after escaping from his donation surgery one week ago at the Charity of Marynook. He has been on the run since and was arrested shortly after residents alerted the authorities of a suspicious man dashing through the streets at dawn. He escaped by brutally hitting the doctor over the head with a tray holding medical supplies and injecting an empty syringe into a nurse. Both were sent immediately to the AE. Thomas Richardson will be trialed in three weeks' time at the Court of Marynook. It is believed that he will be sentenced to further extraction of type-A variants, but sources believe that due to the attack on hospital staff, it is possible that he will be condemned to the injection of type-B variants. More updates will be coming soon.”

The TV screen flicks back to the regular program.

*extraction.*

Crimes resulting in the extraction of type-A variants are rare enough, but I haven't been alive long enough to have seen someone condemned to the injection of type-B variants. As type-B variants make you more prone to diseases, if enough is injected into the body, it can lead to instant death. And to think I was considering running away to escape my donation as well. The thought itself terrifies me.

And yet I know I won't be able to stay here for the rest of my life. The death of my father is just too much to bear, and there is absolutely no way I will voluntarily let the charities take my life away from me. What I want the most is to find out the truth behind my father's death; and to do that, I'll have to come up with a plan. Eventually.



Susan has been gone for six days — six days of me staring blankly at my bedroom wall, wondering when she will come back.

I'm dozing off to the sound of my teacher's voice again when my phone vibrates in my pocket, startling me. Startled, I quickly slip it out of my pocket, because only the people I am closest to have my number. It is a text from Susan: "Look, I know this might sound strange but you have to trust me this one time. I need you to meet me in the bathroom right now. I'll be waiting for you there."

Susan's surgery shouldn't have been completed yet. All patients must go through a week of therapy before their operation. How is she back already?

I must have suddenly jolted upright in shock, as when I look up, my teacher is staring straight at me. I feel my hands start to sweat.

"Peyton Keller, what are you doing?"

"I...I need to go to the bathroom," I mumble, hoping that I don't sound too suspicious.

"If that's all you needed you could have asked. You look like you've seen a ghost!" she says. A flush of heat creeps up my face, and my classmates snicker.

"Okay." I hurry towards the door, sighing in relief as the door shuts behind me. Susan would never let me risk myself to help her, so this must be extremely important. I dash through the halls towards the bathroom, hoping to avoid anyone else in the hallways.

*extraction.*

I burst through the bathroom door, startling Susan. She's crouched down by the sinks, her eyes swollen from crying. I immediately rush to her side and pull her into a hug to try to calm her down. To my surprise, she pushes me away and stands up, wiping away the stream of tears on her cheek with the back of her hand. Looking at me straight in the eyes, she says, speaking quickly, "We need to leave immediately. I promise I'll explain in detail later when we are in a safer place, but what you need to do now is to make a decision. I have the evidence you need to take down all the Charities of Genetics, but you have to run away with me now, and we may never be able to come back. If you choose to come, you won't be able to have any contact with your mom or anyone you know. Every second we waste means that the authorities are one second closer to finding us, so we're going to leave right now.

"Leaving also brings the risk of getting caught by the government, and I'd advise you to only imagine the worst-case scenario possible if that happens. I'll understand if you don't come, but I really hope that you do. Please, Peyton."

Conflicting emotions consume me, and my brain becomes a muddled mess. Leaving would mean having to leave my mom alone, and I know she would be absolutely devastated. Yet staying means cowardice, rejecting the chance to take down the charities I hate so much and denying the one opportunity I may ever get to find out the truth about my father. It is a difficult choice, and even though I know the consequences, I know what I



must do.

Without hesitation, I look over at Susan, asking, “So where do we go now?”



The answer to that question was the last place I had in mind. Susan and I are currently standing in my tiny bedroom, with its small single bed and light oak desk, the flimsy curtains letting in streaks of natural sunlight. It really is a genius decision — my mom is still at work and won’t be home till night, and the authorities would probably never come looking for us here. My backpack is open on the floor, packed to the brim with clothes, food, and daily necessities. I definitely overpacked, but considering that I may never come back again it doesn’t really matter. I take one last glance at the room I grew up in before turning on my heel and leaving behind the life I’ve grown to love.

I’m just about to open the door and leave my home when Susan suddenly lashes out, yanking my hand off the doorknob. I stare at her in shock but she only jerks her head at the door.

“Listen.”

I concentrate, and behind the sounds of our neighbors’ lawnmowers and construction, I finally hear it -- the wailing of sirens getting nearer and nearer.

“We need to go. Now.”

Susan turns around and starts heading back into the house... into the house? I’m still questioning the logic behind this when Susan says, “We’re

*extraction.*

leaving through your backyard. They'll get us in a matter of seconds if we are spotted." Susan locks the front door and starts running.

I hurriedly jog after Susan, not willing to be left behind. We swiftly exit through the back door, and I spot blue and red flashes of light coming from the entrance to my house, signaling that the authorities have arrived. "The door is locked!" I hear one of them yell. There's a loud bang, as the rusty hinges come loose and the door crashes to the ground.

"Come on!" Susan cries over her shoulder, as we dart around our neighbors' gardens, gaining several curious glances as we rush past.

"Stop or we'll shoot!" an officer threatens, announcing that the authorities have caught onto our trail. I risk taking a quick glance behind me, and see several officers pointing guns in our direction. A look at each other, and we quicken our pace instead, feet pounding on the pavement.

I hear the sound of a gun going off behind me. The bullet misses me by bare inches. My feet feel like they are going to give out any second.

At the end of the road behind the furthest house is a lush forest, dense and unfamiliar. Usually, a place like this wouldn't have been inviting even without the massive KEEP OUT sign in the open stretches of land before the forest. But to us, it was a blessing. They would never be able to find us there.

Unfortunately, there is still a small stretch of open ground between us and the forest, and the police are quickly gaining on us. Without a second thought, Susan and I dart across the clearing, bullets tearing into the ground

Jasmine Leung

where our feet were moments before. Just as the second round of fire begins, we dart into the safety of the trees. The thick foliage provides cover and protection, and this time, only a few of the stray bullets whizz past near us.



Susan and I slow to a jog. The forest floor is covered with gnarled roots, and branches snag at my face as I push forwards, though it's still beyond comparison to what we had just gone through.

"We should be safe for now." Susan pants next to me, sweat dripping down her face.

"Speaking of which, you still have a lot of explaining to do. Suddenly appearing at school, dragging me out of class to run away forever, and then causing us to get shot at! There better be a good reason for all of this!" I cry out, "I didn't sign up to nearly getting killed for nothing!"

"All right," she says, "I do owe you an explanation." So, she begins:

*"I was to go to therapy for one week and have my extraction the day after, just like any normal operation. However, the day you and I went to the charity was also coincidentally the day of the annual meeting between the heads of the charities, to update them on progress and such. Due to this, the charity was insanely crowded, and all staff was required to attend the meeting, meaning I was left alone most of the day. I had been very cooperative, so they had agreed to not lock my room door. Little did they know, right after the meeting started, I had snuck out and tailed my nurse to the meeting room, where I eavesdropped on the entire conversation. I would have texted you, but the nurses had taken my phone away while I wasn't looking."*

*extraction.*

*“Since that day, I had been planning my escape, hoping to convince you to try to stop the charities once and for all. This morning, I had snuck out during the nurses’ morning break, stolen my phone back and traveled on foot to school, which is where I found you.”*

“So, what did you learn from the meeting?”

Susan responds, “The charities have been lying to the public since this all started. All the type-A genetics that have been donated to the charities are really so the head doctor can live forever, at the cost of others dying. Don’t you find it strange that our head doctor has never been changed in our lifetime?”

Now that I think about it, it does seem strange that we’ve never reelected a head doctor since the law was set.

She continues, “The government has never even announced exactly who the genetics are donated to, and what progress they have made. All they ever show is the same ad on TV announcing their work against climate change and saving humanity, and yet never any evidence to prove they really are doing anything.”

Everything Susan has said could very well be true; and yet there’s still something that is bothering me. I ask her, “Did you by any chance find out anything about my father?”

Susan stops walking and looks me in the eye before saying, “There was one thing, and I don’t know what it means. Right before the end of the meeting, I heard the head doctor of our charity say: We can’t afford to let

*Jasmine Leung*

what Travis Keller did happen again.”

What? Travis Keller was my father! What could he have done to make the charities mad at him? Is this related to his death? He couldn't have died because of them but if he did, I would track down every last one of them, especially that head doctor from our charity.

I'm suddenly overwhelmed with grief and fatigue, falling onto the forest floor. Susan rushes to my side, slowly comforting me and gently prying my hands off my face, wiping away the tears streaming down.

After what feels like an eternity, I finally stop crying and have the sense to drink water and eat an apple. Susan decides we might as well set up camp where we are as the sun is setting, and we are already quite far from civilization. The authorities won't come looking for us at night, let alone here. We eat a quick dinner of the bread and peanut butter that Susan brought here, and pull out sleeping bags that we packed at my house. After such an exhausting day, I finally settle into a restless sleep.



I wake in the middle of the night to the sound of a snapping twig and a quiet sigh. Someone's here, I realize, scrambling out of my sleeping bag and over to Susan, frantically shaking her awake. No one comes into these woods, so it must mean that Susan was wrong and the authorities have decided to come to look for us at night. In the darkness with no weapons, we are sitting ducks. I start shaking Susan more violently until she finally stirs and makes a quiet noise.

*extraction.*

“Whoa...” A flashlight sweeps right above our heads, and I drop to the ground, the flashlight missing me by milliseconds.

“Strange,” a voice mutters, “I swear I heard something.”

Right then, my watch starts beeping, announcing that it is now 5 am. Susan’s eyes widen in horror and the flashlight moves to point right at us, drenching our faces in glaring white light.

“You!” the man says.

So many things happen at the same time that it’s hard to keep track. Susan must have finally realized we were in trouble. She launches herself straight out of her sleeping bag onto the man, knocking him to the ground. The man releases a high-pitched scream before kicking Susan as hard as he can, sending her collapsing onto the ground. All this happens as I stand there in shock, until I realize Susan is hurt and I rush over to help her up.

But the man scrambles to his feet before I can get there, and slowly he treads over to Susan. I’m panicking, yelling at Susan to get away from the man, but she is too injured to move, and I’m too far away to help her.

The man holds out a hand to her.

I look towards them, confused, and Susan returns the same look.

The man must have finally seen our confusion, as he puts his hand down and takes a step away from Susan. She breathes a huge sigh of relief.

“I’m sorry for scaring you,” he says, in a clear and concise voice, “and I’m sorry for kicking you too. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

He continues, “My name is Sebastian Phillips. I work as a reporter in

*Jasmine Leung*

Marynook and heard about your story. The story they told the public was that one of you helped the other escape their donation, and you are now both on the run from the government. You're all over the news, and they've even put bounties on your head for tip-offs. I haven't been given an interesting news story in a while, and something told me there was a reason behind just suddenly running away. Since my intuition is usually right, I just had to find out what it was.

