

2024-05-01

## Our Author is Crazy

Zani A. Meaders  
*University of Texas at El Paso*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open\\_etd](https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open_etd)



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Meaders, Zani A., "Our Author is Crazy" (2024). *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*. 4120.  
[https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open\\_etd/4120](https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open_etd/4120)

This is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UTEP. For more information, please contact [lweber@utep.edu](mailto:lweber@utep.edu).

OUR AUTHOR IS CRAZY

~A NOVEL~

ZANI MEADERS

Master's Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

---

Daniel Chacon, Chair

---

Jessica Powers, M.F.A, Co- Chair

---

Sylvia Aguilar, Ph.D.

---

Paul D LaPrade

---

Stephen L. Crites, Jr., Ph.D.  
Dean of the Graduate School

Copyright © 2024 Zani A. Meaders

## **Dedication**

To the voices in my head, will you be quiet now.

Also, to my family, thank you for the support. Sorry the voices in my head are so loud. Trust me, they drive me bonkers too.

OUR AUTHOR IS CRAZY

Zani Meaders, BA

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2024

## **Acknowledgments**

I am extremely thankful to my thesis committee for taking the time out of their busy lives to serve in my defense. I want to express my eternal gratitude to my thesis director, Dr. Powers, for cultivating my ideas with her literary keen eye and excellent teaching abilities. Additionally, I would like to thank the entire Creative Writing department at UTEP for creating an environment where I felt I could experiment and grow as a writer.

I would also like to acknowledge my family whose constant support and love has afforded me the confidence necessary to even finish writing this manuscript. I am particularly grateful to my siblings, who have listened to me talk about this story for a decade, and my closest friends, who have always been there to cheer me on and share my wild ideas. I specifically wish to thank Emma whose encouragement and support during this thesis journey has been invaluable, I am forever grateful.

# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments .....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
Preface.....	vii
Bibliography.....	xxviii
Chapter 0. Author’s Note .....	1
Chapter 1. I’m a Real Fictional Boy.....	2
Chapter 2. I Hit My Head Hard.....	12
Chapter 3. Why is There Battle Music Playing.....	22
Chapter 4. Water I Don’t Like it.....	28
Chapter 5. We Are Family! Wait, Do I Get a Say!.....	36
Chapter 6. Whelp, I’m Not Getting Any Sleep Tonight.....	43
Chapter 7. The Future is Violent.....	56
Chapter 8. Trauma the Preferred State of Raz.....	66
Chapter 9. You Like Shopping! So do I! Let's Blow Up Stuff!.....	72
Chapter 10. My Head Hurts.....	82
Chapter 11. Thievery is Wrong but Better Than .....	83
Chapter 12. Bromance.....	100
Chapter 13. Drink Your Sorrows? That Doesn’t Sound Very Healthy.....	111
Chapter 14. We Sort of Kinda Maybe Come Up With a Shifting Plan.....	124
Vita.....	136

## Preface

Throughout the ages, stories have been a catalyst for change. Authors are well known to include social, political, and even personal experiences into their stories, affecting not only their characters but the greater audience. But how can stories influence entire demographics for the better? In the sphere of writing to create a positive impact on society, I believe fiction is an underrepresented field. Sure, we all know the Disney movies where audiences resonate with a main character who learns a universal lesson throughout the course of the movie. However, I often find stories such as these lack the practical steps to get there. Viewers, especially the younger demographic, see the characters and may look up to them, but there is a definite distinction between the characters and themselves. This can be due to a number of reasons, such as unrealistic, “perfect” characters and life situations, lack of steps to overcome challenges, and disengagement with the audience. With this in mind, I feel there is a loss of a psychological reflection that can be found within the young adult (YA) fiction genre itself. Adolescents, specifically those struggling with mental health, will significantly benefit from literature that is not only engaging but encourages audiences to discuss and improve their mental well being. YA readers, similar to their younger counterparts, deserve a safe space to explore their emotions and mental space, thus prompting me to create *Our Author is Crazy*. *Our Author is Crazy* is a pivotal piece in YA fiction because it combines unique, fun, and fast-paced story beats, metafiction techniques, and psychology to help children and young adults achieve healthy coping mechanisms and psychological skills when it comes to processing trauma.

*Our Author is Crazy* is a YA fantasy novel with metafiction elements. First highlighted through the title, *Our Author is Crazy*, the novel displays its metafiction nature through the conflict between Raz (the main character) and the mysterious bet he has with the Author. In the



opening scene, Raz is introduced as a newly-created fictional character. Right from the start, he senses the Reader's presence and is aware of the words on the page. Raz is portrayed to be very inquisitive. He describes and questions his new surroundings as well as the mysterious presence he senses watching him, the Reader. As Raz attempts and fails to communicate with the reader, the Author appears, granting him a new body, a gift at the cost of his ability to see words on the page, and the vague hint of a bet. Raz, the inquisitive character that he is, asks for the gift of knowledge and is abruptly dropped into OC World, a universe for all the Author's characters who do not have stories. Here, he meets his new housemates, a group of OCs who possess various degrees of knowledge about the Author's world and preferences. However, despite this, Raz's housemates have never heard of an OC having a bet with the Author. With their help, Raz journeys to different sections of the Author's mind, such as the Utopian Future District, all in an effort to discover what the Author's bet is.

Even though Raz is introduced as a new character being created on the page, he actually existed before the opening of the novel. Preceding *Our Author is Crazy*, Raz was once an OC World character named Zar. Threatened by the sudden disappearance of OCs and OC World, Zar sets out to confront the Author and discovers that the Author does not want to exist anymore. Stuck in an abusive household, the Author is battling depression and anxiety, and has been deleting and neglecting their writings, OCs, and all of their passion as a result of their life situation. Finding this out, Zar makes a bet with the Author that the Author still loves writing, and challenges them to write a story about him. If the Author enjoys writing the story and Zar saves OC World, the Author has to continue following their passions and write stories for OCs. However, if Zar dies or fails over the course of the story to save OC World, the Author may do as

they wish. In order to ensure their victory, the Author agrees with one condition, Zar will be recreated, and his memories will be erased.

This leads us to the opening of *Our Author is Crazy*, where Zar is in the process of being recreated as Raz and meets the Reader. The Reader is not exactly a character throughout the course of this novel. They are given no characterization or personality traits for Raz to interact with. Still, despite the lack of interaction, Raz manages to form a one-sided relationship with the Reader. No one else, not even the Author, is aware of the Reader, but their presence helps shape Raz over the course of his adventure.

So far, I have highlighted *Our Author is Crazy* as a work of metafiction but have not discussed the implications of using such a technique in YA literature. Metafiction is a literary technique that calls attention to the artificiality of self-awareness in the narrative itself. Often blurring the lines between fiction and reality, it involves techniques such as breaking the fourth wall, addressing the reader directly, or commentary on the process of storytelling within the narrative. Elements of metafiction can be found all the way back in ancient literature, but the technique gained prominence in the 20th century with the rise of modernism and postmodernism. Metafiction has continued to gain popularity in the 21st-century contemporary landscape in a variety of mediums. Today, metafiction has been increasingly popular in YA media with the rise of self-aware characters such as Deadpool.

When it comes to portraying metafiction in *Our Author is Crazy*, I have broken the literary technique into three categories; breaking the fourth wall, addressing the reader directly, and commentary on the process of storytelling within a narrative. In terms of breaking the fourth wall, from the very first chapter of *Our Author is Crazy*, Raz builds a strong bond with the reader by directly acknowledging their presence, talking to them, and sharing insight with them. As Raz

goes beyond the typical role of a character by breaking the fourth wall, readers are able to better engage with the story as there is a mutual feeling that readers and characters are on the same side. Raz often talks with, checks in on, and initiates a conversation with the reader, often referred to as “you,” throughout the course of the novel. The meta-commentary between the characters of *Our Author is Crazy* and the reader is extremely important as it creates a direct connection between the audience and characters, firmly establishing them as friends. One example of this is when Raz dislikes one of his housemates' outfits, but only tells the reader his true feelings on the matter. Speaking to the reader, Raz jokes,

Okay, so maybe we'll just keep what I said a little secret between you and me. I know a lot of the rules in this world are different, but I think people would still get upset if I said something negative about them. (55)

By breaking the fourth wall here, Raz brings the reader into the situation as a friend. Instead of solely reading about this unfortunate clothing situation, Raz invites the reader into the story and even trusts them with his personal thoughts, creating a dynamic of friendship between Raz and the reader. Another example of this is when Raz directly calls out the reader as a friend.

Examples include:

However, my friend, I think the most important question is... (22)

And

But I suppose that's not very interesting for you, my friend. (45)

Raz not only invites the reader into the story but addresses them as a friend, thus creating a direct connection from himself to the reader. This helps the reader stay engaged and see characters as themselves, as well as see characters as more realistic. With metafiction techniques such as breaking the fourth wall, readers are invited to immerse themselves in the character's world,

allowing them to feel less alone as they now have a friend in the novel. Instead of watching an unfamiliar person navigate through their life, readers of *Our Author is Crazy* will travel and learn with their friends throughout the course of the story. Due to the meta, “doing it together”, nature of the novel, as subtext regarding the Author’s trauma is revealed, and Raz slowly starts taking steps to confront and cope with the Author’s and his trauma, young adults who are also dealing with traumatic situations will be encouraged in an empathetic way to take the same steps to heal with their friend.

