The Song in the Smoke

“Raus! Raus!” We scrambled out, slipping and sliding.

“Lie down!” The head Gestapo officer demanded. “Now!”

We stared at him in slight disbelief. He wanted us to lie down, here, in the dirt?

“Are you deaf, Jews? I said lie down!” Apparently. We scrambled to do so.

Lying there, in the dirt and dust of some unknown Polish road, a memory came to me, unbidden and unwanted. A rumour, or a story I had heard in the ghetto. “Nu, it was in a village somewhere in Czechoslovakia, near the border, you see. The Germans, they came to that village, and dragged all of the Jews out of their homes, and made them dig holes. And when they had finished digging the holes, do you know what happened then? Those Jews were made to lie down, in the holes, and the Germans shot them. Every single one of them. Men, woman, even children. So now that village is Judenfrei.” I could hear the voice in my head so very clearly. Soft, slightly complaining, full of bitterness and offense. One of my mother’s friends? It could be. Or maybe just someone on the street.

But that could not happen here, not to us. Could it?

The Nazis were moving among us, removed all valuables with rough hands. My necklace was roughly torn from my neck, my watch from my wrist. Around me, the same thing was happening to other people. I could hear gasps, cries, protests, as precious things were torn away.

When our bodies had been stripped, a bottle of water was handed around. I managed to snatch a mouthful before it was torn away. That water was warm and dusty, but to me it was the sweetest drink I could imagine.

Then we were shoved back into the cattle cars. I managed to fall asleep, I think, only to awaken to the same jolting motion and sickly stench.
We remained in those trucks for I don’t know how long. It could have been one day, or five. Shmuel, my youngest brother, started to cough, a painful, hacking cough that could not be stopped.

I was dozing when we finally arrived at our destination.

“Alles raus!”

I jumped down awkwardly, hindered by Shmuel, who would not let go of my hand. As I hit the ground, I stumbled, clutching at Jakob to keep my balance.

I glanced hesitantly around, wanting to know where we were, but afraid of what I might see. It was misty and dim, the landscape slightly out of focus. I could see a barbed wire fence, a metal gate with something written on it, and the silhouettes of some low huts beyond. The air was full of a sour, burnt smell.

“W-what’s the gate say?” Shmuel murmured.

“I don’t know, I can’t see.”

“It says…” Jakob squinted through the gloom. “Arbeit macht Frei.”

“Oh, well, that’s good then, isn’t it? We can work. We are still healthy, and strong.” As if to prove my words false, Shmuel coughed again, shaking his small body. I rubbed his back distractedly. He looked feverish, the colour in his cheeks bright and unnatural. His forehead burned under my inquisitive hand.

“Men on the right, women and children!” The Nazi soldiers shouted the order.

“No!” Jakob gasped. “No, I’m staying with you!” He grabbed my free hand, holding it with a grip that felt as if it would crack the bone. I let go of Shmuel to wrap my arms around my other brother. Suddenly, he was more precious than anything to me. The last thing I had left in the world.

Shmuel was flung away from me by a soldier’s cruel hands; he fell down, and lay in the cold gray dust of Auschwitz.
Jakob’s fingers tightened even further around mine, if such a thing were possible.

An SS man struggled to pull us apart, but we resisted.

I looked into the face of the man tugging at my brother. His lips were crooked at one corner, on account of a short pink scar, pulling his mouth into a permanent bitter sneer. How had he gotten that way? I wondered. Had it been a Jew, separated from their family like we were now, who had cut him? I hoped it had been. The thought gave me a grim satisfaction.

No sooner had I thought this, than something crashed into the place where my brother’s fingers overlapped mine, sending a spike of pain up my wrist. I heard Jakob cry out, and felt him lose his grip.

“Sara!” He called to me. “Sara! Stay strong! I will find you!”

Tears sprang into my eyes.

I ran to Shmuel, picked him off the ground. He was sobbing.

“Hush, now. Stop crying.” That was as soothing as I could manage to be.

Harassed and hurried from all sides, we were pushed towards the end of the train tracks, where a man, an officer of the SS, was separating people into two groups.

“One at a time now. You need to be seen.”

I pushed Shmuel in front of me, waited to see which way he would be directed.

The man stared at him, inspecting his tiny body, tearstained eyes, feverish colouring. Shmuel stared back, and he smiled. He gave that officer his most angelic smile, as if hoping that would save him. For a second the man seemed to be considering something. Then his expression hardened. He waved disinterestedly to the left, across the tracks.

It was my turn then. I stood tall, determined not to waver under the intense scrutiny. The man’s hand went to the right.

I had been separated from my last remaining brother. And what would happen to us now? Would the groups be reunited, or would we stay separate?
I had no time to think, because I was being shoved on again, towards a building this time. Inside, there were benches around the walls, and a female SS officer with blonde hair to her shoulders.

“Strip!” She ordered us. We stared back, uncomprehending. She wanted us to strip? Here? In front of so many people?

“I said strip. Remove your clothes! Do you not understand? Here, you do what you are told, when you are told, understood?”

My hands were shaking with fear and shame as I removed my shoes, my dress, my stockings. Even our underclothes had to come off, and the pins from our hair.

I stood completely naked, my hair loose and wreathing my shoulders. My clothes lay on the bench beside me.

“Right, into the showers!”

We stumbled into the shower room, some, like me, struggling to conceal our nudity with our hands, others beyond caring.

We were crammed together in a large room, with showerheads in the ceiling. There was a moment of tense waiting before we were drenched with stinking, stinging liquid. Not water; disinfectant.

As soon as the stinging spray of disinfectant was finished, we were doused again, this time with cold water.

When that was finished, we were shoved out of the showers, dripping wet. There were no towels to dry ourselves with.

We were ushered into another room, this one with a pile of clothes in the middle.

“Find yourselves some clothes, quickly, and then you will visit the barber!”

I obtained a dress reaching to my knees, really more like underwear than proper clothing, and a pair of wooden clogs, neither of which fit. The dress was too loose, the shoes too small.
After moving up the room and trading, I was able to obtain better fitting clothing. No underwear or stockings were to be found.

As soon as we were clothed, we were pushed into the next room, lining up behind chairs for our hair to be cut.

Not just trimmed, but completely shaven off.

I watched in despair as my red curls, tight from the shower, tumbled to the floor. My hair. My eyes were burning with tears. *I will not cry*, I promised myself. *Never. I will never let these animals see me cry.*

By the time the prisoner working on my hair was finished, my scalp was completely bare. I was unrecognizable. No longer a human being. Who was I if people could not recognise me? Was I still the same person, even if others did not see it? Was I still Sara Aronowicz, even if I appeared to be just another anonymous prisoner? I could feel the air, cold and unwelcome against my bare scalp. I put my hand up to touch, and instead of the familiar soft weight of my hair I felt nothing but spikiness and skin.

The next room contained long tables, where more prisoners recorded our names, ages and professions. When I told them that I was sixteen, I was firmly contradicted. “No, you are twenty.”

“I am sixteen, as I just told you.”

“You are twenty. Here, sixteen is too young.”

I understood.

But that was not the end of my entry process. No, there was one more humiliation.

In the next room, we were herded into lines. I could barely see what was going on in front of me for the crowd. At least until I was shoved to the front. I sat before a prisoner, a man of around my father’s age. He wore the same striped pajamas as I did, but with a green triangle rather than a yellow star.
I eyed him warily and he gave me a tired smile.

I felt a burning pain in my left forearm as he began to tattoo a number on my skin.

When he had finished, I glanced down to read it. My arm was red and swollen, but the number was already clear enough to read. J19027. “Memorise your number.” The man who had given it to me told me, in a cold and detached way. “Without it you will be given no food. You must always answer when your number is called. Do you understand?” I nodded, numb to my very core.

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“All right, newcomers! I am your Blockalteste. That means you do what I say, when I say, and don’t ask questions! Understood?”

The Blockalteste, Magda, was a tall, sturdy-looking woman. I took an immediate dislike to her. She had a harsh, unpleasant face, with a permanent sneer on her lips.

“You are the highest numbers, you are worth the least. To survive, you must learn, and you must learn fast.”

This was the opening of the harrowing entrance speech that I would grow to know like the back of my hand. There was no warmth in it, no mercy, no humanity. But this was better. It was better that we learnt quickly what we were dealing with. This was no walk in the park. This was Auschwitz. Hell on Earth.

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We remained in those barracks for the rest of the day. We were given no food or water, until late evening, when we were told to line up for soup.

Soup was on long trestle tables. The girl ladling it out looked young, even younger than Jakob. “Hang on to your bowl, because there are no replacements. If you do not have your bowl, you cannot have soup, or water. You cannot wash yourself without it, either. Your bowl is essential for you to live.” The bowls in question were made of tin, shallow and
dented.

Despite the awful taste, I forced myself to eat my food. I had not had anything to eat in days, and I had a feeling I would need to be strong for what the next day would bring.

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I tumbled out off my bunk which was the middle of a set of three, and stumbled outside, along with the others.

Outside, we were told by the *Kapos* to line up in groups of five, so that we could be counted. This seemed to take hours, because every time the guards lost count, they would start over again.

And I had to remember to answer to my number. At first I didn’t. The guard called me twice before I answered, behaviour that earned me glares from all those around me. I had to remember that now I was not Sara Aronowicz, but J19027.

At long last it was over.

It was over, and we could work. A small consolation.

As a high number, I had been assigned the worst job: digging holes. Endless, seemingly useless holes. Ditches, to be more precise.

None of us were told why they were needed. None of us were told their purpose. We simply made them.

I can only imagine what this place would have looked like to a celestial observer, someone who could see all of it.

A sore, that’s what they would have seen. An unhealthy, cancerous sore scarring the Polish landscape. The dark smudge of smoke that lay permanently in the sky, scarring its flawless blue. Below that, the ugly blot of the camp itself. It had three roughly distinct sections, although from any distance they were very nearly indistinguishable to an observer. It was only closer in that the details became visible. Auschwitz, the main camp, with its imposing
iron gate. Behind that, Birkenau, where the smoke hung thickest. Then, at a right-angle to the
other two sections, stuck in for no distinct purpose, Buna-Monowitz, the last and least of the
three sub-camps. Then, tucked in between Birkenau and the forest, our ditches, making long,
pale slashes through the dirt.

We worked side-by-side, in a ceaseless, brutal rhythm. The dirt was hard and dry. Our spades
were shockingly inefficient for the heavy work. The wooden handles scraped the soft skin of
our palms, so that any Zugange given this duty had bleeding and blistered hands by
afternoon. And it was cold. The brutal, biting cold of winter in Eastern Europe. Spring had
not yet come to Poland. The cold was one of the worst dangers here. Nothing kept it out. The
wind cut straight through the flimsy camp uniforms. They barely even blunted its edge. The
snow filled our wooden shoes, melting against our feet into ice-water. In under an hour, my
hands and feet were numb. Before the day was out, my whole body was.

The work did not stop until it after nightfall. We staggered back into the camp to line up for
soup.

I stood in the line apprehensively, clutching my soup bowl, watching the pair in front of me:
a middle-aged woman and a girl of only ten or eleven. They were clearly mother and
daughter. The child coughed convulsively into her cupped hands. Her mother reached out and
stroked her cheek. That touch, the brush of a reddened, frozen hand against a sunken cheek,
will haunt me forever. The sad tenderness in the mother’s eyes was so profound it was almost
a physical force. It brought tears to my eyes, at the memory of my own mother: Rivkele
Aronowicz. Her soft brown hair, pulled into a bun on the top of her head. Her green eyes,
sparkling with laughter as she looked at me. Her soft hands, gently tucking me into bed.

Where was she now? Was she here, in the same camp? It was not out of the question. Or in
another camp, another living hell? Or was she dead? Had they killed, her? And Papa? Was he
with her, wherever they were?
My turn for soup. Describing the substance that now filled my bowl as ‘soup’ might be an overstatement. It was more like brownish water, with a few strands of cabbage floating in it. I wrinkled my nose. I was not going to drink this! Even though I was imprisoned in worse than inhuman circumstances, I still had standards! I put the bowl aside, turning my attention to the only other food I had been given, part of a loaf of bread. I had been informed that this was meant to last me for a week, so I couldn’t eat too much. I tore off a piece, stuffed it into my mouth, and almost gagged. It tasted like soggy cardboard! I later found out that this bread was made with sawdust used as flour, which explained much about the flavour, or lack thereof.

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Around four days later, as I collected my soup ration, I was distracted by a snatch of conversation between two women, off to my left. They were speaking of Mengele’s plans. Of Selection the next day. What was Selection? They sounded scared of it. What was going to be Selected, in the first place? Had to be important, for them to be talking in that tone, strained and heavy and guarded. One of the SS saw me watching them. “Hurry up, Jew!” He screamed. “Why are you just standing there? Why aren’t you in your barracks yet? I was shoved into the barracks, and lost my balance slightly on my uneven, worn clogs. Before I fell, someone caught me and set me back on my feet. I looked up in shock. My mysterious helper was a girl perhaps a few years older than me, it was hard to tell. “I am Shifre. Shifre the Lubliner. What is your name? Where do you come from?”

“Sara. Warsaw.”

Shifre’s face fell. “Sara.” Her voice sounded grave. “There is no Warsaw Ghetto.”

Shock like a fist punching me in the stomach. Gone. The ghetto. My home. I had hated it there, but it had been my home. Now it was no more. I had nowhere. Nowhere but Auschwitz.
Shifre seemed to sense my distress. “Come, come, Sara, you can’t have been that attached to it. Perhaps you should be glad that it is gone. That way, when all of this is over, you will not have to return to that place.”

“Where will I go back to, then? Nowhere! But it doesn’t matter, because this might never be over! We are Jews! Jews! We have no place! We have no chance!”

The force of Shifre’s slap caught me by surprise. “Sara! Don’t talk like that! Don’t ever say those things! God has not abandoned us! He has not! I know this! I know it! You will see your Warsaw again, and I will see my Lublin. This is what I believe. This is what I must believe, you see.” Her voice softened towards the end. She scrambled up onto the top of one of the bunks, and gestured for me to join her. I noticed she was wearing a pair of extremely worn leather shoes. Although her shoes were so old and thin that one of her big toes was almost poking through, they looked much warmer, and more comfortable, than my wooden shoes. Also, she had a woolen sweater, about three sizes too big, on over her camp uniform. Her hair was dark and curly, growing back in clumps since it had last been shaved.

I joined her on the top bunk. She leant against the wall and began to eat her soup. I did the same. The Blockalteste entered, and unlocked a cupboard on the wall, where our bread rations, and the possessions of those who had anything worth protecting, and could get a space on the shelf, were kept. Immediately, there was a crowd around the cupboard. Shifre had her blanket, her bowl and the remainder of her bread ration, as expected. She also had some national coffee powder, and a square of chocolate. How she had come by these things was a mystery to me. I hadn’t yet realised how much trading went on in the camps.

The next morning, Shifre told me the name of woman who worked in the sorting shed, and could get me a decent pair of shoes, and possibly something warm to wear.
Luba from Krakow. She told me to ask for her, that people would know her. They did.
I was directed to Block 8. Luba from Krakow was middle-aged, with steely black
eyes that did not match her soft voice at all. She was not Jewish. She was a socialist.
She was also one of the lowest numbers in the camp. She knew the ropes, that was for
sure. I was informed that yes, she could get me some clothes, but not without
anything in return. I was in far over my head, trying to negotiate with her. I ended up
giving her the rest of my week’s bread, but she did produce a jumper, slightly tight on
me, and some decent leather shoes, probably taken from some other new inmate,
because they were still in tolerable repair.

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The next morning, the ring of the wake-up bell was different. It rang in five short
bursts, rather than a continuous long sound. Shifre, lying next to me, had curled into
the fetal position during the night. Now, she uncurled herself, her face even whiter
than usual, her eyes wide, so that the whites were showing. As I moved to jump down
from our bunk, her hand reached to stop me, clutching clumsily at my uniform. “No,
stay where you are.” Her voice was rough from sleep. How could she sleep? The
barracks were never quiet. Always someone was whispering, crying, praying,
screaming, coughing, quarrelling with the person next to them.

“What? If you knew there was going to be a Selection, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t know it was important! I don’t even know what Selection is!”

“Oh! Oh, Sara…Selection is… it is Choosing… they choose who will work… they
choose who will die.” My expression turned to horror. Just like that, they would
choose our fates. Who did they think they were, playing with people’s lives as though they were chess pawns? Playing God over us? Shifre watched my reaction, her face sympathetic. She reached out and took my hand. “No, no, you’ll be alright. You’re still strong. Just do as I do.”

And then we waited. My mouth was dry. My hands were shaking. Somewhere below me, a woman was crying.

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“All right, Block 10!” The Blockalteste screamed at us.

“Our turn. Do what I tell you.” Shifre whispered.

Together we left the barracks to line up in the Appel square. I was behind Shifre. In our hands we carried cards with our name and number on them.

In front of us stood Josef Mengele, humming a snatch of Wagner as he lazily directed the inmates in one direction in the other.

“Go right, always go right.” Shifre whispered in my ear. “Even if he says left, go right. Left is the showers. Left is death.”

When it was her turn, she stripped off all of her clothes and tossed them on the ground, handed her name card to the SS, and ran. She ran in front of Mengele, her feet slipping and sliding on the loose ground, trying desperately not to slip and fall, not to look slow, sick, or even conspicuous.

Then it was my turn. My sweater caught over my head as I tried to pull it off. My hands were shaking desperately. It wasn’t a long way to run, really, and it wasn’t hard, at least not then. Later, it would get harder, but not then. It seemed like an eternity, though. At the end of it all, I very nearly fell on the ground, like many others, but Shifre caught me. Her arms went around me, and she held me close, for about ten seconds.

“Did you see where my card went?” I asked her breathlessly.
“Yes.” I looked at her, a little confused. “Oh, right! Right!”

We disentangled our clothes from the ground where they had been tossed, along with everyone else’s. Some woman tried to grab my jumper, and I ended up in a sort of tug-of-war with her. It looked like she was going to win, until Shifre came up behind me and slapped her across the face, hard enough to make her let go. I turned to stare at my friend. She shrugged.

“Get dressed, Sara. We have to work.”

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Work. Work was, as I may have mentioned, dreary, monotonous and hard. What were these holes even for? No explanation seemed forthcoming. Shifre had an easier job, in the kitchens. Inside, it was warm, and she said that when you were washing the pans in which our soup was cooked, you could scrape the bits of burnt potato out with your hands, and eat them. It was much better than being out in the cold, scraping your hands to bits to dig pointless holes.

At the end of the day, all there was more of the thin, ambiguous soup. No bread for me, because I had traded it to Luba from Krakow. No bread meant that it was much harder to drink my soup, and that I had no solid food. Soup was more like a drink than food, so in essence this meant I was eating nothing at all.

That is, until the day when Shifre miraculously managed to procure something else for us to eat. One day, she came into the barracks smiling. This was unusual in itself. There was little to smile about here. Her smile was wide and cheerful, and her eyes had a mysterious twinkle.

“Look what I have found!” She said in her singsong accent. Lublin was to the east of Warsaw, and she spoke Yiddish with a hint of Russian.

“What?” I asked. “What have you found?”

From behind her back, she produced a small, hard brown rectangle, wrapped in paper.

“Chocolate!” I exclaimed. “How did you get it?”

She shrugged, which seemed to be her standard response. “I trade. I organise.”
She broke the chocolate in half with a snap, and handed half to me. I will never forget the taste. It melted in my mouth, an explosion of sweetness. It was the best thing I had tasted in years, since I had gone into the ghetto. I had forgotten what it was like to eat a piece of chocolate, to feel it squish up behind my teeth and around my tongue. As I ate it, I could feel my eyes widen in appreciation, until they must have been the size of saucers. Shifre watched me, and her smile got wider. “It’s good, isn’t it?” She didn’t seem to expect an answer.

“Sometimes if you trade well enough, or if you organise it, you can get some better food than that lousy soup and cardboard bread. Chocolate, maybe, or an apple, an onion, sometimes sugar, or even a bit of proper white bread. Sometimes you can even get some butter on it.” Those things sounded wonderful. Beyond wonderful. But there was one part of her explanation that I didn’t understand. “What do you mean, you organise it?”

“It means, well, it means…maybe you take something that you shouldn’t have, maybe from another prisoner, or even from the SS…”

“So you steal it?”

“No! No, we do not steal. We never steal. We organise. You must be careful with your words here, my Sara. Some words you must never use. Steal is one of them.”

“What are the others?” It would not do to slip up and say the wrong thing.

“You must never say someone is dead, they have been selected. And after that, they are not cremated, they are processed. Oh, and there is never a corpse here, only a rag, a schmatte.”

“What else?”

“Never look the guards in the eye, especially never Mengele. Never slip, never trip, never fall, especially when they are watching. Never get chosen, and definitely never volunteer, for the Aussenarbeit patrols, or any kind of experiment or ‘special’ job. Never let them put your name on a transfer list to another camp.”

“Why? Surely it can’t be worse than staying here?”
“Oh, it can. Some places are worse than here. Birkenau, right next door, is worse. And the other are worse still, so they say. And when you’re gone, we never hear a word form you again.” I nodded solemnly, mentally filing away the information to be remembered.

Then the door of our barracks flew open with a crash. I winced, and my hands jerked so much that the soup in my bowl slopped over the sides. Standing in the doorway was a young woman, the most beautiful creature I had seen in an age, with long blonde hair looped into braids and a surprisingly sweet, girlish face. She was smiling, and she looked so innocent that I started to relax, until I saw Shifre’s reaction. Her eyes were as wide as saucers, and all of the blood had drained out of her face. “Irma Grese. The Beautiful Beast. Don’t look at her.” Too late. I had stared at her for too long, and now she was looking back. I froze under her gaze. She longer looked innocent. Now, she seemed cold and malevolent. In her hand, she held a long plaited whip, and she wore heavy jackboots. I turned away, breaking eye contact and cringing against the wall. Too late however, to avoid the deadly accurate stroke of that whip. The single stroke was enough to just break the skin. The only bit of the skin in the whip line left unbroken was the small scar on the back of my neck, left by a piece of shrapnel. The cut burned, as though her whip had been hot. I reached around gingerly, and my fingers came away sticky with blood.

Months passed, their rhythm monotonous and grueling. Somewhere in the year of 1943 or ’44, I wasn’t sure which, Hitler decided to attack Hungary. This was a confusing manoeuver, as I had thought that Hungary was part of the Axis, and an ally of Germany’s. The only reason I was aware of these happenings was that suddenly our camp was flooded with Jews from Hungary, Transylvania and Yugoslavia. More and more of the low numbers lost their lives to the showers. Sometimes selections occurred as often as every two days.

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The Blockalteste shouted for us to wake up far too early, even before the sky had started to
lighten. It was still fully light outside, with the moon only just setting, and the stars still shining. They were a comforting sight. My whole world had turned upside-down, back-to-front. It had gone completely insane, beyond all comprehension, mine or anyone else’s. I was trapped, helpless, in a world that was alien and unforgiving. But at least one thing remained the same. The stars still shone, the sun and moon still rose and set. Perhaps the world I knew was not gone after all. Here was solid proof that some things were constant, that God had not abandoned Earth, and left us to our own fate.

I staggered into the main square of the camp, unsteady from lack of sleep. The bunks were barely more than hard boards with a blanket laid over them, and a thin straw mattress that offered no protection. There were no pillows or sheets. Nor was there any space. Nine people crammed into a bunk built for two, that was the norm. So it was no surprise that I had slept little more than two hours, passing the rest of the time in cold, comfortless wakefulness.

We were herded quickly into huddled groups of five for morning Zehl-Appel. It took longer than it had last night. Someone was missing from Block 10, which was the cause of a small panic among both prisoners and guards. The SS officer in charge must have re-counted the cowering prisoners at least five times, and then shouted at them for as many minutes. He then gestured to three of his men. They came forward and selected ten of the remaining prisoners from that block. Without further ado, they were whisked away. Somewhere off to the left, a woman screamed. “Luba!” Her shout was disregarded by all. We kept our eyes fixed forwards, standing as still as statues, pretending not to have noticed the commotion. Some of us truly had not.

Truly, things did not affect these ones. They were a breed that was easy to spot. Their skin looked like wax, yellow and translucent. Their eyes were sunken and glassy. They did not eat, they did not speak. They did what they were told, but mechanically, like automatons.

These were the ones they called Musselmanen. It was not safe to stand next to them. In a few
hours, a few days, a few weeks if they were lucky, they would walk through the doors of Lilith’s Cave, and if you were too close, you could join them.

By the end of Zehl-Appel, my body was completely dead. Sleet was falling, as though even the weather was mourning for those pathetic ten who had been taken. It would be a hard death for them, that was for sure. Ah, but better not to think about it. Not to get distracted from the work that had to be done. How much bread did I have, again? Half of my week’s ration, or thereabouts. Not enough. I had more than half a week left before I would get more. That would not do, not at all. And Shifre had even less. It was time to do what she had taught me, to trade, to organise. She had fed both of us before, now it was my turn. I could ask Mattel, who worked in the kitchens and had a reputation for being adept at organising what people needed. She had been a good friend of my cousin Zivia’s when we were young. I had met her a few times before the war. Luba from Krakow had been taken that morning, at least I thought it was her, although it could easily have been another Luba. In a camp this size, there had to be more than one.

But what did I have that I could trade? If I traded my bread, that would defeat the point of the entire exercise. If I traded my blanket or my sweater, I would freeze to death in the night. This thoughts were still flying around in my head as I returned to the barracks with my soup that evening. I would have to come to a decision quickly, if I wanted to have time to go and find Mattel that evening.

I was one of the first ones back in the barracks, which turned out to be a fortunate coincidence, as I spotted an onion left on someone’s bunk. Who would have committed such a grave error of judgment as to leave food lying around in plain sight here? Only a higher number, a new inmate from Hungary or Yugoslavia. Oh, well. They couldn’t have been here longer than me, so their need of the food could not have been as great as mine. They could do without it. With this thought, my hand darted out and snatched the onion from where it lay.
“Sorry, whoever you are,” I whispered into the empty dimness.

Then I was off running out of the barracks. I slowed to a brisk walk after a few paces, remembering that seeming to be in a hurry, which I was, would have made me conspicuous, which I did not want to be.

Mattel was in Block 6, I remembered hearing someone say. It was even more crowded in there than in my own block. Two women were fighting over a piece of bread on a bunk somewhere off to my left. I ignored them, and focused on my mission.

“Who are you?” an unfriendly voice hissed from somewhere above my head.

“Mattel?” I took a random guess, and happened to be right.

“How do you know my name?”

“I’m Sara. Sara Aronowicz, from Warsaw. Zivia Aronowicz’s cousin.” She reached a hand down to me, and clutched my wrist in a vice-like grip.

“Zivia? Is she alright? My God, she’s not here, is she?”

“No, no, she’s safe. She’s in America, with her husband.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I want to trade with you.”

“What do you have to trade?”