"After hearing that you were also from Marynook, I followed the police car I saw heading in your direction, and after I was sure the coast was clear, I followed you into the woods. I've been looking for you ever since. All I want to do is to be able to share your side of the story with the public and help with your cause."

If Sebastian is really telling the truth, he could really help us stop the charities. I look over at Susan, and she gives me a slight nod. I turn to Sebastian, and say, "All right, you can help us, but you better not mess up, or we'll all be in serious trouble."

Sebastian nods. "Don't worry, you can count on me."



We decide to get up and head out of the woods since it's now morning. Sebastian gives us scarfs to hide in and leads us down a trail Susan and I missed in the dark towards a small town a few hours away on the other side of the forest.

After arriving, we locate a small motel, and Sebastian books us 3

*extraction.*

rooms with his credit card. We take our time, cleaning up and replenishing ourselves with food and water. As we sit in the diner, I suddenly notice that the TV has started playing another emergency broadcast, this one with me and Susan's school photos on it. We immediately head back to our rooms, deciding to leave as soon as possible whilst we have a head start on the authorities.

Whilst Susan catches Sebastian up on everything we've learned, I pack our bags with supplies. Susan tells him about my dad, and he formulates a plan. It's late afternoon by the time we finish smoothing out the details.

"We'll leave early tomorrow morning when fewer people are around," he summarizes, pacing the room. "If we infiltrate the charity, we should be able to find the information, which is stored in a safe drive in the head doctor's office. After that, we'll release Susan's recording along with any other information we find in the charity."

I really hope that everything goes according to plan as if it doesn't, we really will be dead this time.





We wake in the middle of the night. According to the news, the authorities have surrounded the perimeters on the Marynook side and still believe that we are in the woods. After making sure everything is packed, we leave the motel.

One advantage of including Sebastian is that he is legally an adult, meaning he can rent a car. We sit in an SUV with Sebastian at the wheel, taking a lesser-known road to the Charity.

After 2 hours, I finally spot the silhouette of the charity's building against the dark sky. A few of the lights are on.

"Does the head doctor stay at the charity overnight?" Susan asks.

"Sometimes. Her room is the one at the top of the building," Sebastian points upwards, at what looked like a sleek penthouse located in the middle of the top floor.

We stop the car one road behind the charity and start approaching on foot, as a car driving to the charity in the middle of the night might raise suspicion. We reach the backdoor and find it unlocked. This was surprising, as the charities never leave any entrance open.

"Well, this is where we part," Sebastian says, looking over at me.

Susan walks over and gives me a hug. "I'll see you soon," she says.

I look back as Sebastian and Susan disappear into the shadows.



I take a deep breath and slowly twist the doorknob, and the steel door creaks

*extraction.*

open, revealing a pitch-black and seemingly depthless corridor. I cautiously head down the corridor, praying that no one notices the illumination cast by my flashlight. At the end of the hallway is a set of stairs, and from what Sebastian told me, it leads straight up to the head doctor's office.

The stairs squeak and produce a grisly noise under the weight of my feet. I wince at the noise; if there is anyone upstairs, they probably know I'm here now. After pausing to listen for several seconds, I continue upwards, careful not to lose my footing on the uneven steps.

Just as Sebastian had said, there is a room at the top of the staircase. The door opens a crack as I slowly peer inside. Once I'm sure the coast is clear, I slip inside.

The room is surprisingly large for an office. There is only one source of light — a floor-to-ceiling window on the far side of the room, facing the main road. A wooden desk sits in the center of the room, upon which a massive mess of paper is piled up.

What's most impressive are the file cabinets. There are rows and rows of them filling the entire back wall, all arranged in alphabetical order by name. I creep over to the shelf labeled with a "K" and look for my father's name.

I look through each of the files, and eventually find all the files with the name Keller. There are 26 in total. I go through them methodologically until I finally get to the letter T, only to discover that my father's file is missing. Did we really just come this far to risk getting caught, and not find

anything? I groan in frustration.

Click. Suddenly, a cold, blue-tinted blinding light floods the room. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust.

“I’m sure you’re looking for this,” a voice chuckles. In fright, I drop the pile of folders in my hand onto the floor. There is something oddly familiar in the voice.

“Hello, Ms. Regan.”

As the shock wears off, I turn around, coming face to face with the person that has terrorized my life for seven years. Nothing has changed about her since our meeting seven years ago; she has the same sinister grin and cold glint in her eyes. She holds out a huge file with dozens of confidential stickers, and at the top I see the name scribbled on in marker: Travis Keller.

“You don’t seem surprised by the fact that it’s me,” Ms. Regan says, walking in a circle around me as if inspecting every move I make. “You certainly have grown up since the last time I saw you when you were still a scrawny child.

“Well, welcome to my office. Please make yourself feel at home as I’m sure you will be staying here for a while,” she says, a malicious smile spread across her face. “Though for exactly how long, that’s not a matter of your concern. Take a seat.”

I’m not sure if it’s shock or utter disgust at what she just said, but I stay firmly in place, the folders lying beside my feet.

“Or I’ll get someone to do it for you.”

*extraction.*



“I hope you know that you have caused me a huge amount of trouble, Peyton.” Ms. Regan says. “I’ve had dozens of reporters and journalists pouring into this charity babbling all kinds of questions, and frankly it wasn’t very pleasant. Now I am not one for impoliteness, so I will start off by telling you what you came to look for.” This catches my attention, and I immediately look down at the folder in my hands.

“Your father was a talented man. Such a shame he put his talents to waste.” Ms. Regan sighs. “Your father was a traitor and a liar. He came to work at this charity, and eventually got promoted to being my assistant. I trusted him more than anyone else who worked for me. What I didn’t know was that he had been plotting against me all this time, sneaking around my office when I was away, looking for anything he could hold against me. Then one day, I caught him. He was trying to copy the files from my laptop onto a USB. He very nearly succeeded. I immediately put him under arrest, and he was sentenced to death by injection of type-B genetics, which would have been quick and painless.” Her face turns grim, and she continues, “But that wouldn’t have been enough. He betrayed me! He deserved the worst type of punishment possible. So, I sent a crew to your house, where they captured your mom and brought her here. Your father was supposed to be forced to watch his wife die at his hands before dying himself. But he struck a deal, and really it was one of his most naive decisions.”

Ms. Regan looks me dead in the eye and says, “He begged us to let

your mom live in peace, even at the cost of his own life. And he chose the worst kind of death possible. He stated that he was willing to die by extraction of type-A genetics, as long as we donated half of them to your mom. Of course, I couldn't reject the offer. All of one person's type-A genes can let me live for another 100 years!"

I... can only stare at her. Anger rises to my chest, and I yell, "I hate you!" Tears start pouring down my face. "I hate you! How could you have done this to my father, or to anyone? How could you be so cruel?"

"Now, now, calm down," Ms. Regan says, still smiling. "All that's going to happen is a little bit of pain. You see, I still need to give a reason to the public on you and your friend's escape, but it's easy. You have followed in the footsteps of your father. Your fate will be the same as his."

My scream is muffled by a glove that is slapped over my face as guards materialize behind me and drag me away.

"Goodbye, sweetie" and plain, hard laughter were the last things I faintly hear before I pass out.



When I come to, I am strapped to a chair in an operating room under the blinding light of a surgical lamp right above me, a needle jabbed into my arm. The only thing near me is a timer.

In ten minutes, I am going to die.

I should be panicking, and yet I am oddly calm, knowing that I have done everything in my power already. I just hope that Susan and Sebastian

*extraction.*

can stop the charities after my death.

Five minutes.

I am breathing out one last time, accepting and appreciating everything that has happened to me. Five, four, three, two, and...?

Cautiously, I open one hazy eye against the blinding white light and see two figures standing in front of me. There must have been a mistake with the equipment, and the nurses have now come to reprogram it. I squeeze my eyes shut as the stirrings of fear suddenly begin to appear in me.

But that's not what happens.

The needle is gently removed from my arm and replaced with a band-aid, and I am untied and hoisted out of the chair. The last thing I remember is a calming and familiar voice whispering to me, "It's okay, Peyton. You're safe now," before falling asleep from exhaustion.



A week has passed since my near-death experience.

I learned from Susan that after I entered the head doctor's office, she had sensed something was wrong and called the authorities. Surprisingly, the president was called in as Susan had convinced them that it was regarding national security.

After the authorities arrived, Susan and Sebastian had quickly caught them up with everything we had discovered, including the audio recording of the charity meeting. Though they were still somewhat skeptical at first, police officers were immediately sent into the building, where they found me in the operating room. Ms. Regan and several other doctors were all caught red-handed and arrested on the spot.

An emergency report was instantly written regarding the credibility of the charities, and they were all swiftly shut down the next day. Even the government had been manipulated by the charities, and Ms. Regan and her evil accomplices are now in jail, desperately making up for it.

I also found out that Ms. Regan had brainwashed my mother, and that she had been forced to believe that my father was a traitor, which explains her strange and distant behavior towards me that had started to develop. She is now going through real therapy, and the doctors say she is making good progress.

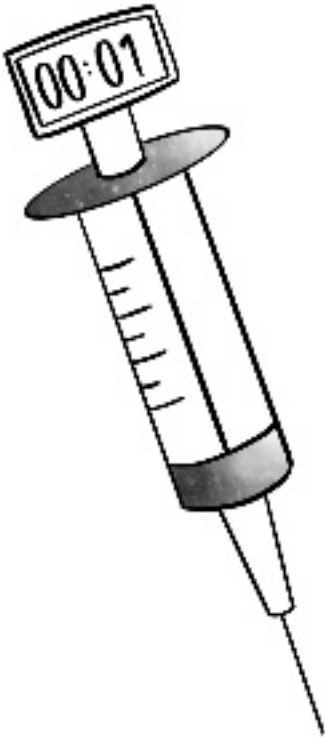
For now, I'm just trying to enjoy everything I can in life. The experience has made me realize that dying is not something that I'm going to

*extraction.*

be ready for anytime soon, and I appreciate the fact that everyone is now safe from the charities.

Even if only for a moment.







# Awaken

*Cherry Li*



A clock strikes midnight.

The scorching heat has surrendered to the onshore breeze. Crickets chirp and the air becomes chilled. The blackness is almost complete, with only the starlight and waxing moon shining faintly. The woods are a maze of tangled roots, with paths in which to become lost. And even with torchlight, it is not a route anyone would attempt.

Peeking out through my window, I glimpse at my grandmother, with matte black boots that reached up to her thigh, a black coat hiding her entire body and a black wig disguising her bright red hair, disappearing into the woods.

I immediately run to my desk and open my textbook:

*“Genetic modification is a cure for genetic diseases. Genome editing allows scientists to add, remove or alter genetic material. CRISPR-Cas9, which stands for*

## *Awaken*

*Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats is a method for such genetic modification. With innovation over the years, genetic modification is now used to modify facial appearance, intelligence, and overall athletic build.”*

I repeat each sentence over and over in my head, making sure every detail is covered for tomorrow’s final exam.