In looking at the psychological aspect of establishing a friendship between characters and readers by breaking the fourth wall, the friendship dynamic between characters and readers can be a large factor in helping an individual grow. In *Our Author is Crazy*, there is a scene where Raz and his housemates have to make a crash landing from their flying car while being chased by armed police birds. Raz is traumatized by this, but still checks in to ensure the Reader is okay.

Quickly, I checked my arm all the way down to my hands; I took off my shoes, and I still had all my feet; I patted behind for good measure. I don’t think I’m missing anything. What about you? All good?

What, just because I can’t hear you doesn’t mean I’m not concerned about your well being. (62)

Again, Raz addresses the audience as a friend by checking in on them after a traumatizing situation, demonstrating a close friendship between the characters and the reader. Even though the reader has not said anything physically, Raz finds it important to check up on them anyway. This connection between the audience and reader is significant because it empowers the novel’s audience to grow and change for the better, (such as learning healthy steps to cope with trauma),

along with the characters in the novel. For young adults who are unable to see a psychologist due to various reasons, Raz allows them to have a friend who cares about them just as much as the other characters in the story. While he may be fictional, allowing a reader to feel as if they have someone who cares is imperative when it comes to encouraging an individual to seek or open up to a support network. Novels that include both metafiction and psychology can become a safe space for readers while providing helpful insight in dealing with trauma to all audiences.

Looking into the metafiction technique, addressing the audience directly, *Our Author is Crazy* not only utilizes direct character-reader conversations, but the story itself reads as if the characters are telling a story after the fact. Using techniques such as chapter titles and past tense narration contributes to the process of readers seeing Raz and the other characters as friends. This is because works told in the past tense often read like a character recounting their adventures. While I want the reader to believe that the events are unfurling on the page, I also want them to feel like Raz is taking the time to specifically narrate to them. Chapter titles are another way to do this. One such author who uses chapter titles in this way is Rick Riordan in his popular series Percy Jackson and Magnus Chase. His chapter titles provide a bit of foreshadowing and suspense in the upcoming chapter. Chapters such as *I Vaporize My Pre-Algebra Teacher* (Percy Jackson) and *Percy Jackson Does His Best to Kill Me* (Magnus Chase), are just two titles that build intrigue and make the reader potentially want to find out what's happening. They also help allude to, on some level, the main character recounting the events that have happened to them. This helps the story address the audience in a less jarring manner by simultaneously reminding the readers that this is a story. Typically, this might take away the immersion; however, the caveat is that it's a story from their good friend, Percy or Magnus. Now, it doesn't matter if it's a story or not, they're invested in the tale.

In *Our Author is Crazy*, the use of chapter titles, such as *I'm a Real Fictional Boy* and *Why is There Battle Music Playing*, directly addresses the readers in an active conversation. The use of chapter titles also has the added bonus of being able to show character growth through parallels. Chapter titles such as, *I Hit My Head Hard* and *My Head Hurts*, demonstrate a natural progression in the story and contribute to the laid back friendship dynamic I want the story to exude. Additionally, the added bonus of chapter titles allow the narrative to be more accessible by making it easier for readers to remember their place.

Another metafiction technique used in *Our Author is Crazy* includes commentary on the process of storytelling within a narrative. Through the literary theme of *Our Author is Crazy*, as well as Raz's interactions with the Reader, the novel brings into question the Reader's role in the story. Through the audience's friendship with Raz, readers may feel like they have a responsibility to help Raz, his family, or his world. This responsibility turns the audience into active participants in the story rather than passive consumers, tying into the allegory nature of the book. An example of this includes the idea of mental help for the Author and Raz. For many readers, friendship with Raz indicates there is an empathetic responsibility between themselves and the characters to help Raz and the Author with their internal struggles (i.e. anxiety and depression.)

*Our Author is Crazy* is a novel that allows young adults to question what they consume. Utilizing metafiction, young adults reading the novel will be called to answer for themselves if they are just consumers or active participants in the story. In a culture that has shifted to predominantly online activities, such as social media, it is imperative that younger generations think about what they consume and make an effort to engage with content. Due to this, *Our Author is Crazy* uses metafiction techniques to directly address the reader and encourage the

audience to take time and think about what's happening. Questions such as *What is happening here?* (51), addressed to the novel's audience, allow readers to answer for themselves. Prompted by the question, young adults will often take it a step further, asking what's happening here in their lives when a similar situation arises. In terms of psychology, readers who establish close friendships with characters are more likely to change for the better when they see that character changing or taking steps to change. These readers are also more likely to be outraged if their character friend is facing abuse or a traumatic situation, and be prompted to seek help if the same thing is happening in their life. "In this way, the child-reader experiences an integral transformation, like a mirror-reflection-effect...which he recognizes himself in the reading of others" (Arlandis & Torres). In encouraging readers to stop and consider what is happening in a story using metafiction, young adults can learn to identify traumatic situations in their lives and be encouraged to ask for assistance, grow, and seek out healthier coping mechanisms in their lives.

I first got the idea for using meta-techniques to comment on mental health when watching the 2006 film, *Stranger than Fiction*, directed by Marc Foster and written by Zach Helm. The film's central character, Harold Crick, played by Will Ferrell, is a seemingly ordinary IRS agent. However, his life takes a surreal turn when he begins to hear a mysterious narrator's voice describing his every action and thoughts. This voice turns out to be the narration of his life, prompting him to find the source. Through his adventure, Harold realizes that he is a character in a novel being written by an author named Karen Eiffel, played by Emma Thompson. The film does a great job of exploring the meta concept of a character and the author interacting. In the film, Eiffel's book ends with Harold dying, something Harold is opposed to, but after reading her book and seeing how beautiful it is, he tells her that the story is wonderful, and she should

publish it. Even if it means his death. His willingness to go toward his demise changes how Karen chooses to view the story overall, which causes her to change the story to one where Harold lives. The theme in her novel switches from being monotonous to being hopeful, which affects how she lives her life from then on out.

The film subtextually touches upon writer's block, dramatic irony, fate, the unknowability of death, and the gray space between what is "real" and what is fiction. This film is the very definition of meta-fiction. The aspect I found most interesting for the use of this thesis was the gray space between what's real and what is not. In the movie, both Harold and Karen exist in the same world. One character was in control (the author, Karen), and the other wasn't (the character, Harold). However, that dynamic switches when it comes to who is in control of their life. In that sense, Harold's life was perfectly controlled. He was a man of routine and structure. Even during the events of Karen's book, which involved his life becoming less structured when he meets a romantic love interest, Harold is able to find peace and happiness in this life by learning he can't control everything and must embrace life no matter how fleeting it can be. Meanwhile, Karen's life was tearing at the seams. She's behind on her writing deadlines and has no inspiration. She spends most of the movie unaware of Harold's existence, and traveling with her publicist to bleak and rather morbid places like a hospital in the hopes that others' suffering can inspire her. Initially, because of Karen's bleak outlook on life, she can only envision Harold's story ending in death because life is fleeting and death is inevitable. Subtextually it seems like Karen's morbid fascination with death and killing Harold in her book stems possibly from a fear of living life and dying without cause. It's only when Harold comes to her, accepting his death but not letting that stop him from enjoying however long he has left



without the worry of dying, does Karen open up to the concept of letting herself live a happy, fulfilling life.

When first constructing *Our Author is Crazy*, the question that I kept asking was how can Raz defeat a god? This proves to be an impossible question to answer. However, the meta nature of this movie reframed my initial thought process. I realized *Our Author is Crazy* was meta beyond the traditional techniques, as it was less about a person versus their creator, or character versus character, but rather it's an internal battle of self, conceptualized in a way a child's mind can comprehend. In this way, the three characters centered around the root of the conflict, the Author, the Reader, and Raz can be seen as three different facets of the Author's mind. Outside the context of the narrative, an author refers to someone writing the story, a reader is someone reading the story, and Raz is a character. Although the Reader is referred to as its own entity and Raz his own person outside of the Author, it's important to remember that in universe this story is being written by a child who decided to call themselves the Author and create Raz and the Reader for this story. So what exactly do these three characters, these three different facets signify for this child author subconsciously?

Well, the Author is a collection of who the abused child sees themselves as or who they want to be. In the moment below, Raz sees four statues. Unbeknownst to his housemates or himself, these statues depict four ideal versions that the Author sees themselves as/ tries to live up to.