I held up the onion, and her interest flared. I could see it in her face, a minute change of expression, visible only in her eyes and the set of her mouth, a shift from hostile to eager.

“What do you want for it?”

“Some food, I don’t really care what.”

“I can get you a carrot in your soup tomorrow, I think. But you have to give me that onion now.”

I held it out to her, slightly reluctant to part with my lucky find, at least until she snatched it roughly from my hand.
“Go!” she ordered. “I’ll pay you back, I promise.”

With that, I turned and ran back to my own barracks.

Shifre lay on our bunk, her body limp and loosely curled up. As I sat down beside her, she barely raised her head from where it lay. “Sara?” she whispered weakly. “Where have you been? It’s so late. What if you had been caught?”

“I went to trade, to get food for us both!”

“You shouldn’t have bothered. I’d have given you some of mine.”

“No, you need your food.”

“I don’t. Not as much as you do. I’m not so hungry now. Not anymore.”

I turned over to look at her. She’d gotten so thin. Her bones were clearly visible, looking like they were about to break through her skin. Her stomach dipped down, and I though that I could have snapped her arms and legs if I tried hard enough, but her face was the worst. Her jaw and cheekbones stuck alarmingly, accentuated by the pits of her hollow cheeks. Her grey eyes looked as big as dinner plates, made even larger by the huge dark rings that surrounded them. The dark cuts in her split lips stood out against her dry, flaky, white mouth. Her clothes hung off her thin frame.

“Shifre, are you alright?” I knew it was a silly question, but I asked it anyway.

“I don’t know. I really don’t know. I can’t do this any longer.” Her voice shook, and she sounded so tired.

I just looked at her, unable to find any words. Her eyes were empty, vacant. She had become a Musselman when I wasn’t watching.

* * *

I was woken that night by someone crying. That was strange in and of itself. Not that someone was crying, that was normal, but that it woke me. Usually nowadays I could sleep through pretty much whatever was going on, except for the wake-up call. It was an acquired
skill, and now it seemed to have deserted me at a crucial moment.

As I listened to the sobs, I realised why they sounded different to what I usually heard.

Usually, it was adults crying. But this was Shifre. My Shifre.

“Why are you crying, Shifreleh?” As if it wasn’t blatantly obvious.

“I’m scared, Sara. I’m so scared. I don’t want to die, not here, not now. Please, God, I beg you, give me another day, just one more. I’ll do anything for just one more day. I want to go home, back to Lublin. I want to see my house again. I want to see my parents and Chaimek, and all of my friends. I…I want to get married, to have children, a house of my own. I wanted to have a bakery. Oh, oh, I so want to live. And I want to be buried properly when I die.” I had always known that her family was more religious than mine, so I knew why she felt this way. “I want someone to pray for me. If I die here, will you pray for me, Sara?”

“Of course I will. Of course.” Her eyes filled up with tears and her lower lip wobbled, looking ready to cry again. I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her face into my chest. She reminded me so much of Shmuel, without looking at all like him. On an impulse, maybe just because of how she reminded me of him, I know what would calm her.

“Ai li lu li lu, ai li lu li lu. Sleep now my pretty little one.” I sang. “Slumber on my precious little one; sleep in peace, the whole night through. Ai li lu li lu. Tucked in your trundle bed; angels are watching overhead. Close your pretty eyes of blue, ai li lu li lu.” I drew in a long breath.

“No, don’t stop,” someone called out of the darkness. “Don’t stop singing. It’s been so long since I heard someone sing.”

“Little bees, little birds are in the trees; little fowls, little owls in the steeple; are in bed for the night, sleeping tight. Just like all good little people. Sleep little one, I pray; I’m so weary with the cares of day.” I was, I truly was. “God bless your little heart. Sleep; lu lu; sleep; lu lu. Sleep, or I will call the little bear. Ai li li li lu; ai li li li lu lu lu; ai li lu. Sleep, my child, lu
The song was finished; Shifre was lying still, curled into my side. Her presence there, her body, warm and fragile, was infinitely soothing. For once, the barracks were silent. People were calmed. I had almost forgotten the power of song to do this: to calm, to soothe, to heal. I turned to look at Shifre, and her eyes locked with mine, desperate and infinitely sad.

“Sara?” Her voice was almost inaudible.

“Yes, Shifreleh?”

“I’m not…scared…anymore.”

“That’s good.”

“It’s…all…going to…be okay. I’m…not cold…or… hungry…now. But I’m…tired…so tired. I think…I’ll sleep…now.”

“That’s alright, liebchen. You just go to sleep.” My voice shook, rough with tears.

“Don’t cry…Saraleh…I’m…happy now.” She closed her eyes. And she never opened them again.

*                                     *                                   *

In the morning, Shifre’s body was still. When I woke, she didn’t move. When I touched her, her skin was cold. I put my hand gently over her mouth, and felt no breath. Gently, I untangled her stiffening arms from around my waist. She was pale. Her lips had a bluish tint to them. Her face looked so sweet, so peaceful. She could have been sleeping, except for her unnatural stillness. No-one should ever have been so still.

I felt tears prickle at my eyes, and, as I stroked her soft, cold cheek, one slid down my face. I remembered my promise to her. So, with tears streaming silently down my face, I took her rough, limp hand in mine and said Kaddish for her. Not all of it. Only what I could remember, which wasn’t much. It wasn’t enough for her.

“B’rikh hu, l’eila min kol bir’khata v’shirata, toosh’b’chatah v’nechematah, da’ameeran
Some weeks afterwards, I was distracted from the endless circle of my own hopeless thoughts by rumours of the Nazis taking huge groups away from the camp at once, soon. The rumours said that the Russian army was getting closer to our camp by the day. They were only around two weeks away. In two weeks, we could be free. But the Nazis weren’t going to let that happen. They were going to empty the camp, take everybody who could handle the journey into Germany, and leave the rest to die. Every day more and more people were taken away, without even Selection, only those who didn’t look well, which was almost everybody, snatched and dragged away to the showers, which ran twenty-four hours a day now, along with the ovens. And there were no more trains arriving at the camp, so the numbers just went down, down, down. Everybody, old numbers and new numbers, was at risk. Sickness, health, it didn’t matter now. A Jew was a Jew and the Jews had to die. Then one morning, they did take us away. Family, friends, bunkmates, all were torn apart with no warning. Every prisoner who could walk was taken, herded away by the guards with their machine guns and deadly black uniforms. It was like the great Aktion all over again. Back then, we had been taken from bad to worse. But could be worse than the death camps? Almost nothing. It was Hell inside the barracks now. The reasonably healthy lay beside the dead and dying. Fights, sometimes deadly, broke out over the smallest scraps of food. Outside was bitter cold, but inside was smothering with the smell of sweat and sickness and filth. The noise of quarrelling and screaming and crying and praying never stopped. We were in a dire state, every one of us: waxy yellow skin stretched to breaking point over protruding bones; skin filthy; clothes crawling with lice; muscles wasted; heads spinning; stomachs aching; exhausted and starving to death. While I was slowly dying, I wasn’t exactly sick in so many words, and this was enough to qualify me to be taken. I was pulled down from my bunk by a Nazi guard. One of the girls I
had been lying next to was sick, too sick to stand. She was left, but all the rest of us, there were seven in all, were taken.

There must have been thousands of us. We were all pushed towards the wire fences, and, finally, out of the camp! For months, years even, I had yearned to be outside these gates, but my common sense told me to avoid the Aussenarbeit groups, and that had been the only way out, other than escape, which was virtually impossible.

Even now, although we were outside of the camp boundaries, there was still virtually no hope of escape, as we were guarded on all sides by army trucks full of Nazi soldiers, armed to the teeth and eager for an excuse to use their fancy machine guns.

And they found plenty of excuses. To stumble and fall was death. I saw so many shot just for slipping in the mud.

It was snowing the day we left the camp, pure January snow. Out here the snow was left unstained by the smoke from the ovens, and as the snowfall thickened, the world turned white. Through the blur I could see no more than blurred black silhouettes of trucks, trees, and other walkers. Even the noise was muffled under the snowy blanket. In this world of blood and death and horror, it was shockingly, breathtakingly beautiful.

After the snow stopped falling, the drifts were no longer beautiful, but simply cold. They were melting into dirty slush, which oozed into our shoes and soaked the hems of our clothes.

In all of my life, I have never been so cold. My lips, fingers, and toes turned red, then purple, then blue. At first I shivered so hard that I could scarcely walk, but then numbness spread from my extremities through my entire body, and I stopped shivering. I also stopped feeling.

The icy water in my shoes had caused my feet to hurt, but that faded to a dull, barely perceptible, ache. My hands and my bare wrists and ankles also ached faintly, but that was all. When a sharp stick raked my foot, I scarcely noticed it. There was no pain. If I had been shot, I doubt I would have felt much even then. Not just pain, but tiredness, thirst, hunger,
cold, fear, everything faded. It was snowing again, and the soft white flakes kissed my
frozen, bluish skin and settled on my eyelashes. As the world turned back to a white haze, I
felt like I was floating. I wasn’t even sure if I was still walking or not, but the absence of a
gunshot, at least one aimed at me, told me that I was. Through the muffled silence, I heard
phantom voices calling to me. Every one of them I knew. Mama, Papa, Shmuel, Jakob,
Itzhak, Janek, Chaya. I felt, or thought I felt, the phantom touches of their fingers brushing
against my arms, my hair. For a moment, I could even feel Shmuel reaching for my hand, but
the moment I tried to grasp his in return the sensation vanished.

*                                        *                                           *

It was after dark when we finally stopped. We were near a train station, on the outskirts of a
town. In confusion, I looked around, trying to work out where we were. Fortunately, there
was a sign on the side of the station building, informing me that I was in a place by the name
of Wodzisław Śląski.

A guard started shoving us into the train station, which was blissfully warm, despite being an
unheated brick structure.

Inside, we were crammed onto freight trains, with no seating, blankets or anything to soften
the metal floor, where I was crammed into a back corner. We were packed in like herrings,
with no space to lie down or even sit. The train compartment was nothing more than a metal
box, unheated and not insulated from the frigid night outside. I was pressed against the icy
metal on two sides, and the cold cut straight through my soaked clothing. On my other sides,
the warming mass of other people, of skin and bone and flesh and cloth pressed into me, and
as a consequence my frozen body started to thaw, which left me shivering violently, as I was
still cold and wet.

As time went on, and night changed to day, the compartment started to warm up. At first, I
was glad of the warmth, as it meant I finally stopped shivering, but soon the air was
smotheringly hot, stuffy, and smelly. Thirst built in my throat to an almost unbearable point.
At last, in the late afternoon, the train shuddered to a stop, and the compartment doors were
flung in, the cold air immeasurably relieving against my sweaty skin. A guard threw us a
bottle of water, which was passed around too quickly for satisfaction, greedy hands snatching
to pull it to parched lips, but gaining no more than a few hot, metallic gulps before it was
snatched away. Not enough water to satisfy my thirst, but maybe enough to keep me alive. I
could have stood there forever, soaking in that frosty air and the taste of metal left in my
mouth by the water, but too soon we were forced back into our airless compartment. Sardines
crammed back in our tin.
*                                           *                                           *
The time spent in that train compartment started to blur together. Hot stuffy days, painfully
cold nights, cramped muscles from sleeping standing up, the only stops a few minutes on
occasion to breathe cold air and gulp desperately at warm water and scraps of bread while the
train refueled. Skeletal bodies crammed together, bones prodding into each other through
paper-thin layers of skin. No space, no air, no rest. The living stood beside the dead until they
starved or thirsted or choked, and joined the lifeless bodies on the floor. Those of us who
endured were screaming inside for release.
At last it came. The train ground to a halt, throwing us off our feet so that we crashed
painfully into each other, and we were shoved, blinking and shaking, into the cold bright sun.
I stumbled, and then straightened up to look at the landscape around me.
I could see that we were far away from where we had started off. There was still snow on the
ground, but it was much thinner here. The sun glinted off the snow as it had off my father’s
watch face, in a bright dazzling flash. We were on a hill here, or a mountain, with that sweet
alpine German beauty.
Yet there was horror in the middle of this neat provincial beauty. In front of me lay a wire
fence, the border of another camp, and the air was thick with a choking pall of smoke. Why? Why would they build a camp here? Why spoil all this beauty?

I didn’t have much time to think about these questions, as we were being shoved through the camp gates, which were pulled shut and locked tight as soon as the last of us was inside. No! my mind screamed. This can’t happen! Trapped again, always trapped! I shot one last desperate look over my shoulder and out through the gaps in the gate. I saw, to my surprise, that like the Auschwitz gate there were words worked into the metal. But this gate was only readable from inside. Jedem das Seine. To each his own. What would that mean for us? Arbeit Macht Frei, now that had at first seemed innocent, even hopeful, but all it had meant was a mad world of blood, death and horror, where the only ‘freedom’ to be had was death. Now this new phrase, which even at first sounded vaguely sinister, could it possibly mean that what was ahead would be worse than what was behind? No, no, that couldn’t be. Things had gotten so bad that now they had to get better. After all, didn’t they say that the darkest hour was just before dawn?

*                                           *                                        *

Maybe this camp was better, maybe it was worse. It was hard to tell. The work was not so hard. I was on the ‘shoe commandos’, pulling apart old shoes to extract bits of usable leather. My hands were roughened from years of digging holes and making rope, so the picking no longer caused me discomfort.

*                                     *                                   *

In my dreams, I was pulling apart shoes. The work was constant, unchanging, repetitive, just as it was when I was awake. Then suddenly, I woke with a start. The bell to wake us up drilled into my ears, shrill and uncompromising. I stood up in a hurry, my head spinning from the sudden movement.

For reasons that would remain unknown, the first Commandant of that camp had decided to
build a zoo there. The bear pit faced into the Appel square. As I entered the square, I glimpsed sinister dark forms and shining eyes in the shadows. A shiver ran down my spine. The Appel that day was shorter than normal, as for once the guards did not lose their place in the count, and everyone was accounted for. We were all accounted for, after some organisation.

As usual, the bodies of those who had died in the night were piled at one end of the square. They lay there like firewood, their limbs as thin and fragile as sticks of kindling, and as white as branches stripped of bark.

By the end of the day, my head was aching with thirst and boredom. I lay still on my bunk, curled into the fetal position, slowly drinking my soup.

*                                       *                                           *

What are you saying? I can hear you, but I don’t know what you’re saying to me. What is it? Go away. Let me sleep. Stop it. Stop. Turn off that light. Please, it hurts. What have I forgotten? There’s something I need to remember, but I don’t know what. Faces. People. Names that I can’t remember. Who are you? Mama? Is that you? I can’t see you properly. Where am I, Mama? Why am I here? You’re holding out your hand to me, Mama, and I want to take it, but I can’t. I can’t touch you. You’re so far away, and no matter how hard I try, I can’t reach across that gap. Mama, what’s happened? Where am I? Who am I? “Leave that one, there’s no hope for her.” No, please! Please don’t leave me, Mama! That light, it’s so bright, too bright...

*                                       *                                           *

Leaning over me was a man in uniform, not black uniform, green. Green uniform, like Daniel’s.

“Who…? What’s happened? Where am I?”

The uniformed man glanced at me in confusion, then responded in German, with a strong
accent. “Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. What’s your name.”

“J19027.”

He shook his head. “No. Not your number. Your name.”

My head felt like it was full of cobwebs. My name? What was my name? I only knew my number.

“I…” Then, from some forgotten corner of my memory, I heard someone calling to me.

“Sara. Sara Aronowicz.”

“Sara Aronowicz.” He noted something down on the clipboard in his hand, and then moved on to the others, leaving me lying where I was, still confused.

“Hello.” I hear a voice from above my head. “Don’t you know what’s going on?” It was a young girl’s voice, jarringly cheerful and quivering with breathless excitement.

“No, I…What is going on?”

The girl coughed, sounding as though she was about to choke, and then caught her breath and answered. “The British Army have taken control off the camp! Well, the British and the Hungarians.”

I think my heart stopped beating then. I know for certain that I forgot to keep breathing. The world tilted around me so suddenly that I had to clutch at the edge of the bunk to keep myself from falling off. It couldn’t be true. She was lying, or I was mishearing…it had to be my mind playing tricks on me. The British Army was further away than that! Weren’t they?

“There’s no water, though,” the voice chattered on, sounding more sober now. “The Germans did something to it. And they, well, they don’t really know what to do with us, do they? I mean, there’s so many of us. It’s crazy, it’s really crazy. I didn’t think…I never thought there would be so many. So many…there’s just so many!” Her voice choked up, and I could hear her sobbing softly.

My head was spinning. I struggled to lift it from the pillow, to see the face connected to the
emotional voice that brought me such amazing news, but I flopped back against the wood, to
weak to sit up properly. I tried sitting up again, more slowly this time. The movement,
unfortunately, exposed my eyes directly to the beam of light spilling through the half-open
doorway. The light pierced my eyes like a knife. I screwed them shut in defense against the
pain, and twisted around to face away from the doorway. The girl leant down over the edge
of her bunk, and I could see her properly. She was young, with pale, delicate-looking skin,
dotted with freckles. She had a length of red cloth wrapped around her head, so I couldn’t see
any of her hair, but I thought it would be dark. She had black eyes, framed by the longest,
thickest eyelashes I had ever seen.

“What’s your name?” I murmured, struggling for some context to that face, something
concrete that would ground me in this sea of shocks, and penetrate the cobwebs in my mind.

“Agi. And you?” An Eastern name, from Hungary, or Yugoslavia, or thereabouts. That fit
with the dark eyes, the accented Yiddish. Not Polish, but I had known that from the
beginning.

“I’m Sara. Where do you come from?”

“I come from Hungary. Szeged, near the border. Come, the British can give us some food,
maybe. I heard they had medicine, too.”

My muscles cramped and balked at the effort it took to stand. I managed to stagger as far as
the doorway before my knees gave out under me, and I sank to the ground. I lay in the dust
for a few long moments, staring up at the cloudy blue sky, until Agi pulled me back onto my
feet.
Lucifer’s Apprentice

Awakenings

"At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise." – Daniel 12:1

Blinding white light filled my vision. It slowly receded to reveal a plain white ceiling. I lay on my back, my ears ringing, my vision clouded. I felt a cold surface beneath me and tried to raise myself, but any movement was met with resistance. Panic rose within me as I struggled against my unseen bonds.

Two figures suddenly moved into view, muttering noises that I could not comprehend.

One leant over me, and in his hand he held a small piece of something, and he opened my mouth and forced it down my throat. Sensation engulfed my mind, and my senses rang in response. I gasped in amazement, as images and information flashed at blinding speeds through my mind.

The sudden burst of knowledge receded, and I panted breathlessly, exhausted from the ordeal. The figure who fed me muttered again, yet this time I understood.

“This one is significantly larger compared to the average. Should we report this to the Lower Council?”

“Run the tests first,” the second figure responded.

The pressure on my limbs receded, and I raised myself. The two figures held me steady as I scrutinized them. The first was a male and the other female, and they had kind faces, and they were covered in cloth of the purest white. Looking down, I found myself in nothing but a loincloth of the same colour. I held my head.

“What did you do to me?” I asked.

“It is a piece of the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge,” the man responded. “It gives you years of knowledge within seconds, such as language.”

I looked around the room. It was white and pristine.
“Where am I?” I asked, bewildered. The woman answered. “I know you must have many questions, but there is a limit to what I can tell you at this stage.” She quickly glanced at a tablet in her hands.

“According to this, your designated name is Michael.”

Michael. I toyed with the word in my mind. It felt so right, like I was created for that name. The woman spoke again, but this time to the man.

“Check his wings.”

I turned sharply to her. “Wings…?”

I craned my neck desperately to see my back. In doing so I saw the opposite wall, a mirror. The sight I saw was breathtaking.

Glorious wings of pure white protruded from my back, swaying softly but with power. Thick, strong feathers craned outwards. I gaped at myself in awe. Stepping down from the bench, I rose to inspect myself.

As soon as I stepped down, I felt the weight of the wings on my back. But they weren’t heavy; they were more like an extension of myself. I tried to move them.

A thunderous sound of rushing air filled the room, and every loose object was sent rocketing off in the opposite direction. I went hurtling, crashing into the mirror, sending shards flying across the floor.

“Are you alright?” asked the woman.

Groaning, I raised myself and attempted to clean up the mirror shards. I caught my face in the reflection. Bright, intense blue eyes stared back at me in surprise. Short hair as white as my wings framed my face.

I looked at the man and woman, my eyebrows knotted in confusion.

“What am I??” I pleaded.

The woman walked over and took my arm reassuringly.

“You are an angel.”

* * *
I straightened my robe and ran a hand through my white hair. Sitting on a stone stool, I waited. Next to me, enormous white marble doors took up an entire wall, creating the entrance to the council chamber. Why I am here I still do not know. My thoughts are cut short by a shuddering sound reverberating throughout the hall, as the marble doors are opened.

I stand, breathe deeply, and enter.

I was amazed how such a scene could be so foreboding. I had walked into a circular room, and was surrounded by twelve massive obelisks.

I squinted upwards, and spotted twelve wizened figures atop the pedestals.

“The Lower Council is now in session,” a strong male voice boomed. A figure leaned over a pedestal, the owner of the voice.

“What is your name?”

I cleared my throat.

“My name is Michael.” I said strongly. The first voice spoke again.

“Well, Michael. You have been summoned here because we mean to assess you.”

A female voice spoke.

“His stature and height are quite significant compared to the average angel.”

The other council members murmured agreement.

“Spread your wings, Michael,” the first figure requested. I complied.

Remarks of surprise ran throughout the council.

“Quite a substantial wingspan,” said another council member.

“I think we have all come to the same conclusion,” said the first voice. “Michael is a potential—”

He stopped. The entire council chamber was in stunned silence.

I felt an ominous presence behind me, an aura that was pressing down on me. I turned and took a sharp intake of breathe. The figure before me was even taller than me, and powerful in stature. Long, brilliant, blonde hair swayed, and white and gold robes moved in an invisible wind. Not one, but three sets of enormous, glorious wings swung on his back. Yet his face was the most alluring. He
had a long, angular face, and a wry, disarming smile danced beneath a fine nose. His eyes met mine, and I was shocked to find they were gold. He was the image of perfection, and he radiated an aura of authority that you dare not disobey, yet an attraction that was irresistible.

The first voice stuttered.

“Captain Lucifer....for what reason have you graced us with your presence?”

Lucifer looked at him with sharp eyes. He gestured to me.

“I have need of this angel. He has potential which I mean to utilize.”

His voice was deep and beautiful, each word and syllable rolling out like caramel. I fawned at the blessed sound.

“I hope this is not a problem?”

The question was not really a question. Who could refuse such a being? Lucifer, seeming to know this, beckoned to me, and turned curtly on his heels, his robes and hair twirling as he turned. He gave the council chamber a final view of his three glorious sets of wings, then exited through the marble doors, each step controlled and elegant. I watched after him, dumbfounded. The other council members sat in a stunned silence also. I managed to break from my daze and follow the magnificent figure of Lucifer out through the marble doors.

The Morningstar

"For whoever glorifies himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be glorified." - Isaiah 15:11-15

I ran a hand over the white texture. Lucifer sat opposite me, bemused at my reaction. The cloud on which we rode was tangible, supporting us as it peacefully floated to our destination. I looked back at Lucifer, and he sat gracefully, looking at the view below with bored eyes. I on the other hand, was not bored at all. How could someone be bored with such a wondrous scene before me? Monolithic clouds filled the sky, hundreds times the size of the one we rode. On these gargantuan plumes rested magnificent cities made of stone and marble, with golden towers craning upwards. Delicate
bridges with golden frames connected cloud to cloud, and angels walked across them. It was a metropolis of the skies, a city of dreams.

Beautiful. Absolutely Beautiful.

Lucifer interrupted my fascination.

“These are only the lower levels of Heaven” he said. “These cities host angel civilians”

“What exactly do these cities do, sir?” I asked, “That cloud, for example?”

That--” A slender finger points down to a large cloud with a city sprawled across it. “—is the cloud of carvers. They helped design and build most of Heaven.”

“I would enjoy becoming a carver, sir.” I said.

Lucifer’s sharp eyes glinted, and he laughed, a rich, pleasurable sound.

“Too tedious! They only just finished building the Lower Council Chamber! What a boring way to spend eternity.”

He does have a point. I turned in my seat to see over the other side of our cloud. My jaw dropped.

“This is the Plaza, centre of Heaven. From here, every other cloud can be reached.” Lucifer announced.

It was spectacular. The plaza consisted of hundreds of buildings, but with a giant clearing in the centre. This centre was packed to bursting with angels hurrying about their business.

The cloud flew towards an enormous golden gate, thrice the size of the High Council’s.

“Those,” I gasped, “are enormous.”

Again Lucifer laughed at my ignorance.

“These are insignificant,” he corrected again; “This is only the Gate of the Citadel, wait until you see the Gates of Heaven.” I sat in silent wonder as the Gate to the Citadel opened smoothly. In front of us were hundreds of stairs, ascending up to the sky. We passed through the gate, and as they closed slowly behind us, the cloud slowed and stopped.

Lucifer glanced at me.
“I suggest you hold on.” he said. I barely had time to hang on for dear life as the cloud went rocketing up the stairs. Wind roared in my ears. I looked to Lucifer. He sat there; perfect, not a single hair out of place. The cloud began to slow its ascent. Lucifer stood gracefully, and straightened his robes.

“Welcome to High Heaven.” Lucifer announced proudly.

I looked around, taking in once more the overwhelming sights. All the buildings were pure and pristine. They were magnificent palaces of stone, gold and diamond.

“These are the mansions of The Seven Archangels.” Lucifer explained as he stepped off the cloud, onto the steps.

I followed him eagerly.

“If I may ask, sir, but what is an Archangel?”

“They are superior to average angels, both in power and stature. They are the seven pillars of authority in Heaven.” Lucifer explained, satisfaction in his tone.

*Superior in height to the average angel?* A flashback came to me, and the comments the other angels made on my stature.....

But I noticed how tall Lucifer was, standing at least 4 heads above me. Not to mention he had three sets of wings.

“Sir, if I may ask, are you an Archangel?”

Lucifer stopped abruptly on the steps, and I hesitated, terrified that I had said something wrong.

Lucifer turned to me and looked at me with his golden eyes, and they shone with superiority. His voice rose in mightiness as he announced his title.

“I am Lucifer Morningstar, Right Hand of the Lord, Captain of the Archangels.”

I bowed my head, now aware of the awesome presence before me.

*Why am I with such an important person? What reason could he have to take me to High Heaven?*
Lucifer turned smartly, his robes dancing, and commenced to walk gracefully up the steps. I looked around at the Archangel mansions, and each was beautiful, with ornate carvings on the walls, and some with fountains pouring crystal clear water.