The sunlight pours through the cracks in the blind. Today is a big day. I will take the test, receive my diploma, and choose to either follow my grandmother or my heart.

Walking to the kitchen as if it were any normal morning, I see my grandmother cooking some eggs for breakfast as she hums a familiar tune. It is at times like this that I feel the most guilty for betraying her, lying to her, and for leaving her. My mind drifts to the choices I have. I have studied until my last brain cell died, making sure I have every detail memorized for the final exam, yet I still have not decided whether to undergo genetic modification or not. In my heart, I know what my decision will be, but the guilt in my stomach is pulling me back.

“Are you nervous about today?” My grandmother asks as she sits next to me.

Caught off guard, I feel my heart pounding, threatening to burst forth from my ribcage as I looked away from my grandmother.

Taking a deep breath, I force a smile, trying to mask my guilt and fear. “Why should I be?” I respond with a shaky breath. “Never in my life have

*Cherry Li*

I thought about genetic modification. I don't care about facial appearance, intelligence, and athletic build."

"I'm so proud of the person you have become." She smiles warmly, leaving me with a pang of guilt in my chest.



"Welcome to today's graduation ceremony!" the principal's voice booms as everyone quiets down. "It is a pleasure to have all family members attend today's celebration. As you all know, the graduates have passed their final exams, and they are sitting in the first five rows. We will start giving out diplomas shortly."

I start conversing with friends around me, trying to keep my mind away from the choices I have to make soon. I know both Julie and Morgan, my best friends, are choosing to genetically modify their facial appearance, which is what my heart keeps telling me to do.

"We will start by announcing the graduates. Once your name is called, please make your way to the stage to receive your diploma and head to the selection room."

"Julie Grace William," the principal announces. I notice Julie's eyes light up in response as she shoots up from her chair and makes her way up the stage. I glance to the right and see her mother taking photo after photo, thrilled.

I am so lost in thought that I almost jump from my chair as the principal announces Morgan's name. I share the same last name as Morgan.

## *Awaken*

*Oh no, no.* My name will be called right after. My stomach shifts uneasily, as my palms start getting sweaty. My hands clasp and unclasp each other as if in constant need of touch and reassurance.

“Sheyla Louise Davis.” I keep my hands to the sides as I slowly walk up the stairs. I extend my arm to the Principal and he shakes it before handing me my diploma. “Congratulations on graduating! Top of the class, no less!”

Hesitantly, I look up and see my grandmother beaming with pride. I try my best to smile for the camera, although I clench my jaw and look up, fighting the tears back as soon as I hear the camera snap.

“Please make your way to the selection room,” the principal whispers to me. I take one last glance at my grandmother as I reluctantly walk away.



The selection room is packed. Everyone is chatting with each other, excited. I walk to Julie and Morgan, both of them certain of their choice. I know my grandmother will be waiting for me outside the school. For the last 14 years, my grandmother made it clear that I should and must not undergo genetic modification after my mother died when genetically modifying her genes when I was four.

I close my eyes as a flashback of my mom’s funeral appears in my mind:

*A girl dressed in a black mini dress enters the room where the coffin is located, with a woman around the age of sixty trailing behind, tears streaming down her face.*

Cherry Li

*The woman clutched her napkin tightly as she mourned for her lost daughter. She hovered over the coffin as she yelled at the unmoving form, begging her to wake up.*

I shake my head, trying to rid myself of the flashback, as I hear the assistant principal start talking. “As you all know, genetic modification was originally invented years ago to solve the problem of people inheriting genetic diseases due to mutations. Genetic modification allows characteristics of the human body to change.

“The method CRISPR-Cas9 is a tool that we will use to modify facial appearance, intelligence and athletic build based on your choice today. Your choice will bring you to the college you will attend. You will be asked to pass a series of tests before officially being granted the chance of genetic modification. Once your name is called, please proceed to the room to which you are assigned in order to make your final choice.”

Cold sweat glistens on my forehead. My hands clasp tightly in front of my stomach as I fiddle with my knuckles, twisting my fingers around each other.

“Sheyla Louise Davis, please proceed to Room 3,” a staff member announces. I give Julie and Morgan a hug as I stand up from my chair. “Don’t feel pressured to choose what we want; follow your heart,” they whisper to me, giving me an encouraging smile. I nod and slowly enter Room 3.

Four electric option boxes are set up on a desk. They read:

## *Awaken*

- “1) Genetically modify facial appearance
- 2) Genetically modify intelligence
- 3) Genetically modify athletic build
- 4) Do not undergo genetic modification

Please make your decision by pressing your thumb on the option box of your desired choice that will scan your fingerprint.”

All the reasons not to genetically modify come flooding in. I feel butterflies in my stomach as I stare between the “Do not undergo genetic modification” and “Genetically modify facial appearance” boxes.

*“Do not ever even consider genetically modifying yourself, Sheyla. You know the cause of your mother’s death. Do not ever choose genetic modification. Genetic modification kills you, murders you, ends your life.”* My grandmother’s words repeatedly play in my brain.

I take a deep breath and let my heart speak to me. *“You are very fortunate to be given the chance to genetically modify yourself. Don’t you want to have a perfectly symmetrical face? Don’t you want to look the best you can?”*

I exhale and hesitantly take a step closer to the table. I close my eyes and let my thumb glide on the surface, making my final decision.

I follow my heart. I betray my grandmother.



The college is filled with young adults all genetically modified with perfectly symmetrical faces. I walk beside Julie and Morgan as we admire the college. It



*Cherry Li*

is innovative, elegantly built, and massive. “I am going to get lost,” I whisper to Julie as we follow our new Principal. We pass through different corridors as we finally enter “the hall”.

“Welcome. I assume everyone knows why they are here today. We will be giving you a series of tests for which you will have two months to prepare. If you pass, you will be allowed to genetically modify your facial appearance. If you fail, you will forever be declined the opportunity and you will be forced to return to your family.” the principal shouts across the hall, making sure everyone is clear.

“The series of tests are the same in all colleges. The tests will all be done digitally and will cover the history and procedure of genetic modification, as well as genetic modification in general. All resources needed to support your preparation will be sent to your dorm tomorrow morning. You must stay on the college campus until your two months are complete.”



I retire to my dorm immediately after dinner to clear my mind. A lot has happened today. I graduated and received my diploma. I made my choice, and now I must try my very best to pass all the tests given. I know I already have a head start, as I secretly started learning about genetic modification long ago.

I lie in bed as I let sleep slowly take me away from reality. It is a cruel thing, to have reality claw its way through the dream and run its ugly claws down my line of vision. We can't dream forever, but we sure as hell pretend

## Awaken

to.



*“Genetic modification is done by transferring a piece of DNA from one organism to a different organism. Genomes encode a series of messages and instructions within their DNA sequences. One method to edit genomes is CRISPR-Cas9, which is a tool that can allow DNA sequences to be easily altered and modify gene function.*

*Around 20 years ago, scientists created a small piece of RNA with a sequence that binds to a specific target sequence in the DNA of a genome. It can also bind to the enzyme, Cas9. The RNA will be able to identify the DNA sequence and the enzyme Cas9 that cuts the DNA at a targeted location just like a bacteria. After the DNA is cut, scientists can use a DNA repair machine to add and delete pieces of the genetic material, as well as to replace an existing segment with an artificially customized DNA sequence. Scientists constantly investigated and repeated trials to find a cure for genetic diseases such as blindness.*

*However, as genetic modification and CRISPR-Cas9 evolved and became more popular over the years, its use extended to young adults (graduates) to conduct genetic modification based on their preferences.”*

I read information for the tenth time with Julie and Morgan. Tomorrow

*Cherry Li*

officially marks the end of the two months in college. Julie, Morgan, and I are going through all the resources given at the start of the two months.

“Do you guys think we are prepared enough?” Morgan asks as she checks the time.

“It is almost midnight, we should just head back to our dorms,” Julie responds while yawning.

“It’s not like we can be even more prepared if we keep studying,” I mumble as we gather all our resources together.

Morgan rolls her eyes. “You of all people are going to be fine. You’re one of the youngest graduates here! And you graduated with top grades!” I elbow her playfully, laughing.

Two months have passed, and I rarely feel any guilt for betraying my grandmother. I occasionally think about her, but it never leaves me feeling awful for leaving her anymore. Tomorrow is going to be tough. I have to pass the tests. I’ve made huge sacrifices, and it will be a shame if I come this far and fail.



“All tests will be conducted today. Each of you will be taking different tests at different times and have rotations. After you finish all the tests, you will head back here and wait for the results. If you pass, you will be sent to the community’s genetic modification center to undergo genetic modification to your facial appearance today at midnight. Future information will be delivered. Good luck,” the principal reiterates, his voice echoing around the

## Awaken

hall.

Everyone starts to depart from the hall, heading towards the separate rooms to take their tests. I wish Julie and Morgan good luck and we depart towards our respective rooms.



The community's genetic modification center is stuffy, and the air has an undertone of bleach. The walls and chairs are in a magnolia colour, with scrape marks from the countless medicine trolleys bumping into it. Gathered in the waiting room are all those who passed the series of tests.

Morgan finished her registration a moment ago and is now inside the surgery room. I now sit quietly in the waiting room, thoughts of my grandmother come washing back. *“Do not ever even consider genetically modifying yourself, Sheyla. You know the cause of your mother's death. Do not ever choose genetic modification. Genetic modification kills you, murders you, ends your life.”* My grandmother's words repeatedly play in my brain.

“Sheyla Louise Davis,” a nurse calls. I hesitantly walk towards the registration desk.

“Hello, I come from the facial appearance college,” I say with the smoothest voice I can manage, trying to conceal my nervousness.

The nurse furrows her brows and responds with surprise, “Please wait here for a moment.”

I start getting anxious. All Morgan had to do at the registration desk was sign her name. *Is this about my mother?* I fidget with my jacket, trying to

*Cherry Li*

suppress my fear. Minutes pass by and I start pacing back and forth, my hands running through my hair.

“Sheyla Louise Davis, may I ask for your family background and information?” the nurse asks.

“I was born in South Carolina. My parents separated a month before I was born. I was left with my mother, Laverne Rose Davis, who had an accident when undergoing genetic modification and died, leaving me with my grandmother, Lorie Marie Davis, when I was two.” I breathe out. I feel my legs start to wobble and weaken, as I realize that I just summarized my entire family history to a nurse.

“Please take a seat, and we will call you to surgery when prepared. Thank you.” the nurse replies calmly.

I am so lost in thought I barely hear the surgery room door crack open. Julie steps out, and when I see her I practically feel my eyes and mouth freeze, wide open in an expression of stunned surprise.