I halted at four statues that stood in the center of the room. Each of them looked like the girl from the future district. The first one was made of stone[...] no hint of

understanding. [...] There was nothing kind behind those stone eyes[...]Discipline etched into the platform (87)

From the way Raz describes the statue, we can see a glimpse of how the Author sees different attributes of themselves. Discipline is described as cold, Leadership with admiration, Protection with child-like mischievousness, and Happiness is described as the youngest of the statues and being made of glass, hinting at the fragile nature of this particular ideal in the Author's mind. Regardless of the Author's opinion of these particular statues, these statues allude to the fact that Raz and the Reader represent something more to the Author. While I do wish to leave a certain level of ambiguity of what that could be for the sake of allowing every consumer of this story to form their own relationship, I approached writing Raz and the Reader as if they were two different aspects of hope.

The Reader for the Author is hope for the future. On the very first page, even before Chapter 1, there is an author and character note. In the author note, the Author thanks the Reader for reading their story.

I appreciate you taking the time to read this note and story. I hope you guys find this story engaging and exciting despite the fact that I'm writing about a particularly annoying character of mine. (1)

This is the only time the Author acknowledges the Reader as themselves, and ultimately it acts as their secret hope, to finish the story and to have Raz win. However in the actual story the Author denies the existence of anyone else when talking to Raz.

“Who are you talking to, Raz?”[...]

“Just to the presence out there.” I would have pointed, but I had no idea which direction you would be.

“Hmmm.” They hummed. “There’s no one else here. Perhaps I hit your head too hard.”[...]

The Author frowned. “There is no other person.” The air seemed to get colder. An unearthly stillness seemed to overtake the sky. Before, the sky seemed to rush by in a series of different colors, but now it was completely frozen. (12)

The Author’s denial of the Reader’s existence, therefore, showcases the Author’s inability to carry this hope. Meaning in some way, Raz, within the narrative, is the embodiment of that hope.

The concept of a character being the last hope is not new, especially in Children’s and YA fantasy literature. However, just like the statues, hope is often portrayed in media by larger-than-life characters. Superman is one such character, with the symbol on his chest literally meaning hope. Since Superman is all-powerful, this alludes to hope being all-powerful. However, the other interpretation that more traumatized or pessimistic individuals might take is that they can never live up to the feats of Superman so how can they have hope. Raz is different. He is not written to be an indestructible force; he’s written to be a curious kid. A curious kid: who won’t stop asking questions, who’s scared of his new environment, who doesn’t quite know how to fit into a world that he doesn’t understand. Contextually, Raz is hope for the Author, but Raz is also hope for the Reader. He’s not an unwavering character but he is one that always rises for another chance. In my humble opinion, this is a much more relatable and obtainable representation that more works should strive to achieve in this current media landscape.

While this information is not at the forefront of the narrative, and it's highly likely that most children who read this story will miss the connection between all three of these titular characters, the idea of hope portrayed by relatable characters is important in understanding the deeper nature of the conflict. Allowing the reader to relate or root for any one of these three aspects of what is essentially the same character aids in the primary goal of this thesis, which is to help young adults navigate their own mental health. From my vantage point, this allows any reader to engage with practices, tools, and situations hidden in the subtextual elements of the story at their own level and pace.

This brings me to my next inspiration for this story, psychology.

The 2020's have seen a rise in mental health movements and awareness one after the other. Many forms of media try to incorporate this concept, and my story will go right alongside them. Mental health and psychology is such an important part of my writing process. Even before this story was conceived nearly a decade ago, I had an interest in psychology that only grew as I tried to integrate research into my stories. While I'm pulling from all the knowledge I have acquired over the years, I returned to a foundational work in the Psychology field, Dr. Perry's book, *The Boy Who was Raised by a Dog*.

Child Psychiatrist Dr. Bruce D. Perry has spent his career answering two questions: how does trauma affect a child's brain and how can they recover? In his book, *The Boy Who was Raised as a Dog*, he provides a collection of short stories following particularly traumatic and memorable cases that shaped his outlook on trauma recovery in children and young adolescents. The book went over several techniques and practices the Doctor attempted with children;

however, the part I found most insightful when writing was the concept of letting the child or adolescent regulate their exposure to stress within a loving, supportive environment.

In one case, a four-year-old girl found a transformative means of processing the trauma of her mother's death and assault by role-playing as the abuser during therapy sessions. During these sessions, the therapist engaged with the child, granting her approximately 45 minutes of uninterrupted control over the scenario within a secure, enclosed playroom environment. By refraining from exerting pressure or intervention, the therapist enabled the child to explore and process the information at her own pace and on her own terms. In doing so, not only was the therapist able to find out more about what occurred, but the child was able to slowly overcome her PTSD. From what I could understand, part of the reason this treatment worked is because "if the experience is familiar and known as safe, the brain's stress system will not be activated. However, if the incoming information is initially unfamiliar, new, or strange, the brain instantly begins a stress response" (Perry 52). When a younger person is in a heightened state of stress, it's hard to take in information. By forcing them to confront their stressors constantly, they are more likely to develop unhealthy coping mechanisms like violent outbursts or shutting down. However, allowing individuals to experience emotions at their own pace allows for a controlled catharsis. According to Greek Aesthetic theory by John Gibson Warry, catharsis is specifically about a strong emotional controlled release through the process of media and stories. This allows people to access emotions they might otherwise not have the bandwidth for, as it provides them a safe outlet to view their emotions from a different perspective.

It's highly unlikely that every person reading this manuscript has gone through a trauma on this level. However, by understanding this concept of letting individuals regulate their exposure to uncomfortable and potentially triggering topics, I was able to include healthy coping

techniques and potentially darker elements, such as abuse, without making it the forefront of the story. In the scene below, Raz has just witnessed someone be erased, an in-world term for being killed, and he is traumatized, seeing himself as an immovable blob. He's only able to recover due to a mysterious OC showing up.

I shook my head. I couldn't. Everything today was just too much. I was done. She held out her hand to me. I eyed it for a second before I took it. I expected her to drag me along till I recovered. But instead she squeezed my hand softly[...]eventually my own breath started to slow[...] I no longer felt like I was a blob. She let go of my hand when I stopped. (74)

This moment takes place about a minute after the traumatic event, and with a bit of help, Raz is able to ground himself and jump right back into the action. Part of the reason I chose to make mental health aspects like this subtle instead of overt, is because I am not trying to pander to my audience. It is not my goal to tell readers what is good for them or not. Rather I want smaller moments like this to give young adults who want these details or elements a chance to find them, while at the same time allowing those who want pure escapism to have exactly that.

In a later chapter, Raz is faced with another life or death situation that brings him to the edge of panicking. While it's subtle, Raz uses the technique from the previous chapter to help himself calm down.

I took off, scroll still in hand. I did my best to ignore what was happening to the papers around me by squeezing my other hand. It didn't help, but it helped me keep my rhythm as I raced to the center of this not-maze (95).

While this is a relatively small moment, it showcases Raz using something small he learned to assist himself on his adventure. Squeezing his hand can be attributed to a grounding technique to help calm his anxiety, but it's not a cure all. It doesn't stop Raz from worrying about what's happening in the environment around him, but it does help him focus a little bit better in the chaos, enough to keep going towards his goals. Small moments like this will help set the stage for when Raz, in future installments, faces the Author, making their encounter and the antagonist forces Raz runs into along the way feel all that more cathartic when defeated. Simple steps like this can also be more relatable than constant, large cathartic moments. Mental growth tends to happen slowly over time through the smallest of steps and behavioral changes. Allowing a character to take time to learn things, such as a grounding technique for anxiety, takes the pressure away from the audience to have their own big cathartic moment of change. Instead they can have smaller moments, and as Dr. Bruce D. Perry recommends, can grow at their own pace.

Psychology elements like this are important for me when constructing the subtext of the story because I want *Our Author is Crazy* to be a safe space. There are many stories that depict realistic characters/life situations within the context of fantastical adventures, while including meta-narrators that comment on events happening in the story. In Rick Riordan's case, the narrators are quick-witted and sarcastic, often adding a sense of levity to every situation. Meanwhile, the narrators in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (Lemony Snicket) and *We Are Not Eaten by Yaks* (C. Alexander London) are subdued outside observers of events, whose dry, matter-of-fact commentary adds humor through the contrast of their tone and the over-the-top events happening. My story is not the first to use these techniques and have darker subtextual elements, however these stories lack the portrayal of characters truly working through their trauma and developing healthy coping mechanisms. This is not a fault of these stories. They gave

many children a way to feel seen; however, in lieu of easy, digestible messaging, they fail to fully explore all aspects of trauma present in their stories. *Our Author is Crazy* aims to expand upon this style of storytelling.

Now for stories like *We Are Not Eaten by Yaks* and *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, even the young teenager that I was could understand that these stories were for middle-grade audiences. A category for stories that were aimed towards a younger demographic of kids. Middle grade stories take the time to explain anything younger readers might need to be explained, such as feelings and why someone is being bad in the first place. They are great books for starting to teach children to identify issues and introduce them to a slightly more mature category of thinking, beyond good and evil, right and wrong, while still adhering to those familiar societal happy conventions. Meanwhile, YA stories like Riordan's series cover slightly more mature topics. Now, what YA exactly means and what ages should fall under YA is debated. However, most seem to agree that YA starts somewhere around twelve and goes up from there. With YA being such a wide category that incorporates so many ages, there is some wiggle room in what those ages want to see.