We passed six palaces, but then we arrived at the seventh. It was the largest of all the palaces, and the most awe-inspiring. It was at least three stories high, with vast balconies supported with diamond pillars. Water cascaded from the roof, creating screens of pristine water at every pillar interval. I heard the beating of wings and saw three figures fly from the entrance of Lucifer’s mansion, and come skimming across the ground to greet us.

“Greetings upon your return, Captain,” the first angel reported, bowing to Lucifer. Unlike me, or any other angel I was yet to meet, this one had darker, smoother skin. His face had full lips and brown, friendly eyes, and his voice was deep and warm. I looked over at the other two angels to compare. One was a female, with blonde hair. Her eyes were fierce, her expression stern. The final figure was a burly man with a shaven head, his eyes hidden in the shadows of his brow. Lucifer glanced down at the one who addressed him.

“At ease, Samuel. I trust my orders have been completed?”

“Yes sir, but I am yet to understand why new quarters were to be made. Your retinue is full, is it not?”

Lucifer turned his head to me.

“This is Michael. He will be joining the retinue.”

The three angels looked at me as if I had appeared out of thin air, their initial attention totally focused on Lucifer. They looked up at me in bewilderment, both at my freakish height and my pure white hair. I was a head and a half taller than them, yet I still felt insignificant. I held out a hand. Samuel looked curious, and slowly raised a hand to shake mine. He smiled.

“Pleased to meet you, Michael,” he said, “I’m sure you will become a valuable asset to Lucifer’s retinue.” I looked over at the woman, and found her eyes slightly jealous. Our eyes met, and she turned away, somewhat bitter.
“Why is he here? The retinue is full, with me, Samuel and Tartan!” she asked Lucifer, annoyance in her voice.

I was thinking that myself. What AM I doing here? Lucifer slowly looked down at us, the atmosphere tense as we silently awaited his answer.

“Silence, Cana,” Lucifer commanded. “I have decided to make him my personal apprentice.”

“What?!” we all cried in unison.

I turned to stare at Lucifer. He glanced back, his face calm, his sharp eyes unblinking. Lucifer smirked as he stepped past me and the angels, towards the palace. “Come. We have much to do.” he announced, his robes swirling around him, his three sets of wings swaying.

The angels gave one glance towards me, then headed to the palace. I stood, dumbfounded. Still absorbing this revelation, I once again followed Lucifer, my mind a cacophony of thoughts.

**Eden**

“You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, every sapphire, turquoise and emerald.” – Ezekiel 28:11-17

I stood rigid, gaping upwards in awe and incomprehension. Lucifer and the retinue stood behind me, watching my reaction. Before me stood the Great Gates of Heaven, inconceivably monolithic. They reached up into the skies above, so high that I was yet to see the top, far higher than any tower in Heaven. But it was not only its sheer size that made it absolutely magnificent. Every bar, every ornament, was made of gold. It shone brilliantly in the sunlight, catching every ray. Ornate vine swirls and depictions of angels were found in the intervals between each bar that made up the Great Gate, creating both a shield and a work of art. The Gate to the Citadel was no comparison, just as Lucifer had promised. And here I stood, at the bottom, insignificant.

“Did the carvers make this?” I asked. “No,” answered Samuel. “God himself made this, from his own hands. It is the first piece of Heaven, and the most glorious.” Lucifer stepped forward, walked past
me and put a hand to the Gate. As soon as his hand made contact, it sent a slight ripple through the gold where his hand touched it.

The Great Gates opened, dividing the sky, yet it did so silently, without a single whisper from the hinges.

Samuel, Cana and Tartan walked past me wordlessly, and I followed Lucifer. On the other side, I found him and the retinue, waiting, their wings spread, about to take wing. They stood at a precipice. Lucifer turned his head to me.

“If you are to become an Archangel, even an angel at all, you must learn to fly,” he said.


“I have faith in you, Michael.” he said in his deep, caramel voice, and for a moment I believed him.

Lucifer turned, and leapt off the cloud himself. I stared at the place where he stood, and looked around desperately at the retinue for support, yet they had already taken wing.

_Calm down, Michael._ Tentatively, I peered out over the edge of the cloud, and was greeted with an abyss. The ground was a speck below. My head spun and I pulled back. _Nope._

Yet Lucifer was not returning soon. And I dare not disappoint him...

I spread my wings. I looked down, and said my prayers. _God have mercy._

I jumped.

My lungs were emptied as I screamed, tumbling earthwards. My wings were totally useless, buffeted by the wind, which roared in my ears. I continually fell and spun, glimpses of the ground appearing with every rotation. A white shape loomed below me, and I tumbled through a cloud, my wings now waterlogged. _Don’t panic._

Straightening my body, I now faced directly down, plummeting head first. My wings stayed tucked into my body. _Deep breaths._ I breathed, and concentrated. In one swift movement I opened up my wings.

The air met them eagerly, and my feathers cut through it like scythes. I tilted slightly, and levelled out, no longer plummeting face first. This new sensation of flying was inexplicable and glorious.
I spotted Lucifer and the retinue below me, and I dove towards them.

Lucifer looked magnificent on three sets of wings, as they beat effortlessly. He glanced at me when I fell into formation, but said nothing, and only nodded. Samuel spoke instead.

“Good work Michael. You seem to have learnt flying quite well.”

“Thanks Samuel,” I responded cheerfully. “I never knew flying could be quite so…..”

“Difficult?” cut in Cana. “It takes centuries of practice to perfect, so don’t think you’re a master yet.”

I looked at her, surprised.

“Don’t mind Cana,” Samuel apologized.

I grinned towards Samuel. “I agree, it must be difficult, but I never knew flying could be so exhilarating.”

Lucifer suddenly dived downwards. The other angels followed without missing a beat, leaving me to quickly swoop after them. They descended swiftly through a dense cloud bank, and I shot after them, and once through, was faced with a paradise. Trees towered, with flowers blooming on every branch, whilst waterfalls cascaded at every cliff.

The colour was overwhelming, a stark contrast from the white and grey of Heaven. I marvelled at my surroundings as I re-joined the others. Lucifer stopped, and floated vertical. The retinue and I did the same. Lucifer addressed us.

“This is a standard scouting routine. Go along the perimeter, do not separate. Dismissed.”

“Yes sir.” Samuel, Cana and Tartan said in unison, bowing their heads, then took flight, leaving only me and Lucifer. I turned to him, a question on my tongue. His sharp gold eyes looked at me expectantly.

“Sir, if I may ask, what is this place?”

“Eden,” Lucifer answered, glancing around, his long blonde hair swaying. “Come. I shall show you.”

He took flight, and I flew beside him. We passed over a lake, and I realised just how huge Lucifer’s size was compared to mine, as my wingspan barely reached half of his.

“It is so beautiful. Why don’t the angels live down here?” I queried Lucifer.
“Down here?” Lucifer sneered. “Beings such as us belong in the sky, looking over all below us, rather than playing in the dirt.”

I could see what Lucifer meant, yet as I looked around, there was no doubt that this was still a paradise. But as my eyes scanned the scenery, a shadow loomed on the horizon, black and out of place against the surrounding rainbow of colours. Something inside me jumped at the sight of it. I pointed.

“What is that black shape?” I asked him, as we arced through the sky towards it.

“That is the border of Eden,” answered Lucifer.

As we flew near, the malicious darkness grew closer. I looked below, and the vegetation had begun to dwindle. Eventually, there was no greenery at all, only barren earth, with paradise far behind us, and the giant wall of shadow in front. It dominated our view, and was perfectly flat, not a single anomaly along its surface, as if an unseen barrier blocked it from entering the haven. Yet at this proximity, I could feel its presence. It was cold and dark, untouched by the light. Only one word came to mind – corruption. I felt a natural repulsion towards it, and everything it represented.

“Beyond this barrier,” Lucifer, his deep voice a whisper, “lurk evils, trying to enter Eden. The strongest of these spirits can sometimes break through the barrier, and create havoc as they please. That is why we are here. To send them back.” As he spoke those words, a wisp of something unknown flickered across the surface of the barrier.

“But by no means should you ever try to cross the barrier. As strong as angels are…” he turned away, and I kept looking at the spot where I saw the movement. I turned back to Lucifer. Suddenly, his eyes went distant and unfocused. But he snapped back, and his eyes turned to me, slightly annoyed.

“I have been summoned by the Citadel. I must bring you also.”

Lucifer beat his wings several times, and I followed his lead, ascending to Heaven, wondering what awaited Lucifer, and in turn me, at the Citadel of High Heaven.

The Lord
“The Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire.” –Exodus 33:13-19

If I had any presumptions about the appearance of the Citadel, they were banished the moment I topped the great stairs. Compared to the detail of Lucifer’s mansion, the Citadel was plain. No great statues stood in the halls, and the carvings simple. Yet one thing about the Citadel made up for its lack of art: its sheer enormity.

Monolithic pillars stood sentinel outside the entrance. They upheld a ceiling that towered off into apparent eternity. Not only that, but everything was white.

Lucifer and I walked through the entrance, and into the stark white hall. Lucifer turned to me, his expression noble; his previous charismatic demeanour replaced by one more professional.

“Wait here, Michael, proceedings shall be beginning soon,” Lucifer ordered me, and strode deeper into the Citadel, leaving me. Gazing around, I found that the interior was as glorious as the outside, but also just as plain. No tapestries, no statues, just white marble. Enormous pillars, vast archways, all white marble.

Light footsteps echoed through the Citadel, and I turned.

Another angel walked towards me, dressed in light robes, highlighted with blue. Dark blonde hair framed his face, and neat stubble ran along his jawline. He had kind, warm features, much unlike Lucifer’s, whose were angular and defined. Six great white wings swayed softly behind him. But I was taken aback, as one thing in particular took me entirely off guard: he was the same height as me.

Every other angel I had met had been shorter than me by a head and a half, with the exception of Lucifer, who towered over me. But this new arrival met me eye to eye. He saw me, and smiled warmly.

“Greetings, brother!”

I stared at him blankly.
He approached me, and scanned me briefly. “You must be Michael, the one everyone’s talking about.” He held out a hand. “My name is Gabriel, Archangel of Heaven.”

I shook it instinctively, my mind still whirling with incomprehension. Finally, I managed to blurt out a question.

“An Archangel? But….Lucifer is so much taller...” I compared our heights. “Why are you my height?” Gabriel laughed and smiled at me again.

“Is that how you greet a brother? Come, we shall talk.” He walked past me and deeper into the Citadel, and I kept in stride.

We reached the end of the hall and turned into another. “Lucifer is the highest ranked of the Archangels, and therefore the tallest. The other six Archangels, however, stand at....” He turned to me, and we met eye to eye once more, “...this height.” I took a nervous breath.

We rounded a corner and were met with giant stone doors, yet unlike the rest of the Citadel, these were quite intricate. Upon closer inspection, they were a scaled down version of the Great Gates, at the entrance to Heaven. Voices wandered from the room within.

“Ah, here is the High Council chamber. Unlike the council in lower Heaven, this includes only Archangels and the Father himself.” smiled Gabriel. “The moment of truth has arrived for you Michael.” We went to enter the chamber, yet turned around at the sound of footfalls. Lucifer approached from behind us.

“Greetings, Lucifer,” said Gabriel, bowing his head in salute.

“That would be Captain, Gabriel,” said Lucifer, but Gabriel only smiled wryly. Lucifer turned to me. “I requested that you waited.” I felt my face redden and I looked down, daring not to meet Lucifer’s eyes.

“No matter,” he said. “We have arrived.” He turned and entered the chamber, Gabriel and I not far behind. As soon as I entered, I noticed eight skylights letting sunlight pour into the room, each beam of light basking each of the eight podiums that surrounded the centre of the chamber. The one in the middle was larger than the others, and clearly left for the highest authority. Five of the eight
positions were already occupied. Lucifer took wing, and settled not in the largest podium, but to its right. Gabriel smiled at me and patted me on the back.

“Good luck, brother.” he whispered before heading to his own podium, leaving me stranded in the middle of the chamber.

Seven seats were filled by immensely powerful beings. Light shone down on each individual, and I felt the sheer power that emanated from them.

Gabriel took his place. The temperature of the room dropped immediately, and the atmosphere of the chamber was....electric. *What is happening?*

Above, dense clouds swirled around. But they were inside. Then it began. Slowly at first, but it propagated and ran throughout the chamber, reverberating with every second. This roar of thunder, climbed to a volume so immense, so deafening, I fell to my knees with my hands to my ears.

Suddenly, with a blazing flash of light, it ended. I remained on the ground, my ears ringing, my sight blinded. Slowly, the world began to return, and I looked up, only to find the largest being I have ever laid eyes upon standing at the head podium.

The rest of the chamber remained in silence, watching my reaction. But I only had eyes for this incredible entity before me.

White hair crowned his head and flowed over his shoulders, and a magnificent beard ran to the floor. His stature was colossal, standing about four heads above Lucifer. I tried not to meet his eyes, for fear of the overwhelming weight of his gaze. But I could not relent. I looked at his eyes. They had no iris, no pupil. They were just white. But they glowed. At their depth they shone with an unearthly radiance.

“Hello, Michael.”

The deep, powerful voice echoed within my mind. It was warm, and I felt drawn to him, and I knew, as I looked into those deep, glowing eyes, that this was my creator. He spoke again, but addressed the rest of the chamber room. “Thank you, for coming. Let us address our newest arrival. As most
of you know, his name is Michael. Lucifer was quick to find him, and took him under his wing. Is he strong, Lucifer?”

The Morningstar stood tall at his podium.

“He is quick to learn, yet he is an amateur to this world. He lacks training.”

God closed his eyes in thought.

“If he should join our ranks in High Heaven, he must have power equal to ours.”

He opened his eyes, and gazed directly at me.

“I shall give you two weeks to train with Lucifer. At the end of that fortnight you shall be examined, and if you are deemed worthy, you shall be accepted as one of the Archangels.”

There was a pause of silence in the chamber as his words were absorbed.

It was broken by the other Archangels spluttering ‘My Lord’ in disagreement of this decision.

“Silence.” It was a single, quiet word, but beckoned no challenge.

The room quieted immediately. God gestured to an Archangel to his right.

“Speak, Raguel.”

“My Lord.” The angel who spoke, Raguel, was dressed in robes lined with purple, and had a middle-aged face, with short grey hair.

“This angel was created merely yesterday, and it took us centuries before we were powerful enough to acquire the title of Archangel. He cannot do it in two weeks.”

Some other Archangels murmured their agreement.

*He’s right, how can I possibly reach their level in a fortnight?*

Another Archangel spoke.

“My Lord, there are only seven Archangels allowed to exist, do you wish to replace us?”

“No, my child. I must admit, I had no intention of creating an eighth archangel, and you shall not be replaced. But that is no reason to disregard him. If he can show his worth, I find no reason why he shall not stand with us.”

“My Lord,” said Lucifer. “If I may.”
God nodded consent.

Lucifer spoke in a low, rich voice, and the chamber listened intently.

“When I was created, I was given the title of Archangel immediately. Who is to say that Michael is no different?”

I looked up, my eyes full of surprise at the fact that Lucifer was standing to defend me.

“He shall be my apprentice, and in a fortnight he will be one of us.”

The corners of God’s mouth turned upwards.

“Well said. Thank you for coming, my children.”

A flash of light filled the council room once more, signalling the Lord’s departure, and the other Archangels took leave to the great doors, leaving the chamber empty except for me and my newly appointed mentor.

I collapsed to the training room floor, exhausted. Lucifer stood before me, his fist remaining where it had been when it hit me. We both wore light battle armour, me with standard silver, Lucifer with gold.

“Your fitness is high, but your coordination is poor.” Lucifer explained, as he returned to a relaxed position. “This hand to hand combat will increase it, as well as your reaction time.”

He turned side on to me and beckoned.

I slowly approached him, and we circled each other.

There’s an opening in his defence!

I darted towards it, but was suddenly cut off by one of Lucifer’s giant wings obscuring my view. As soon as the wing was gone, Lucifer’s fist was there to greet me.

I went flying across the floor once more.

“Don’t be so gullible. That opening was too obvious, so you failed.”

Lucifer moved to a stone slab, and picked up two swords. He tossed one to me, and I barely managed to grab it.
“Sir,” I wheezed, “I’m exhausted. Please, let me rest.”

Lucifer turned to me.

“I thought you had greater endurance. We shall continue.”

Another wave of fatigue overcame me, and I dropped to the floor, aching.

Lucifer’s hand grabbed my shoulder.

His hand grew hot and began to glow, and I grimaced, looking to Lucifer in shock. Is this punishment?

But with every second that passed, I felt my muscles become rejuvenated, alive with newfound energy that was coming from Lucifer’s hand. I looked at him in confusion and awe.

“Each Archangel has a special, unique ability,” he explained. “My ability,” he said, as he took his hand off my shoulder, “is to donate my power.”

I moved my joints, and found that my soreness from the training had vanished.

“Now,” Lucifer said, his charismatic glint returning to his eyes. “We shall begin sword training.”

I pounced backwards, a similar glint in my eyes. I was ready to become an Archangel.

Outside of Paradise

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” – Ephesians 6:12

Already a week had passed since the meeting, and only a week remained. In that time alone, Lucifer had taught me hand to hand combat, sword fighting and more. Lucifer, the retinue and I stood outside the Great Gates of Heaven, wings spread. Samuel came up beside me.

“I hear it’s been a long week for you, Michael,” he said, smiling.

I inclined my head in agreement.

“This is the chance of a lifetime. Since I was created, I was thrown into the deep end.” I turned to Samuel. “Besides, I enjoy it. There’s nowhere I’d rather be than with my comrades.”
“Retinue, prepare for departure.” Lucifer commanded. All five of us got into the arrow formation, with Lucifer at point. “Spread,” Every wing opened, the sudden rush of air buffeting our robes.

“Dive.”

Staying in formation, we took wing, diving. Unlike last time, I wasn’t plummeting. The experience was still exhilarating, but I was in control. The wind rushed past my face, threatening to wrench me off balance, yet I continued to look earthward, unblinking.

We broke through banks of clouds, and I could see Eden slowly accelerating closer. Only when we were several hundred feet above the ground, did Lucifer give the order.

“Glide.”

We released our wings, now flying horizontal to the paradise below. I looked behind me. Cana and Tartan had survived the rapid tactical drop, as well as Samuel. Of course they did, they were experts. Still, I felt an obligation to ensure the survival of my comrades.

“Single file position,” ordered Lucifer. We fell into line.

“We will patrol the borders again. If you notice any rogue spirits within Eden, notify the rest of the team. Understood?”

“Yes sir!” we cried in unison.

Lucifer accelerated towards the dark shadow that haunted Eden’s borders, and we followed in pursuit.

As we neared, I felt increasingly uneasy. The corruption beyond the barrier repulsed me to such a degree, I felt my stomach churn and clench. I wonder if the others feel the same way? We came up alongside the border, and I scanned the terrain below, searching for any dark spirits, yet my mind was elsewhere, trying to ward off the ominous presence beyond Eden.

I turned behind me to check on the others.

Cana and Tartan were scanning the ground also. But at the end, where there should have been Samuel, there was no-one. My eyes darted around frantically, searching.

Finally, I saw him.
He was on the ground, at the border. Looking out into the shadows beyond. Before I could blink, Samuel took one step forward and was swallowed by the darkness.

“NO!” I cried.

I broke formation, racing towards the point where Samuel disappeared.

“Michael! Keep in formation!” commanded Lucifer.

I whirled around, locking eyes with him.

“Samuel’s gone beyond the border!” I yelled back.

I saw genuine alarm in Lucifer’s expression, and he too broke formation to come bolting down to the edge of Eden, overtaking me.

“Michael, Cana, Tartan! Stay back, I will handle this.”

Cana and Tartan held their position, but I blatantly ignored the order.

I sharpened my wings, trying to gain ground on Lucifer. He had reached the point where Samuel had crossed over, and he stepped into the shadows without hesitation.

My heart rose in my throat at the thought of losing two people to the corruption.

I landed at the border.

The impermeable wall of darkness radiated a malevolent aura, and unlike Lucifer, I hesitated. Just being near the barrier was enough to make my stomach turn, but the thought of going into it was just...

I summoned my resolve.

No matter what, I was not going to lose Samuel.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped through the barrier.

The sensation was instantaneous and overwhelming. Nausea rose within me instantly, and I doubled over. The darkness was thick and oppressive, a heavy blanket, making the atmosphere dense and clouded. I could barely see three feet in front of me. Stumbling through the darkness, I could make out a figure.

“Captain Lucifer!” I cried.
The figure turned, revealing itself to be my mentor.

“Michael,” his face was a mask of anger. “I ordered you to stay behind!”

“How could I when a comrade could die?” I asked.

Lucifer was about to chide me, but then we heard a cry of pain from within the mist.

We both raced towards the sound.

There, standing rigid, was Samuel. I grabbed his shoulders and whirled him around, and looked into his eyes. They were clouded, his expression one of torture and fear.

“He’s been tainted by the darkness,” said Lucifer.

“Samuel!” I shook him, yet reaped no response. I heard a shriek, but not from Samuel. I turned. Something dark was twisting and convulsing in the shadows. Something unearthly. Something evil. It shrieked again, and flew towards us, allowing me to glimpse it. It wasn’t solid, but it wasn’t intangible either. It reeked of corruption, flying with the mist. A dark spirit!

It attacked, lunging at me.

I dived to the ground, but only to realise that it was not pursuing me. It was pursuing Samuel.

I cried out to Samuel, but in vain. The spirit gave a victorious screech before penetrating into then out of Samuel’s chest, and flew back to the darkness. Samuel released an ear-splitting scream.

Lucifer caught him before he fell, and I ran over, panic stricken.

“Samuel….no…..” I cried.

“He can still be saved,” Lucifer said. “I can use my ability to donate power. The spirit almost destroyed his soul, but I can restore it.”

I watched as Lucifer placed his hands on Samuel’s chest, and his hands began to glow.

But something was wrong. Samuel didn’t look like he was recovering. In fact, he looked worse.

The whiteness of his wings began to dull to grey. The glow of Lucifer’s hands intensified.

Samuel’s eyes snapped open. I recoiled in horror. They were black. He screamed, threw off Lucifer’s hands. Samuel’s skin dissolved and I jumped back, just in time to avoid Samuel’s complete death.
transformation into a dark spirit. Screeching, it twisted through the air, escaping into the depths of the darkness.

I looked at Lucifer, open-mouthed in horror, and he looked back, his golden-green eyes deep in thought. We took wing and swiftly returned to Eden. My mind was wild with thoughts. *Lucifer said he could save Samuel. Was Samuel too late to save? The power ability should have helped him. Yet Samuel’s condition worsened.*

My feelings of grief for my friend began to rise. But still my thoughts went back to what happened beyond the border. *Who was responsible for Samuel’s death? The dark spirit? Or Lucifer?*

* * *

Two days had passed since the incident, and I hadn’t seen Lucifer since. He had shut himself inside his mansion once we returned. Now we had another training session, and I was sitting in the training room alone, waiting for my mentor to show.

The door to the room opened, but it was not Lucifer. Instead, it was Gabriel.

He grinned at me broadly.

“Michael, my brother! Shall we begin training?”

I approached him, and shook hands.

“Where is Lucifer?” I queried.

Gabriel’s expression darkened.

“He is unable to attend. For what reason I do not know.”

He brightened.

“But for the meantime, I will be your mentor.”

He walked over to the stone table, and picked up a strange object and held it out for me to see.

“This is a bow. Try it.”

I took the bow, unsure what to do with it. Gabriel gestured the position to hold it.
“Now comes the difficult part,” explained Gabriel. “Bows usually use arrows, but these are different. They use light. Michael, you need to muster as much spiritual energy as you can, and let it flow towards your hands. Then, pull back.”

I closed my eyes. I felt my spiritual energy stir within me, and I coaxed it out. Suddenly, it released in a torrent of power, flooding my body. I sent the energy to my hands. I pulled back my right hand, creating an arrow.

The light from the arrow illuminated the room, glowing so fiercely that Gabriel and I were nearly blinded. My hands shook with the strain of controlling the energy.

I let the arrow go. The light arrow flew faster than the eye could follow, and disappeared into the opposite wall. I looked at the hole it made. The path of the arrow was straight and unbending, and had created a perfect hole. Gabriel whistled.

“In all my years, I’ve never seen an arrow so intense.” He turned to me. “The arrow reflects the soul of the archer. From what I just saw, your soul is incredibly pure and powerful.”

I smiled, but it was wiped away when I sensed something. What is this feeling? It’s familiar...

The source of this feeling came closer, until I realised. It was the same feeling of corruption that came from the dark spirit that attacked Samuel.

“Where is it?” I searched frantically with my eyes, all around the room.

“Where is what?” Gabriel asked, confused.

It was close now. I heard a shriek and it lunged suddenly, from the corner of the room. I dove out of the way.

“A dark spirit?!” cried Gabriel. “How in blazes did it get into Heaven?!”

It circled the room, watching Gabriel and I warily. It must have chosen me to be weaker, for it lunged once more. We fell to the ground, its head only millimetres from my face, the only thing stopping it from killing me being my hands. I looked into its face. It was a contortion of darkness, with a gaping mouth filled with hundreds of black, razor sharp teeth. It pushed against me, shrieking.
I felt my spiritual energy stir again. It rose slowly, and then surged rapidly to my hands. They began to glow, and felt blisteringly hot. The dark spirit shrieked again, but this time in pain and panic.

I felt my energy begin to break down the corruption. The spirit was dissolving, screaming its death cries. I sent more energy to my hands. With a final screech of agony, the spirit dissipated into thin air. I allowed myself a huge breath of relief, and Gabriel helped me up.

“Michael….it seems that you have reached the level of the Archangels. What you just did….you unlocked your ability.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Lucifer has the ability to give people power. I have the ability to fly at incredible speeds. Your ability, from what I’ve witnessed, is purification.”

I looked over to where the spirit disappeared.

“Can’t everyone do what I just did?”

Gabriel shook his head. “The best we can do is injure the spirits, and they retreat to heal themselves. But that spirit…..he won’t be coming back. Michael, your ability is the best weapon against the darkness.”

“But the real concern,” Gabriel continued, “is how it got into Heaven. It would have enough trouble getting into Eden, let alone past the Great Gates. It should be impossible.”

He passed me the bow again.

“For the meantime, let us continue.”

I grasped the handle, my thoughts wandering to my missing mentor, locked in his mansion.

Coup

“I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.” - Isaiah 14:12-15

It was finally time. The two weeks were finished, and my examination was moments away. I stood outside the council chamber, where only a fortnight ago, I was given the task of becoming an Archangel. The golden door opened, and I entered the chamber.
Similar to last time, I was placed in the centre of the council room, whilst the Archangels and the Lord observed from the pedestals. Yet two were empty. God’s pedestal remained vacant, as did the one directly to his right. Where is Lucifer? I would have thought my mentor, of all people, would be present for this.

Raguel, the grey bearded Archangel, began the meeting.

“We have all been summoned to witness the examination of Michael, for the role of Archangel. Unfortunately, the Lord is unable to attend, as urgent matters beg his attention.”