“Wow!” I run to Julie. God, she is breathtaking. Her eyes are now ocean blue, her nose shaped perfectly to match her eyes and mouth. Everything about her face is perfectly symmetrical.

“You look amazing, Julie. The doctors performed magic on you.”

“I know. I can’t wait to see how you-”

“Sheyla Louise Davis.” the surgeon calls out. I inhale deeply as I stand up, giving Julie one last hug. I head to the surgery room, the smell of medication overwhelming me as I push the thoughts of my grandmother

## *Awaken*

away. *There is no turning back. I will do this. I can do this.*

The surgeon greets me with a smile as he ushers me inside the surgery room. “So you are Sheyla Louise Davis, correct?” I hesitantly nod as I observe the room. It is filled with pieces of equipment I have never seen before, with lots of machines and digital screens.

“Well, please follow me to the genetic modification designing room.” His shoes clip-clop across the room. At this point, I have no idea what is going on so I follow him, trying not to show a sense of fear. I’m shocked when the doctor opens a door that leads to a dark tunnel. “I can’t believe your mother allowed you to end up like her. What a great mother,” he said with sarcasm through gritted teeth.

I look at him and know there is no way I can escape this, he towers over me. In a blink of an eye, he shoves me roughly into the tunnel. I knee him in the groin, trying to defend myself, but he does not even bat an eye and shoves me, causing me to stumble and fall flat on my face.

“Click.” The door closes, and I am left with one choice: to head down. I exhale deeply. The tunnel curls away coldly into the infinite dark. My skin crawls as I take a step, holding tightly to the torch the surgeon threw at me. I drag my hand along the wall, only to find my hand covered in dust and grime. Wind streams through the tunnel, causing shivers to ripple through my body. I hesitantly take another step forward, only to find that the floor is uneven. Reluctantly, I shine the torchlight on the floor.

“What the -” I yelled in surprise. My heart starts racing as I see a grey

Cherry Li

frozen hand stick out with a bracelet identical to Julie's on the ground. No way, *I just saw Julie walk out of the surgery room.* I look at the dead body. How can there be two of Julie?

It finally hits me. The term "cloning" no one dares to talk about except in school textbooks. Genetic modification is just cloning.

I put the pieces of the puzzle together. *We all have been tricked. There is no such thing as symmetrical faces. There is no such thing as rebirth. There is no such thing as genetic modification. WE ALL HAVE BEEN BRAINWASHED. This is no genetic modification. This is cloning and murder. Pure murder. How could they do this to us? Cloning people into perfection then murdering their true selves? My sweet Julie, now living as a clone. How could they call cloning and murder 'genetic modification'?*

I shudder at the thought of a college full of clones, their dead bodies piled on top of each other in this tunnel. CLONING? All the college kids I have talked to before, all the models I admire, all the celebrities I once loved are all CLONES. I cannot bear the thought. Almost half the population are clones, not humans. Wide-eyed, I bring my hands up to cover my mouth. The blood drains from my face as I shake my head in disbelief, unable to hide my incredulous expression. *There is no such thing as genetic modification. It is all cloning. People have been cloned to perfection, leaving their original body to die. People with perfect faces are all clones. They are not human, not human, I keep telling myself.*

Still left in utter shock, I force myself to continue down the tunnel. My footsteps echo sharply as I take step after step down the tunnel, trying to avoid looking at the dead bodies. The cold air spread across my skin like a

## *Awaken*

tide. I wrap my thin cardigan around my body tightly, shuddering.

My torchlight shines on a rectangular box as I round a corner. *NO! This is not true, this can't be true.* I stare at the jail cell ahead of me, struggling to believe the sight.

In a state of disbelief, I take a closer look at the jail cell and almost drop the torchlight when I see a figure there. An exceedingly familiar person, with black matte boots that go up to her thigh, a black coat that covers her figure, and black hair with a strand of red hair peeking out.

“Grandmother?” I choked out in disbelief.

“I see you made your final choice,” her voice echoed, “I was trying to protect you for 14 years, trying my very best to stop you from making the wrong choice. I assume you have found out the dark truth behind genetic modification. As you have seen, every single person was killed after they were cloned. Every single person except one. That person woke up during the cloning process and has been trapped for her entire life. The surgeons were not willing to take any chances of the dark secret being spread.”

“This is her.” Grandmother spun me around, and I looked up. At a woman with the same pair of hazel eyes and height as me, almost a replica, but with my grandmother’s red hair.

My lips quivered as I broke the ominous, brittle silence.

“Mom?”

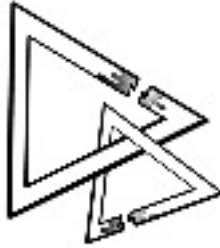






# Evolution

*Joanne Tang*



*Dr. Krates' Journal*

*Feb 29th 5067*

*WORLD POPULATION: 15,482,827*

*TOTAL DEATHS : 250,084*

*TOTAL BIRTHS: 500,274*

Do you think there's something out there? I'm not talking about new galaxies or planets. I'm talking about life outside our planet: extraterrestrial life. Does it exist? Imagine a bag of 10 marbles. 9 of them are black and one is white. The chances are that you will draw a black. The chances of drawing a white is  $1/10$ . It's simple math. Now draw a marble, just one. No looking. What color is it? Most likely black. Right? You sure are lucky if it's white.

## *Evolution*

Imagine that the universe could be placed in a bag. An infinite number of black marbles in a bottomless bag. You could turn the bag upside down and pour out those marbles. That's our universe: infinite. Now, place one white marble into that bag, and give the bag a shake. Watch the black marbles swallow the white one. Now draw. Black. Black. Black. Black. Black. It's always going to be black. You won't see that white marble again. The chances of picking it is  $1/\infty$ .

Humans, on the whole, value human life. We spend billions trying to extend our lives and some of us spend years in medical training, believing that our efforts will help prolong human lives and delay our inevitable deaths. Our search for the *elixir of life* is one of our greatest quests. Death is inevitable, but humans will do anything to push it back. It's hard-wired - our will to survive. Most living beings fear death. We believe that we are special, to be blessed with this *life* and we believe that Earth is special as the only known planet to host life.

Let's go back to the marble analogy - an infinite universe held in a bag by the palm of a human hand. We are the white marble, lucky to be chosen. Instead of adding just one white marble in the bag this time, imagine adding a billion. The chances that a white marble is drawn remain as slim as before; an infinite number of black marbles remain.

The mediocrity principle states: *If an item is drawn at random from one of several sets or categories, it's more likely to come from the most numerous category than from any one of the less numerous categories.*

*Joanne Tang*

The chance that we, as a species on Earth, just happened to be the singular selected white marble, is impossible. There is certainly something else out there. And that something else is likely more developed and stronger than us.

The question is, however, not whether something *is* out there, but the question of *when* it will come?



And they're coming right at us. Based on my calculations, they're still hundreds of millions of lightyears away. But they're coming fast, barely under the speed of light. We need to prepare ourselves. If we aren't prepared for their arrival, we will surely perish.



## *Evolution*

*1:52PM*

*March 16th, 5067*

*UN Council Meeting*

*United Nations*

*Krates:* We need to evolve. We will not be around for much longer if we don't. The time is now.

*Official Casey:* So you propose to poison the world's population's food? So that we may 'evolve'? Killing off almost everyone? To ward off aliens? We have no proof of extraterrestrial life.

*K:* They're out there, I know it. But it may not even be aliens who ensure our demise. We may be responsible for our end ourselves. We have driven this planet to its limits. Global warming may get us before alien invasion. After humanity has exited, even temporarily, peace and balance will be restored to Earth. Wildlife will flourish, vegetation will grow. It's a win-win situation! All I'm saying is something will happen and we need to prepare.

*C:* Mass genocide? You're a madman.

*K:* I am simply speaking of what has to be done. I am saving humanity.

*C:* By killing everyone? How does that help?

*K:* The dinosaurs in their time were the biggest, strongest, best alive! Until an asteroid came, and wiped them all. They weren't prepared. What emerges? Us, advanced, smarter, and better. When the Earth was settling, an asteroid hit it. This time it may not be an asteroid. We have to evolve. There's no room

*Joanne Tang*

for the weak.

C: By killing the vast majority of the human population?

K: Once the dust settles, humans will have every opportunity to improve.

C: Get him out of here! Security? This is a madman!

K: I'm not trying to destroy humanity, I'm trying to save it!

C: Get him out... he's clearly wrong in the head.



## *Evolution*

*Dr. Krates' Journal*

*September 2nd, 5067*

*WORLD POPULATION: 15,484,812*

*TOTAL DEATHS : 251,109*

*TOTAL BIRTHS: 503,243*

My job as a biology professor has granted me access to the entire college's laboratory. I teach at one of the top schools in the country and the lab equipment here is the very best. I enjoy a private work space. It's perfect.

Since the UN meeting in March, I have spent time engineering the disease. Their thinking was flawed. Without their support, I had no access to water suppliers to proceed with my plan to poison the population. Casey left me no choice but to take the matter into my own hands. They brought this upon themselves. It's been a couple months since my initial development of TI-37. It's controversial but doing well.

I plan to release TI-37 into the water system. It will infect, and ultimately kill, almost every human on Earth. The only humans who survive will be the very fittest. We only have room for the fittest.

My disease will be beautiful and it will be very infectious. What's great about society is how social we are. Every second every day billions around the world interact, talk and touch. It will be transmitted from one human to another through social interaction. It needs to be very infectious; it



*Joanne Tang*

needs to be a pandemic.



*Dr. Krates' Journal*

*December 22nd 5067*

*WORLD POPULATION: 15,466,483*

*TOTAL DEATHS : 249,028*

*TOTAL BIRTHS: 503,948*

Antibiotic resistance is a concern for scientists working in field of epidemiology. TI-37 responds very well against antibiotics. I introduce a small, diluted amount of an antibiotic and allow time for the TI-37 to adapt. The antibiotic kills off weaker TI-37 cells and leaves the stronger ones behind. Soon, the stronger cells are the only ones left and they begin to reproduce. All that is left is an improved version of TI-37. It models evolution. So far, TI-37 is immune to 4 out of the 10 classes of antibiotics. Today I will be adding Penicillins to TI-37's list of immunities.

Without an effective antibiotic, there will be no treatment for TI-37.



## *Evolution*

*Dr. Krates' Journal*

*July 15th 5068*

*WORLD POPULATION: 15,470,837*

*TOTAL DEATHS :250,402*

*TOTAL BIRTHS: 500,937*

I have successfully tested all combinations of antibiotics against TI-37. I must now focus on increasing infectivity and incubation period length. The incubation period is the period between initial infection and the moment when symptoms show. A typical cold's incubation period is 1-3 days. That's 1-3 days before a person realizes they have the cold. Then they either go to the doctor or self-medicate. That's 1-3 before someone realizes they must stay at home so as not to infect others. That's 1-3 days before action is taken against the disease.