From where I stand, there have always been two sides of YA fantasy. You have stories like Percy Jackson that are basically PG13 action blockbusters, and you have stories that cater to the older side of the spectrum, with darker, political, or sexual topics, in a manner that is very real and almost grown. In many novels, on both sides of the spectrum, coping mechanisms as a whole, as well as the actual trauma a character is facing, is often not elaborated upon. While the popularity of these types of series speak for themselves, characters who are identified to have trauma are not depicted working through that trauma throughout the course of the novel. Instead, it's often breezed past for the sake of the narrative or is fixed through one-off conversations and



grand gestures. Stories that do focus on taking steps to heal are not usually in the fantasy category, if they're in the fiction category at all, and those stories don't usually have the quirky adventures or meta-commentary that lovers of fantasy and adventure crave.

For young adults who resonate with not only the fantasy genre but the characters in these series, the actions that the characters take, as well as the psychological skills they learn in overcoming their trauma, would be extremely beneficial to add. I noticed this gap in literature when I was fourteen and reading Percy Jackson. I and many other teens turned to the online sphere to write fanfiction and discuss with others the trauma these characters must be experiencing. For context, Percy Jackson is the demi-god son of Poseidon. In the first book alone, he watches his mother die (so he thinks), his abusive stepfather puts out a manhunt on him, he's thrust into a war of the gods, and finds out he's been lied to his entire life. A quick search on blogging sites such as Tumblr for "dark Percy" or "Percy Jackson analysis" reveals thousands of young adults and children talking about how these events affected Percy on a deeper level. If we expand into everything that Percy has gone through over multiple series, young people are analyzing how those events affected his life in later books and how he's healing. Now, nearly a decade later, I still see this demand for something more than self-help books. Young people want content where they can explore how an event might affect someone and how they might heal.

Seeing this gap in literature, *Our Author is Crazy* aims to couple both deep psychological exploration with fun, chaotic adventures like those associated with the middle-grade fantasy genre. Currently, there is not a bridge between the two extremes of YA literature, leaving a group of individuals without a mirror or a controlled catharsis in their media life. Children do experience trauma and, unfortunately, are often one of the most vulnerable groups when

experiencing trauma. There are many forms of childhood trauma, and depending on the situation, children may not be able to leave abusive situations or seek help. Due to this, it is imperative that more authors combine attention-catching, accessible, and engaging narratives with the metafiction and psychology genres in order to offer children and young adults a safe place to feel seen and to learn how to process and heal from trauma. Trauma is not too heavy of a topic for children and young adults. In fact, those experiencing trauma may feel a sense of comradery and relief that they are not alone in their feelings. Some may even look for stray implications in a story that a character is similar to them. After heavy research, I understood that the best way to approach forming unique, fun, and fast-paced story beats was through the lens of fantasy, in order to provide a proper potentially cathartic escapism fantasy.

When writing a story aimed at helping the younger generation learn healthy coping mechanisms for trauma, it is essential that a fresh, fun, and attention-catching approach be used. Fast story beats are used to catch and hold the reader's attention, while unique characters allow readers to have fun, stretch their imaginations, and fully immerse themselves into the fictional universe before them. For example:

I could feel the hot breath of the monstrous crab on my heels. I took a second to look at where it was and barely dove out of the way as its colossal pincher crashed down into the earth, inches from where I just was [...] “Run!” I tried to scream, thinking maybe they were just as shocked as I was.

The purple hair girl reached behind her, pulling out a very steampunk looking cannon fitted with gears and bolts. “Duck,” she said as she fired directly at me. (19)

This scene is the start of Chapter Two after Raz is dragged through the door to OC World in Chapter One. After being nearly drowned, Raz ends up on shore on top of what he thinks are rocks. From there, he's introduced to three of the supporting cast, Sim, Trillo, and Sophia, and all the chaotic nature of their dynamic before the rocks move, revealing to be a giant crab that tries to kill Raz. This quick action keeps the pace of the story high, allowing readers to be swept into this world and all it has to offer. The visuals help stretch the imagination by warping the familiar into something grander than the sum of its parts. Using high energy and exciting moments that young adults will remember allows for a greater reach of *Our Author is Crazy*, as it turns the novel from a help book with a story to an action-adventure first and foremost.

One of the hardest elements to get right when crafting this story was Raz's housemates. They make up a majority of the supporting cast and are often right along for the ride. From a writing standpoint, they give Raz interesting personalities to bounce off of throughout the narrative. They're essential to Raz because of the support network they provide, and they're essential to the story in helping Raz solve the overarching conflict of the bet. Yet in early iterations of this story, I found the characters lacked purpose. Dolly is the mentor figure whose past is directly linked to the overarching mystery. Her dynamic with Raz is the closest Raz gets to a parental figure. Sim, Sophia, Trillo, and Viola naturally fell into the sibling roles. Their dynamic is very heated at first, full of cruel teasing, but over time, it molds into them being genuine pals and the four of them looking out for Raz in their own ways. Penelope is like a distant older sister, and Quote was posed to become Raz's closest friend and confidant once the language barrier was overcome. While I love the dynamic between all the characters, I was struggling to figure out how their dynamics serve the wider story conflict. What can Raz learn from these characters other than just pieces to the mystery that will help him figure out the bet

with the Author? On a more meta note, how do these characters and their dynamics translate to the Author's internal conflict with themselves? Well, I found the best way to explore these characters was simply to let their chaotic personalities shine through. For example, while wandering the Utopian Future District with Sophia, Raz asks where the flying cars go and where they park after watching one disappear into the ground.

“Sophia where do the cars go?” I asked[...]

Sophia continued to skip, unaware I haven't been listening to her infodumps. “Underground. Sim likes cars lots and so does Ani.”[...] “She used to live with us but she left like everyone else..” Sophia's voice was surprisingly monotone for her, losing some of the energy that makes her sound younger than she actually looks.

“Everyone?” I asked, [...]

“Unno,” She said. “I do know that leaves turn different colors in the fall.

You know that?” (66)

Allowing Sophia to simply be her naturally childish, hyperactive self in this scene, instead of trying to find a way to have her fit a psychological technique, allowed me to reveal world-building and weave in some foreshadowing without slowing down the pace. Her tone when mentioning “everyone” changes drastically, going from very happy and hyper to subdued. This foreshadows a bigger mystery about Sophia and the rest of Raz's housemates, and starts setting up elements that can be used later when more of the psychological narrative exploration comes into play.

The journey of crafting this thesis has been deeply rewarding, not only in terms of its literary exploration but also in personal growth. As I reflect on the narrative experimentation, character development, and thematic nuances woven throughout, I find a sense of pride in the evolution of both the story and myself as a writer. This endeavor has not only allowed me to channel my unchecked imagination and delve into psychological depths, but has also served as a means of self-expression that resonates with the aspirations of my younger self. In the end, the meta element of *Our Author is Crazy* is that it has served as a catalyst for my own development both as a person and as a writer over the last decade. As Raz's journey continues to unfold beyond the confines of these pages, so too does my own journey as a writer. It is my hope that every reader who meets Raz will walk away from this book feeling understood and seen like they have a friend. At the very least, they are provided with a few hours of entertainment. After all, a little bit of happiness and fun might be the very ray of hope some children need.

## Bibliography

- Riordan, Rick. *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*. London, Puffin, 2008.
- Magnus Chase. *The Ship of the Dead*. London, Puffin, 2011.
- Bosch, Pseudonymous. *The Secret Series Complete Collection*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2 Oct. 2012.
- C. Alexander London. *We Are Not Eaten by Yaks*. Penguin, 22 Feb. 2011.
- Snicket, Lemony, and Brett Helquist. *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. HarperCollins, 2006.
- Forster, Marc. *Stranger Than Fiction*. Columbia Pictures, 2006.
- Perry, Bruce Duncan, and Maia Szalavitz. *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog : And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook : What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us about Loss, Love, and Healing*. 2006. New York, Basic Books, 2017.
- King, S. (2000). *On writing : a memoir of the craft*. Scribner.
- Arlandis, & Reyes-Torres, A. (2018). Thresholds of change in children's literature: The symbol of the mirror. *Journal of New Approaches in Educational Research*, 7(2), 125–130.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Bollingen, 1956.
- John Gibson Warry. *Greek Aesthetic Theory : A Study of Callistic and Aesthetic Concepts in the Works of Plato and Aristotle*. London, Routledge, 2013.

## Chapter 0. Author's Note

Dear Reader,

~~I appreciate you taking the time to read this note and story.~~ I hope you guys find this story engaging and exciting despite the fact that I'm writing about a particularly ~~annoying~~ character of mine. ~~Don't worry I intend to give him a happy and exciting life,~~ so look forward to this little ~~slice of life~~ adventure and thank you for taking the time out of your day to read my silly little story.