Gabriel spoke.

“What of Lucifer? What is his reason?”

Raguel paused.

“Lucifer’s inability to attend is unexplained. But we will carry out the examination nonetheless.”

Suddenly, there was a flurry of quick, panicked knocks on the council chamber door.

There was a pause.

The knocks repeated themselves, even more panicked than the last.

“Let him in, Michael,” said Gabriel.

I opened the door to an extremely alarmed angel, covered in dirt and sweat, breathing heavily. His eyes were wild with panic. He took several breaths before addressing the entire chamber.

“Heaven is under attack.”

Shock hit everyone in the chamber. Raguel was the first to take action.

“Quickly, we must assemble to combat the dark spirits!”

The angel shook his head, his face a mask of fear and horror.

“We’re not being attacked by dark spirits. We’re being attacked by angels.”

The cloud rocketed down the stairwell from High Heaven, carrying Gabriel and myself. I looked up at the sky. Peaceful blue had been replaced with dark, angry, foreboding storm clouds. Gabriel had his sword drawn. I looked at his face, and his eyes were deep with concern.
“Why would angels be attacking us?” I asked him. He turned to me.

“I’m not sure, but I have a suspicion.”

The cloud stopped at the Gates, and we braced ourselves. It opened only a fraction, and we took wing, racing through the gap before the Gates closed once more, and out into the Plaza.

I stared in horror and shock at the scene before me.

The Plaza was a painting of the apocalypse.

Buildings had been utterly destroyed and devastated, fires blazing in their remains. On the ground and in the air, angels were fighting angels. The war cries of either side were deafening, only overcome by the sound of thunder that boomed in the sky above.

“I must leave you!” cried Gabriel over the roar of battle. “Take care! You may be strong, but you’re not invincible!”

I nodded, my eyes glued to the chaos that consumed the Plaza. Gabriel flew into the battle.

At least two thousand angels fought around me, and I dipped and dived to escape their clashing swords. I looked at the warring angels, on two locked in combat. One was an average angel, but the other.....

His wings were grey, and he fought with such ferocity that he appeared insane.

*Grey wings?* I remembered Samuel, just before he died, and how his wings turned the same shade.

Now, with new eyes, I flew above the plaza, away from the chaos.

The two sides were easily discernable. One was pure, and the other was corrupt. I gasped.

There were significantly more grey wings than there were white.

*We’re losing.*

I spotted the fallen bodies of angels on the stone slabs. Some hadn’t even had their swords drawn.

*They took us completely unawares. They have the advantage of surprise.*

I noticed a figure approaching the centre of the Plaza, walking calmly. He was untouched by the bloodshed around him. The tide of battle parted, both sides distancing themselves from the figure. I noticed his stature and his six great wings. *Lucifer! If anyone can stop this horror, it is him.*
But Lucifer made no move to stop the corrupt angels. Instead, he raised his left hand, and in it he held a bow. He aimed at the Gates of High Heaven. His right hand pulled back, creating an arrow as black as night itself, with dark shadows licking from its surface. I could not look away, and Gabriel’s words echoed in my mind: “The arrow reflects the soul of the archer.....”

Lucifer released, and the arrow hurtled through the air, and into the Gates of High Heaven.

The Gates buckled and contorted, their golden bars breaking like twigs under the immeasurable power that Lucifer unleashed.

Lucifer spread his magnificent wings and took to the air, flying through the remains of the Gate, and up to High Heaven.

I headed towards the remains of the Gates, the battle still ensuing around me.

A presence approached me, and I swirled around, ready to face my attacker. But it was only Gabriel.

We entered the Gates, and he turned to me.

“I have much to tell you, Michael,” said Gabriel, his voice strained. He cursed to himself. “How could I not see it earlier?”

I looked over to him. “What do you mean?”

“I interrogated some of the dark angels. The one who corrupted them was Lucifer. It was his ability. His ability to donate power has been reversed. He drained the angels of their souls, and the space was filled with darkness.”

My memory went back to Samuel’s death. When Lucifer used his ability to save him, it did the reverse. When he intensified his ability, he ended up draining Samuel. That’s why he turned into a dark spirit.

Gabriel continued.

“That incident at the training room. That dark spirit didn’t bypass Eden, or the Great Gates. It was an angel, the result of Lucifer experimenting with his newfound ability.”

My mind became clear, as every puzzle piece began to fit.
“So the reason that we haven’t seen him last week,” I gasped, “is because he’s been corrupting angels.”

“He’s created himself an army of dark angels dedicated to his cause,” agreed Gabriel.

My gut tightened. “But what is his cause?” I asked.

We looked at each other, the answer clear.

Gabriel said it first.

“He wants to overthrow God.”

Gabriel began to glow. “I must pursue him and use my speed ability, so I must leave you. Don’t stop till you reach the Citadel.”

With that, Gabriel rocketed upwards in a burst of energy and light.

I increased my pace, and could begin to see the ends of the steps.

For what reason would Lucifer want to challenge God? What made his ability reverse? My mentor, the person I look up to, what would cause him to do this?

The closer to High Heaven I flew, the more questions filled my mind. But when I finally topped the steps, my mind was blank.

Outside the front of the Citadel, was Lucifer. In his right hand, held by the throat, was Gabriel. He dangling above the ground, his wings limp and broken. His blonde-brown hair hung over his face, matted with blood. I gaped wordlessly, looking at the broken state of my final friend. Lucifer gave Gabriel one last look, and ruthlessly threw him off the cloud.

“NO!” I cried.

I ran to the point where Gabriel fell, and searched the skies below. But I could not see Gabriel. He was gone. I turned to Lucifer, but he had continued, marching through the pillars and into the depths of the Citadel.
“Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendour. I cast you to the ground.” – Ezekiel 28:17

Pillar after pillar, and still I ran. Lucifer had escaped my vision, but still I pursued him. An arched doorway was ahead, and I ran through. I stopped dead.

The room I had entered was God’s personal chambers. Two tall figures occupied the space, standing off at either end of the hall. I looked between the powerful figures, but they did not notice me. They were occupied in looking intently into each other’s eyes. God’s; pure white and glowing, and Lucifer’s; gold irises surrounded by black. Between them, they raged a battle of the minds. The silence was deafening, the tension overwhelming.

God stood at his throne, which were raised upon several steps. The wall behind him had a round window, framed with gold, letting light shine in over the throne and the Lord. Lucifer stood opposite him, at the other end of the small hall, his blonde hair and glorious wings swaying. I had entered through a doorway between the two.

God stepped forward from his throne, and descended the steps. Only then did I realise.

*Lucifer and God are the same height.*

The soft footfalls of God were the only sounds that echoed around the room, and only then did God speak.

“What is the meaning of this, Lucifer?”

Lucifer looked across with darkened eyes. Slowly, he began to smile, but it was not a smile that brought joy. Looking into his gold and black eyes, I saw fury and madness.

“What is the meaning? All these centuries, I looked up to you, yet a small part of me thought that I could be suited to the role of God,” Lucifer said, inclining his head. “Only when I left Heaven and Eden, did I truly see. The power beyond the barrier brought clarity to my mind, revealing to me what you truly are.” Lucifer pointed at God, his eyes sharp and hateful. “You are weak.”

“And you are mad,” replied God. “My child, reconsider your actions.”
I revealed myself, stepping between them, and they looked down in surprise.

“Michael. What are you - ”

“You,” I interrupted angrily, tears in my eyes. I turned to God. “You are the Lord; do you not have the ability to foresee this? Hundreds are dead. Gabriel is dead. Why did you not prevent this?”

God lowered his eyes, his expression drawn.

“You see?” said Lucifer, smiling wryly. “Even your closest have lost faith in you.”

“And you,” I said, turning to Lucifer, my feathers bristling. “It was your actions that caused this. Because of you, Gabriel is…..” I clenched my fists.

“You are right,” said God. “As God, I should have prevented this dark army from attacking Heaven. But for the last week, my omnipotent vision has been clouded.” He glared at Lucifer, his glowing eyes blazing. “I now know by whom.”

Lucifer swayed his wings, which were now grey. He stroked his angular chin, and spoke.

“After thousands of years, I knew what it took to defeat you. All I needed was a little push.” He glanced at me. “Leaving Eden changed my ability, enabling me to create my legions, willing to die for their new God.”

Lucifer spread his wings, took wing and vaulted over God to land directly in front of the throne. The Lord made no move to attack Lucifer.

“And God I shall become.”

I rose and ran towards the throne, but maintained equal distance from both of them. I looked incredulously at God.

“Why didn’t you stop him?” I asked.

“He can’t” interrupted Lucifer, a sneer on his lips. “Due to me absorbing power from other angels, we are now at equal power. He couldn’t defeat me even if he wanted to.”

I looked at God, and the tall, broad figure looked somehow weaker. He looked defeated.

Lucifer, on the other hand, looked glorious, standing over the Lord.
“How can you call yourself a God, as hundreds of your faithful die, whilst you hide away in your Citadel? Your time is over. A new era is at hand.”

He gestured to me.

“Come, Michael. Join me, and together we can create something greater.”

He spoke in his rich, caramel voice, and I felt once more the feelings of awe of when I first met Lucifer. His hand was outstretched, promising, and his golden eyes, although also black, still danced with charisma and power.

I looked at God. The once magnificent entity was standing in Lucifer’s shadow, his eyes no longer glowing with their previous intensity. Our eyes met, and I looked away. I’ve made my decision.

I strode towards the throne, and stood at Lucifer’s right hand side, his hand resting on my shoulder.

“See? You have lost. Even Michael has abandoned you.” Lucifer sneered at God. “This is my Heaven now. Here, you shall die.”

He looked down at me, with a half-pitied expression. “I’m sorry, dear Michael, but you are a necessary sacrifice if I must eliminate my predecessor.”

His hand on my shoulder tightened, and I felt it increase in heat, and his hand began to glow. Instead of my strength being increased, I felt it draining, siphoning out of me through Lucifer’s touch.

I closed my eyes.

My spiritual energy stirred within me once more. Slowly at first, then rapidly, it pumped through my veins and around my body. Finally, it rose up to meet Lucifer’s touch, and in turn his corruption. My purification ran from my shoulder and up Lucifer’s arm, burning every shadow it touched, dissolving his very essence. With a final burst, I aimed for Lucifer’s core.

Lucifer let go, screaming in agony and torture, clutching his hand and heart. His eyes were wide with horror and incomprehension, and smoke rose from both hair and wings.

Just like the dark spirit.
God wasted no time in letting his foe recover. A bolt of lightning arced through the hall, striking Lucifer in the chest, sending him hurtling through the air, over the throne and into the window, shattering the glass. He slumped to the ground.

I looked at God, and I saw that his previous intensity had been revived. His eyes blazed as he walked around the throne and to the window, and with a single blow from his enormous fist; he shattered the remains, leaving only an empty hole in the wall. God picked up Lucifer by his chest plate single-handedly, raising him to eye level. Lucifer raised his head, parting his golden hair. He looked at me with angry, questioning eyes.

I met them.

“You were no longer the Lucifer I knew and admired.” I said bitterly.

“You were my greatest creation.” God whispered, as a tear rolled down one cheek. “and my greatest failure.”

Lucifer words came out in a whisper.

“You reap what you sow, Father,” he said.

God held Lucifer outside the remains of the window, with nothing but the ground below.

“You are no child of mine.”

With those words, God flung Lucifer from the window, and from Heaven. I watched as my former mentor plummeted down into the evils that awaited him. His gold hair and glorious wings billowed around him, broken. I glanced at God, who looked on sadly. But we both knew that our actions were necessary if Heaven were to survive. So I too watched on. I watched as the Morningstar fell from the sky.

THE END

(Please turn to next, final page)
Epilogue

They shall fear me

As I was cast down from above, I too cast down my former self.

These white mockeries that gave me flight; now stained shadows.

As He discarded me, I too shall discard.

A new title I shall adopt,

And its very utterance

Shall cause those above to cower,

And the minds of men to turn to dust.

They shall seek me, to avoid me, but never find me.

But I will always find them.

They whisper my name, terrified that mere mention will summon me,

But I am not summoned, for I am always there.

Just as He looks from above to guide,

I look from below to destroy.

They shall fear me,

As fear is my ally

Plaguing their minds as they run from unseen shadows

That pluck at their skin,

As I slowly consume them into this world of chaos and pain.

I embrace this darkness, this corruption

For it ensures the end for those that oppose.

They shall fear me,

And the pain that I promise,

That is brought with my name:

Satan.
Marie

Your name is Marie and you are Dead.

You died last year in a car accident along with your twin sister Sarah. You don’t know why you, rather than Sarah, were chosen to continue to walk the world even though you are a walking corpse. Not many believe that you are actually dead. Your mother did, and that’s how you ended up living in your Aunt May’s house in Melbourne. It’s a rather average house, its double story with 3 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, a kitchen/dining area and a nice lounge room. You don’t like to call the lounge room a living room; you think it’s rude to all dead people.

It’s just you and your Aunt in the house, she’s only 25 and so to her it’s not a big deal that she doesn’t have a boyfriend or husband. You try to tell her that she should value the life and time she has before that time is gone, like yours, but she doesn’t listen to you. You’ve also tried to tell her that since you are both 18 and dead she doesn’t have to take care of you but she just said that since you are still in school you still need a guardian, you countered that you don’t have to go to school but she told you that if you are on this Earth you have to still go to school and do things with living people.

Today you are doing one of those living people things. Aunt May tells you that she’s signed you up for a ‘Help Group’ you don’t understand why she would but you suppose it’s because you can show people that killing themselves isn’t a good opinion because there’s no certainty you wouldn’t get up as a living corpse.

Right now you are getting ready for the help group. You have your hair up nicely in two loose white rings that float lightly around your shoulders. You ran a hand over the green around your void black eyes. The green is the only sign of decaying skin on your paler than living skin. You smile softly and
put on the vanilla perfume to cover the smell of death and decay before making sure the bow of ribbon behind your neck it done up probably. You like white ribbon and made sure to wear it. It wraps around your hands, trailing over your arms, crossing over your chest before having been tied up in a bow where your neck meets your back. You don’t bother to care if it’s tight, after all you don’t need to breathe. You have matching ribbon that runs from your white slippers, up your legs to just above your knees. The dress you were is a lovely soft dark red with lace and pink frills at the bottom and two red bows. You smile, enjoying your appearance. Corpses always look their best before being buried. You head downstairs.

“Aunt May, I’m ready!”

Anna

Your name is Anna and you are a Thief.

You have been called a thief for the last 4 years of your life and you don’t think you’ll ever deny it. It’s not that you’re poor or that you’re a bad kid. You just like the rush of stealing; you just can’t
help yourself really. That’s how you ended up here in the Community Home for Troubled Teens. It’s a large building with 3 floors and more than 8 bedrooms. There’s a large kitchen, dining and living area. The backyard is one a hill and large with a small herb garden and large trampoline.

There are 4 kids living there, not including yourself, and 2 ‘Carers’. There’s Kelly the anorexic, Jamie the Mute, Lucy the Druggie, Matthew the Suicidal and you the Thief. You’re all pretty okay friends you guess, all joke about everything with each other. But, really, you are all just kids whose parents didn’t know how to deal with them. Or at least you are. You’re parents divorced when you were 10 after you’re brother ran off. When you got caught stealing 3 years later you’re mum just sent you to the House, saying she couldn’t deal with you. The Carers try to be parents but they aren’t.

The Carers are the reason you’re going out today. You were just going to sit in your room, maybe go on the trampoline, but no, Missie signed you up for a help class. She just came in and dropped them bombshell on you when she dragged you from bed.

With a sigh you quickly brush out your dyed red hair, checking your roots before grabbing the first couple layers and tying it up in a ponytail and letting it lay against the rest of my slightly longer than shoulder length hair. Your green eyes travel to the pile of shirts as you try to figure out which ones are clean and if they’re all yours. Eventually you pull on a black top with a puppy-like image on it. The thing is white on the front but the back of the puppy was red with light red spots. It’s too big for you, probably because it’s Matthew’s shirt not yours but it’ll do. You grab your favourite pair of pants with lose chains and a loose long red belt around your waist. You put on you brown boots, tie them up, grab your brown patchwork shoulder bag, quickly put it on and rush down the two flights of stairs and out the door to Missies car and all you can think is that you really hope they don’t hate you.
Kevin

Your name is Kevin and you are not a Jerk.

You act like it, of course you do, you’re mum always told you that there’s no other way to act if you ever want to be anything. So you act like a jerk but you really aren’t. You have to perfect, and perfection means popularity and popularity means sport and sport means appearance. It’s a never ending circle of what you do day in and day out now. Apple for breakfast, school and bullying people you don’t think deserve it, skip lunch, training, come home, tell your dad you had a large lunch and only eat half the same serving of dinner, go to your room and do homework, if there’s time read, go to sleep and wake up the next day to do it all over again. Your weekends have always been training and sleeping, sometimes just spending time with friends in your dad’s mansion. The place is huge. Its three stories with over 30 rooms, although you’ve only seen the game room, the theatre room, your room, your dads room and the kitchen. This weekend you were going to hang out with your friends before you heard about a self-help group and signed up.
You’ve convinced your dad you’re okay, that the bruises are healed and your arms perfectly fine. But you know you’re not okay. You know you don’t eat enough, don’t talk enough, that you follow all her rules even though your mother is in jail and can’t tell you what to do anymore. You’ve resourced it and told figured out the problems you have and now you’re going to a self-help without your dad knowing.

You’ve currently got an hour until the session and you’re tossing your hair into its usual style and rubbing concealer under your blue eyes to blend in the bags. You sigh as you look over your chest. You’re way to skinny and you know it as you run your hand over your rib bones. You sigh and put on your oversized green camouflage hoodie, thankful it covers your arms. You throw on a pair of black jeans and slip into your red sneakers. You look in the mirror and force a smile. It doesn’t reach your eyes but no one ever notices so you don’t mind.

“Time to go I guess.” You sigh, heading downstairs and skipping your usual apple breakfast before leaving, grabbing your house keys from the door as you exit. You’re dads at a meeting this weekend so he isn’t here to drive you. As you walk to the bus stop you find you’re actually rather glad for that.
Claire

Your name is Claire and you are Alone.

Though not technically. You can hear the servants downstairs and you’re pretty certain that you’re parents are having a party tonight. One you are not invited to. You’ll be, like always, in your room wishing you didn’t exist. After all, to everyone else, you don’t exist. It’s not fair.

Your family is rich; you live in a mansion in a neighbourhood of mansions. Even the jock has a mansion that’s only a little while away from yours. And yours is bigger. There are over 30 rooms and you’ve been in them all. Lots of the rooms are bedrooms, there’s a ballroom, a study, a huge library, a family room, a game room, a theatre room. There’s even a huge kitchen and dining room. You can go in all of them but no one ever pays any attention to you! The maids and workers stopped when they realized it wouldn’t make their checks any bigger.

The people at school also stopped paying attention to you when you realized they were just friends with you because of your parents and called them out on it. You ended up being friendless.

That’s why you let the school councillor sign you up for the self-help group. But you’ve not going to get there in time if you don’t stop brushing your shoulder length brown hair! It’s not going to get any better. All the same you brush it once more just to be sure its fine. You’re really nervous and scared. What if the other people in the group hate you? Everyone always hates you. It’s all because of your creepy purple eyes. You wish you had shaded glasses rather than the clear ones you have. But there’s no chance your parents would ever get that for you. They don’t even remember your birthday. You sigh and put on you grey cap just in case your hair does look as bad as you think it
does before looking at yourself in the mirror. A yellow top with a brown and white panda wearing a cactus suit on it and a pair of blue jean pants with brown sneakers. You look as good as you’re going to get. With a sigh you head out the door and down the street to the bus stop. There is the Jock you were talking about earlier. You wonder what he’s doing here. You’d ask but you wouldn’t get an answer. So instead you end up standing and waiting for the bus will you freak out in nerves about the self-help group and hoping that they don’t hate you there.

Joshua

Your name is Joshua and you don’t Care.

You haven’t cared about anything for at least two years. Maybe more, you’re not sure. You don’t really keep track of how your care rates change over, this is possibly because you don’t care.
You live on your own in a three room apartment with a bedroom, a bathroom and a living/dining/kitchen room. It’s a quiet neighbour, nothing noteworthy ever happening in the area. Sometimes the cops chase a car or a crook down the street. That’s about as much excitement as you get here. You’d love to say it bored you to death but, honestly, you were grateful. You’d had enough excitement to last a lifetime and you didn’t want anymore.

That’s why you really didn’t want to go to this self-help group that your councillor signed you up for. Which is also the reason you get up 10 minutes before you have to be there and it’ll take you 10 minutes to get there. You sigh and tighten the belts at the top of you long arm sleeves. The grey material covers from the middle of your upper arm down to your hand; where it loops around your thumb so that it stays in place. You throw on a white singlet over your black sleeping top and zip and button up you’re worn out red jeans. You also shrug on your thigh length sleeveless vest and slip into your black and white sneakers. Blue eyes search your face in the mirror and you run a hand through your longer than shoulder length uneven and messy hair. You don’t bother to brush it before heading out, slipping your gold chain necklace with a small crown charm out from under your shirt to rest over your chest as you head to the building.
You sit in the chair and wait for the 3 other people to come in. Unsurprisingly, Missie had dropped you off 20 minutes early just to make sure you got there on time. What was surprising was the fact you hadn’t gotten there first. That freaky chick that goes on about death and always looks like a perfect porcelain doll was here 10 minutes before you and was sitting on the seat by the wall of 3 windows.

You only knew there was going to be 5 people in the group because there were five chairs and single person desks. You took the one furthest from the other girl, whose name you don’t know. You sit with your feet on the desk while she sits very politely. You roll your eyes when she smiles at you and get out your book out oof your bag, listening to music and wait for the others.

15 minutes later two more people walk in, looking confused they were both there. Or really looking confused the other was there as well. Personally you were surprised.
“The Jock? You have to be kidding me.” You exclaim. “Morbid chick I get, talk-a-lot next to you makes sense, but you?! Of all people?! There’s no god damn way you actually need to be here! You have everything! You’re popular, rich and you have your daddy living with you. You lose a goddamn football match or something?” You scoffed.

“You’d be surprised.” A man said as he walked in. He was blonde with his hair slicked back. His grey eyes were covered by glasses and his white shirt was tucked into his grey dress pants, a tie loosely tied around his neck and the whole thing was well fitted. Your eyes couldn’t help following him as he makes his way to the desk at the front. “It seems you’re all early. Expect our last guest.” He hummed. “Well, that’s alright, let’s all just talk while we wait.” The man said. You assume his the one running the class if he’s saying that. You look to all the people in the room but none of you seem to start talking to each other. Which isn’t surprising, you may all go to the same school but you really aren’t close friends.

The jock goes for the seat near morbid girl, drags it back a while and seats down. Talks-a-lot takes the seat next to you.

“H-hi, my, my n-name’s Claire.” Talk-a-lot says, holding out a shaking hand. You raise an eyebrow before taking the offered hand and she smiles.

“Anna.” You say before pulling away and going back to your book. She looks like she wants to try to spark the conversation again but doesn’t and nor do you. The next time you look up is when talk-a-lot’s best friend shows up. You don’t know the guy’s name but he actually looks pretty cool. You’re also not surprised his here. The jock though. You still don’t understand the jock. The last boy takes the last seat and the man at the larger desk got up.

“Perfect! Now let’s take roll.” He said.

“Oh my god.” You mutter under your breath, rolling your eyes.
“Alright, since you seem to be so into this let’s start with you Anna Hance.” The man said, taking a file from the desk next to him. “17 year old female; interests include photography, music, reading and art. Lives in the Mental Help Home for Troubled Teens under the diagnosis of Anti-Social Behaviour, Anxiety Disorder and Kleptomania, which for those of you that don’t know is an impulse control disorder that makes it impossible not to steal, you’re therapist notes that your problems seem to stem from abandonment issues, it also happens to be your therapist that signed you up for this.” He reads. You blush lightly.

“So why would you read that?” You mumble.

“I’m reading everyone’s sweet heart.” The man grins. “You wanted to know why the jocks here. Allow me to explain.”

“What?! No!” Said jock exclaims, shooting up in his seat.

“Kevin Coiage. 16 year old male; interests include football, gardening and cooking. Lives with your father for the past 3 years since you were moved out of his mother’s home under order of law. A government ordered therapist saw you for 1 year until you stopped, by choice it says. The therapist declared you to have PST, or post-traumatic stress, Insomnia, Anorexia and a case of Body Dysmorphic Disorder, which is a mental thought disorder that sees you to have a certain view that you have to have of yourself.” He read. You’re shocked really; it’s not what you were expecting. Kevin mumbles something, trying to hide his face as he sinks further into the chair. “Next up we have the nicknamed talk-a-lot.” Oh now he’s just being a jerk.

“O-oh, uh, m-me?” Claire blushes a little.

“Claire Marionette. 16 year old female; enjoys reading, dancing and cooking. Live with your millionaire parents who are never home. School councillor discovered you have a bad case of Depression, Anti-social Behaviour and Avoidant Personality Disorder, which is not the same in fact
it’s very different. Avoidant Personality Disorder is a case of an emotional state that leaves one feeling completely alone, among many other things equally as bad. You’re councillor was the one that signed you up for this.” He hummed as he read it out. Claire blushed and sunk further down to look more invisible.

“Oh! Oh! Do me next!” The morbid girl said. You roll your eyes but the man on the desk just chuckles and flips to a different page.

“Marie Saccharine. 18 year old female; interests include design, sewing and gardening. You live with your Aunt May and were in a car crash last year that kill your twin sister. You’re mother refused to believe only one of her children had lived and this is believed by your therapist believed this was the cause of your post-traumatic stress and Cotard Delusion, also known as Walking Dead Syndrome in which the person believes themselves to be dead beyond all reason.” The man said.

“That’s mostly correct, but I do not just believe I am dead. I am dead without a doubt.” She said matter-of-factly. The man just moved on to the next and last person in the group.

“Next up, Joshua Maroon. 17 year old male. Do you mind if I read this?” The doctor said, looking from his file to the boy that had been last to arrive. Why did he get a choice? Rude.

“I don’t care.” Joshua shrugged.

“I thought you might say that.” The man hummed, looking back down to his file. “So, as I was saying. Joshua Maroon. 17 year old male; there is no data on your interests. Lives alone after your mother sent you here. It’s believed that was because both your mother and yourself couldn’t deal with the guilt over you’re the fire that blinded and burned your younger sister and also left you with burns on your arms, which I see you are skilfully hiding behind though gloves. You’re therapist describes you as often bored and void of emotion and diagnosed you with Anti-Social behaviour, Depression and Depersonalization, or the feeling of watching your own life without being able to
control it, much like living in a dream according to these notes and it was the school councillor that signed you up for this.” He read. Joshua didn’t react at all to the things the doctor was saying.