Once people start going to the doctor for TI-37 symptoms, it will be noticed. Once it is noticed, doctors will realize how infectious and resistant it is. Organizations such the WHO will declare it a threat. They will attempt to develop a vaccine. If a vaccine is developed fast enough, it will be distributed globally. This would mean defeat for my plans. They may even eradicate my disease, just like Smallpox, which was eradicated in 1980 using vaccines.

The longer someone is unaware of their infection, the more time they will have to unwittingly transmit the disease. Whilst the host is unaware of

*Joanne Tang*

the infection, the TI-37 will slowly take over the body and gain control. When symptoms start to show after 5-7 months, symptoms will appear, initially, as influenza. Victims are most likely to stay at home and self-medicate with over-the-counter drugs. Doctors will dismiss the symptoms as the flu and send the person home with the same over-the-counter products. I will strategically plan the date of my release of TI-37 so that a majority of the infected begin to show influenza symptoms during the flu season. Scientists will feel no need to further investigate the disease.

The infected will begin to experience symptoms: sneezing, coughing and vomiting. These symptoms will aid the infectivity of TI-37. Most people will still have the strength to go outside and continue to work. After 2-3 weeks of influenza like symptoms, things will take a turn. By this stage, the disease will have taken full control of the host's body and it will begin to attack its systems. Symptoms will become more serious.

As a result of its long incubation period,  $\frac{3}{5}$  of the world's population will, at this point, suffer TI-37.

9-10 months after infection, symptoms will be lethal for the host.

At this point it will be put onto a WHO watchlist and closely monitored. Research for a vaccine will begin in earnest.



## *Evolution*

*Dr. Krates' Journal*

*October 1st 5068*

*WORLD POPULATION: 15,470,482*

*TOTAL DEATHS : 250,917*

*TOTAL BIRTHS: 501,927*

It has been over a year since I started work on TI-37 and it is now ready. The incubation period for TI-37 is 6 months and it is transferable through human contact, bodily fluid, air, and water. It is resistant to all 10 classes of antibiotics.

It's a masterpiece.

All my work so far with the disease has been contained in a secure environment. I am not infected. After release, I can't confirm that I will survive the infection, however. To my advantage, I am the only one aware of its existence.

I plan to release it tomorrow at three locations. Each location has been chosen to maximize transmission. The locations are: the international airport, the city center, and District 7, one of the poorest and most densely populated districts in our city. The airport will offer overseas opportunities for TI-37.

TI-37 will be released in three timed contraptions I have created. Each will contain the disease in a small capsule which will be released in aerosol

*Joanne Tang*

form. My contraptions are disguised to look like common items found in the various environments so that no suspicion is aroused and to ensure they are not moved from their designated locations.

I will place my contraptions in their designated locations tomorrow.



## *Evolution*

*Dr. Krates' Journal*

*October 2nd 5068*

*WORLD POPULATION: 15,466,983*

*TOTAL DEATHS : 248,089*

*TOTAL BIRTHS: 500,480*

TI-37 is released and my plan is finally in action! And there is no stopping it. I will spend the rest of my days at home. I have been preparing my home for months with food supplies, water, rations...etc. I will live the rest of my life here. I will not set foot outside. Even I have no vaccine or cure for TI-37; it is too powerful. Of course I will eventually get infected, for that is part of the plan, but I would like to stay alive long enough to watch the pandemic unfold.

I am saving humanity.



*Joanne Tang*

DAY 2

INFECTED:

PEOPLE:265

COUNTRIES:2

DEAD:0

STATUS: UNNOTICED

TI-37 HAS INFECTED ITS FIRST OVERSEAS COUNTRY(S): CHINA, CANADA



DAY 8

INFECTED:

PEOPLE:3087

COUNTRIES:5

DEAD:0

STATUS: UNNOTICED

TI-37 HAS INFECTED ITS FIRST 5 COUNTRIES: USA, CHINA, CANADA,  
MEXICO, BRAZIL



DAY 27

INFECTED:

PEOPLE:20,321

COUNTRIES: 20

DEAD:0

## *Evolution*

*STATUS: UNNOTICED*

*TI-37 HAS INFECTED 20 COUNTRIES.*

\*\*\*-----\*\*\*

*DAY 42*

*INFECTED:*

*PEOPLE: 453,980*

*COUNTRIES:12*

*DEAD:0*

*STATUS: UNNOTICED*

*TI-37 HAS INFECTED EVERY INHABITED CONTINENT.*

\*\*\*-----\*\*\*

*DAY 66*

*INFECTED:*

*PEOPLE: 1,000,000*

*COUNTRIES:18*

*DEAD:0*

*STATUS: UNNOTICED*

*TI-37 HAS INFECTED 1,000,000 INDIVIDUALS.*

\*\*\*-----\*\*\*

*DAY 87*

*INFECTED:*

*PEOPLE: 100,000,000*



*Joanne Tang*

COUNTRIES:69

DEAD:0

STATUS: UNNOTICED

TI-37 HAS INFECTED 100,000,000 INDIVIDUALS.

\*\*\*-----\*\*\*

DAY 186

INFECTED:

PEOPLE: 786,005,801

COUNTRIES:84

DEAD:0

STATUS: NOTICED

TI-37 INITIAL SYMPTOMS NOTED AND IS NOTICED BY A DOCTOR IN USA. IT IS ASSUMED TO BE THE INFLUENZA VIRUS, ANTIBIOTICS ARE PRESCRIBED.

\*\*\*-----\*\*\*

DAY 192

INFECTED:

PEOPLE: 1,957,076,989

COUNTRIES:83

DEAD:0

STATUS: NOTED

UPON CLOSER INSPECTION, TI-37 IS IDENTIFIED TO BE A NEW DISEASE.

## *Evolution*

OTHER COUNTRIES REPORT TO HAVE FOUND THIS DISEASE AMONG POPULATIONS. IT IS THOUGHT TO BE HIGHLY CONTAGIOUS, BUT NOT DEADLY. SCIENTISTS LOOK FURTHER INTO TI-37.



DAY 202

INFECTED:

PEOPLE: 3,000,009,002

COUNTRIES:95

DEAD:0

STAU: RECOGNIZED AS POTENTIAL THREAT

UPON CLOSER INSPECTION, TI-37 IS IMMUNE TO CLASS 1 AND 3 ANTIBIOTICS. AWARENESS HAS BEEN RAISED AND OTHER METHODS OF TREATMENT ARE BEING TESTED. TI-37 IS VERY EFFECTIVE AND HAS INFECTED A FIFTH OF THE WORLD'S POPULATION. MORE RESEARCH IS BEING DONE. SYMPTOMS ARE NON-LETHAL.



DAY 204

INFECTED:

PEOPLE: 3,072,791,749

COUNTRIES: 99

DEAD:0

STATUS: UNDER WATCH

*Joanne Tang*

*TI-37 FIRST MAJOR SYMPTOMS NOTED: RASH AND INSOMNIA.*

*TI-37 IS UNDER WHO'S WATCHLIST. IT HAS BEEN DISCOVERED THAT TI-37 IS IMMUNE TO ALL CLASSES OF ANTIBIOTICS. PEOPLE ADVISED TO STAY INDOORS AND SELF-ISOLATE.*



*Dr. Krates' Journal*

*April 22st 5069*

*WORLD POPULATION: 15,496,983*

*TOTAL DEATHS : 249,028*

*TOTAL BIRTHS: 503,948*

I have just watched the news. Those infected with TI-37 are now experiencing the first major symptoms and I'm so excited! In 65 days the lethal symptoms start. The scientists have figured out TI-37's resistant bacterial shell. Soon they will realize that they are hopeless for a cure. I have not yet been infected.



## *Evolution*

*Day 217*

*INFECTED:*

*PEOPLE: 5,000,490,029*

*COUNTRIES: 123*

*DEAD:0*

*STATUS: EPIDEMIC*

*TI-37 HAS DEVELOPED MORE SERIOUS SYMPTOMS, SUCH AS PARANOIA, SWEATING, AND SEIZURES. SOME SYMPTOMS HAVE INCREASED INFECTIVITY OF THE DISEASE. IT IS DECLARED AN EPIDEMIC. CURFEWS ARE IMPOSED.*



*Day 237*

*INFECTED:*

*PEOPLE: 8,050,490,029*

*COUNTRIES: 154*

*DEAD:0*

*STATUS: EPIDEMIC, WORLDWIDE EMERGENCY*

*TI-37 HAS DEVELOPED MORE SERIOUS SYMPTOMS, SUCH AS CYSTS, PULMONARY FIBROSIS, ABSCESSSES, AND HYPERSENSITIVITY. SOME SYMPTOMS HAVE INCREASED INFECTIVITY OF THE DISEASE. IT IS DECLARED A WORLDWIDE EMERGENCY. BOTTLED WATER AND MASKS ARE DISTRIBUTED. CURFEWS ARE IMPOSED GLOBALLY. ALL PORTS WORLDWIDE ARE CLOSED. THE UN'S PRIORITY IS THE PURSUIT OF A*

*Joanne Tang*

VACCINE AND THE ISOLATION OF THE INFECTED.



*Day 276*

*INFECTED:*

*PEOPLE: 13,000,490,029*

*COUNTRIES: 195*

*DEAD:176,000*

*STATUS: PANDEMIC*

*TI-37 HAS DEVELOPED LETHAL SYMPTOMS, SUCH AS PULMONARY OEDEMA, PULMONARY FIBROSIS, AND IMMUNE SUPPRESSION. SOME SYMPTOMS HAVE INCREASED INFECTIVITY OF THE DISEASE. IT IS DECLARED AN INTERNATIONAL EMERGENCY. ALL PORTS WORLDWIDE HAVE BEEN CLOSED AND OVERSEAS TRADE IS HALTED. EVERY COUNTRY HAS BEEN INFECTED. TI-37 HAS BEEN DECLARED A CLASS 5/5 WORLDWIDE PANDEMIC. ALL GLOBAL PRIORITY IS TO DEVELOP A VACCINE AND CURE.*



## *Evolution*

*Day 301*

*INFECTED:*

*PEOPLE: 14,993,837,021*

*COUNTRIES: 195*

*DEAD: 890,382*

*STATUS: CLASS 5 PANDEMIC*

*TI-37 HAS DEVELOPED MORE LETHAL SYMPTOMS, SUCH AS NECROSIS AND TOTAL ORGAN SHUTDOWN. LESS THAN 1,000,000 REMAIN UNINFECTED.*

*\*\*\*-----\*\*\**

*DAY 302*

*INFECTED:*

*PEOPLE: 14,328,980,382*

*COUNTRIES 195*

*DEAD: 2,073,133*

*STATUS: CLASS 5 PANDEMIC*

*TI-37 HAS INFECTED EVERY HUMAN BEING ON EARTH. MILLIONS HAVE DIED. EFFORTS OF THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY ARE NO LONGER FOCUSED ON A VACCINE, BUT A CURE. PROGRESS IS SLOW.*

*\*\*\*-----\*\*\**

*Joanne Tang*

*Dr. Krates' Journal*

*August 2nd 5068*

*WORLD POPULATION: 14,328,980,382*

*TOTAL DEATHS : 802,837,028*

*TOTAL BIRTHS: 5,048*

I have finally been infected. I have played my own game. Over the next few months, humanity's population will diminish. I was infected about a week ago. June will arrive before my disease fully takes over my body and kills me. This will be a painful death, but it will be the best pain. It's a bittersweet victory. Only the strongest will be left. The weak will be gone. Humanity will be pure.