~ Author

Hey,

They're lying. The Author is trying to do the unspeakable act of erasing. They want to chuck all the characters you're about to meet in the garbage pit of their mind. Sounds fun, right? We need your help. I know this conflict doesn't really have anything to do with you. You can close this book right now and leave everyone to their fate. I'll just scream in agony while you do. I might be kidding, I might not be. To tell the truth, I don't know what will happen, but I don't want everyone else to pay the price.

So, sit back with your special reading socks and visors. Grab a warm drink to share with a deformed stuffed animal or whatever readers are supposed to do, and help us, please.

~ XXX

## Chapter 1. I'm a Real Fictional Boy

I know I'm a fictional character. After all, that's what the chapter title says: a fictional boy. I take it that the person I'm sensing right now, just outside the page, is the Author. Nice to meet you. How's the writing going? Perhaps you could write some light in this room soon, it's kind of dark.

I don't mean to rush you. It's just that I've been sitting in this void for only you know how long. I'm beginning to get a little claustrophobic, not because of the void itself. No, the void is nice, all things considered. It's just the words that are now appearing around me.

Around me, huh? Interesting. Is there a chance that I am this void and I'm just staring at a reflection of myself?

If it is not too much trouble, could you give me an answer?

I'm just curious.

Hello?

I can still sense you there. Are you purposely ignoring me? I'm not being rude, am I? Huh.

Actually, now that I think about it. I have no idea what you're going to say. That means you can't be the Author. Otherwise, wouldn't I just be your thoughts? Meaning this conversation is meaningless because you would already know what I'm going to say, and I would already know what you're going to say.

Hmm. Okay, I'm pretty sure you're not the Author, but that begs the question, if you're not the Author, who are you? Why won't you answer me?

I would say it's rude not to introduce yourself, but considering I have yet to introduce myself, I suppose I can't accuse you of being rude.



I would introduce myself, but to be honest, I have no idea what to call myself. So yeah. Sorry about that. I feel like I'm forgetting a lot of things right now.

Anyway, for now, you can just think of me as the disembodied voice sitting in the void. I'm really hoping this is the case and that I'm not the void itself.

So, how are you?

Whelp, this is awkward.

I guess we're at a standstill. What to do?

Hey, do you feel a pulling type of feeling? It's a little painful, and it's uh... right, we can't speak with each other. Never mind, forget I said, um, thought anything.

So, if you're not the Author, and I'm this void on the page, and you exist outside the page, doesn't that mean you're reading my thoughts or something? How exactly does this work? Are you perched over the Author's shoulder, reading as they type out what I'm thinking? Or are the words just appearing for you, too?

So...

Do you think if I yell at the Author long enough it will get their attention? Like if I just screamed and they were forced to write just a bunch of AAAAAAAAAA's it would get their attention long enough for them to come talk to me. Maybe they can make it so I can speak to you?

It's worth the shot, don't you think? Okay, here I go.

I don't suppose you know how to yell without a face. Yeah, me either. Well, unless you do know, and you're just not telling me because of the whole communication thing. Well, that plan died before it started.

Do you want to try writing something? Maybe that will get their attention. Don't worry, I'll wait.

Hey, are you closing the book? Not that you can't, it's just that- you know what, never mind.  
I'm fine, don't let me worry you.

Actually, on the off chance that you're a doctor, let me worry you.

Everything hurts, and I don't know why.

Scratch that I do.

Something, everything, anything, is pulling me, stretching me. Everything is numb, but somehow everything is itching. I'm being pulled out of my skin. Do voids even have skin? If you're messing with the page, could you please stop?

Please.

The words from our conversation swirled around me as the darkness of the void dispersed and light filled my vision. The words that first started appearing in the beginning paragraph became the black and white checkered floor. My questions slowly shaped themselves into various types of fountains that sprouted other letters before slowly drifting off into the distance, far enough to become nothing more than silhouettes. What was left of the white of the page slowly turned to a light purple sky with little currents of reds and darker purples.

For a split second, I could feel every part of this expanding environment, even the currents that swam through the sky. The letters that didn't have a place among the checker floors. Fountains swelled and fluffed up, taking their place in the sky as clouds. I felt the floor ripple as if someone dropped a coin in it.

For a moment, I swear I could sense you just beyond the page, the dryness of your fingers holding on to the book a little too tight as your hands were my own.

But then it stopped.

The feeling of everything was stripped away, leaving only a mirror and a black, unshapely blob of ink. The blob just sat there in front of the mirror, or was it standing? It's impossible to tell.

Honestly, I really hope this blob isn't me. Not only is it weirdly shaped but then that would mean I really was the void. Suppose there's nothing wrong with being a void, but... I don't know, it rubs me the wrong way. Just look at it.

The ink blob, well, blobbed in front of the mirror. Just there being all inky and weird.

Alright, let me stop thinking about this. Let's talk about something else.

The sky. Yeah, that's...something. It's trippy right. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm pretty sure the sky is not supposed to be purple. Blue is the usual color of the sky, during the day, and

sometimes in the morning and evening it might be orange, pink, and red, but I don't think it can be purple.

“Sometimes I swear the sky has a green hue, but nobody ever believes me.” In the mirror, a small figure stood behind the blob. They too were a dark, inky figure, but unlike what was unfortunately most likely me, that figure had a shape of a young human.

They poked and prodded my sides a couple times, never stopping, always circling.

“Tell me,” their voice was low, barely above a whisper, “do you know who you are?” They gave the blob one last poke. I guess I have no choice but to accept that I'm the blob. For some reason, this really makes me sad, the type of sadness that comes with doing homework while the rest of your family is out race car driving. The type of sadness that comes from a friend causing you to drop your favorite ice cream cone on the street. Especially if it was the last scoop of that flavor.

I can't for the life of me tell you why I feel this way.

The human figure is still staring at me expectantly, circling at a constant rate. I suppose I should answer.

Umm, I was hoping you could tell me. I tried to speak, but-

Right, no voice.

I did my best to sludge around to communicate what I was trying to say, but without a mouth, it was literally impossible. All I can do is stand here blobbing.

My lack of an answer didn't seem to deter them as they finally slowed their circling to a stop right behind me in the mirror. “Do you know who I am?”

One would assume they could be the Author, but if this is all taking place on a page, why would they be here instead of writing?

Slowly, they lowered their head to their inky hands and froze. Not even a breath was taken.

In the mirror, while the figure had frozen, the world had not. Everything shook. The water in the fountains sprayed in all directions. The floor beneath me was moving faster, the black and white squares momentarily blurring together to make gray. Droplets from the fountains found their way to my inky skin, and I instantly flinched on impact.

Are they laughing? I don't know why, but I feel like they are.

The figure slowly lifted their head from their hands, and the world slowly stopped shaking. Everything returned to its normal state. They tilted their head to one side. "I see you still don't like water, and you recall some things, but," a very slight smirk formed on those black lips, "for the most part, this is perfect."

I would ask what's perfect, but again, they seem to be forgetting a fundamental part of my biology. The lack of a MOUTH.

"I see the snark and temper remain too." They exhaled very strongly out of their nose, and the ground began to shake. "Give me a sec."

They reached behind their back, and a non-inky sliver tablet appeared in their hand. They instantly began typing.

Metal probes came out of the ground, clamping tightly on either side of me.

In the mirror, I could see the metal clamps probing, stretching, yanking, and pounding me. With every tap on the pad, the metal would stop twisting and yanking me in one direction and start probing and twisting me in another.

With every twist, the world momentarily became dark.

With every pull, an intense piercing pain shot through my entire being. There was no denying I was the blob now. I would admit to being the blob, the void, a thousand times over if it would get it to stop.

Just make it stop.

After a few more twists, the metal hands started shaping me. It pulled out a section of me and started making what looked like a leg. The pain came slower once the blob in the mirror started looking like a human. A human with broad shoulders, the hair was slightly mop-like, like bangs barely touching the eyes. There were other features, but they were much tinier and harder to make out.

“A little too much, just a little too much.” They mumbled. I have no idea what they’re talking about. Quickly, they moved in front of me, their tablet gone, replaced with what appeared to be a hammer and a nail.

They held it up to my face.

Whelp, it was nice knowing you, external presence.

“This isn’t supposed to hurt.” They said, although, for some reason, I felt unsure.

Either way, I nodded very slightly. Thankful that it’s not supposed to hurt.

They were wrong. They pierced my arm with the nail before driving the hammer unnecessarily hard into it. Breaking off pieces of my arm and my other limbs that they found unsightly. They worked diligently the whole time. Their features remained obscured except for a slight gray smear of ink on their otherwise black cheek.

Once they finished, they stood up and inspected their handy work. “Good. Speak.”

“I can speak now.” I meant to think, but the words flowed out of my mouth. A guy’s voice, neither deep nor high, filled the silence of the room. In the mirror, a human guy figure stood just a bit taller than the Author before me. “Is this me?”

They gave a slight hum before dropping their tools and turning around to tap the mirror. Instantly, it melted into the floor. “You’ll take your final form once you enter the door to OC World.”

“To where?”