“And last but not least, myself. My name is Dr Davidson. I am a 37 year old male and enjoy the thought process of the human brain, especially the human brain that has a mental illness. Before working here I worked at a mental ward as one of the top doctors there. I left there to work with young adults suffering with mental illness in hopes to make sure none of you end up in there. To do this I researched all about the mental state and hormone levels of my patients and compared them to teens of normal and altered brains and compared the actions of these teens and adults. Using this data I came up with these.” You had zoned out somewhere in the middle but as he pulls out a small box of tablets you pay attention again. “These are sleeping pills that I’ve developed. But with a difference.” He pulls out a sheet of them. “You can see these have an 8 on them. That means that they’ll last 8 hours. You’ll take on, fall asleep roughly 7 minutes later and wake up exactly 8 hours later. There is also a line of them with a 3 on them, those ones last 3 days. Do not take them unless instructed to.” He adds.

“Why would you need a three day one?” Marie asked.

“You’ll find out sweetheart.” Dr Davidson smiles. “The last one has an F on it. That one is simply there to keep the others working probably. Do not take it.” He adds, passing out the boxes. “Every weekend we will meet up here for an hour to discuss the effects of the tablets.“ He tells you all. You look at the tablets. They have pretty plain white packaging with a sticker on one side reading ‘Dreaming State, use only as directed’.

“So basically we’re being test subjects for your new product.” You say, sighing.
“Exactly.” He grins. There seems something off about that grin, something dark. But you shrug it off. You never were a very trusting person. “Come in again tomorrow at the same time so we can see how well it works the first time.”

Kevin

You look at the tablet in your hand. There’s a glass of water on your bedside table and you look at that too. You’re nervous. It’s a test of the pills, there’s no assurance it’ll work. But what have you got to lose you suppose. The chance of failing asleep in 7 minutes rather than 2 hours, at least, seems like a good one. You gulp down the tablet and water while you start up the timer and lay down on your bed, snuggling into the covers of your grand king sized bed with covers from France or England, you don’t remember. You sigh and wait for the sleeping pills to take you under. 8 minutes and 32 seconds after taking the pill it does.

You open your eyes and you not in your room. You shoot up and look around in fear. You’re in a room with one other single bed. It’s a generic room with blue walls, a dresser for each bed, a wardrobe and what looks like a door to a bathroom. You look over to the bed and see that the
covers are messed up like someone ran out of it. Which is a good idea, why haven’t you done that as well? You get out of the bed and run out of the door that hung ajar to the right. You find yourself in a hall with polished wooden floors. There’s an open door to the right and it looks into a music room and one further door to the left that looks like it leads to a library. You run down the hall way, slipping on the floor. You’re in the clothes you fall asleep in so you aren’t wearing any shoes. There’s a right corner that you take and almost slam into the wall. There’s only a small stretch before there looks to be a door that leads to a room with tiles. You assume it’s a kitchen.

“Watch the step.” A voice warns as you push the door open all the way to run in. You don’t take their advice and your foot catches on the step. Suddenly you’re falling face first onto the tile floor.

“W-we tried to warn you.” Another voice sighs as someone one grabs your arm to lift you up.

“Don’t touch me! Who are you?! Where am I?!“ You shriek, trying to get the hands off of you.

“Calm it Jock, we’re in the same boat you are.” You look up, recognizing that voice, Anna stands behind a bench, sipping from a streaming cup. Her hair is down up in a messy pony tail and lays over her right shoulder. She’s wearing a plain black singlet and matching sleeping pants with red devils over them.

“What she uh, what she means is that we woke up here to, and d-didn’t know where we were... though there’s a uh, note.” You look over at the person that helped you up. It’s Claire. She’s wearing a pair of pale pink shorts and white top her hair a mess.

“You can have a read of it if you would like, although I do believe it’d be easier for us to summarize it for you instead.” A third girl says. It’s Marie. She’s wearing an elegant white night dress that’s covered in roses and her hair is perfectly straight. You never knew it was so long, going down just past the bottom of her back. She’s sitting on a couch that’s on the soft blue carpet of what you assume is the living room a few meters away.
“It’s basically just saying that the tablets are what got us here, that we are still asleep and to ask the doc next week.” The last person said. It’s Joshua. He’s wearing a black singlet that you swear he was wearing before and a pair of red boxers. He’s sitting on a stool at the bench looking bored.

“But... how’s that-” You start.

“Possible? No god damn clue. How late did you take the tablet? We’ve been waiting for like half an hour for you to get up.” Anna said, drinking from the cup in her hand.

“10:15.” You tell her.

“That’s only 15 minutes after me.” She said. “Buts it’s definitely been a half hour since I got here.”

“Maybe time here moves at a rate of 1:2. 2 minutes here for every 1 minute back home.” Marie hummed.

“So what? We’re going to have to spend the next 16 hours here?” Anna exclaimed angrily.

“W-what are we going to do?” Claire stuttered.

“I suggest having a good look around if we have so much time!” Marie smiled, clapping lightly as she jumped up.

“I suggest having breakfast first.” Joshua sighed, getting up and heading to the fridge. There he found bacon, eggs, milk, and apple juice along with a lot of other food. He grabbed out the bacon, eggs, sliced cheese and sauces before going to check the pantry. He grabbed out muffin bread from there before hunting around for a fry pan.

“Why would you eat this food? The guy drugged us!” Anna said annoyed.
“You’re drinking the coffee aren’t you?” Joshua rolled his eyes and Anna looked embarrassed at that. “Besides, I don’t see how he drugged us. We knew it was a sleeping pill ad we took it of our own free will and now I’m eating this food out of my own free will because I’m hungry. Get out of the kitchen so I can cook us all some food.” He said, pushing her from the kitchen with her coffee after he’d found a fry pan. Although she didn’t seem happy about it she left the kitchen.

“I’m going to look around outside.” She mumbled, heading back through the door that leads into the corridor.

“Jock kid.” Joshua said, looking up to you.

“I have a name.” You reply. He rolls his eyes.

“Kevin, you like cooking right? Come give me a hand.” Josh said, making sure to put strain your name.

“Alright.” You say, looking for a toaster to cook the muffins.

“I wonder how Dr Davidson knew all those things about us.” Claire says as she sits on the stool that next to the one Joshua had previously been using.

“It’s not that surprising.” Said boy said as he started cooking the eggs.

“Really?” You ask, a little bit surprised about the doctors ability to get the information as well.

“He’s our doctor for a therapy-like group.” Marie hummed. “So when we signed up e would have contacted our previous therapists and asked them for our files, which he would have full access and right to.” She explained.

“But not even the school was given that information about my mother.” You say.
“No, but the therapist you had after your mother went to jail would have. He’d have contacted them for the file.” Joshua said.

“How w-would you know about what he’d do?” Claire asked, looking interested.

“He’s had a lot of therapy before of course.” Marie giggled a little. “Like I have. Usually you ask you’re second therapist how they have information from your fist.” She said.

“That and it’s the logical thing to do.” Joshua sighs; grabbing the plates you put the first two muffins on and placing the bacon, eggs and cheese on them. “Sauce?” He asks the girls.

“Barbecue sauce please.” Marie smiled. Joshua put on the sauce and passed it to her.

“N-no sauce for me, thank you.” Claire said quietly, taking the offered food you passed her as Joshua started on the next two. No one comments on the Jock being able to cook, on you not acting like an idiot. You feel like you can be yourself here. You decide that you don’t want to wake up.
You went down to get Anna for breakfast. She was talking to someone when you got there.

“A-anna?” You stutter as you go around to the corner to where she’s talking to a blonde girl with long hair done in too loose ponytails over both her shoulders. Anna didn’t hear you when you called her name. Or maybe, maybe she was just ignoring you like everyone else did. “Anna, t-the boys’ finished ma-making breakfast.” You try again. This time she turns.

“What? Claire I can barely hear you.” Anna rolled her eyes.

“B-breakfast is ready.” You say louder, relieved she hadn’t been ignoring you.

“Alright, I’m coming. Bye Lilian, it was nice to meet you.” She says to the girl in front of her who’s wearing a plain white t-shirt and blue jeans with black boots.

“Nice meetin’ you too Anna.” The girl smiles, waving as she heads off. “I’ll come back in a couple hours to take you to town.”
“Alright, see you then.” Anna replies, turning to head back inside.

“W-who was that?” You ask nervously.

“Lilian Rose. She lives near here and wanted to know who the new comers where. She’s offered to take us into town later.” Anna tells you.

When Lilian comes back you’re all dressed in the same clothes you were wearing when you all meet because that’s the only clothes you could find. They seem to be clean though, so you’re glad about that.

Lilian takes you into town and rants on and on about the town and how excited she is to have new comers. She gives you the grand tour of the little wood made town. She shows you the mall, which Marie decides to check out for new clothes with some of the money you discovered Dr Davidson had left for her. Next she shows you the arcade which Anna instantly ditches you all for. There’s an oval with some kids who invite Lilian and you all to join their game of football. Kevin takes them up on the offer instantly but the rest of you go to the movie theatre. Lilian insists on paying for the three of you too see a new movie that’s recently come out about superheroes. She turns out to be a big nerd on the movie and whispers things to you that you never would have realized or picked up on.

After the movie you find the others and you all go out for lunch, your treat this time. Lilian shows you to a nice diner and you all sit down. After you’ve ordered you start to chat about your days.

Marie tells you about this dress that was simply to die for and about one of the seamstress’ at the store she went to who took her to where they made the clothes and allowed Marie to share her designs and comment on the designs that were yet to be turned into actual dresses.
Anna tells you all about this really cool game she played and how she got the high score on it and a boy came over and challenged her to a match, which she proudly tells you all she won. The two of them played every game in the arcade, the shooting games she usually won but she lost in most of the racing games.

Kevin tells you about the people he played football with and tells how he was tackled to the ground a lot more than he usually would be at a school game. They had ended up going for ice-cream afterwards and all of them were joking around and laughing. He said he’d had a really good time and how it was so much better than playing at school.

You tell them all about the movie you saw and tease Lilian about being a super hero geek and she just teases you back saying you were pretty geeky yourself. By the time you’ve all eaten you’re all smiling and laughing. You think even Joshua was smiling, although you doubt he’d admit it. As you look over at the others you realize something, this is the coolest thing you’ve ever had to friends.

As time starts to run out and the 16 hours are coming to an end you stare at the ceiling, all of you had decided it was a better idea to go to sleep and wake up so that you wouldn’t be doing something that might hurt someone or burn the house down. You think about the day and how much fun you’ve all been having and you realize something.

“I don’t want to wake up.”
Marie

As you open your eyes you find yourself back in your own room at home. You look to the clock and find its 5:32, exactly 8 hours since you feel asleep. You sigh happily and get up to get ready for the day. You pick out a nice dress that’s plain white but puffs out at the bottom with an under layer of black lace that can be seen at the bottom. You do up your hair the way you normally do. You can’t help thinking but to your dream. Was it actually real? You’d have to ask today when you go see them all.
You get there half an hour early like the day before and sit down. 10 minutes after you Anna walks in. She smiles at you and moves one of the desk chairs to sit next to you.

“Hey Marie.” She says. She’s wearing her hair the way she had it the day before but this time she’s wearing a black top with a band logo of some sort on it and red shorts.

“Good morning Anna. Did you have a dream last night with us all in it?” You say, very straight and to the point. She chuckles a little.

“Holy shit it was real.” The two of you don’t speak any more. Instead you both sit in a comfortable silence. Anna puts her headphones in and starts listening to music. A few minutes later Kevin and Claire walk in, talking softly.

“Good morning Kevin, Claire.” You smile at them both.

“Hey guys.” Anna waves. They both greet you. Kevin’s wearing a sports hoodie and black jeans as he moves a chair to sit with you and Claire is wearing a plain red shirt and black jeans. She sits next to Anna. 10 minutes before the class starts Joshua walks in.

“Oh my god no way.” Anna gasped. “Joshua, the king of last minute, is early.” She teases.

“Shut up Anna.” Joshua chuckles, sitting down.

“So I take it that the last doubled 8 hours of our lives was real.” You say.

“Seems so.” Kevin nodded.

“Well then. I’d say we had a good 16 hours and became close friends even though we still know nothing more about the others than minor details.” Anna said.
“Are you suggesting we rant about things to each other?” You ask with a raised eyebrow.

“No, I’m suggesting that tonight we play truth or dare!” Anna grinned.

“That sounds like a good idea. I take it you all liked tonight’s adventure.” Dr Davidson said as he walked in, wearing the same outfit as the day before.

“Where was that?” Anna demanded. You’d almost forgotten how snappy she was when she wasn’t being nice.

“I call it Dream State. A world in between our dreams and our waking lives.” He answers calmly.

“The pills I created are portals between these two worlds and I am your guide in them.” He tells you.

“Wasn’t this meant to be a self-help group?” Joshua points out.

“It is. Look at you all right now, how much of an improvement you’ve made since only yesterday.” He said. “In a dream we are exactly who we want to be. Our mental illnesses are gone. Just like a man who lost his leg dreams he has two again.”

“So you’re saying that when we dream we don’t care about what we cared about when we’re awake?” Kevin asks.

“Yes. And if you’d like that to continue into your waking lives stay with me and I’ll show you how.” Dr Davidson started before turning to the board and starting to write.

You walk home smiling softly to yourself as you think about tonight’s game of Truth and Dare. When you reach the door of your house you can hear yelling. You sigh as you walk in.
“She’s dead! Why do you treat her like a living being?!” Your mother shouts.

“She’s not dead Caroline! She’s living and breathing!” Aunty May yells back. You sigh and hope they aren’t going to notice you as you go to head up the stairs to your room.

“And you!” Her mother shouts, pointing at you accusingly. “How dare you pretend to be my wonderful daughter you stupid demon!” She screams. “How dare you possess her corpse! How dare you! How dare you! How dare you!” As she screams she gets closer to you before slapping you across the face.

“I’m sorry.” You mumble quietly.

“Caroline! Stop it!” Your Aunt exclaims, quickly pulling your mother away from you. You rush up stairs and collapse onto your bed, trying not to cry. As you do you bump something and hear a box fall to the floor. You pick it up. The sleeping pills. You look and see the water you didn’t finish earlier on your bed side table and check the time. 3 o’clock. You have to be up for school by 8. 8 hours from now would be 11pm and 8 hours from then would be 7am. You take out two pills and take them, falling asleep in minutes. But maybe you should have taken more. You don’t want to wake up.

Anna

You stretch as you get up in Dream State and head out to the kitchen again.
“Sorry I’m late guys; wardens wouldn’t let me go to bed early.” You say. You make a coffee and take a few pancakes that they must have already made.

“Oh no, its fine!” Marie smiles. “Now we can play!” Something seems wrong. She’s trying too hard. You don’t push though.

“A-alright, w-would a-anyone mind if I s-start?” Claire asks as you sit down on the couch next to her.

“Go ahead.” Kevin smiles.

“Well... Joshua, truth or d-dare?” She stutters, trying to face the boy who’s still in his pj’s like everyone else. Its night this time and you think that sets the mood better.

“Truth.” Joshua said.

“O-okay, I hope I’m not prying but, why do you wear those gloves all the time?” She asked.

“You’re meant to pry, don’t be sorry.” Kevin chuckled.

“I have burn scars.” Joshua said indifferently.

“Ohhhh, how’d you get them?” You pry.

“Only one question per truth.” Joshua says. “So, Anna, truth or dare?”

“Dare.” You declare firmly.

“Alright. I dare you to cut these headphones.” Joshua smirked as he presented her with headphones.

“What? No!! Not fair!” You pout.

“You backing out already?” He smirks back.
“Arghh, no I’m not. Give them here.” You pout as you take the headphones, grab a pair of scissors off the table and cut the headphones. You are getting revenge later. You’ll make sure of it. “Kevin, truth or dare?”

“No way am I doing a dare after that hard ball, truth.” Kevin says.

“How come you act like a jerk at school? You’re a really nice guy.” You ask.

“I...” He starts, biting his lip and looking at the ground. “My mum told me the way to get anywhere is to trick people like ants so you can step on them.” He said. “She’d hit me whenever she saw me being nice to some that was... ‘lesser’ than me.” He mumbled. The room fell into a heavy silence for a moment and you had a feeling you were all comparing your own parents with his mum. “Anyway, Marie, Truth or Dare?” He said, smiling at the self-proclaimed dead girl.

“Hmm, truth.” She smiled.

“How come you were here so early?” He asked. “Lilian said you two went and saw a movie already.”

“Oh, well, my own mother happens to be home at the moment and I just... decided I needed the sleep.” She said.

The game continued, eventually it was just question you gave each other. They ranged from “What’s your favourite colour?” to “What’s the stupidest thing you’ve ever done?”. By the end of it you’ve learnt that Claire’s favourite colour is green, Kevin wants to become a doctor, Marie loves the smell of cinnamon and Joshua’s favourite food is pink iced donuts.

You’ve also learnt that Claire’s parents throw parties every other night but haven’t remember her birthday since she was five, that Kevin’s will never look a girl with blood red lipstick in the eyes because it reminds him of his mother, Marie lives with her Aunty May because her mother was
trying to perform painful exorcisms on her after her sister died and Joshua was looking after his sister the day the fire that had hurt them both had started in their kitchen.

By the end of the game you’ve also revealed that you had a brother who ran away when you were 10 and that after that was when your impulse control disorder had started. All too soon your time is up and all too soon you’re waking up to get ready for school.

At school you sit with Marie and Joshua. Kevin sends you all apologetic glances from where he’s sitting with the other jocks at lunch. You just smile at him while the other three of you talk.

It’s Marie’s idea to go shopping, you don’t want to but you agree anyway, enjoying your time with her.

You shouldn’t have agreed.

You sit waiting for Missie to come pick you up in the office of the shopping market. You hadn’t meant to steal, or get caught. It had taken the explanation of your disorder from your doctor to get the market to not place charges. You sigh, you had been going so well!

It’s not Missies car that pulls up, it’s your dads. You gulp before getting in.

“Hello dad.” You say quietly.

“I can’t believe this! Here I was ready to take you out for a nice dinner and you go pull this again!” He yells at you as he heads to his house, it must be there once a month night of looking after you.

“Why do we even pay for you to get help if it’s not helping?” He exclaimed.
“I’m sorry dad.” You saw quietly.

“No, if you were sorry you wouldn’t pull this kind of stunt.” He snapped.

“I’m trying.” You all but whisper back. He continues to yell at you. All you can hear is yelling.

You’re tempted to take a Dreaming State pill; you’d started keeping a sheet in your pocket, to talk to the others. But you got Marie in trouble as well. What if she hates you? What if she gets the others to hate you too?

You skip the pill and just wait to pass out to the blackness of sleep.

When you wake up you find yourself having had an extremely bad night. You sigh and look at the clock. You’re already late for school so you skip it. You get up and look around the guest room of your parent’s home. They claim it’s your room but there’s nothing you own in here. It’s just a plain room with a bed, a set of drawers and a television. You head out to the kitchen. Your parents live in an average house with 3 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, a study, 2 lounge rooms and a kitchen/dining area. You head to the kitchen. Your mum and dad have already gone to work so you don’t bother looking for them as you make some toast for breakfast.

A knock on the door makes you jump. You look in the mirror. Your hair is a mess and you’re still in your pjs. Oh well you suppose, sighing as you go to the door.

“Where were you last night?” Joshua’s at the door.

“Hooooow did you find me?” You say, shocked to say the least.

“Missie told me you’d be here.” He sighed. “You look like a mess.” He teased.

“Oh shut up.” You mumble, blushing a little. “Shouldn’t you be at school?”
“You should to. We’re all ditching, we were worried about you.” Joshua said.

“I just... didn’t feel like it.” You mumble, looking at your feet. There’s a moment of silence.

“Come on, you’re coming with me.” He says, grabbing you and heading outside.

“What?! I’m not even dressed yet!” You exclaim, but you’re really not even trying to fight it as he drags you away.

“Missie’s allowed you to stay at my place for the next 3 days. Kevin’s dad agreed, Claire’s parents won’t notice and Marie’s mums staying at her aunts all week.” He says. “We’re going to Dream State for the next 3 days.” He adds. You grin.

“Really?! You guys don’t hate me?”

“Of course not, how could we ever hate you Anna? You’re our friend.” He said. You grin widely and hug him tightly but rushing off ahead to his place.

“Then lasts go!” You shout of your shoulder to him.

When you take the tablet and enter your dream world you discover that you love it here, with your friends, with no worry of your parents or of stealing or of anything.

You realize that you don’t want to wake up.
Joshua

When you wake up there’s still one day before you see the doctor again. You smile as you wave your friends off when they head home. You’re glad for the last 3 days of sleeping and the 6 days with friends. The group of you did heaps, including discovering that Dream State also has watchable shows and having marathons of your favourite shows.

When you finally wake up you find yourself a little sad to be living but you don’t mind, it’s not like you’ll have to wait that long to go back.

When you go back you all have a huge feast.

The next day you go to the group again.

“Hello boys and girls, today I have something knew for you to try.” Doctor Davidson said as he walked into the room. The five of you shut up instantly.

“What is it?” Claire asked and you’re impressed she doesn’t stutter this time, something she’s been doing less and less of since you’d meet her.

“I want to test this new dose.” He said. “It should make the effects permanent.” Dr Davidson said. He took a sheet out of his pocket.
“So you mean every time we go to sleep we’ll go back to Dream State? Without taking a pill every night?” Anna asked, looking up at the doctor with a hopeful look on her face.

“Exactly.” The man replied happily. “You all willing?” He asked. Everyone but you agreed. There was something off about it but you saw you’re friends take the offered water and pills and when Dr Davidson came to you with the same offer you took it.


When you open your eyes you wake up in your room. You look over and see Kevin is waking up too. What a weird dream. You wonder who this Dr Davidson is. You sigh and get up out of bed. Hopefully Anna’s already made a coffee you can steal off her.

“Morning Kevin.” You yawn as you head out the door. You hear the other boy groan, probably trying to say that he doesn’t feel like getting up.

For some reason, even after you’ve had your stolen coffee, cooked breakfast and gotten dressed you still don’t feel like you’ve opened your eyes once.

“Snow white looked upon the man who had kissed her awake and punched him in the face, yelling at him for doing such a thing to a sleeping lady! Haha, okay, so she didn’t actually do that, but I think she should have! These fairy tales are really silly, who would act like this in real life?” A young female voice giggles.
“Joshua.” Claire’s voice cuts through your day dream as a book hits the top of your head. The first thing you see is 42.

“Ouch!” You say, rubbing your head.

“We’ve been talking to you for two minutes.” Marie giggles.

You sit on the roof of the house with the Anna, Lilian, Marie, Kevin and Clair but the only ones still awake are Marie and Anna. You stare at the stars that only seem to read ‘42’.

“Big brother, please wake up.” It’s that female voice again, this time she’s sobbing.

“Do you two ever think something’s wrong?” You say quietly.

“What do you mean?” Marie hummed.

“I mean we’ve been here for 6 months and I can’t remember how we got here. Or who my parents are, or why we even live here without any adults.” You say.

“Sometimes,” Anna starts sadly. “Things like that are best left forgotten.

You don’t too forget though.

“Big brother, please. Please wake up. I miss you.” She sobs. You can feel a hand wrapped around your own and tears start to wet your chest.

No.

That’s not right.
She’s not allowed to cry.

“Pop... Poppy.” You mumbled. You shoot up in your bed.

No, not your bed. A medical bed.

“He’s awake!” Someone yells.

“Where... where am I?” You say, your voice hoarse.

“You’re in a hospital bed. In room number 42.” A man bedside you says.

“Brother? You’re awake.” A girl says. You feel her hands wrap around you and you hug back tightly.

“Poppy.” You say softly. You ran a hand along your sisters brown hair and see a hand book on the bed side table. Fairy tales.

It takes them 3 days to let you out of your bed to see your friends. They’re all in comas, like you were. You visit Kevin’s room. He’s fathers there. He looks up at you.

“You were... you were that boy that was asleep before.” He says softly. “Please, he’ll wake up right? Like you did?” The man begs you. He doesn’t look or smell like he’s changed his clothes or had a shower in days.

“I... I don’t know.” Is all you can mutter. He looks back down to his sleeping son and you know that son has no idea the father he’s left behind. You hate seeing Kevin wearing a white robe like that. Hate seeing him had all those needles in him. He hates needles.

You visit Marie next. Her white hair is still done up and the white makes sense. There are roses next to her. No one sits in the room. The beeping proves her to be living. She’d hate that.
You’re surprised to see two people in Claire’s room. Her parents. She’d love to know they care.

You’re even more surprised when you see a man in Anna’s room but he tells you he’s her brother. She’d love to know he was back.

“Let me go back under.” It’s been a week now.

“Excuse me?” The scientist that you learned had helped Dr Davidson make the pills without knowing their purpose looks over at you.

“I can make them wake up.” You say. “Let me go under.” The doctor looks nervous.

“I can give you 1 and a half minutes. Any more than that and you’ll be risking staying under forever again. Take these.” He passes you 4 tablets. “These will force them awake.”

“Got it. 3 minutes there 1 and a half minutes here.” You nod, taking a seat.

“Good luck.” He says as he passes you the pill. You take it without the offered water.

“Joshua! You’re alive!” They four hug you as you walk in. You smile softly and hug back before pulling away.

“We’re asleep.” You say.

“W-what?” Claire looks confusedly at you.

“We’re in Dream State. We need to walk up.” You say.

“Haha, very funny.” Anna said. “Great joke.”
“Anna, it’s not a joke. Your brother is by your bed side in hospital.” You tell her.

“C…Cameron?” She mumbles.

“And Kevin, your dad hasn’t left your bed side in at least a week.” You tell the jock.

“Oh my god.” Realization is settling.

“Claire you’re parents are worried about you. They love you.” You tell her.

“T-they do?” She smiles.

“And Marie you’ve got a heartbeat.” You smile. She looks so shocked.

“Take the pills.” You smile, passing them. Kevin hesitates.

“Alright.” He whispers. He goes and gets you all a drink, passing them around. You check how long you’ve been in her and freeze for a moment. 4 minutes. You were meant to pass out at three.

“Take mine.” Marie draws your attention to her.

“What?” You mumble.

“You need a pill and there are only 4. Take mine.” She repeats, placing the glass and pill in your hand.

“No, I… I can’t do that too you! You’d be stuck here.” You say, worried.

“It’s okay Joshua.” She smiles. “I’m dead anyway, remember?” It’s a joke but it doesn’t lighten the mood at all. Claire is the first to move. She hugs Marie tightly.

“I’ll miss you.” She whispers.
“We all will.” Kevin smiles sadly, hugging her as well before taking his pill, Claire already asleep.

Anna hugs Marie as well and you stand shocked. Its Anna that moves your arm, makes you take the pill that was meant for the white girl in front of you.

When you wake up again you’re still in the scientist’s room. You run out and find your friends awake. All of them expect one.

Your name is Joshua and you care.

You care about your friends and you care about your sister.