## *Evolution*

*DAY 320*

*INFECTED:*

*PEOPLE: 13,273,430,318*

*COUNTRIES: 195*

*DEAD: 2,092,073,132*

*STATUS: CLASS 5 PANDEMIC*

*SOCIETY IS COLLAPSING, NATION STATES ARE FALLING. NO CURE FOR  
TI-37 HAS BEEN FULLY DEVELOPED.*

*\*\*\*—————\*\*\**

*DAY: 422*

*INFECTED:*

*PEOPLE: 7,483,781,293*

*COUNTRIES: 195*

*DEATHS: 8,730,317,381*

*50% of EARTH'S POPULATION HAVE DIED DUE TO TI-37.*

*\*\*\*—————\*\*\**



*Joanne Tang*

*Dr. Krates' Journal*

*May 31 5068*

*WORLD POPULATION: 3,284,7421,984*

*TOTAL DEATHS : 12,833,928,740*

*TOTAL BIRTHS: 201*

I am dying. Unfortunately, I won't live to witness my plan complete. I can rest knowing my work is done, however. I have found myself rather bored during this time. It has been quite entertaining watching my plan unfold, I must admit. I do pity mankind, but once I am reminded of my goal, I remember it is for the greater good!

Two weeks ago my nephew died. He was my last living relative. I never knew my parents and I don't have children. I grew up with my older brother, Andrew. Andrew was the best. He stood up for me and helped me even in my darkest times. I loved him very much. Before he passed, he had a child: my nephew.

I didn't know my nephew well, but I met and conversed with him a couple times. He was a strong, young man, which probably explained how he survived so long. I was really hoping that he'd pull through. It is quite unfortunate that he couldn't.

This will probably be my last entry.



## *Evolution*

*DAY: 502*

*INFECTED:*

*PEOPLE: 12*

*COUNTRIES: 4*

*DEATHS: 15,928,980,382*

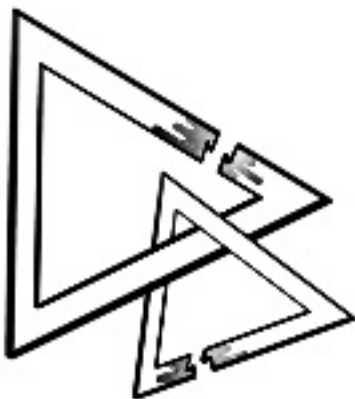


*ONLY 12 INDIVIDUALS, FROM FOUR DIFFERENT COUNTRIES, HAVE SURVIVED TI-37. THEY SHARE A VERY RARE GENETIC DISORDER, KNOWN AS MUTATION X.*

*HUMAN CIVILIZATION IS DESTROYED. BUT HUMANITY WILL GET BACK UP, STRONGER, FASTER, AND BETTER THAN EVER. AS THE FINAL HUMANS REPRODUCE, THEY WILL HEREDITARILY PASS MUTATION X, (WHICH REQUIRES BOTH PARENTS POSSESSING THE GENE), TO THEIR OFFSPRING. THIS WILL CREATE A NEW, FRESH, STRONGER SUBSPECIES OF HUMAN, FAR MORE CAPABLE AND BETTER THAN THE LAST. HUMANS WILL HAVE A FRESH START.*

*MEANWHILE WITHOUT THE PRESENCE OF HUMANS, WILDLIFE FLOURISHES. THE UNIVERSAL SCALE BETWEEN MANKIND AND NATURE HAS FINALLY REACHED EQUILIBRIUM.*

*BALANCE HAS BEEN RESTORED.*





# BIRDS

*May Proctor*



When Aaron was 50, he ran away, screaming from a single pigeon. All of the color drained from his tanned face, his light hair standing up on its end. Then he saw a tree filled with parakeets and collapsed on the ground, his limbs shaking uncontrollably. “I’m terrified of birds,” he choked out as he lay paralysed by fear on the asphalt, a concerned old man looking over him asking if he was alright.

Ten years later, he moved into an underground burrow in the Mojave Desert and dedicated his life to eradicating birds from the world.

Little did Aaron know, in a military base near his dusty home in the desolate Mojave Desert, the most infamous and sophisticated spying machine of all time in the shape of his worst fear was being created.

General Milo, the mastermind of the BIRDS (**B**ionic **I**ntelligence **R**adar **D**irective **S**ervers) program, woke up feeling unsettled on the morning

## BIRDS

of the first test flight. General Milo was a tall man of seven feet with broad shoulders, a disproportionately small head, and a sunburned bulbous nose square in the middle of his face. He strode past the fleet of BIRDS in the nesting rooms charging on the long-lasting quantum batteries powered by excitonic energy cells. These photon signals were undetectable by wireless networks and all other power sources.

“And to think it was all my brilliant idea,” General Milo thought. He himself, the creator of BIRDS, walked into the flight viewing room where he was greeted by the hum of GPS trackers and flashing screens. Just as his lieutenant, Nately, a short man in a white shirt, black tie, and short black hair walked in a mechanical voice announced, “The BIRDS will be launched in T minus five minutes.”

The BIRDS took off, a great cloud of brown and grey tones clouding the clear cyan sky, contrasting the bright amber, orange, and bronze shades of the sand and rocks. The sound of their camera lenses shuttering filled the viewing room where General Milo and Nately sat waiting anxiously for their test to be a success. Suddenly, a warning light came on, scattering red shadows all over the room. Then, the monotone, mechanical voice blared, “Warning, a threat is approaching. Warning, a threat is approaching.”



Aaron had just stepped out of his burrow that morning to check his rusted old mailbox that was always empty. A hot dry breeze greeted him, blowing sand into his threadbare slippers. He gazed at the flat, inhospitable, wild desert

*May Proctor*

where not a tree or creature could be seen for miles. He had no acquaintances and no one knew where he lived, even the vile Internal Revenue Service. Suddenly, a giant cloud of black appeared on the horizon. As the cloud got closer, Aaron could make out feathers, razor-sharp beaks, and sinister beady eyes staring back at him.

“The birds have arrived,” he stuttered.

He felt as though he was in a pitch-black room that was too small for him. He felt his legs tense up and curl up into a ball, his elbows and knees curled up against his cheek. He heard a chattering sound getting louder and louder, resounding violently in his head.

“They’ve found me at last,” he stammered. “I must defeat them.”

Aaron picked up a petrified tree branch, his legs shaking like jello under his blue-striped pajama pants. The birds swooped down on Aaron, but he was prepared: he had a purpose, a mission to complete.

“Arg!” he screamed and charged at the birds, wielding the petrified tree branch, glowing golden under the harsh desert sun’s rays. There was a mighty crash as birds fell from the sky onto the scorching bronze desert sand. Once the great cloud of birds dissipated from the once again cerulean sky, Aaron looked down to admire his handiwork. The ground was littered with birds who had fallen from the sky because of his assault. After looking around to make sure no other birds were present, Aaron ducked back into his burrow and made himself a cup of tea.



## BIRDS

Suddenly, an appalled expression came over General Milo's pale face, flushing it bright red as the warning lights cast flaming shadows across his face. Down on the hyper-realistic projection from one of the cameras of the BIRDS' eyes, an old man in a pair of blue-and-white-striped pajamas with a grizzly beard appeared, carrying an orange-ish log of sorts.

"Uh, sir," Nately stammered, "the man seems to be attacking the BIRDS. I think we have a potential threat that needs to be neutralized." General Milo spun around and stared deeply at the projection, his eyes getting wider and wider with each passing second.

"How is this possible? An eccentric, old hermit has just single-handedly destroyed America's most promising spying drone! Unbelievable! Unbelievable!", General Milo muttered to himself. "Send a team out and bring that man here. I can't find any records of him in the system. He's a complete ghost."

General Milo leaned back in his chair, placed his hand on his feverish forehead, and sighed deeply.

Aaron sat under the dim lamp in his burrow sipping his piping hot tea and staring at his crumbling dirt walls, recovering from the shock of the earlier events of the day. His hands still trembled at the thought of all the birds rushing at him, their feathers rustling, their wings making clicking sounds as they flapped together, forming a giant dark cloud.

Without warning, the walls of his burrow shook and crumbled violently, and a deep indistinct voice called from outside. Aaron rose from his



*May Proctor*

chair and stepped back, retreating deeper underground. The men outside stormed into the burrow, their heads brushing against the crumbling dirt ceiling glancing into the shadows where Aaron lay hidden.

Aaron sat in the back of the armored truck bouncing around like a ping-pong ball in the pitch black. Suddenly, the truck stopped and Aaron lurched forward. He groaned as he stood up and called out in the darkness,

“Hello? Is anyone there?” All of the sudden, Aaron crumpled as he was hit in the back of the knees with an aluminum baseball bat. A coarse piece of black cloth was placed over his eyes, and he was picked up by a rough, gloved hand slung over a shoulder. Aaron was carried into a cold room where he was placed on a primitive metal chair that squeaked when he leaned back on the cool but rusted metallic backrest. He heard the door crack open and slam shut with a click as hard-soled leather shoes tapped across the concrete floor.

“You can take your blindfold off, Sir,” said a low, growling voice. Aaron pulled his blindfold off his weathered face and blinked.

“Now I understand that you attacked a fleet of our BIRDS recently, and I just want to ask you three simple questions. What do you know about our drone intelligence program? Why did you attack those BIRDS? And who are you?”, General Milo barked, and Nately sat quietly, spooked by the old man. “Those birds are the devil incarnate. You can see it in their eyes. Their beaks are silently waiting to gouge your eyes out. Their claws are razor-sharp and they just stare into your soul with those beady eyes of theirs. They have an appetite for murder silently waiting to be fulfilled.” Aaron’s face was

## BIRDS

inching closer and closer to the General's as he proceeded with his descriptions. Aaron began to curl into a ball on the cold hard chair, and after seconds of rapid breathing he managed to stutter out, "I'm terrified of birds... they're pure evil." He trailed off and shuddered at the thought of the horrid birds.

General Milo stood up, kicking the chair across the room as he sprinted to the intercom system. "We have a Code Alfa Zulu Red. I repeat we have a Code Alfa Zulu Red! This man," he gasped, "He knows about the BIRDS program!"