“It’s where I send my characters that I have yet to write stories for. That is where you’ll be staying.”

“O,” I said. I’m still not entirely sure what they mean.

“Indeed. Follow.” They strode away fast, their legs hardly moving but the floor carrying them ten steps away at a time.

No matter how far we walked, the fountains stayed the same distance away, and the clouds never moved. However, now they took on the shape of keyboards and pens.

The only things that seemed to move were the Author, me, and the sky.

Eventually, we appeared before a circular door in the middle of nowhere. Decorated with golden dragons on either side, the door itself seemed to be entirely made from water and rose petals.

“Author.” I cleared my voice, “May I call you that?” Best not to be rude to the person who literally moves the world with their laughter.

They nodded.

“Where are we?”



They tilted their head, ink appearing as long, straight hair fell to their right. “Door to OC World. You go in there.”

“Okay?”

What am I supposed to say to that?

“Nothing. Once you step through that door, you’ll be able to see what I designed you to look like. You also won’t be able to come back here, so make sure that you’re ready to go.”

“Well, it’s not like there’s a lot to do here.” I laughed slightly, the laugh sounding off to my ears, but the world did not shake.

Apparently, they didn’t find me amusing. They just stared at me with their eyelid-less, smooth black eyes.

“Make sure you’re ready to go.” They commanded. “You get one gift.”

“A gift?”

“Yes, every OC gets one gift before they go. What do you want.”

My tongue moved before I could even think. “Knowledge.” Knowledge, huh? Where did that come from? Was it you?

“Interesting.” They pursed their lips, their voice quiet and deadpan, “Are you sure? There’s no take backsies.”

No take backsies. Sounds serious. What do you think?

I don’t quite know where knowledge came from, but I have a feeling it’s important. I guess I have no way of actually knowing and there’s no way you and I can debate ideas. So, I guess we’ll go with the first thought, best thought mentality. Who knows, maybe this will give me the knowledge on how to have a conversation with you.

“Author, please give me the gift of knowledge.”

They sighed. “If that is what you want, then it shall be done. May your gift give you luck, happiness, and interesting stories to tell. All that is left is to give you a name.”

“A name huh, I almost didn’t realize I was missing one.” The Author didn’t move once again, frozen forever, staring at me.

I waved my hand in front of their face, there was no reaction.

Well, okay then. I guess it’s just you and me. I plopped on the floor and stared at the sky, waiting. Huh, I just noticed something. Even though the clouds felt like they were fluffing up earlier, they’re really just outlines. They are not fluffy or anything; it’s like they’re drawn on the sky. They don’t have any real color either; the color of the sky just flows through them.

Shouldn’t clouds, at the very least, be white or a cooler color like blue?

I’m going to assume you’re from the same world as the Author. When you have the chance, can you check to see what color the clouds are? I feel like they should be white and fluffy. At least they took interesting shapes like a pen and now rectangles. Can you also check on the cloud shapes for me? The rectangle one concerns me.

“Who are you talking to, Raz?” They finally moved, their figure becoming drippy, leaving ink on the floor as they moved. Somehow, they were farther away than I remembered them being.

“Just to the presence out there.” I would have pointed, but I had no idea which direction you would be.

“Hmmm.” They hummed. “There’s no one else here. Perhaps I hit your head too hard.”

“Well, they don’t seem to be here, they seem to be outside the page. Like you were a bit ago.”

“So, me?” Their voice sounded confused, though their face gave away nothing.

I thought about it. “No. I mean someone else. The other person out there.”

The Author frowned. “There is no other person.” The air seemed to get colder. An unearthly stillness seemed to overtake the sky. Before, the sky seemed to rush by in a series of different colors, but now it was completely frozen.

Maybe I should just change the topic. “So, umm, Raz. I like it.”

“Good. It’s based on an old friend of mine.” They made to move closer to me. With each step, their figure lost its detail and became drippier.

Before I realized it, I moved to grab their arms before their figure became too goopy to stand. “Are you okay?”

They stiffened in my touch for half a second, becoming more solid before they dripped away faster than before. Their hair bled into their shoulders. Their arms became sticky in my hands, and their legs slowly became one with the black on the floor.

“I will be.” They smirked at me, and despite not being able to see the rest of their face, there was something sinister in that smile. Their actual voice seemed to echo all around us, their whisperful tone slowly getting quieter and more filled with pain until they melted entirely into the floor.

I don’t know whether I should be concerned or not. One can assume they’re probably fine, probably. Suppose we should see what this door is about.

As I made my way to the door, the floor began to freeze and crack in areas where I stepped, like a broken phone screen. I tried not to give it too much attention, as the Author seemed to particularly like weird floor features.

The door was cold to my touch as I pushed it open. Revealing a watery surface.

How the water was standing up, I didn't possibly know, but I did know I had a bad feeling about water.

I reached out to touch the water only stopping once my black fingers slowly started disintegrating. "Ouch, ouch, ouch." I flinched my hand away. A quick examination proved that my hand was fine, but it still ached terribly. "Okay, that's a no for water."

Perhaps I'll just stay here. As long as I stay away from the water fountains in the distance, watch the clouds or something, I'll be fine.

I turned around, adamant about finding a place to sit, but the only real places to sit outside the floor would be the fountains, and there were two issues with that. The main one was that they were gone. There were no longer fountains in the distance, just an endless void stretching over the purple sky and checkered floor.

As I watched, the void sprung up from the floorboards, swallowing up the white flooring instantly and shooting the black flooring up into the air like fountains. Any letters that made up this world before were gone, and something in the very fiber of my being told me they weren't coming back.

If I were smart, I would move, but my feet were rooted to the spot, either from the fear that racked through me or the fact that my own feet were starting to get consumed by the floor. The floor cracked quicker all around me, spraying just out of reach.

The sky was gone now, swallowed by the void, and slowly, the void started to move down to where I was. I tried to scream but when I opened my mouth only goop came out, as I realized that my lips had started to fuse together.

Help me. Someone help me.

Just as the void was about to swallow me, I suddenly stopped melting into the void and I felt a strong, invisible force begin to push me. First down onto my back, and then it dragged me through what was left of the checked floor and headfirst through the door into the world that awaited beyond it.

Muffled in the distance, the Author spoke, “Good luck on our bet Raz.”

## Chapter 2. I Hit My Head Hard

I don't know what I was expecting when I was dragged through that door.

Maybe an endless, beautiful skyline welcoming me to my new home, or perhaps a gentle breeze to carry me down.

Or if the door worked like a normal door, just for me to walk through to the other side with very little resistance.

But instead, I'm drowning.

The water swirled around me, filling my lungs as I tried to scream. I tried to grab onto anything, but the only thing I could sense was you. I didn't want to risk dragging you in, so I tried to swim in the opposite direction. The force was pulling me back towards the door, but it was no use. I just kept being pulled in all directions.

Swim diagonally with every ounce of willpower, something told me.

I did my best to figure out which direction was diagonal and swim against the relentless force trying to pull me down, until I finally broke free of the water.

My chest was burning while I tried to gasp for breath. In the distance, I saw the shore, thank the Author. I spat water out of my mouth. Now I just have to swim back.

That was awful. At least the worst is over now.

Music began to swell, becoming more intense and pounding as I felt the ocean pull back and a dark shadow fell over me. I looked to see a giant wave. It loomed over me. The point of the wave positioned over me like the wave was staring me down. "HI."

I shouldn't have said that.

The wave crashed into me, taking me with it as it rushed forward to the shore. It tossed me along until it dumped me unceremoniously on the banks. Narrowly missing a few sharp rocks, my head slammed into the ground.

~

I sat up with a gasp. The sun blared down at me as I vigorously tried to blink the sand out of my eyes. How long was I out?

My head is pounding like I was hit by a monster truck that decided the best course of action to deal with my now rotting corpse was to back up over it again and call for some squirrels to eat my body. Only for the squirrels to decide the best course of action was to fill my head with the nuts they found out of the ground. Does that make sense? Probably not. It's possible that I have a concussion.

Everything blurred. I tried to stand up, only to fall back onto the rocks. Other than the pain in my head and now my bottom, I noticed I can still sense you as easily as I can hear the waves moving in perfect rhythm with the pounding of my head. Where am I?

The water spraying my face did not answer my question, so I decided my best bet was to get up and look around.

Once I stood up with shaking but upright footing, I noticed I was on some giant rock formation on a tiny sliver of a beach. Above the rocks, there seemed to be a small cliff that overlooked the sea. A little bit away, there was a sand pathway that led up towards the cliff and a mountain wall on the other side. The water stretched on forever, perfectly calm except for small waves moving in the distance. If I hadn't almost drowned here, there might have been something relaxing about this place.

“The Mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell.” A high-pitched voice ruined the peace.

“Lovely, you’re giving me a shifting headache would you please shut up.” This voice was a bit lower than my own. I glanced at the path to see three figures slowly getting closer. As they got closer, I saw two girls walking with a green-haired man. They looked like something out of an anime with their bright color-coordinated clothes and their flowing jackets.