Your mother and sister moved to your town so you don’t live alone anymore and every week you visit Marie in the hospital with the others, and every week she’s asleep.

You think that’s alright though because you know she’s happy where she is. That’s what caring means, want someone to be happy and letting them.

Claire

Your name is Claire and you wanted to be loved.

You are loved. By your friends, your parents. They are trying to make up for the time they missed.

You think that’s sweet. You go to all the night time parties now. Most of them at least. Sometimes you’ll skip on and you’ll go to Marie’s room and show her the latest dress you’ve gotten.

You make sure they all have ribbons on them because you know she loved ribbon.
Kevin

Your name is Kevin and you don’t have to be who you’re not.

It took you way too long to learn that. You eat probably now and you let your dad fuss over you.

You quit the football team and most of your previous ‘friends’ ditched you. But you don’t care. You have your own friends that you spend enough time with anyway. You’ve taught them how to play football, or at least you’re trying to. Joshua is great and Claire’s getting better but Anna’s still hopeless at kicking.

You like to laugh about that with Marie. Or, at least, you like to believe she can hear you. You like to believe that maybe, just maybe, she’ll wake up soon.
Anna

Your name is Anna and you wanted an escape.
You got one. It was nice but it wasn’t right. You can’t escape your problems you have to overcome them.

You live with your brother now, it’s funny how close he’s been this whole time and you never knew. You’re all but overcome you’re impulse control and yesterday you went and bought the small rose broach from the store you’d been with Marie and stolen on impulse.

You left it by her bedside. You’d know she’d have liked it.
Your name is Marie and you’re not dead.

You’re just sleeping. You explained the whole thing to Lilian and you were surprised when she believed you, but also relieved. You’re glad she didn’t call you crazy, because you’re not. Not anymore.

You like it here and Dream State. You can hear your friends talk to you when you sleep but you doubt that’s the only time they talk to you. The house is pretty empty without them but you don’t plan on moving out because maybe if you stay here, surrounded by the memories of everything that’s awake, you think you might be able to wake up as well.
You want to wake up. You want to live again, this time with friends by your side instead of your twin.
The Carter Confession

Chapter 1: Knives, Sharks and Icecaps

A car honked its horn outside, accelerating Bill's heartbeat. Eyesight clearing, he glimpsed in the mirror the image others would see: weathered blue eyes and a weak smile, a receding hairline and a small grey moustache, accentuated by the growing number of wrinkles spreading across his forehead, an aging process that frightened him in its finality. He had no youth to correct his mistakes, no lifetime to build a proud legacy.

Most Presidents, Bill knew, spent their retiring years pursuing various humanitarian agendas, whether due to a belief in the cause or because the organisations were a ticket to society's elite. Aside from the occasional philanthropic donation or one of his wife's fundraisers, Bill remembered nothing in his retirement aside from digging: digging spaces to build the garden in their backyard, digging through books to rest his mind in the thoughts of the greats, or digging through his mind to bury the memories, freezing them in the icecaps of his subconscious. Whenever those memories were melted into the ocean of his mind, the twisted knife in his stomach would become omniscient.

Exiting the bathroom, Bill took one careful step before another down the staircase and towards the front door. As he descended, the President barely noticed the pretty sunshine glowing through the door. Instead, he thought of the sins, growing heavier: the mistakes and justifications his administration had concocted, the back-room deals and breakage of campaign promises. A two term President and thank God for it.

Once the ex-President had reached the front door, sweat had soaked his forehead: it was so hot, and the memories were heavier, submerged in his subconscious and floating to the surface like little pieces of ice. Stepping outside, Bill glimpsed the sun: shiny and intense, radiating heat down upon the surface, like his interviewer would upon the memories of the infamous President Bill Carter.
Bill had exited the estate in a similar car many years ago. With his slicked-back brown hair and expensive suit, the Senator had contemplated the length of the party rally speech during the drive. Remembering little of the content, Bill could only recall the ninety minute length of his speech, and the twisted knife in his stomach that had preceded it. While the speech had created a rollercoaster that had culminated in his Presidential election, the twisted knife would only grow in size for different reasons.

Fingers digging into the leather back-seat, Bill stared outside and noted the scenery: grass that flirted with green and brown and tall trees whose leaves were brown with the heat. It was not a very good distraction from the phone-call in his head, where *The New Frontier*'s principal journalist had contacted the reclusive ex-President without warning.

Michelle Greenwald had explained the series of interviews she had conducted with the staff of his administration in order to write a feature, with the ex-President the last to be asked in order to complete a picture of the administration's inner workings. With the staffers and former cabinet members having already gone on the record, Bill's option was to stay quiet and possibly be swamped with lies, or tell the truth for the record's testament. Having left office twenty years ago, Bill opted for the latter.

Once the deal was done, the twisted knife had begun sharpening. Once every few months, a memory would stir and Bill would descend into the classics to lose his thoughts. This time, the memories were the *currency* in the coming interview; they could not be buried. With the knife came the sharks, starting at their infancy in his mind until they were fully-developed predators: it was a constant sensation of having committed sin, always there but not *quite* there. All Bill could feel was the knife, and all he could see was the sharks, as the car exited the freeway and entered Melbourne's Central Business District.

The last thing the ex-President wanted to be known as was the neurotic President. Digging into his memories, Bill searched for the lessons his father had taught him decades prior: assume a poised
posture and easy smile, visualise the emotion you want to express and then project it, even if you had to consciously contort each muscle. Bill smiled to himself, shifting each muscle until the closed-lip expression felt natural. *They aren't getting my dignity.*

The New Frontier's offices were a mess of cubicles and glassed-wall offices, decorated with the disorganised movement of journalists, their flurry reminding Bill of his staffers inside *The Government House.*

Bill was inconspicuous, a small figure next to his bodyguard as they surveyed the floor. Where Flynn was searching for Michelle Greenwald, Bill was struggling to project a smile over the grim, impassive stare that had become infamous during his second term. Flynn, tall and well-bulked, nudged his charge along. Bill inhaled, exhaled and nodded, taking one step forward, and then another.

It felt strange to be unrecognised. True, his handsome face had descended into wrinkles, he had grown a moustache and the ex-President lacked his surrounding security detail, but Bill almost felt annoyed that his anonymity was present inside a political magazine. *Being a President means more than this, doesn't it?*

The twisted knife disappeared as an intern approached. The boy looked seventeen with receding acne like that, his brown eyes conveying an unrecognising blandness. *Am I old or is he just young?*

Bill overheard his name and not his title as he stared at the floor. He wondered who was working on the feature, whether that rapidly-chatting woman on the phone in a cubicle some metres ahead would be the one poring over the interview transcripts, or whether that mid-thirties-man all the way down the back was transcribing the interviews of his staffers, whose names had already been identified by Michelle on the phone. None were in contact with him anymore. *Maybe that's why she gave them up.*
The intern told them to follow him and the two visitors followed. As they walked down the floor's left-hand-side corridor, Bill glanced over at the cubicles, each occupant's curious glance succeeded by a glance down at their work. *Maybe I should've become a King.*

The moment Bill sat down inside the empty office, the twisted knife reappeared in his stomach. Feet planted underneath a steel table in the centre of the room while a concrete wall surrounded him on three sides, Bill could do nothing but stare at the table, or at the glass wall and door that provided the room's entrance, while the knife sliced through whatever calmness he had acquired out on the floor.

Inside his mind, the memories were stirring. Having been frozen inside icecaps for two decades, they were melting into the sea of Bill's thoughts, floating free to be vocalised. If the man swam inside those memories, the sharks would appear, circling until they could bite. From being a failed President to a treacherous President, the sharks would bite until the blood would overwhelm his mind; unable to think properly, he would retreat into *The Iliad* or *Crime and Punishment* until the oceans returned to a calm blue. *I need my books.*

The books were irrelevant once Bill glanced up at an approaching woman of average height, dressed in a red shirt and jeans while her ponytail blonde hair seemed to shine under the sun radiating through the window, opposite Bill's position. Michelle Greenwald proceeded across the floor as if nothing could go wrong, her green eyes giving Bill the impression that not only was her head in another universe, but that daggers were resting inside her pupils. *She looks as if she could carve me in two.*

Once she opened the door and stepped inside, an easy smile appeared on the journalist's face.

'Mr President,' Michelle's voice was a paradox: razor sharp and soothing, animated by what Bill saw in her eyes. *'I am so sorry to keep you waiting; place is a mad house.'*
'It's fine, it's fine,' As if slipping an old coat, Bill smiled, stood up and shook her hand, keeping his eyes locked on her green irises, as if waiting for hers to slice his apart.

As they sat down, Bill noticed the Recorder dangling from a chain against Michelle’s neck, consisting solely of a single thin screen with the width and length of his finger.

'So, I was gonna walk in here and be all...,' Michelle unclipped the Recorder from her chain and placed it on the table. '..."Hey, Mr President, how's your day going?" but we're very short on time. I was wondering if I should reschedule it but inconveniencing an ex-President isn't on my bucket list.'

Bill smiled and nodded.

'That's alright, Miss Greenwald,' Bill hoped they would go from a walk to a sprint before too long. 'I'm just wondering how long it'll take?'.

'Depends on how much detail you get into,' Michelle's smile hadn't faded, yet the glistening friendliness was competing with a calculating curiosity inside her eyes, like a psychiatrist charming an institutionalised patient prior to assessing them.

'The truth, you mean?' Bill knew the longer the interview it took, the harder it would be to tell the truth without getting destroyed by it. The ice-caps of memories had melted, but the sharks had not begun circling yet.

'Are you planning on telling the truth, though?' Michelle's smile was vanishing, superseded by a cautious seriousness.

Bill stared at her, exchanging his offence with her cautiousness.

'I'm not a liar,' Bill scratched his head. 'Anyway, do I get to read what Cook, Mars and Underwood said?'.

Michelle chuckled.
'No, Mr President,' her smile reappeared in the same fashion it had before. 'We're- you're- doing this blind. That was our deal, just like theirs.'

Momentarily, Bill contemplated leaving: the hot afternoon sun outside, along with the commuters and the approaching traffic jams, would be preferable for any sane person to the details he was about to spill. *Imagine the headlines: Former President Bill Carter refuses to answer difficult questions; walks out.*

'Alright,' Bill sat up straighter, back aching with the twist of the knife in his stomach, slightly sharper, as his blank expression supplanted that look of offence. The questions loomed in his mind, though the sharks were nowhere to be seen, so far. 'The truth it is, then. It was over twenty years ago, anyway, so who will care?'. 
Chapter Two: Compromise

Michelle tapped the Recorder's screen once. The screen lit up and a straight line appeared from end to end: it was recording.

'You've said in a previous interview about...ten years ago that the first hundred days of an administration always make or break its integrity,' her back facing the room's entrance, Michelle was in complete control, and they both knew it. 'So I suppose the question has two parts. The first is: do you feel as if you accomplished what was possible in the first hundred days? Secondly, what obstructed you if you didn't?'.

Amongst all the fuzzy details, Bill remembered the flashing lights best. The flashing lights of the journalists and photographers when he was a Senator had been nothing compared to the flashing lights during the party rally: a blur of speeches that preceded his own, each speaker's face illuminated every few seconds, blinking rapidly whilst concealing their annoyance. Senator Bill Carter had ascended the stage and launched his barrage of words for ninety minutes, amounting to a new electoral platform: “the New Path”. A collision of hands against hands followed, a booming roar of sound as Bill stared out into the crowd and saw the money-makers: suited and well-groomed white males whose expressions were incongruous with the euphoric optimism flooding the room.

The flashing lights had followed the Carters every day, from the early morning jogs in the cold to the press-conferences that Senator Carter had especially called to attack the incumbent Presidential candidate's policy announcements or to the rallies inside major cities, where cameras would capture every moment of his booming oratory.

The flashing lights caught his grim face on the election night, devoid of any joy or pride in the landslide election victory that they had attained. As the party and its supporters partied all night, Bill had made his victory speech and retreated from the hall as quickly as possible, conscious of the
money-maker's presence. He had no wish to become interact or become involved with bankers, investors, media moguls or businessmen.

Shadow Education Minister Jeanette Mars had noticed his evasiveness, finding him slumped inside a stairwell, her hazel eyes glowing an understanding. Bill spoke only in generalities, not willing to think too much about the job ahead. The President-elect had been glad that no cameras were around to capture his face when he realised how much opposition in the party there would be to the New Path's implementation.

'I knew, going into the election, I was going to be dealing with party factions; part and parcel of politics,' Bill eyed the Recorder, momentarily transfixed by its red straight line. 'They thought my platform was mad, but it won votes, so they kept their mouths shut.'

Michelle smirked.

'They were expecting you to break your promises as soon as you were in office, in other words?'.

Bill shrugged, finding it difficult to care as to what his allies within the party really wanted or expected.

'All politicians are opportunists, Miss Greenwald,' Bill smiled. 'The platform was bloody good not because of how great it would make this country, but because the opposition had their dicks in their hands for once. It was just an election strategy to them. They were going to come knocking.'

'Don't they always?' Michelle seemed slightly bored, as if hoping for a more elegant, complicated story.

'They're always knocking if you're important: X will give us votes, Y will bleed them,' The later stages of the campaign were vivid: with victory assured, the shadow cabinet meetings had begun eroding into assertions of individual agendas, such as the Defence Senator reminding Bill of the
importance of air force funding. 'My time in the last four weeks was split between campaigning and ensuring I didn't get slapped during my first hundred days.'

Michelle nodded, sitting up straighter once she felt her back beginning to slide down.

'So your expectations were tempered by party factions?' As soon as she asked it, Michelle saw Bill's eyes glaze over. 'You weren't expecting much, in other words?'.

'I was expecting my first hundred days to be more about building bridges than walking over them, yes.'

The tie Bill had won within *House* and *Senate* meetings was always the same: blue or red. The President had worn a blue tie as he entered the *Senate* chambers for the first time, his mind closer to a screwdriver than a sharp blade, exchanging glances with the Senators surrounding him across the enormous room, its seating pattern layered like an onion. The President sat at the centre, the rookie Senators sat closest to the back. On one side were the incumbents, the other were the opposition. Both sides had glanced at each other as if they were sizing up their own power.

With th electoral promises a vague hope in his mind, Bill and his government capitalised on the post-inauguration honeymoon period to legislate the reinstatement of income taxes for the upper economic quartile and the reorganisation of military funding to reduce private contracting, while Bill had flicked his red tie in glee when they introduced legislation to abolish the *Hamri International Educational Initiative*, whose over-reliance on test scores had disproportionately affected the lower quartile of students.

At all three legislation introductions, Bill had sat, poker-faced, as his allies fabricated solidarity while the opposition voiced their contempt. The feuding would continue and Bill glanced up at the ceiling, wishing for the flashing lights instead of political negotiation.

Within the party, meetings began reaching an intensity not seen since before the campaign's launch:
the taxation roll-backs became compromised once Treasurer Russell Cook and his economic advisors began launching arguments reminiscent of trickle-down economics many decades prior, capped when Cook had given him a coded warning that Bill's Chief of Staff- Jesse Stamper- had translated as: “Don't piss off the money-men”.

Similarly, education reform meetings quickly became weighed down with arguments over minimum-standards funding, state power over their school system and curriculum requirements. Bill had flicked his tie as he watched Jeanette argue for ideas he had placed within the electoral platform, knowing the bill could never pass without conceding minimum-standards or federal jurisdiction.

'So the first hundred days and the compromises you had to begin making,' Michelle kept her eyes locked on her subject, careful. 'Did they make you think you were the smartest person in the room?'

Bill smiled, hoping she would write it as self-deprecating.

'I had to compromise so many good policies just to please a bunch of suits getting paid a hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year. I had to hurt my own voters,' Bitterness burned through Bill's voice. 'I could have done my job if they weren't in my way.'

Michelle glanced at the Recorder.

'I don't agree with that,' said Michelle, returning her gaze back to Bill. 'How quickly do you think your policies did damage?'

Words marched into formation inside his head, sentences forming to respond to her disagreement. Yet, the President knew better than to leave a question hanging.

'We killed the Hamri Initiative on...day fifty one, I think,' a shark was circling inside his head. 'We had to replace it with a reform pretty quickly. We spent another month- I think- on putting a bill
together. It was a cluster of ideas: Cook's, mine, Jeanette's. It was passed soon after. We started
getting teacher complaints not long into the new school year. Why don't you agree?'.

Michelle shook her head.

'It's not my place to say.'

'You're the writer of the piece, not me. You can leave out anything you want.'

Michelle stared at him before nodding, conceding the point.

'Politics is a game. You have to play with your team, and other teams. They'll beat you, otherwise,'
Michelle's eyes narrowed. 'You were a President, you should know this.'

'All of my policies were supposed to benefit everybody. They got bent into focusing on the
privileged,' Bill's eyes radiated incredulity and wounded pride as the shark vanished. 'Don't blame
me for being a bit optimistic.'

Michelle's gaze was careful.

'That's not what I was blaming you for, if you want to call it that,' the journalist shook her head,
pushing her hand through her hair until it was removed from her eye line. 'Would you like to take a
break?'.

Bill shook his head.

'What's the next question?' The shark had gone, replaced by a storm front that created enormous
waves inside the water as lighting flashed in the sky.

Michelle blinked, before sitting up straighter again.

'The Federation Square bombing, and its consequences,' Inside Michelle's green eyes were an
eagerness, like a hunter about to catch its prey. 'We don't have time to go through your
administration step by step so we're going in broad strokes. I hope that's okay?'.

Half-smiling, Bill glanced down at the table and then at Michelle, nodding his understanding.

'I need a coffee first.'

The amount of lies peddled around this period had kept the ex-President up at night, sending legion of sharks after him. Yet, the sharks had vanished and opportunity radiated inside Bill's eyes. Why am I enjoying this?
Chapter Three: Storm

An intern placed a cup on the table, glancing at the President before turning to face Michelle, who nodded and smiled. Message received, the intern placed her cup down and walked out, closing the door with a final glance at Bill, trading the former's suspicion with the latter's amusement.

'Does he hate me?' Bill chuckled before he drank, watching the intern disappear into the maze of cubicles outside, harder to see as the sun began lowering.

'Possibly,' Michelle opened her mouth to speak but thought better of it, cautious. 'He's the one who's been transcribing all the recordings with...your staff, if that explains anything.'

'Does indeed,' Bill scratched his hair and folded his arms, smirking. 'He must think I'm the anti-Christ after the others were done.'

'Not exactly; you've mentioned things the others didn't,' said Michelle, shaking her head, patience thinning. 'You've been more helpful than they were, if that helps.'

'Is it my job to shore up the gaps?' Bill glanced at the recorder, aware he was possibly digging his own grave. 'To give you the greatest hit piece on Earth?'.

Michelle's eyes narrowed.

'No, Mr President, that's absolutely not what I'm doing,' her poise had been supplanted by what Bill interpreted as wounded pride.

Is it that easy to get under her skin?

'So what is it you're going to write?'.

Michelle tapped the recorder once and crossed her arms.

'I'm building a complete picture of your administration: what went right, what went wrong, and who did what,' Michelle’s professionalism was slowly beginning to emit from her eyes, her annoyance
disappearing under her reappearing veil. 'Do you even know why your staff opted to speak?'

Bill shrugged.

'Opportunism, long-standing grudges, who knows,' the sharks were circling, Bill realised. Their fins were visible above the water's surface, approaching as he floated with his memories. 'Does it matter why they wanted to do it?'

'Terry Underwood opted to speak because it's been two decades and he's bored of the lies, Cook spoke up because he wanted to clear up misconceptions of his fiscal policies as Treasurer, Jeanette Mars came in here because she wanted to defend you and....,' Michelle trailed off, a curtain of surprise appearing inside her eyes, widening at the conversation's turn. 'I was going to write the feature anyway. The circumstances would've meant I was relying on unreliable outside sources, Mr President. All your staff wanted in exchange for their cooperation was permission to tell their story. They did that. That's what I'm doing for you. Every single thing they said has the potential to hurt them.'

Bill said nothing, glancing from Michelle to the recorder while she stared continuously, as if contemplating whether the interview should be aborted. Deciding otherwise, the journalist tapped the recorder and sat back.

'Mr President,' Michelle's formality would have made him laugh if he knew he was not being recorded. 'Can you take us through the events of the Federation Square bombing?'.

It had been raining the day Bill had been briefed on national security matters by Jesse Stamper and Terry Underwood. His office was tense: photos of suspected East Timor militants lined the coffee table in the centre of the room as a Medium security grade was projected onto a wall. While Underwood had theorised that the militants were part of the Free East Timor Brigade, Stamper reminded Bill multiple times that the security apparatus' hands were tied in regards to surveillance:
while the Federal Police could certainly follow the group, they could not monitor their internet usage or banking accounts, nor tap their phones, due to the country's raised legal standards for surveillance warrants.

Seven days later, Bill had sat under Melbourne's overcast skies, conversing with the State Premier over lunch as a light breeze rustled through the city, forewarning the coming rain. The pair could hear the Grand Final excitement over a nearby television, the atmospheric excitement palpable at various sites across Melbourne, from Federation Square to the MCG. Biting into an apple, Bill felt the table shake as a freight train seemed to crash a couple of blocks away, sending dust hundreds of metres into the air. Billowing smoke overwhelmed the dust as police cars began speeding past.

The security protocols kicked in and Bill bid farewell to the Premier and entered the Presidential motorcade, staring grimly through the back of the car at the smoke billowing higher into the sky. It took seconds for Bill's aide to breathlessly explain the initial reports: an unknown number of bombers had suicide-bombed at various points across Federation Square, a fact Bill had barely comprehended the enormity of until he visited the site two days later, finding trains halted at the platforms of Flinders Street Station and the surrounding block cordoned off while masked responders shifted through the rubble, taking care to avoid trampling on body parts.

Upon being flown back to the House, Bill found Stamper reviewing a tape released by the FETB, his grim expression at odds with the manic intensity of their leader as he spat the group's justification for the bombing: the increasing presence of Australian in East Timor and the wider region over the last decade.

Whereas Russell Cook's face had been painted with fear, Terry Underwood's eyes were livid with equalised rage and opportunism: not only did the FETB have the audacity to attack Australia, but they had also given the Australian government the perfect excuse to retaliate with military force.

Response-planning quickly superseded education reform and fiscal management as the primary item on the Cabinet meeting agenda, where the room seemed to split between those who viewed
any show of force as dangerous, those who saw a show of force as an imperative to create a deterrent, and those who were contextualising any response within the wider objectives of the administration as a positive or a negative. Amidst all that debate, Bill would sit in his chair and disappear into his fantasy land of being a citizen, where he could criticise the President making the decisions instead of being the President himself. Parallel to that fantasy land was the mounting pressure the man felt: to respond, to protect, to provide justice to the sixteen hundred victims.

During an outdoor lunch under the early-October sunshine, Bill had ordered the drawing of operational and contingency plans for an invasion of the insurgent-controlled areas of East Timor. Whereas Underwood had been almost giddy, Cook seemed on the verge of a heart-attack at the prospect of a long-term and costly war, eroding his ambition for a surplus.

Meanwhile, Stamper had provided a report from the intelligence community identifying the 'suspected militants' from East Timor as being the actual bombers, providing a perfect pretext to increase the capabilities of the intelligence agencies. By the end of November, the Chief of Staff had cornered the President into deciding whether to maintain the status quo or to make the jobs of the analysts easier. Bill had finally nodded to Stamper on the sixth time that the Chief of Staff had made the argument for the latter, reasoning it would be relatively painless to pass that legislation in light of the bombings. Some within his party had flashed the President the same look he had flashed his predecessor when the *Hamri Initiative* was passed upon the Security Act’s passing.

A light drizzle was what Bill found when he exited the *House* and slumped down against one of its walls, overlooking Canberra, knowing that Australia was weeks out from invading another country.

The sharks had been attacking Bill's mind as he spoke, their teeth lining his skin with each thought that passed: he had made so many wrong decisions, he had let his own Chief of Staff force him into a decision he had been uncertain about, he had allowed a bloodthirsty Defence Senator to dictate the crisis-response. Blood coloured the ocean, exhausting the old man. *But East Timor was the right*
'You sound like you regret half of it and believe in the other half,' Michelle looked confused, leaning forward to hear the old man better. 'Do you?'.

Bill's age had never seemed more apparent.

'East Timor was the only thing we could do. We hadn't stepped foot in that country in years and they still murdered over a thousand of our citizens,' Contempt overwhelmed the President, seeing the child's arm beneath a slab of concrete. 'They were a threat to be neutralised. People died in the crossfire. It's war.'

Michelle nodded.

'What about the intelligence practices?'.

'Did I regret it at the time?' Bill shook his head. 'I couldn't. We were hamstrung by those laws. We let the rats slip through our fingers and people died. But, yes, I regret it now. Most people do.'

Michelle's eyes lit up.

'Why?'.

'The Eldon leaks,' said Bill, before Michelle nodded. 'I had suspicions that the agencies were intimidating individual citizens using their data. Jason Eldon just confirmed it.'

Michelle blinked.

'I was a coward,' Bill's ocean was clearing as the sharks swam away to another oceanic current, away from those memories. 'I caved when I should've thought it through.'

Michelle tapped the recorder, keeping her eyes locked on his. Bill knew empathy when he saw it.

'I don't know who'd call it cowardly,' the journalist's voice was softer, gliding on the air instead of cutting through it. 'Not in context, anyway; something had to change after the bombings.'
Bill looked down and shook his head, eyes focused on his lap before he gazed at the recorder, its straight line obstructed by an additional vertical line. *How much of what I said is front-page worthy? What will they think? Is any of this even helping?*

'Mr President,' Sympathy radiated through Michelle's voice; the President's muscles tensed and relaxed. 'I am honestly not out to write a hit piece. I wanted to understand your decision making, that's all.'

Bill stared at her.

'I don't agree with all of what you did,' Michelle drank the last of the coffee. 'But, I'm a journalist. I'm telling the truth. I'll write whatever context I am *presented* with.'

'You're very gracious,' A slight smile creased Bill's face, parallel to the calm waters inside the President's head. 'If you want to understand my decision making, we'll have to go to the second term. That's basically it for my first term.'

'The recession, labour union disputes and the Kanez scandal, then.'

At those words, Bill felt as if he was covered in mud, sprinting in search for water.

Michelle tapped the recorder and Bill nodded, sitting up straighter again.

*Just like church.*
'I'm curious: have you ever rated your integrity during your Presidency?' Michelle's question caught Bill off-guard: *I should've been expecting a question like that. 'It's something I wonder if Presidents do.'*

Bill thought for a moment: a qualitative rating had appeared in his head years ago but it had felt worthless. On some days, he had dug into his memories and found a younger man whose actions were contextualised reactions to pressures- political, social, and personal. On other days, Bill had dug within his memories and saw a coward: stocky and small, dressed in sheep's skin while his wolf face snarled at the integrity dripping off his skin. Immediately, the sharks begun circling once more, teeth bared.