As if he was in a trance, Nately slowly followed Milo out of the interrogation room, forgetting to lock the door behind him. As he walked down the dimly lit corridor a few steps behind his boss after the interrogation, he felt a moist trickle of sweat slide down his clammy neck. He couldn't get the bizarre man's words out of his head. Thoughts about the demonic birds and their razor-sharp talons and how you could see death in their eyes echoed around in his head, clouding and distorting his thoughts. He began to glance around nervously. After seeing a synthetic feather on the floor he felt his pulse quicken and nausea began to build in his throat. "That man's right," he thought, "those BIRDS are horrible."

Having been left in the frigid interrogation room for some time, Aaron tested the door and found he was able to open it, so he decided to go and figure out where he was. After shuffling down the poorly carpeted hallway, he saw a bird feather flutter slowly onto the floor and drift onto his

*May Proctor*

frigid bare toes. He felt his heartbeat accelerate, and his palms began to sweat profusely. His pupils began to dilate as he saw a whole cloud of birds coming at him with murder in their eyes. He began to run, his worn-out slippers slipping on the slick floor. Suddenly he came upon a room full of flashing blue lights and birds hooked up to sleek black servers. The birds' eyes were open and glowing with a dim red light that cast broken shadows into the gloomy corners of the room.

Aaron froze in his tracks and felt a flash of heat come over him. Almost like he was in the desert, standing on the sand with his bare feet, he felt the temperature slowly rising around him as the sweat from his forehead started to plaster loose hairs to his forehead. Suddenly he was transported to an arctic wasteland, his limbs shivering alarmingly as he felt ice sting his body. Finally, his eyes started to focus back onto the birds with their ghostly glowing eyes. He saw a packet of discarded matches lying on the floor and he bent down to retrieve them, his knees aching as he picked up the packet. Aaron struck one of the matches alight and watched its flame dance on the end of the match, illuminating his face in the poorly lit hallway. Suddenly, he thrust the match under a bird and watched its synthetic feathers burn off in little embers. All at once, alarms started blaring and electronic voices started going off. "Warning, the BIRDS' Nest has been breached. Warning, the BIRDS' Nest has been breached."

Back in the control center, Nately and General Milo heard the alarms and warning signals. "Christ," General Milo groaned, "Nately, you go check

## BIRDS

the BIRDS Nest, and make sure that the maniac psycho is still in the interrogation room where we left him. We'll rendezvous with team Delta at Drop Zone Yankee."

"Yes, Sir," Nately timidly responded as he dashed out the door toward the BIRDS Nest. The corridor was in chaos as white-hot flames leaped up the servers, showering sparks everywhere. He saw the crazed man running out of the Nest as it began to be engulfed in flames, BIRDS chasing after him and soaring around his head, their knife-like talons clawing at his head and shoulders, their razor-sharp beaks diving into his face. His pajamas were in tatters, and the crimson blood from fresh cuts seeped into the thin cotton fabric, staining patches red. There were jagged, red scratches all over his face. Nately stood there frozen with fear and felt buckets of sweat soak into the stiff fabric of his white button-down shirt. As the flames began to consume the end of the corridor, Nately and Aaron took off down the hallway, chased by the blood-thirsty BIRDS and the wall of flames that threatened to devour them. Finally, they reached the end of the hallway, and Nately hurriedly punched in the key code and flung open the doors so they could escape. Then they charged out into the sweltering desert afternoon. Nately stood to one side panting and coughing, his hair soaked with sweat. He staggered around until he saw Aaron stumble in the fine sand of the desert ground.

Suddenly, one of the giant BIRDS swooped down over his head, grazing the top of his hair, and flew towards the crazed man, who was gasping for air on the dusty, desert ground, his grey hair stained a rusty

*May Proctor*

beige, and his white and blue striped pajamas dyed a ragged shade of red clay. The BIRDS landed on Aaron's chest, with many more circling above in the cloudless sky, their eyes making clicking sounds as they blinked, their beady pitch black eyes staring straight into Aaron's dark brown eyes.

Aaron felt the bird's razor-sharp claws settle into his chest. He felt his heart start racing and his entire body began to tremble, kicking up the dust around him, forming a cloud of bright orange dust around him. Suddenly, one of the birds thrust its talons deeply into Aaron's insides. He let out a cry of pain as the bird propelled itself from him, flying into the cyan sky, its feet mangled and dripping crimson. Nately continued to gape at Aaron's body, with dark red blood pooling around him, settling the dust and staining Aaron's whole body crimson. His hair and pajamas stuck to his body and small rivulets of cold sweat ran down his bloodstained neck, clearing small pathways through the red landscape of his body. Nately, who was petrified throughout the whole ordeal, ran to Aaron and heard him mutter softly, gasping for breath, "What did I tell you, I knew those birds had murder in their eyes."

Aaron's eyes rolled to the back of his head and Nately averted his gaze from Aaron's body lying on the hard-packed ground. He screamed as he fled, his hands trembling as he pointed in Aaron's direction.

Needless to say, Nately never made it to Drop Zone Yankee because he ran for the hills hyperventilating all the way with his unsteady breath. His feet sifted through the desert sand as he slowed his pace, the white-hot heat

## *BIRDS*

of the sun beating down from overhead. He could not escape the vision of the strange man lying on the dry, cracked ground with the bird standing on his chest, menacingly glancing around as the burnt orange colored dust swirled around them.

Back at the base, General Milo was waiting impatiently for Nately, pacing around and fidgeting with his hands when out of the blue, one of the BIRDS swooped in and dove straight at Milo's face. At first, he was relieved that his creation had survived the calamity, but his relief soon turned to anguish as it kept diving at his face, picking up speed as it went.







# cinereal.

*Jasmine Yang*



*cinereal.*

(sɪn'ɪəriəl) adjective. Of an ash-gray colour, or pertaining to the Tuber Cinereum of the brain. Helps control the sympathetic nervous system, directing the body's rapid involuntary response to dangerous or stressful situations.

## **PROLOGUE**

***Three years later***

**June 1, 2157**

*I returned home to the eerie streets of a deserted downtown. Brooding figures in grey armour patrolled the cobblestone streets. It was clear they no longer ruled in secret. Since my last visit, they had started to roam the streets freely, shamelessly killing citizens who didn't abide by their rules.*

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*My head snapped up as a scream cut through the air. The passersby had given one of the alleyways a wide berth, leaving me a clear view of the scene.*

*A teenage blonde girl sobbed as she hunched over the unmoving form of a brunette protectively. Towering over them was a tall woman with an impassive look on her face. Blood pooled thickly from a wound on the brunette's left leg. Judging by the amount, a main artery had been hit. Despite the blood already soaking the brunette's blue tank top and white denim shorts, no passersby so much as glanced in their direction.*

*"Why did you do it?" the blonde shouted, her eyes bloodshot and red. She reminded me of myself years ago, when the same people killed the one person I promised I would protect.*

*"She was a potential threat. We can't have that." The standing guard spoke in a voice as cold as the icy expression she wore.*

*"A potential threat?" the blonde scoffed. She let out a hysterical laugh, tearing through the tense atmosphere even as the tears flowed. "She was my friend! Her test was only conducted two days ago and she still had so much to live for. Why would yo-*

*The gunshot echoed through the street.*



*Jasmine Yang*

**I - MARINA**

**April 2, 2154**

Murmurs of impatience flooded the dull school halls. In just a few moments, we would be able to see the highly anticipated results of the National Obligatory Aptitude Test. My classmates seemed to take note of my leg-tapping and fist-clenching; two asked if I was okay.

‘Of course I’m not okay,’ I thought to myself. I was nervous. Hysterical, nearly. Just like many other participants, I had spent the past weeks worried sick about my results. I couldn’t wait to see them, but now, as they came closer, I suddenly dreaded them.

“Evans, Marina. Stall 14.” A robotic voice called. I made my way to a makeshift stall. The only items the narrow room contained was a beaten-down leather chair, a tray table and a laptop. I was met by the warm smile of a woman, but her icy green eyes sent chills down my spine. Her unkempt auburn hair barely brushed her nametag. It read *Nadia P.*

“Good morning! Would you like to hear your score and test background first, or would you like to receive your tattoo first?” Nadia had a raspy voice. Her breath smelled of cigarettes and her clothes of alcohol.

“Excuse me, a tattoo?”

“Here at the N.O.A.T., we’ve established a system where your tattoo represents your level of intelligence. It lets the neurosurgeons easily identify who you are, and what type of surgery you will receive. I am sure you’ve been informed of the surgery?”

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I nodded. For all seventeen years of my short life, the protocol had been drilled into my mind: every citizen of our nation would undergo what we understood to be brain surgery when we came of age. The information we were given about it was vague. As far as I could tell, we would be sedated and then wake up to doctors who would tell us that everything was as good as new. Nobody knew why we needed to undergo the surgery. The televisions advertised it as a “checkup to ensure everyone is in their best mental and physical state.”

Nadia began to explain the test result scale and what the scores meant. A red tattoo meant you received a score well above average; a blue tattoo represented those who scored around average or below. “Now, hold still,” Nadia started, pulling out a large, intimidating tube with a needle and syringe attached to its end. “This will hurt just a bit.”

Wincing, I watched the tattoo ink bleed into my skin. I couldn’t help but feel relieved when the ink turned up blue. Something inside me sensed that the blue was the safer of the two, and it would ensure that I blended in with the others. Here in Utah, especially at our school, there seemed to be some stigma surrounding those with a red tattoo. They seemed to disappear halfway through the year. Nobody paid much attention to this; we figured they moved just away, to another state.

Nadia muttered to herself as she hastily took a piece of paper from the tray table and scribbled a series of letters and numbers. She shoved the paper into my hand. “G-0520-152120,” the paper read. “It’ll all make sense

Jasmine Yang

soon,” she reassured me, noticing my doubtful look. Her icy green eyes had softened a bit, and an odd expression, almost akin to fear, swirled in their depths. I opened my mouth but before I could speak, I was ushered out of the room.

©

Promptly after returning home, I discovered that G-0520-152120 translated to the words “get out”. All it took was a simple google search, but it drained the little energy I had left. In my anxious state, I had slept little and the effects of that insomnia were starting to show. Engulfed by fatigue, my eyelids grew heavy and I found myself wandering towards the bed.

“One new email.” A robotic voice from my laptop woke me. Begrudgingly, I limped over to my desk, clicked open the email and began to read.

**Dear Marina,**

***I'm writing this as a last resort. Soon, I will flee the city. Don't expect to hear from me; for a nation so technologically advanced, the data service is inadequate. I'll keep in touch as much as possible, however. It is vital for your survival.***

It could've been the lack of sleep, but the email was incomprehensible. “Don't expect to hear from me... I'll keep in touch?” It made no sense. Frowning, I read on with a furrowed brow.

*cinereal.*

***You belong in the red category, not blue. I gave you the blue marking for your safety. Under no circumstances should you mention this. It won't be long until the government starts filtering every email. If you haven't already figured it out, G-0520-152120 means 'get out'. Open the attached file, and read it thoroughly and follow the content. It'll come in handy.***

***Best regards,***

***Nadia***

I fought the urge to sleep. The words started to float around the page, but I forced myself to read the file. They were a set of rules. Not many; three, to be exact. Of course, I did what I was told. I read each rule and did exactly what she had asked of me, unquestioningly.