“The Mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell.” The red-haired girl said.

The purple-haired girl fell to her knees and slid down the sloped path a bit. “I’m begging you, just tell us what that means,” she said. She looked over to where the rocks and I were chilling. “Oh, my Author, there’s a man on the crabs, guys.”

The green-haired guy walked a bit closer, coming up behind her, “What do you mean there’s a... well shift you’re right.”

They stared at me.

I stared back.

They stared some more.

I decided to wave.

The red-haired one gave me a little spin in return, but the other two just stared at me.

The purple-haired one stood up, cupping her hands to her mouth. “Aye, what ya doing over there, the crabs don’t like to be played with!”

“At least not by caps locks like you.” The guy called out before the purple-haired one hit him over the head.

What are they talking about? The ground started rumbling as the rocks began to move. I did my best to hold on as the rocks stood up, but they easily knocked me to the ground, sand finding its way into my mouth. By the time I spat it out, I was staring face to face at a giant crab. Its pinchers were at least three times as big as me, its legs like ancient tree trunks, and with horror, I



realized it was only a little bit smaller than the giant cliff above us. I could make out my entire body in just one of its eyes. Its very sandy, beady eye.

I found myself blinking at the crab. “Um, hi.”

It didn’t blink. It simply moved one of its giant legs right at me.

Panic forced me to move as I desperately tried to wrangle my feet back underneath me. The sand caused me to slip and slide, but with all my strength, I tossed myself out of the way and broke into a sprint.

I could feel the hot breath of the monstrous crab on my heels. I took a second to look at where it was, and barely dove out of the way as its colossal pincher crashed down into the earth, inches from where I just was.

The other pinchers swung at me, and I ducked. Its massive claws clanged together, creating a bone-chilling sound that echoed in my ears.

The world blurred around me, but adrenaline kept me moving to where the three people were standing.

“Run!” I tried to scream, thinking maybe they were just as shocked as I was.

The purple-haired girl reached behind her, pulling out a very steampunk-looking cannon fitted with gears and bolts. “Duck,” she said as she fired directly at me.

I hit the deck, sand once again finding its way into my eyes and mouth. I highly don’t recommend it.

“You missed,” The guy said, addressing the purple-haired girl.

“I wasn’t trying to erase it ya dolt.”

A quick glance behind me revealed that she did in fact miss me by an inch. The cannonball was just past my foot, the crab on the other side of it. It snapped and bounced its legs angrily before it turned and went into the ocean.

It didn't go far. I can still see the pointiness of its rocks sticking out from the ocean.

"See, problem solved." The purpled-haired girl tossed the cannon in the air. For a second, I was afraid she was now trying to hit herself with it, but instead of coming back down and giving her a headache to match mine, it went up in the air and disappeared.

"Woah." I said, to which six eyes snapped to mine. "Hi." I tried again.

The red-haired girl waved at me enthusiastically, "Did you know some crabs have a claw that's significantly bigger than the other one, it's called a fiddle!"

"Umm, I did not know that." Why was this important information? Was that crab called a fiddle?

"Aye so, what are we gonna do with this one?" The purple-haired girl gestured to me.

The guy shrugged, "I don't care, erase him and send him to the end would probably be the easiest way to deal with him."

"You and erasing." The purple-haired girl rolled her eyes. "We ain't erasing anybody, Dolly would erase us."

"Trillo, do you really want to do all the paperwork to figure out who he is and how he got here?"

"Course not. But that doesn't mean we-"

"What about you Sophia? You want to do all that paperwork, Lovely."

The redhead, apparently known as Sophia, excitedly cheered, "Nope."

"So-" Sim said, dragging out the O, rolling his hand in a continuing motion.

“Sim.” Trillo groaned, tossing her hair out of her face.

“-it’s settled, let’s erase him and go back to wave fishing.”

### Chapter 3. Why is There Battle Music Playing?

I have several questions. What's wave fishing? Was that crab called a fiddle? Is that why it's so big? Why did the green-haired guy, apparently known as Sim, not like me? Would it be correct to assume erasing is a bad thing? I know in the Author's world, it's something usually done with paper and an erasure, but I fail to see how that's important here. Is Sophia okay? She sat just past Sim, Trillo, and their shouting. Her legs were crossed, eyes unblinking. I think it's best to ignore her for now. However, my friend, I think the most important question is how I can get this Sim fellow to stop pointing his weapon at me.

At some point during Sim and Trillo's argument, Sim had reached behind his back and drew a sword. I believe the smart thing to do would be to back up and get as far away from the dangerous tip that Sim carelessly pointed in my direction, which I did. Until I remembered there might be more crabs behind me. The only other exit seemed to be up the path the three of them came from or the ocean... I don't think I like the ocean, although, I suppose I shouldn't judge since I just got here. Still, I didn't feel like getting tossed around like a shirt in a washing machine again. No one should ever do that. So that only leaves one thing to do.

"I had way more paperwork than ya and I got it done twice as fast!" Trillo crossed her arms.

"We all know you had Dolly help you." Sim barked.

"We all know you had Sophia!"

The conversation seemed to have spiraled into other issues, but still, I slowly brought my hands up in the universal signal of harmlessness, "Umm, hey."

Both Trillo and Sim's eyes snapped to me. Sophia's, I don't think, ever stopped staring. "It's nice to meet you guys, uh-." My voice sounded awkward even to my ears. "I'm Raz, I'm sorry if I'm on your property or something. The thing is, umm, I just got here, so maybe don't shoot?" I

think this is a decent way to introduce yourself. Pretty sure this is how it's done in the Author's world.

Trillo made a step forward to me before Sim stopped her.

Trillo huffed. "Really."

"Your name is what." Sim practically growled.

"He said his name is Raz." Sophia helpfully perked up."

"I'm aware Soph, thank you." Sim sighed. "What I want to know is if this is some type of prank."

Trillo snorted. "Why would it be?"

"Mute it, Trillo! I'm asking the caps lock in front of us." His sword started to turn green, the same shade as his hair. Even from as far back as I stood, I could feel the heat radiating from it. He cracked his neck, I'm guessing for dramatic effect, although I don't entirely understand what's dramatic about it.

I held out my hands. "Wait, wait let's not get riled up. Is my name not to your liking or something?" The look on his face told me yes, while the girl's faces told me they were just as confused as me, "Look, nevermind, this isn't a prank. I don't even know how I got here, the Author just plopped me here, just show me the nearest exit and I'll quickly leave the premises- why am I hearing dramatic music?"

Fast-paced rock music with a building guitar riff, to be exact. I looked around for the source. I looked up only to see the different color clouds in the sky ominously taking on the shape of music notes and skulls, not sure I like that. Looking back towards the trio, there was Sophia who was bobbing her head along, Trillo who just looked annoyed while she looked around, and Sim who's grin was a tad too big for his face while he tapped his foot to the beat.

Okay, good, I wasn't the only one hearing it. For a second, I thought the concussion was coming back with a vengeance. I glanced at the sky again, it definitely looked like skulls and music notes. Maybe I shouldn't rule out the concussion.

The music started to rise, the beat getting faster, reaching a crescendo. Clouds of different colors suddenly darkened the sky. The wind blew harder. My hair was nice enough not to whip directly into my eyes. The sand, on the other hand, had no such pleasantries, and I did my best to block the sand with my arm while keeping an eye on Sim.

He quickly cracked his neck slightly to the side. His hair really looked like grass blades as the wind wove through it. "Soph, remind me to thank Viola later." He called and then swung.

I watched as he brought his arms all the way back and then forward, the green light swinging from the blade in my direction. As the music slowed, so did the rest of the world, but despite this, my own body didn't have a single hope of moving out of the way.

Huh, this seemed bad. Although I'm sure if the Author wanted something bad to happen to me, they'd have done it already, right? They'll protect me.

The light grew dramatically through the air, becoming so big I could only see it and the sand that disappeared as it got closer and closer to my face.

Maybe this is like when friendly fire is turned off in video games. Maybe my skin is bulletproof. My chest started to hurt in the same way it did when we first met. Reader, what are you trying to tell me?

The light slowly started touching my hands. The light felt burning when a hard force slammed me back into the ground. The sound of glass shattering was loud in my ears. Before the world returned to normal, the music was gone.

My head bounced once, twice. Before I landed head first in a pile of wet sand. The throbbing let me know that I definitely wasn't dead.

"Shift Quote, why do you have to ruin our fun!" I looked up, mud dripping down my face. As Sim dropped his sword behind his back, it completely disappeared.

"Yeah no ruin our fun!" Sophia pouted.

"Speak for yourself, we were almost screwed." Trillo sighed.

The one he just referred to as Quote crouched next to me with an outstretched hand. She was a young girl, younger than the other two I met. Her hair was white with black streaks, or perhaps black with white streaks, making her hair look almost like a piece of paper. Just like the others who wore clothes reminiscent of anime, she wore a black cloak with the rest of her clothes hidden beneath it. The cloak perfectly matched the one eye I could see, with the other hidden behind her bangs.

"Where did the light go?" I asked as I took her hand. She pointed to her cloak.