'I...I don't feel comfortable answering that, Miss Greenwald,' Bill twitched to the chair's side, eyes uneasy as they glanced into Michelle's purified and confident curiosity.

'Michelle,' the journalist said, smiling. 'But are you sure? It wouldn't hurt, with all you've shared.'

The second-term memories floating inside his ocean had morphed: they were stacked against a wall, wired with explosives that were ready to detonate. *I need them out.*

'I'm sure,' Bill sat up and drank, immediately regretting the decision as the cold coffee coursed its way down his throat. 'The recession or the Kanez scandal: which one first?'.

'The recession.'

Bill would always press his pen during his least favourite part of campaigning: budgetary meetings. When the budget begun to dwindle due to advertising and the campaign staff, Cook had introduced the notion of soliciting donations from several businessman and one media mogul, all of whom had expressed their interest. Bill refused initially, having looked his staff in the eyes and promised them...
that their campaign would not be compromised by private interests. Yet, the spending was not sustainable.

The only way Bill had been able to deal with his bad mood was by clicking his pen when the round of donor meetings happened, all following the same process: a set of suited figures would sit opposite Bill and Cook, coffee would be poured and formal smiles would be projected as the terms-of-agreement were negotiated. The terms were always simple: press-positive regulation that did not regulate the markets at all and a safety net of bailouts for any banks who would go south during a recession. The businessman ignored Bill's clicking pen, focusing on the man's agreement, failing to notice the future-President's poker face.

The caretaker Treasury had briefed the President-elect on the state of the previous government's policies, ranging from inconvenient to disastrous. The high debt sustained to increase employment through expansion of the public sector had been redirected toward classified military projects, private rebates and mismanaged infrastructure. Bill nodded in admiration upon realising how much spin the Treasury had worked for three terms.

Post-inauguration, Bill had entered his office and, instead of decorating it as he had planned, immediately organised a meeting of his economic advisers, all of whom predicted a coming recession. Once Cook asked if bailout packages should be prepared, Bill had shaken his head. There would be no legislative signatures on bailout packages in the first term.

As his re-election came closer to victory, Bill would watch Cook during Treasury meetings. With employment steady and growth reasonably-consistent, the budgeting ambitions for each consecutive year had grown, ranging from a troop surge in East Timor to tax cuts.

The ABN bank sunk beneath their years of debt in the first week of January, eight weeks after the re-election and ten years after the previous administration had punctured the market oversight enough for useful loopholes to be created. Consequently, Cook had quickly devolved from a confident Treasurer to a nervous bank cheerleader, persistently arguing that the bank's death would
crash market confidence and send the economy into a death rattle. Bill would never forget Cook's
eyes when the President refused to sign a bailout package for the ABN: it was as if he had plotted
the Federation Square bombings himself.

Michelle was transfixed.

'How did any of that feel?' She was smiling at the pride that had glowed in Bill's eyes as he spoke.

Bill scratched his head, cognisant of how this memory had not been frozen, that there were no
sharks to bite if he answered incorrectly.

'It felt good,' Bill placed his hands behind his head, leaning back. 'The arch-capitalists got us on the
mining first. Then it was the banks. I was...proud to take a stand on it, for once.'

'If you lost the third election because of it, would it have been worth it?'

Bill's smirk faded, the knife twisting, imagining that fantasy: the praise of the lower classes, the
smile of his wife while he burned through his opponent's arguments in the debates and being hailed
a hero by his family.

'I'd have gone home a proud man.'

The ABN, CAB and ANZ bank executives had sat on the couches in the centre of Bill's office while
Stamper and Cook stood to the left and right of their President. The banker's arguments for the
bailout were concise and unoriginal: the ABN's collapse would shake the market and trigger a
meltdown that would reverberate through the economy and worsen the escalating recession. Bill's
throat would dry as he vocalised the economic counter-arguments, tapping his pen against his chair
incessantly. Cook had stood, silently, until the ABN's CEO dropped the dirty bomb: re-election.
The majority of campaign funding for any serious candidate was derived from private donors, always directed to the most business-favourable candidate. The executives promised that it would only take one election to roll back Bill's policies and render the Carter Administration pointless. Cook had quickly reiterated the wider impact of the ABN collapsing, causing Bill to glare at the Treasurer before politely concluding the meeting.

Once the door had been shut, a rapid volley of words exited the President's throat, whose rage fired on all cylinders as he chastised the Treasurer for betraying the government's unity in order to support the bankers. Rage calming, Bill ordered the Treasurer to begin preparing a bailout package, glaring at the man as he walked out. That glare barely subsided when Bill pulled out his pen and signed the package legislation, the pen making him feel as if he could not walk.

As the recession wore on, the labour unions became a hindrance. Initially, Bill tried to play for both sides through meeting with representatives of both the businesses and the unions, hoping to locate a middle-ground. The union representatives were more endearing in their common vocabularies and simple requests for protection, while the slicked-back hair and suits of the bankers betrayed the pure classism of their request to have collective bargaining and other union tenets abolished. The attitude of the bankers and the helplessness of the unions were what led Bill to construct those icecaps in the first place.

Although Stamper was a union ally, even he had acknowledged the benefits of a third term to consolidate the education reforms and to conclude the East Timor operations. Stamper's concession that the private donors could propel the opposition to victory had been what motivated Bill to call his Workplace Senator into his office.

The union's faces were fresh in the President's mind as he ordered Senator Cave to begin drafting a reworking of workplace regulations, a reworking that he had broken his pen for when signing. Those faces would never leave.
'Would you support the unions if you were in that position again?' Though the question was neutral, Bill could see sympathy and disgust battling each other inside Michelle's eyes.

The President nodded.

'Siding with those people was the second biggest mistake of my Presidency. It set a horrible precedent,' Bill knew that the workplace had only begun recovering within the past decade, lockstep with the economy's greater prosperity. 'I should've bailed them out anyway, but not at their request.'

Bill felt lighter, the more he talked. Every few seconds, the man glimpsed the veil in Michelle's eyes giving way to the anger inside, to the incredulity that he could be that stupid. He wanted to see that anger: it was shifting his mind, from the icecaps to a myriad collection of islands in every shark-infested direction. The fragments were slowly floating toward land, warmed by the sunshine above.

'I want to ask again,' Michelle's firmness unnerved Bill. 'How do you rate your integrity as a President?'.

The relief was in sight. The sharks had begun receding for longer, the more he swam in those memories. Their danger was lessening the more he spoke. I need to finish this.

'Do you want my rating or the Kanez scandal?' Bill sat up straighter, hoping the grand finale would make his sleep easier in the future. 'I can't do one without the other.'

'The Kanez scandal,' Michelle and Bill knew it was: besides being the last notable subject to talk about, it had been his administration's execution. 'Tell me what I don't know.'
Chapter Five: Integrity

'Jeanette Mars,' the moment Bill uttered the name, he felt himself drowning beneath the memories of that scandal, glimpsing the sharks a safe distance away. 'Did you two talk about the Kanez scandal?'.

Michelle's eyes narrowed.

'She skipped over the topic.'

The President nodded.

'I understand why.'

East Timor had not been a smooth invasion. After the initial landing and rounding up of FETB militants, the Australian forces quickly discovered that invading a nation is more likely to strengthen an insurgency than put one down. Groups already opposed to the government's harsh policies folded into the FETB, triggering a series of reprisal killings of Australian soldiers and collaborators that left Bill with one of two options: a troop surge or a departure, with the latter leaving the field open for another Federation Square. The consequences of choosing the first had been immediate: bombing waves, guerrilla attacks on Australian soldiers and public executions of Australian POW's.

Radicalised Australian citizens eventually became affiliated with the FETB. Driven to extremism by Australia's costly interventionism, they usually quickly died in the shootouts between soldiers and insurgents. Emre Kanez had not been one of them, whose naive anti-Australian ideology was paralleled with the common sense to stay out of hot-spots and hide deep within insurgent territory.

While Underwood had readily soaked up the intelligence, it had been the newly-promoted Intelligence Chief- Jeanette Mars- who had questioned its reliability. Mars would always spar with
Underwood in weekly meetings over the apparatus' ability to positively-identify citizens amongst the chaotic chatter of domestic and foreign threats. Having served as an analyst in one of the agencies, Underwood would consistently argue their methods to be state of the art, a fact that Jeanette could not refute. It was almost discrediting of Mars to undermine the reliability of her institution.

Jeanette had warned Bill of the media fire storm that would occur if they were wrong about Kanez, a notion Jeanette reiterated when she handed him intelligence that gave a strong likelihood of Kanez plotting an attack on Australian soil. Yet, any attempt she made to caution Bill into careful action was always undermined by Underwood's presence, who persistently reminded everybody of Federation Square.

Once the attack's likelihood was raised to a certainty, Bill had convened a meeting of his advisers and closest Senators to decide the course of action. Immediately, Underwood had provided a simple option: bomb Kanez at the first available opportunity, or let him return to Australia and risk the man going underground, surfacing only to attack the country. It would be a necessary execution, Underwood had reasoned.

Whereas Stamper and Cook said nothing, Mars was livid, her eyes radiating the intense disgust reserved for war-criminals. Underwood was the inverse: calm and collected, always calculating the most proportional response. The two argued for hours, trading human rights notions for the idea that becoming a terrorist relinquishes one's entitlement to the law's protections. Bill listened dispassionately, his water eyes conveying the resignation of a President willing to compromise himself one more time. The risk of a Federation Square repeat was too great, a thought he vocalised to the room. Mars' eyes had narrowed, comprehending, before she stormed out of the room.

The following morning, Bill, Underwood and Stamper had stood within the situation-room. The live drone feed of Kanez's car traversing the East Timor countryside appeared the moment Mars stormed the room. Stopping short of begging, the Intelligence Chief unloaded every counter-
argument one could think of when it came to executing a citizen without a trial, let alone an
indictment. As she continued, a pilot from a drone control centre had asked for the greenlight.
Heartbeat racing, Bill nodded his assent and Underwood vocalised the order. As Jeanette silenced
herself, a drone began locking on the vehicle.
Once the smoke cleared, all the room could see as a demolished vehicle. Twenty years later, Bill
could still see human remains inside.

Bill's hand was shaking, his heartbeat accelerated as if he were in the situation room again. As the
sharks circled, Michelle's expression was unreadable; he couldn't tell if she was disgusted or
transfixed.

'It would've been one in a long line of compromises,' Bill continued, finding it difficult to breathe
properly. '...if one of our analysts didn't leak the intelligence on Kanez, and if a press foundation
didn't claim Kanez as one of their own: an embedded bloody journalist.'

Bill exhaled deeply, sensing a nearby shark, teeth bared, smelling the flesh.

'It killed your administration instead,' Michelle had only been a child, but her memory of the
headlines has been obvious.

Bill smiled.

'President Bill Carter: murderer of journalists, traitor to the middle-class, butcher of education
reforms, ally of the bankers, and the first President since the referendum to resign.'

The icecaps had vanished from sight completely. On all sides, Bill could see islands, drawing nearer.
The water was getting shallower, and the sharks more distant. A day earlier, his mind had been
submerged within icecaps, sharks chasing him on all sides. *What is this?*

Michelle leaned forward, opportunism radiating from her eyes.
'Your integrity,' the opportunism vanished, replaced by an empathy whose sincerity was indiscernible. 'How much integrity do you think you had as a President?'.

Bill's mind sprinted through the different ways he could convey the answer: self-loathing or prideful, truthful or an exaggeration. Does the world even have a right to know?

'My father used to rate my effort on a ten point scale. Chores never got above eight, school work effort sometimes got to ten. He liked to push us, to get us to that ten. He'd buy us something if we got to ten, something really nice,' it had been over seventy years but the President wondered how he may have turned out if his father had not been mauled by that shark. 'If my father were here, he'd say I was a three. I think I'm a two, or a one, but it depends on my mood.'

Bill could have sworn he saw satisfaction inside Michelle's eyes before it vanished.

'Do you think about your terms a lot?' Michelle stared at her subject as if listening to a friend who was confiding their lifelong troubles.

Bill shook his head.

'I buried the memories.'

As silence grew between them, Bill glimpsed the Recorder and saw that long line, unbroken as the seconds ticked past for the ninetieth minute.

'Do you believe you should've been President?'.

Anyone who becomes President deserves to be President just because they were smart enough to accomplish it in the first place. Everyone knows that.

'Hindsight is...,' Bill's voice trailed off, standing on the beach of an island as the memories of his two terms floated along the coast-line, approaching as the tide rose. 'No, I shouldn't have been President. Somebody could've done better.'

Michelle closed her mouth just as quickly as she had happened opened it, shaking her head instead
as she glanced down at the Recorder.

Michelle tapped the device, ceasing the line as a set of options—play, pause, and record—appeared on the screen. *The icons are so old I was born during their inception. Bloody hell, those times were easier.*

'Thank you, Mr President,' Michelle's sincerity was something Bill could never glaze over. 'I don't agree with what you did, but...you don't either, so that's fair. This interview, though: it'll do a lot for the country.'

'How so?' Bill felt a gaping hole in his feelings at that moment, devoid of any sentiment. Not even the knife was in his stomach. Nothing was. 'It won't do much besides sell more subscriptions to the *Frontier*, maybe.'

Michelle smiled and shrugged.

'You can't know that,' she stood up and dusted herself off, turning around to face the late afternoon sun drifting into sunset. 'Got any plans for the rest of the day?'.

'Home,' Bill stood up and Michelle offered her hand. Their eyes met and they shook, as if they had both done a service for each other. 'Thank you, Miss Greenwald.'

'Michelle,' she smiled slightly. 'And thank you, Mr President.'

The traffic down the street was enormous: a never-ending string of metal, wheels and jarringly-coloured paint that were completed by a young fellow's audio system, blasting music from one side of the street to the other. *Isn't this place alive?*

Bill saw Flynn get into the black car, opening the passenger-side door a few moments later as the old man descended the *Frontier's* steps, grateful he could still move without a cane. Peripherally, the President saw a red-wearing figure approaching, leading him to turn on the spot to face Michelle
as she descended the steps. There's no recorder around her neck.

'What can I help you with, Michelle?' Bill felt like any old man at that moment, his Presidency a very distant memory.

Michelle's eyes were radiating empathetic warmth, as if harnessing the sun's power.

'I wasn't sure if it was appropriate of me to tell you this, since I technically have to be impartial,' Michelle seemed the very antithesis of an adversarial journalist right then. 'I disagree with you.'

'Of course you do,' Bill smiled.

'Your Presidency, I mean,' Michelle continued, shaking her head as her hair begun to billow in the breeze. 'Nobody could've made the right decision in your circumstances. You tried to stick to your principles for as long as possible, and that's admirable. It was an impossible situation for you. The guy before you couldn't have done much better, neither could the woman after you.'

Bill shook his head.

'I murdered an innocent journalist, Michelle,' Bill envisioned Kanez's face once more: youthful, handsome and charismatic, as if his very skin seemed to glow magnetism. 'It's not something any principled man would've done.'

The President shrugged his shoulders.

'I suppose you've had years to think about this,' Michelle gazed into his eyes, as if appealing for his understanding. 'I won't be able to change your mind?'.

'I just don't think about it,' Bill entered the car, closing the door as his hip begun to ache, smiling appreciatively at Flynn while Michelle approached.

As the window rolled down, Michelle stood closer.

'Don't make it a puff piece, please.'
Michelle chuckled and nodded.

'I promise, then,' She shook his hand a final time. 'Maybe I'll get a prize or two out of it.'

Bill smirked.

'I thought I'd get a Nobel Peace Prize when I was younger. That was partially why I became President. Stupid idea.'

'Why?' Michelle looked twenty years younger then, her eyes reflecting the innocent curiosity of a small child.

'Only the people who play by the game's rules win.'

How would people talk about his various admissions, such as how he had considered himself smarter than his party? Would they fixate on the labour disputes or the Kanez scandal for the fiftieth time? Was there any point to worrying about it?

The first half of the drive home was preoccupied by those thoughts, from the CBD to the suburbs. Bill would gaze out into the surroundings and see vague forms of houses, trees, parks, shopping centres and schools, lacking any defined form as he tried to assess the impact of everything he had owned up to. *I owned up to it, though, and that's the important thing.*

Once that thought entered Bill's head, the knife in his stomach vanished. Outside, he saw a fully-realised world: suburban homes that looked like they cost a million dollars, shopping centres whose exits were lined with Christmas shoppers, schools that the last teachers were exiting for the day.

There was a *life* to that world, Bill realised once he got out of his own memories and thoughts.

Bill reached his front door, pushed the key into the hole and hesitated: his wife. *What will Ellie say?* *She'll probably think I'm a damn fool for confessing all of that.*
The husband turned the key, listening to the door as it opened with a harmonic combination of sound and movement that relaxed the man's muscles: he was home. Entering the entrance hall, Bill heard no sign of his wife: not in the cooking nor on the TV. *She's out picking fruit, of course.*

The stairs were closest and Bill could glimpse the bathroom up the top on the right-hand side, with the door still open and the last vestiges of sunshine still shining through it against the dark ambient lighting of the two bedrooms opposite. Curiosity swept the man and the President ascended the stairs, hip aching at the rapidity of his double-time speed.

Entering the bathroom, Bill carefully stepped toward the wall-length mirror, all of his features vividly accentuated the closer he got. Bill’s heartbeat slowed as his eyesight focused: his wrinkles seemed to have receded, his smile was stronger, his moustache certainly had to go but it was barely noticeable against his eyes, which were the true anomaly. As the sharks inside his head disappeared from existence, Bill saw a youth in his eyes, as if he were twenty years younger.

Gone were the icecaps and the sharks, having disappeared from existence. They were replaced by a warm sunshine, glowing down upon the island sands that Bill was digging his fingers through, lying down on his back. The bamboo trees behind him rustled under the sea-breeze as Bill noticed his memories and their fragments: mere outlines as they floated along the coast, with the tide way out. Bill smiled.
The King, The Captain and The Priestess

And Their Role in the War between Lighte and Darke.

The King

“Your Majesty, the council urgently requires your attention.”

“What do those bureaucratic idiots want?” came the grumbled reply.

“They say it is regarding the Summer Feast,” the harassed squire replied.

“They say it is regarding the Summer Feast,” mimicked the King as he rolled out of bed.

He hated being woken prematurely. There was an awkward pause as the King went to stand in front of the mirror.

“Well don’t stand like a blithering idiot, help me into my clothes.”

“What’s wrong now?” the King bellowed as he stormed into the Great Hall. Five men huddled around a simple table, a complete contrast with the ostentatious archways and tapestries that adorned the walls and ceilings.

Silence echoed through the room as the Council debated who should face the King’s wrath. Eventually they all looked pointedly at the youngest member, the Keeper of Information. He had drawn the short straw of the soundless conversation. The Keeper of Information looked tiny beneath his robes. His shoulders hunched and face scrunched. He would’ve been somewhat handsome if his face hadn’t puckered like the fate of the world rested on his shoulders.

“Your liege, it’s... it’s the summer festival,” came the meek reply.

“And...” the King queried.

“Well, it’s just too big. The kingdom is bankrupt enough. Everyday more people starve to death and your lavish parties don’t help,” he squeaked.

“And that’s my problem, because? You’re the Council. It is your job to solve the kingdom’s problems, not mine.”
“And we’re trying, but it will be a lot easier if you merely took some people off the invitation list,” suggested the Keeper of the Keys.

“Well you just need to do your job better! This festival will improve the people’s spirits! I’m your King and you gibbering idiots will do as I say!” With that, the King stalked out of the room, returning to his bed.

“Well, what do we do now?” the Keeper of Information.

“What the King wants,” sighed the Keeper of Coins.

*The Captain*

“Wakey, wakey you can’t sleep forever!” a mellifluous voice called out.

“I can and I will,” grumbled Melvin.

“The dead bodies are getting cold” the voice called as the covers were jerked back.

“So is my body,” grunted Melvin.

A weight flopped down onto the bed next to him and a soft kiss was planted on his mouth and he groaned with approval.

“Would you get up for a kiss?” the soft voice whispered again.

He cracked his eyes open into slits letting the soft light that filled the room filter through.

Another kiss was planted on his lips.

“You’re not convincing me to leave, staying here is already so good,” Melvin quipped.

“Well, then I just need to stop making it good.” With that Melvin felt the weight lift off the bed.

He opened his eyes fully to see the silhouette of a women sauntering off into the next room.

Melvin sighed as he heaved himself out of bed and started to dress himself in his captain’s armour.

He walked through to the kitchen as he knotted his captain’s cloak. He smiled as he saw his wife making him breakfast at the stovetop.

“Do I get a reward for getting up?” he whispered as he nuzzled her neck.
“If I give you one you’ll never leave,” she chuckled as she turned and planted a kiss on his lips. Her lips soft and warm. “Come, breakfast is ready."

She placed two plates on table and sat down. Her blue eyes glinting with amusement as she considered her husband.

“Fine,” Melvin huffed as he sat down, stabbing his eggs as though they had just gravely insulted him.

Breakfast passed merrily with husband and wife passing jokes, until a loud banging interrupted them. Melvin sighed and got up to open the door.

“Sir! There’s been a murder, I’ve come to escort you there,” said a guard red in the face, sucking in breaths, his chest heaving.

“Could you not have waited for me to finish breakfast, Stanley?” Melvin sighed and turned to give his wife a quick peck on the cheek.

Stanley had oversimplified the situation when he said there had been a murder. This was no ordinary murder. The body, if one could call it that, was a blackened and shrivelled up husk.

“Do we have any idea how he... she died?” Melvin asked a healer who helped the city guard with murders.

“No, I have never seen anything like it,” a slightly greying man, wearing a long green robe said. Thin gold detailing marking his cuff distinguished him as a grand healer – they had called in the big guns.

“Any idea as to their identity?”

“We can’t even tell their gender,” the healer replied, “but I’m sure someone will come forward with time.”

The house, in which the body was found, was located next to the docks - the area was notorious for its crime. Yet, nothing was missing of value was missing. Nor was the rusted bolt on the flimsy wooden door broken.
“Sir,” Stanley said as he came towards the captain. He painstakingly avoided looking at the desiccated body lying on the floor.

“Yes?” said Melvin, stepping away from the body to spare Stanley’s infamously weak stomach.

“I found this in the bedroom” he said and opened his palm. There lay some Ramshi, a powerful hallucinogenic drug favoured by the poor and desolate, and a small glass bead that contained a red flame.

“The Thieves?” said Melvin, perplexed. The Thieves were the underground organisation of the kingdom. They imported and distributed Ramshi, as well as participating in an innumerable number of other sordid businesses. Their calling card was this glass bead left as a threat or a warning. *Why did they kill the corpse like this? Surely slitting their throat would be just effective?*

“It would appear so,” the guard replied.

“Has anyone found anything else?” Melvin asked.

“Nothing of interest,” Stanley reported.

“Well, I’m going to go see my contact. Send a messenger if there are any more developments,” he instructed and then promptly strode out of the house.

*The Priestess*

“Crack!” went a piece of dry wood under the pressure of Marilyn’s foot. She bent down to pick it up and added to the growing bundle strapped to her back. She gently placed a wind-chilled hand to the hot welt on her face. Her father had gone on one of his rants again. The effects of the Ramshi making him strike out at his daughter. His addiction to the powerful drug tainted her love of him. She loved him, but the beatings had slowly eroded that love. She sighed and forcing herself out of her reverie to continue collecting firewood.

Marilyn loved the forest that surrounded the hamlet that she resided in. It afforded her precious time outside the claustrophobia of the house. The wind created a susurrus in the trees, a counterpoint to her sighs. She scanned the forest floor looking for potential firewood.
A glimmer caught her eyes in the long swaying grass. Curious, she approached it. The glimmer flew up and swelled into a bright, white light. Marilyn shielded her eyes from the blinding light. When the light had bled away, a beautiful woman appeared. She was dressed in a flowing white dress that seemed to be made from the light itself. Marilyn fell to her knees when she realised it must be Lighte – the deity worship by the people of the kingdom.

“There is no need for that my child,” her voice was like honey as it echoed through Marilyn’s head. “I have come to give you a mission of the Lighte,”

“Why me?” Marilyn whispered, perplexed as to why Lighte would pick her for anything. She was a lowly peasant not worthy of anything.

“You have a greater strength than you realise. I know that you don’t believe that, but you are the one who I have chosen. You are the one to fulfil my wishes.”

“What do you want of me?” she breathed.

“You must travel to the kingdom’s capital. Once there my wishes will become apparent.”

“How? I have no money. I am merely a peasant.”

“You are a Priestess of the Lighte. The people will look after you. You shall want for nothing.”

The Goddess reached out and cupped Marilyn’s cheek. Marilyn was suddenly filled with a calming fire, a feeling of purpose, destiny. Light filled the clearing turning the dark canopy an emerald green then a blinding white light. When Marilyn’s vision readjusted to the darkness of the clearing, Lighte had disappeared. The only thing convincing Marilyn that it hadn’t been a hallucination was a glowing white ring on her finger. It glowed softly and she was filled with the same sense of destiny as before.

The reassurance provided by the ring persisted, encouraging her as she went home packed her bags and scrawled her father a farewell. She briefly wondered if he would cope without her, but when the frosty night air hit the swelling on her face she didn’t care. She was destined for more good than to help a man already lost to the world. She started down the rough road that led to the capital, her ring shining. She left her heart lift with the elation of actually doing something with her life, even if she didn’t know exactly what. With the moon
illuminating the road ahead, Marilyn began her journey.

_The King_

“Please welcome Ser Balcan, heir to the shire of the northeast, cousin to...”

The King sighed, resting his head on his hand. His rings dug into the soft skin of his cheek, but he didn’t care. He was tired of the antiquated customs, the tedious announcements, the constant worries about offending some duke because he was announced after some count with whom he had an argument years ago. Yet, the customs persisted much to the King’s ire.

The King’s eyes meandered to one of his four wives - the Water Queen, Mercia. She was talking to some unnoticeable squire. She was unpredictable and unforgiving just like the ocean. The King married her purely to appease the Water Tribes of the West. They felt that country did not appreciate the trade that they conducted over the seas, and threatened to stop paying tax. So a royal wedding was arranged and now the water tribes gladly pay even more exuberant taxes to fund the royal coffers.

The court herald droned on while the King looked at his other wives - the fiery, temperamental Fire Queen from the North and the flighty, harebrained Air Queen of the East; both of them were married to appease the people for some reason or another. The King sighed again, the air leaving his lungs with a soft whoosh. He skimmed the crowd looking for his fourth and final wife, when the herald called, "Lady of the Southlands, Her Eminence the Earth Queen." The King sat up straighter and removed his hand from his cheek, his rings leaving red ridges on his face. His heart lifted as his Queen entered the throne room. She was radiant. Her long blonde hair plaited and twisted, cascading down her shoulders. The emerald dress she wore sparkled in the light, brought out her eyes. The Kings heart swelled, Emeraldine, the Earth Queen, was the only wife he married out of love. A love that nearly tore the Kingdom apart, but it was worth it. She was the greatest thing in his life.
“Your liege,” mumbled a timid voice.