***ONE.***

***Escape. To another city, another state, it doesn't matter. Just out of this town, where everyone will recognize you. It's not worth the risk. The further away you get, the safer it will be for you. And undertake a new identity; it'll make it easier to blend in.***

Stifling a yawn, I tossed my most prized possessions into a duffel bag. Running. It sounded simple enough. No specific destination, no particular goal. Just running away. With everything on the line. "Great," I muttered to myself.

Jasmine Yang

Thoughts of what would happen if I were caught I shoved aside. I zipped the bag, stood up and left the room with one last forlorn look at the place I had called home for so long. I avoided goodbyes. No emotions, no heartbreak, no attachment. Nobody needed to know that I had left.

The moment I stepped out of the door, I ran, my tiredness quickly forgotten. I was high on adrenaline and with no plan and nowhere to go. A storm smothered the sun. Rain beat against my skin in a rhythmic pattern, matching the pounding of my feet. The warmth suffocated me. My clothes and hair stuck to my skin. But I wasn't at all fazed by it. I wasn't stopping for anything. All I knew was that I had to get as far away from home, as quickly as possible.

Distance was all that mattered.



**TWO.**

***Talk to no one, trust no one. Sounds easy enough, but take it seriously. Whomever you encounter, no matter how friendly they may seem, don't allow yourself to be tempted by whatever opportunity they present to you. Don't let anyone know anything about you, especially the fact that you're a red.***

The warmth of the bus seat was unsettling, but I didn't mind. A dull ache had long since formed in my feet, and walking was painful. Every so often I looked out the window in bouts of paranoia-induced fear to make sure nobody was following me.

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The few people sitting on the bus swamped it with a muddied silence. We sat in relative stillness as the sights of the city rolled past. Every once in a while, there someone would shift in their seat, a little cough and a mild “bless you.” The bus was basic. The seats of moquette fabric were dulled by decades’ worth of grime, and caught in between the gaps were crumbs and blackened plastic wrappers.

Without warning, the brakes squealed as the bus abruptly came to a stop. We jerked forwards at the sudden halt. When I regained my balance, I pushed away the remains of what used to be a curtain to reveal a woman standing at the door of the bus. Her black hair was highlighted with the same shade of grey as the stormy sky outside. Stepping onto the bus, she dropped her cigarette and smothered it with the toe of her stiletto-heeled boots.

I heard the clink of a dollar dropped into the steel box. She blew a ring of smoke into the driver’s face and earned herself a disgusted glare. Taking no notice of him as he swatted the smoke back in her direction, she walked down the bus aisle and took a seat behind me.

Moments later, I felt a light tapping on my shoulder. I turned around and smelled the woman’s pungent breath. Up close, she seemed younger than I had initially thought. She didn’t look approachable, and the scar running down the left side of her face didn’t help either. I tried not to stare.

“Excuse me, do you know where this bus goes?” It was hard to make out what she said through the thick European accent. Portuguese, maybe Russian? I told her that I was unsure. She attempted to strike up a



*Jasmine Yang*

conversation, but I was simply too tired to converse with her. After a short while, she gave up, and I settled back into my seat.

I pulled my phone out of my duffel bag and opened the app “Mail”. I started to compose a new email and updated Nadia. I asked where I should go. So far, my runaway experience had been rather tedious. I was unsure of where to go, what I needed to do and whom I should trust. Up to this point, I had kept her rules in mind, though they were rather unhelpful.

***Dear Nadia,***

***Thank you for trying to help me. So far, I have yet to encounter any suspicious characters. Don't worry, I will stay alert and sharp; I won't get overconfident and let hubris overtake me.***

My typing was interrupted when my bag was knocked by a passenger passing, followed by my phone dropping on the ground. I looked up to see the woman with the boots. She apologised, picked up my bag and handed it back to me. Without another word, she left the bus. I ducked, eyes searching the floor for my phone so that I could continue typing- but it was nowhere to be found.

**THREE.**

***Stay alive.***



*cinereal.*

## **II - NADIA**

**May 31, 2154**

*Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a woman surrounded by a group in grey armour. She was enraged, yelling and cursing at the guards. The language she used was too foul to describe, certainly foul enough to infuriate the guards.*

*One of the guards stepped forward. I could hardly see through her bloodied visor; she seemed to be a fresh face, but I felt I had met her before. Her hand swiftly moved to the gun holster and, without hesitation, she fired.*

*A deep, percussive thud, the woman heard the shot and tried to run, but it was too late.*

*“Move!” I wanted to scream. I wanted to push her out of harm's way, but my body refused to move. I stood frozen as I watched the young woman, no older than I, fall to her knees. A bullet wound reddened her chest.*

*The guard wiped her visor with her bloodstained, glove-clad hands. The action only served to move the blood on it around, smearing streaks of dark reddish-brown onto the rest of her helmet. She turned in my direction. I closed my eyes and prayed she would spare my life. As she approached, I heard a faint clacking of her heeled boots. I squeezed my eyes shut.*

*My eyes opened when an icy metal kissed my forehead. The guard was looking down at me, the cool barrel of her gun pressed to my head. Through her visor, I could just make out her features. A long, jagged scar ran down the left side of her face, and black bangs, streaked with a cool grey, fell over her right eye. I opened my mouth to defend myself, but all that came out was a pathetic whimper. I shut my eyes again*

*Jasmine Yang*

*and the sound of the gunshot rattled through my body.*

I woke up in a cold sweat. The dream had been so surreal that for a moment, I could only sit, trembling. As my thoughts turned to Marina, I shuddered again. The thought of what would happen if they found her was terrifying. I was in deep enough trouble for trying to hide Marina, and I knew what they did to regular reds. I didn't know what they would've done to a hidden red. I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

When a knock on the door sounded, I let the mayor's assistant into my dressing room. "Miss Nadia? Your presentation starts in less than an hour; are you sure it's the best time to take a nap? If you don't give a performance that convinces the public that brain surgery is good for them, you know what will happen to you." I knew she doubted my ability to give a convincing presentation.

Taking a deep breath, I opened my laptop and made the final adjustments to my presentation. It had been a week since Marina's escape; at this point, they knew she was out there. I didn't know where exactly she was. Luckily, neither did they. From what I gleaned, it was a wild goose chase. They would locate her and, by the next day, she would've fled.

The loudspeaker called me up on stage. I was greeted with a loud round of applause that was quickly silenced by the guards in the venue. I introduced myself and began to explain what the government's brain surgery would mean for the citizens.

"Is it safe?" A voice from the crowd called out. "Yeah! How do we

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know we won't die after our skull has been cracked open?" I was soon bombarded with questions as every citizen added their cries to the chaos. Under the sudden assault, my mind went blank. Thankfully, they were stopped by the guards. The resulting silence allowed me to clear my mind and answer their questions the way the government would have wanted me to.

"For us to perform the brain surgery, we will have to first perform a craniotomy," I started. I could already sense the crowd's doubt and confusion, so I followed by explaining how it works. "A craniotomy involves the surgical removal of your scalp that creates a hole that leaves part of the brain exposed. The bone flap is temporarily removed but is later replaced once the surgery is complete.

"Of course, a series of tests performed by your doctor will determine the best location on which to perform the craniotomy. Next, the incision area will be prepped with an antiseptic, then the incision will be made. Once the incision is made, the skin and muscles are lifted off the bone and part of the skull is cut apart and removed. The bone flap will be set aside, and will later be replaced at the end of the surgery. The protective part of the brain, known as the dura, is then opened, exposing the brain. Using a variety of very small instruments, the neurosurgeons work deep inside the brain to correct the problem."

I proceeded to explain the benefits of brain surgery. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a small figure running into the crowd. She didn't look like the others; her dark brown hair stood out from the sea of blonde.

I tried to keep my composure as several guards started to chase the brunette. As I wrenched my attention back to my presentation, I made an effort not to think too much about it; it was most likely another stoner mucking around the event. This presentation was, after all, a public event. Yet as the brunette began to approach the stage, guards started to gather at the stairs, guns at the ready. An uneasy feeling rose within me, and I faltered in my speech as I turned subtly to get a glimpse of the person. People were starting to part around her, and it was then that I finally saw her face.

It was Marina. Guards began to surround her as she worked her way through the crowd. Without warning, the sound of a gunshot rang out, echoing through the crowd and reverberating through the buildings surrounding the public area.

The world seemed to slow. Marina staggered, eyes widening and arms flailing for balance as her knees buckled under her. Her lips parted slightly as if she were trying to form a word. Somehow, she found the strength to look up towards the stage.

Our gazes locked and held. Her face was a mask of shock, fear, and panic as she lost her balance, but her eyes told a different story. They were full of pain; it's not fair, they seemed to say; a grim acceptance of her fate. Before I realised it, I was running towards her, shoving the guards away as she slumped to the ground.

This wasn't supposed to happen. She was supposed to flee the city, flee this hell in the guise of a tame society. Instead, she collapsed, unmoving.

*cinereal.*

Long dark brown hair splayed across the concrete ground, already becoming matted and stringy with blood that pooled beneath her head and stained her simple grey clothing.

I fell to my knees beside her prone form, now nothing but a lifeless shell of the young woman I had tried to save. Tears threatened to spill from my eyes and I harshly rubbed them away with the back of my hand. The prayers and sadness that filled my mind were both directed towards her. She who had deserved so much more than an unjust death, she who had never really known the horrors and despicable acts people were capable of, she who had deserved a life away from this ruined society.

I thought back to when I had first met Marina Evans, nervousness and innocence shone in her wide grey eyes. The colour grey would forever be different to me. It used to represent the government, a controlling regime and manner they restricted the people; us. It used to be as bland and drab as the grey sky that hung above us. The colour now held a new meaning: it reminded me of beauty, innocence and freedom. When I first met Marina, I decided to help her. Her unconditional beauty, internal and external was now tied to the colour grey.

Wiping away a stubborn tear, I made eye contact with the glassy eyes of Marina Evans for one last time. The guards, busy controlling the crowd, took no notice of me as I walked away from the dimmed arena.



Jasmine Yang

**EPILOGUE**

**Three years later**

**June 1, 2157**

*The gunshot echoed through the street.*

*“You talk too much.” The guard spoke in a muffled voice, turning on her heel into a shadowed alley.*

*My jaw dropped in horror. As I watched, the blonde’s kneeling body slowly slumped to the ground. Her wide, steel-grey eyes stared blankly at the sky above her, a shocked expression being the look her face would be frozen in for eternity until the earth reclaimed her body and nothing but bones remained.*

*The last thought in my mind to no consolation was that at least she died with the person she was willing to die for. I stared at the intertwined hands of the two teenage girls, unmoving on the ground.*





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