“What?” the King snarled, angry to be disrupted from his preoccupations.

“Everyone has arrived. It’s time for you to open the summer festival.”

“More silly traditions,” the King grumbled inaudibly and he heaved himself out of his gilded throne.

As the King stood there was a quiet susurrus as mothers shushed their children, squires nudged each other in the ribs and countesses scowled at their spouses to be quite. The King waited patiently for silence and let it ring for a several seconds. He took a deep breath and with a tone of voice used only by kings and heralds boomed, “Ladies and gentlemen. People of the water, fire, air and earth tribes, from the West, North, East and South. I hereby officially open the Summer Festival. Eat, drink and enjoy!”

The Captain

Rap tat tat tat tat. Melvin beat out a rhythm on the decaying door and a slit suddenly opened in the middle of the door. Light bled out into the shadowy night and a pair of eyes looked out. The eyes shifted as they looked him up and down. He stood awkwardly trying not to scratch the itchy wool of his street clothes.

The slat closed with a loud snap. He stood with the silence of the night swirling around him. A second passed and the door was jerked ajar. He stepped through into the jolly hubbub of the tavern frequented by the Thieves and their associates. Melvin walked briskly to the darkest corner and swiftly ordered a mug of ale.

Melvin sipped his drink as time crawled by. Eventually, Melvin’s guest joined him at the table.

“You’re late,” Melvin said coldly.

“We don’t all have time for punctuality,” came the heavily accented reply.

Melvin’s façade broke and he chuckled, “Good to see you, friend.” He stood and gave Zachariah a firm handshake. Zachariah was an importer for the Thieves, moderately high in its ranks. He came from the Sholoqu islands, a race that was renowned for its sailors. It was
his Sholoqi heritage that accounted for his dark skin and handsome features. His fingers were cluttered with rings, as was the custom with both the Thieves and the Sholoqi tribes.

“You’ve hardly touched your drink,” Zachariah exclaimed he sat.

“I was waiting for a friend,” smirked Melvin. He and Zachariah had always been friends. They had often tried to remember when they first met, but they never could. Zachariah was always happy to provide information on the Thieves as long as it didn’t directly affect his business and in return Melvin didn’t set the guard on his ships.

“So what can I help you with?” said the foreigner as he ordered a drink

“There was murder. Ramshi and a Thieves’ token were found in the house. The body was completely desiccated. Dry and shrivelled like the prunes you so love. I have nothing, I need your help.”

“Interesting,” the foreigner mused, tapping his tanned hands on the table, his rings glinting in the dim light. “I don’t have anything concrete. I’ve only heard rumours. Apparently the Leader is in town.”

“The Leader? You mean the Leader of the Thieves,” Melvin exclaimed. “I thought the Thieves were led by a council, that they don’t have a single leader.”

“I was also surprised when I heard it, but maybe it is just another of the Thieves’ well kept secrets or maybe it is just a rumour.”

“Well, I suppose it can’t hurt to investigate. It’s not like I have any other leads.” Melvin sighed resignedly. “Any idea where I can find him?”

“I heard that they are in the Docks Inn.” There was a slight pause. “Melvin, be careful. This information was not protected. Everyone, even a common street thug, has heard this rumour. If this information is true, they’re not trying to hide.”

“I’ll be careful, like I always am. Thank you, friend,” replied Melvin. “Now let us be merry and forget about all this business.”

Melvin and Zachariah spoke late into the night, about friends, family and adventures, until the sun was cresting the horizon. Then they stumbled home drunkenly and fell into bed, awaking the next morning with a constant rapping in their heads. Rap tat tat tat tat.
The Priestess

Marilyn had travelled hard to reach the kingdom's capital in seven days. She was touched how hard the people of this kingdom had worked to provide for her - giving her fresh horses, food, shelter, everything. A particularly kind old lady had even dug out her old wedding dress for Marilyn to wear, saying that a Priestess of the Lighte should not have to wear rags. A slight insult to Marilyn’s clothes, but compared to the compassion of the gesture it was soon forgotten. Today was the day she was to reach the city and so she had donned her ‘robes’. They were simple, but exquisite, made from a sheer material that hung simply. It looked like robes worthy of a Priestess, not a forgotten wedding dress.

She stood outside the city, a sense of destiny hanging over her, when she heard the thunder of horses. She turned just in time to see a procession of horses slowing to a halt. They stopped right in front of her, and she stood confused trying to figure out a reason as to why they stopped. They couldn’t have stopped for a simple peasant girl.

“Now, what is a Priestess of the Lighte doing all the way out here,” hailed the leader of the procession, ending her confusion – they had stopped for her. He wore the purple finery of a royal, edged with small silver clouds marking him from the air tribe lineage. He had sandy brown hair that looked blonde as the sun shone on it and mud-brown eyes that were laughing even when there was no joke.

“My duty,” said Marilyn as confidently as possible, she shoulders squared and eyes defiant. The leader chortled, his eyes crinkling. “Well, at least let me escort you into town, so you can do your duty quickly... or more quickly.”

“I’m quite alright, She gave me legs didn’t She?” she retorted, eyes ablaze, not liking the dismissive way he treated her.

“It would be my honour, please allow me to.”

Before she had time to refuse this noble, who thought he could do whatever he wanted, he had already instructed one of his men to help her onto the horse behind him. Her brain had
hardly processed it before she was on a horse and they were rumbling into town.

They rode in complete silence, Marilyn silently affronted at being bandied about. She wasn’t confident in her newfound rise in power, and didn’t know how to deal with this presumptuous aristocrat. So she continued to sit in stony silence, as the scenery progressed from the squalid slums to the immaculate manors of the noblemen, and still they carried on towards the hulking, regality of the castle. They blustered into the castle courtyard accompanied by the sharp skittering of the pebble stones. Promptly, everyone had dismounted and Marilyn was lifted off her horse. The nobleman offered his hand. She took it, not happily, but out of courtesy. He started to walk towards the castle entrance and Marilyn panicked when she realised that he intended for her to enter the castle.

“Thank you for escorting me, but I don’t wish to burden you. I’m happy to make my own way from here.”

“Nonsense, why do you think I brought all the way to the castle? A Priestess of the Lighte can’t be expected to stay in anything less than the best.”

“I’d rather not,” she insisted, perhaps a touch too blunt.

“It’s the summer festival, you’re not going to find a place to stay anywhere,” he replied calmly, but his eyes were all challenge.

“I’m sure I could,” she defied.

“Please, I would be affronted if you did not accept my hospitality.” His edges of his lips smirked, but the rest of his mouth remained perfectly still. What could she reply to that? No one was expecting her and insulting the nobles of the capital was the last thing she wanted to do.

She hadn’t even acquiesced and the brown eyed nobleman was moving towards the white marble steps of the castle. The whole castle was in fact white marble, with ornate facades and gilded detailing. It was a remnant of a time when the King wasn’t so greedy and the people were happy to serve.
On the steps stood a woman in a grey silk dress, a silver crown decorated with pearls and clear glass sitting atop her head.

“Son!” she welcomed. “How was the hunt?”

Marilyn flinched. This nobleman that she been so rude to, was in fact a prince - the son of the queen of the air tribes. She stood frozen in dismay, until the prince intervened.

“This is…” he looked at her questioningly.

“Marilyn, Priestesses of the Lighte, Your Majesty.” She curtseyed as she spoke.

Once Marilyn had recovered from the shock, she looked at the queen. She had a stern face, with as many smile lines as frown lines. She was neither young nor old, but somewhere in between. She was dismissive of Marilyn, barely sparing her more than a cursory glance, before turning the conversation back towards her son. She clearly adored her son, nodding enthralled as he recounted the story of how he took down some poor animal.

They stood for some time. Apparently, in depth analysis of the hunt was required. Marilyn stood awkwardly as the prince and the queen spoke. When they had finished they started to walk towards the massive, gilded doors. Only then did the prince realise that Marilyn was still there.

“Mother, you go on. I have guest to take care of.”

The Queen’s face fell imperceptibly before she smiled and nodded.

“So, would you like a tour of the castle?” the prince queried as he turned to Marilyn.

_The King_

Thwack! The arrow hit the target dead centre. Hurrahs went up from the crowd as the archer took his bow. The King roared along with the crowd, banging his goblet at the appropriate times. The Royal Archery Competition was one of the King’s favourite events of the summer festival. He insisted on his sons competing, whether they wanted to or not. He believed that it taught them strength, patience and dedication. He had four sons, one with each wife.
There was a certain symmetry to it, four territories, four wives, four sons - fire, water, air and earth.

The Earth Prince was the King’s favourite and relished the competition. He was tall, strong and good at any type of sport. He was second in line to the throne, which was pity. The King thought that the Earth Prince would make a fine King. However, first in line was the Air Prince. He had the talent to do well at these competitions, but thought the competition were silly. The King could not abide by his laziness - never training, always wandering off to be found sitting and laughing with the servants. The Water Prince was third in line. He was quiet and scholarly. He had the intelligence needed for a King, but not the life skills nor the interest. He would make a great advisor. His fourth son - the Fire Prince, was only a child, barely eight summers old. Despite his age, he was fiery and temperamental, qualities common to all members of the Fire Tribes. The King liked his sons; he just wished that they acted in a way more befitting to their lineage.

A roar went up from the crowd, as the princes walked onto the tourney field. They had all been put in the same round, a coincidence that the King appreciated. Trumpets bellowed and flags of crimson, sapphire, emerald and silver flapped in the wind. All competitors wore the archers leathers, so the princes, technically, should’ve been indistinguishable. However, the crowd knew who they were. The King sat transfixed as the competition commenced.

The results weren’t surprising, yet the thrill of the competition held every person enchanted. The Earth Prince won and the Air Prince came second. However, the greatest upset was between the Fire Prince and Water Prince. The small eight year old was already better with a bow than the fully grown Water Prince. The Water Prince held the bow awkwardly and without command. He didn’t hit the target once in the twenty four shots that he had. A complete thrashing, the Fire Prince hit the target ten times albeit just. It was sad.
The King walked over to where the Earth Queen was standing talking to her son. He warmly congratulated him, clapping him on the shoulder. He turned to the Queen and saw how proud she was of her son, her eyes burning with a fierce joy. She turned and looked at the King and his heart almost stopped she was so beautiful. She gave him a smile, so full of love that it almost blinded him. Why was he so lucky?

_The Captain_

The Docks Inn was a ramshackle building on the waterfront, famous only, because it was the place to be if you were involved with nefarious activities. Melvin stood ready in his civilian clothes and men of the Guard surrounded him. They had watched the comings and goings of The Dock Inn’s patrons for days and noticed nothing out of the ordinary - as ordinary as the centre of the kingdom's illicit activities could get. Despite all that, the number of desiccated bodies had stacked up – there had been three in the few days they had been surveying the inn.

“I’m going in,” he said.

“Sir, take someone with you. Please,” his second in command petitioned, knowing that Melvin would not accept someone going in his place and not going at all would be totally out of the question.

“We don’t want to spook them. I’ll be fine, trust me.”

Before he could reply, Melvin had sauntered off.

The reception of the inn was also a bar. Not surprisingly, there were quite a few people drinking despite the early time. Melvin approached the bartender to make some inquiries.

“He’s waiting for you. Second floor, first door on the right.” said the bartender before Melvin could ask anything.

Melvin’s eyes widened in surprise, but he didn’t say anything. Alarm bells started to ring in his head.
“Thanks,” he muttered gruffly and turned away.

His discombobulation didn’t abate as he climbed the stairs. *Who is in that room and why are they waiting for me?* He wondered. Yet, he was stuck when approaching this case. So the only solution was to carry on climbing the stairs and see what waited behind door number one.

He went to the second floor, first door on the right as per the bartender’s instructions. The room behind said door was dark, as if there was something absorbing any light that squirmed its way through the narrow gaps in the shutters.

“You came sooner than I expected, you must be truly desperate,” a deep and rich voice mocked.

As Melvin’s eyes adjusted to gloom, all he saw was a table and two chairs. He waited a couple more seconds, weary to fully enter the room.

The disembodied voice seemed to sense Melvin’s hesitancy. “If I wanted kill you, I would have done so by now. Especially considering how reckless you’ve been,” chided the voice.

“Honestly I’m a bit disappointed. I was expecting a whole army - or at least a platoon.”

Melvin remained silent, all his sense screaming to pick up any information that could tell him what he was dealing with. Several more seconds passed in utter silence before Melvin saw the source of the voice. There was a figure sitting in the chair. The shadows gathered around it in a deathly hug. Any light in the room was immediately absorbed by the shadows. The figure wore a black hood, hiding its face.

“Finally saw me?” the figure teased. Another pause

“Pleased sit down,” invited the figure cordially in an abrupt change of tact. “I assure you, I have no intention to harm you… yet.”

Melvin sat, not entirely sure what to think, but sure that the figure meant it when it said it could kill him at any time.
“I have a proposition for you Melvin, Captain of the Guards. I only hope that you would consider it carefully,” said the figure. “Especially considering that your decision would affect those closest to you,” added the figure.

Only then did Melvin realise that he was truly dealing with the Thieves. This man who had single-handedly run the organisation responsible for most of the kingdom’s crime could only have gotten there by being a ruthless, devious killer. Genuine fear set in and Melvin could feel his legs starting to shake. Adrenaline flooded his system and his brain kicked into overdrive.

“Listen Melvin, like I have mentioned repeatedly I am not going to hurt you. I have a favour to ask. I want you to kill the King,” it asked as if it was a merely a request for him to look after his pet while on holiday.

“Why on earth would I do that?” Melvin exclaimed.

“You mean apart from the fact that the King is a greedy, selfish tyrant that is turning this land into a place riddled with poverty.”

“Well, isn’t the corruption good for you?”

“Let’s just say a much loved queen wants her son on the throne, sooner rather than later. However I wouldn’t worry about that. What you should be worrying about is your motives. I believe they would be of great interest to you,” accompanying this, not so subtle, deflection the figure removed an object from his sleeve.

Melvin’s eyes widened, “You wouldn’t… you didn’t.”

“Well, not yet.”

On the table sat his wife’s wedding rings, glinting in what little light was in the room. The simple wedding band and the engagement ring with the single shimmering diamond.

Melvin’s mind whirred furiously. Is there any way I can refuse and still protect her? He most likely has every angle covered - he isn’t just some common thief.

“Please, Melvin, don’t demean me by thinking that you can get away from this. You can’t and we both know it.”

Damn, how does he do that? It’s like he’s reading my thoughts.
“I am,” quipped the figure. “So do we have a deal?”

“I suppose I have no choice.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“So how do I do it?”

“That’s not my problem, you’re a smart guy figure it out. Now go on, get, shoo. You’ve got things to do.”

Melvin got up and picked up the rings, disappointed with how easily he gave up. He loved his wife and would never do anything to hurt her. Anyways the King was a tyrant, so he was doing the kingdom a favour, right?

Just as Melvin was about to leave the room, he turned, looked to the shadowy figure and said, “Why me? I’m sure there are people who would do this job for money.”

“You can’t trust the corrupted; there will always be a higher bidder. I know you’ll follow through, I trust you. The stakes can’t get any higher.”

The irony was not lost on Melvin as he descended the stairs. He made up some lie and fed it to his second in command. He then stumbled home to check on his wife. He felt numb inside, yet he knew that the split second decision was the right one. His wife was his treasure in his life and if killing the King meant he could keep her he would willingly pay the price, any price.

_The Priestess_

Wrong, she was dead wrong. When she first met the Air Prince she immediately wrote him off as a shallow, insincere noble like the rest of this court, but he wasn’t. He was kind, helpful and genuinely cared about the people of the kingdom. The more time she spent with him the more she regretted how she behaved earlier, like an insolent child. She had treated her with dignity and respect and she had acted out just because she felt uncomfortable. She still wasn’t sure why She had sent her to the capital, but Marilyn was determined to make it up to the Air Prince.
“Where are you off to?” the prince called, jogging to catch up with her as she walked briskly to the doors of the castle.

“Well,” she said suddenly feeling a little foolish, “I was planning on visiting the Docks District. Try to help some of the homeless there. Get a better idea of what I was sent here to do.”

“Ah, that old conundrum. Just let me tell a squire and then we can go,” he said smirking roguishly.

“You don’t have to come, it’s quite alright,” she said sheepishly.

“Nonsense I want to. I think it would do the kingdom good to see some nobles actually taking in interest in something other than themselves.”

They spent the whole day in the Docks District talking to people, seeing how they celebrated the summer festival and helping people where they could. Despite the fact that they were prime targets for the Thieves, yet by some divine intervention they were left alone. The day was wonderful and Marilyn was so glad that she could spend it with the Air Prince. They stayed till the sun was setting, burning the sky to a brilliant red.

“I had no idea you had any healing training?” the prince asked in the carriage on their way back to the castle. He was referring to their visit to a hospice and Marilyn had helped the healers to dress wounds.

“I used to help the healers in my village,” she said vaguely, unconsciously rubbing her cheek even though the bruise from her father had long healed. She had to dress the wounds that her father inflicted on her, a fact she wasn’t comfortable discussing. In attempt to change the topic she asked a question that wasn’t exactly appropriate. “May I ask your name? Or should I just call you Your Majesty?” She rebuked herself immediately. She was a mere commoner who was she to call the Prince by anything, but his title.
The Prince chuckled, “It’s Nathaniel, but everyone calls Nathan. Well, everyone who doesn’t call me Your Majesty. And before you ask, yes please call me Nathan. I’m so tired of being noble.”

“Nathan,” she breathed. It was a lovely name, for a lovely person. *I wonder who thought of that name? Please not the horrible King!*

She didn’t realise there had been a significant silence, until Nathan coughed awkwardly and said, “So did today help you find out what you were sent here to do?”

“Yes and no. I know that I want to study to be a healer. She seemed to indicate that I would know, that it would suddenly be clear to me, but I don’t feel that. So I don’t know what I am supposed to do.”

They had had many discussions about what she had sent here to do and still Marilyn was still unsure, but at least she found a compassionate ear with the Prince.

“I’m sure it will come in time,” he said sympathetically. “While you wait for your eureka moment, I’ll talk to the Royal Healers to see if any of them would be interested in taking a part time apprentice.”

“Really? You would do that for me? Thank you so much.” She was astounded again at his generosity. She twinged as she thought of her earlier behaviour.

“Of course I would. I consider you a friend and I would do anything for a friend,” he said and flashed her that heartbreaking smile that had all the ladies in court chasing him. It was all teeth, brilliant white teeth.

“Thanks,” she said, her cheeks heating up with an oncoming blush. *I’m his friend! I’ve never had a true friend before.*

“Well it looks like we’ve arrived,” he said peering out the windows.

They dismounted and said their goodbyes. As she lay in bed she was overcome with a sweeping feeling of happiness. The prince was her friend! Hers! Never had she felt so glad that she left her father to embark on this mysterious quest.
The summer feast was upon the kingdom. The King didn’t care what the Keepers said the feast was necessary. He looked at the splendour of the Great Hall. The sun shone softly through the stain glass windows illuminating the hall with shades of red, blue, green and white. Sounds of merrymaking echoed throughout the hall, soft chatter and clinks of beer tankards. The King knew that as the day progressed and people drank more, this pleasant rumbling would turn into a stentorian roar.

The King sat for most of the day whispering sweet nothings to Emeralda. The other queens long since inured to this kind of behaviour sat resolute in their elegance. The princes sat on the long table on the dais below, as per tradition. The Priestess of the Lighte sat at the table with the princes. It had been so long since a Priestess had been present for the summer festival that the proper place for their seating was long forgotten. She was friendly with Nathan, almost too friendly. So she had been put next to him.

_A King has no time for religion and neither should a prince._ The thought was soon forgotten – the King made a rule to try and forget his sons’ downfalls at the Summer Feast. It was a perfect day and he didn’t want to waste it with negative thoughts.

A guard choose that moment to come up to him ruining his resolve. His face was scrunched with worry, his eyebrows pulled close together, as if they were trying to tie themselves into knots. Luckily for the guard, the King happened to be slightly inebriated and so anger his was tempered.

“What’s wrong Jones?” – his name wasn’t Jones – “Grab a mug and enjoy yourself!” the King exclaimed and leaning over the table and messing food all over his court fineries. Jones’ eyebrows squeezed even closer together.

“Well sir, we’ve heard reports that someone wants to kill you.”

“Nonsense Jones, why would anyone want to do that?”

_The King_
At the second incorrect use of his name, something hardened with Jones. His immediately relaxed and his eyes became flinty. Jones’ sword flicked out and clipped the King’s neck. “Wrong answer,” said Jones, “and it’s Melvin.” Then he ran off.

In the meantime chaos had erupted, yet the King remained calm. The Water Queen who sat to the King’s left was screaming her head off. The King dimly wished she would shut up. He lifted his hand up to his neck and was shocked when it came away bloody. With that all the life seemed to whoosh out of him and he fell back limp. As he was slowly sliding off his chair, he turned his head to Emeralda, wanting to spend his last moments (for he knew he was going to die, no one survives such a neck wound) looking at a loved one.

However, instead of seeing love and sadness in the face of the queen, the King saw anger and hatred. The queen’s eyes burned and a sadistic grin was plastered on her face. “Surprise, you bastard. Did you enjoy your Summer Present?” she whispered. Then the guards grabbed the King and put him down so that the healers could get to him. He saw the Priestess peering down at him, she shook her head and turned to say something to someone. The King didn’t care, the world was gone to him. “She never loved me. Did she even like me?” he thought dully before slipped quietly into the abyss.

*The Captain*

He drove the sword in quickly. The sword crunched against the cartilage of the King’s neck. The sword met the bone and stopped moving, but the damage had been done. Melvin’s eyes widened in horror as blood spurted in a red arc. He stepped back, turned and fled.

He was into the courtyard outside the hall, before anyone had even processed what had happened. He leaped onto his horse and they flew out of the courtyard, out of the castle and out of the capital. When he came to a stone marker he hopped off his horse and led it into the forest that bordered the road. After a while, they came to a small cottage. You could tell it had been there for some time purely because trees had grown into the stonework, but
otherwise, the house looked in good condition. The room inside the cottage was as dark as the hotel room.

*Clap, clap, clap.* The slow clap echoed throughout the room. “Congratulations on a job well done,” said the figure as it detangled itself from the shadows gathering around it.

“Where’s my wife?” Melvin demanded.

“Well isn’t someone impatient. She’ll be here,” the figure said.

“Fine,” Melvin spat, “then we’ll just wait.”

A moment of silence passed.

“Why are you here?” The figure just looked at him. “I mean you don’t have to be here, you can just get one of your minions to escort Sarah.”

“I don’t understand you, Melvin,” said the figure in reply. “You murder someone, but still believe you are good. Just admit it, you’re a selfish person. You played God; you saw two lives hanging in the balance and decided to protect the one that meant more to you.”

“I did it out of love!” Melvin cried, outraged that this creature of darkness dared to talk morals with him.

“You did it out of greed. I am not berating you, greed can cause both good and bad.” The figure turned thoughtful. “You have great potential in you. If you just shucked these pseudo-morals, you’d be a happier person.”

“Screw you.”

“Suit yourself,” said the figure and swept out the room, taking all the shadows with it.

Once Melvin’s eyes had adjusted to sudden influx light, he saw what the shadows had been hiding.

He rushed to the side of his limp wife. He turned her over, and before his eyes, her skin turned grey and dusty, as if all the water was sucked out of her.

Something inside Melvin snapped and any feelings he had had, good or bad, melted away replaced with a cold, grey wasteland. The
He retrieved the two rings from his wife’s stiff fingers and slipped them into his pocket. He jumped onto his horse and then rode off into the sunset. He spent the rest of his life trying to forget the tragic events that led him to this point.

*The Priestess*

She took one look at the King and knew he wasn’t going to make it. No one recovers from a wound like that. A small shake of her head told Nathan what he already knew. She stepped away from the body, as panic bodies swarmed around the King.

Nathan looked pale and white. Marilyn placed a concerned hand on his shoulder.

“I can’t believe… Why would someone do this?”

“Because the world is full of evil people,” she replied with weary resignation, thinking of her father.

She looked around scanning the crowd for the culprit and a dark shadow caught her eye.

The shadow lifted up a bow, it had a sable finish and the only thing darker than it was the arrow that was notched and aiming straight at Nathan. Time seemed to slow down and the air crystallised into a viscous liquid. In that split second, all the indecisions of the past weeks disappeared and she knew what she was sent here to do. She jumped, floating in the solid air. The arrow released and time snapped back to a normal pace.

A searing pain materialised in her chest and she fell to the floor. Nathan suddenly reacted, a look of horror on his face as he tried, and failed, to catch her. He leapt down, ripping off his shirt with unbelievable speed to staunch the bleeding. He shouted incomprehensibly to Marilyn.

“Thank you,” she whispered causing Nathan to look at her. His arms went limp and he let go of the bloody remains of his shirt realising it was a lost cause. A tear dripped down his face onto Marilyn, the water mixing with her blood.

Then she was lost. Time once more ticked by slowly for her. A soft white light engulfed her.
You did well. The voice of Lighte echoed in her head and peace flowed through her. She had finally found what she was tasked to do, her life had meaning.

Prologue

Darke

Not a bad day’s work. Not bad at all. Murdered a king, murdered a priestess and caused untold damage to all involved. Darke mused watching from the eves in the Great Hall, his shadows clustering around him, hiding him from any prying eyes. Although with all the commotion below, he doubted anyone would even think to look up. The best thing in Darke’s eyes was that Lighte thought she had come out victorious. Putting the Air Prince on the throne may have furthered Lighte’s motive’s. Yet, Lighte did not realise that the Air Prince loved the Priestess and watching her die before his eyes would scar him in an irreparable way. He would commit suicide in a few years and on his short stint on the throne would accomplish nothing. The Water Prince was easily picked off, hopefully dying this very minute amongst the confusion of the King’s death. Then the Fire Prince would then take over and his temper could only suit Darke’s infernal deeds. A bit of persuasion, a few bribes and a war could be started. A smile stretched across Darke’s face and his shadows writhed in anticipation.

And Melvin! He had been annoying the Thieves for years, one the few incorruptible Captains of the Guards. Now, he was gone and the death of his wife had ruined optimistic nature. He would act the fugitive for many years, but eventually he would join a group of brigands putting his sword skills to more nefarious purposes. A spurt of glee filled Darke, everything was going according to plan and Lighte would never realise. She always assumed the best of people and so her plans always relied on others strength. Darke was not so naïve he relied on others’ weaknesses. He created plans in such a way that the failings of one person would make the whole tower fall. He always thought four moves ahead and this led him to
believe that the only outcome of this war between good and evil was him winning. Yet his faith in weakness was just as blind as Lighte's faith in strength. They were opposite and equal. Neither would ever have the upper hand as much as they both think they would and that is why there shall never be a winner in the war between bad and good, Lighte and Darke.

The End