"Did you take the light?" I questioned.

"Light can not exist without Shadows."

I blinked, "Okay." I don't think that really answers the question, does it? She nodded at me, then turned towards the rest of the group. "This house no longer feels like home."

"You can't be serious Quote, we can't go home yet. We just got here." Trillo said.

"Dolls hold the secrets that only children's tears will summarize."

"But why would Doll want to speak to him?" Sim said.

Trillo laughed, "Isn't it obvious? Quote wouldn't have stopped us for any other reason."

“What reason?” Sophia asked, “Is it because he has cool eyes?” She grabbed her eyes and opened them wide. I had to resist the urge to cringe as I watched some of the sand get dangerously close to her eyes.

Quote gestured towards all of us. “Birds of a feather flock together.”

Trillo jumped up excitedly. “Exactly. Take that Sim I was right!”

“Yeah, whatever.” Sim huffed.

“I don’t get it.” Sophia looked around, confused, before she looked at me.

I shrugged, “I don’t get it either.”

Sim moved to block my view of Sophia while he scowled at me. “Don’t worry about it Soph, let’s go.” Sim marched back the way he came, with Trillo close on his heels.

Sophia scrambled to her feet, her floofy dress twisting awkwardly. “Yay! Let’s go!” She said a little too sharply before she followed after Sim, a skip in her step. Or perhaps bound would be more accurate.

With me, Quote, and you the only ones left, I figured I would try to converse with my savior. “They’re a lively group aren’t they?”

Quote gave me a small smile before she held up a finger and went towards the underside of the cliff.

“Be careful.” I called out, “there was a...” Quote punched the wall, and a young girl around the same age as her appeared clutching her stomach. “.., a giant crab.” I trailed off. People just kept popping out of nowhere. I resisted the urge to look under my feet to make sure I wasn’t accidentally standing on someone’s face.

The girl looked like Quote, only her hair was definitely black with wavy white streaks. Unlike Quote, who rocked the cloak, she just wore a plain tank top and jeans. The two of them



didn't bother answering my question, as this new person made a face at Quote and walked up to Trillo, who gave me a small wink as they followed after Sim.

I looked back at the cliff. There's not a single hole in the cave wall.

How was she hiding in the wall? I turned back to the girl before me, who looked at me with an amused face. "Thank you for earlier."

She dipped her chin at me and then gestured for me to follow. I'm pretty sure it would be rude to ignore her, perhaps even dangerous if judging by everything else so far. Since I still can't hear you and your opinion, I had no other choice but to follow her.

## Chapter 4. Water I don't like it

I was out of breath.

After walking up through the pathway, I was greeted with lush, green, rolling hills that seemed to stretch on forever in every direction. At first, it was beautiful. There was nothing but blue skies. It was relaxing to see a sky color that made more sense than the one I saw with the Author earlier. The clouds were a little off though.

They seemed to make the sky dance in an ocean of colorful waves. There were red ones, purple ones, pink ones, green ones, and I especially liked the blue ones. Unlike the other clouds, these didn't take shapes and they blended into the sky like ninjas. As far as I am concerned, they were the most normal things in this world so far. The other colored ones took forms like compasses, maps, and question marks. As much as those ones freaked me out, I was still hoping we'd take the time to watch them. Perhaps lay on our backs and wait for the clouds to change. Maybe imagine what shapes the blue ones could be, or at the very least, walk at a slower pace.

But alas, they kept moving, I kept moving, and now with trees in sight, I think I'm done for.

Everyone else was still walking, chatting even, and I couldn't breathe. My lungs and sides were on fire, and my breath sounded like a dragon. Don't ask me how I know that; I just know. I felt my legs buckling underneath me when very slow music started to play. Quote reached for me, keeping me upright.

"What's wrong with him?" Trillo asked.

"He's breathing funny?" Sophia's high-pitched voice began to imitate my breathing with a very overdramatic wheeze, I might add.

When I finally caught my breath, I only saw Quote and the girl who looked like Quote around me. The girl looked away when she met my gaze and disappeared into the trees.

“Please tell me we’re almost there.”

Quote smiled and started pulling me through the trees. The grass swiftly switched to mud. I couldn’t help but wish the Author had given me some type of shoes as a gift, especially if they knew there was going to be mud.

“How much longer-”

I instantly lost my words when I walked into the clearing. I have no idea how to even process this.

“Home sweet home.” Quote said.

I don’t know about you, but when I think Home Sweet Home, I think about a little picket fence, a family, and maybe the smell of something home-cooked, most importantly, I picture a house. Maybe a story or a few high, not...whatever I was looking at.

This place looked like a mansion? A castle? Perhaps a cabin or a jungle gym. It was like a combination of Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory, a futuristic skyscraper, and a fantasy castle with a moat. All completed with monkey bars and slides coming out the windows. It's utter chaos.

Or perhaps I shouldn’t say this in case your home looks something like this. I'm not saying it's bad by any means, it's just... a lot. The longer I looked at it, the more things seemed to appear, like is that a beanstalk or just a really tall tree behind the structure?

The girl from the wall stood by a relatively normal-looking wooden door, next to some monkey bars. She opened her mouth, and a song I somehow recognized as the Jeopardy song, wafted over.

Quote huffed, “To lose patience is to lose everything.” Still, she dragged me rather impatiently through the door and after her.

~

Despite the elaborate outside, the inside didn't look like much. The walls were white as a piece of paper, and the floor carpet was as green as the grass outside. I looked around in awe at the normalness of it all.

"Please tell me the rest of the house is as normal as this." I asked Quote as I followed her and her twin through the plain halls.

"Normalcy is overrated. Insanity is the only truth."

I blinked and gave her a polite smile. Somehow, despite not being able to talk, you make more sense to me than her.

As we turned a corner, I was instantly met with a grand, silver double door. A giant black dragon laid on the right facing upward and a smaller golden dragon laid on the left facing downward. The black one was rough, with scales and spikes sticking up throughout its body. Letters were carved into every part of its body like scars. The gold one was smooth and shiny as it danced with the reflection of the sun. Its eyes were made of mirrors that somehow only reflected the black dragon.

I didn't realize until Quote's twin coughed at me that I was dragging my hands along the dragons, there was just something about them. "Should I open the door?"

I meant to ask you this question, but Quote nodded at me. Using all the strength I possessed, I couldn't get the door open.

I tried until Quote's Twin moved me out of the way, rather forcefully, I might add, grabbed the door handles with her pinkies, and flung it open.

I believe that's what one would call showing off.

Two silver slides were on the other side, one with water and one without, making me kind of glad I didn't open the door even when the twin smirked at me and flung herself down the water slide.

"We don't have to go down that, do we?" I'm not afraid to admit that I don't think I'm becoming the biggest fan of water.

Before Quote could answer with another cryptic message, Trillo's voice called out from behind, "fraid so, that's where the meeting's taking place."

"Underwater!" I did my best not to squeal but I don't think I'm equipped for water.

Trillo ignored me while Quote gave her a look I wasn't able to read.

"Don't give me that look." Trillo laughed, "I'm better equipped to explain this to him anyway."

Quote raised a singular eyebrow.

"Don't worry I'll walk him through it."

Quote huffed, pointed at her eyes, then pointed at Trillo before she gave me a slight smile and a pat on the back.

I didn't even have time to ask what was going on as she flung herself down the slide disappearing in the darkness. Water splashed as she went down, and I instinctively flinched away.

"So, is there any way for me not to get wet?"

I turned to ask Trillo.

She smiled at me, "Nope." She popped the p with her lips as she kicked me.

And I was sent tumbling down the slide.

I'm not ashamed to admit I screamed until water filled my mouth, making me choke. The water stung my eyes with salt. My stomach dropped to my feet. I'm pretty sure I'm going to die.

The pain went through my knees as I hit something hard. Before I could scream, water wrenched from my mouth, bending me forward.

"I told you! In your face! I was right! I was riiiiight. I was- "

"Alright, Lovely you were right. Now shut up before Dolly actually burns holes in your head."

"Not my hair!"

Instantly, I recognized Sophia's high-pitched screams and Sim's sarcastic voice. There was nothing left in me to throw up so I forced my back onto the freezing marble floor. Finally realizing what Sophia just said. After everything, hair was the priority? I don't know about you, but something about that seems off about these people.

When I finally managed to wipe the water from every hole in my head, I noticed a young girl with button eyes and porcelain skin standing over me with an outstretched hand. I started to reach out but I hesitated, trusting these individuals hadn't gone so well, but her smile, there was something about it that was just so patient and kind. I got the feeling she would wait for me to feel comfortable, even if it took me all day.

Her hand was cold to the touch as she flung me to my feet, positioning me behind her. The water flowed out of the slide, falling into a designated slot in the floor. Almost giving it a pleasant waterfall effect. I might even say it's kind of nice if it didn't almost drown me.

Dolly planted her feet in the ground and stared down the slide, right as Trillo flew out of the tunnel with two bright purple wings. Not a single drop of water on her I might add.

“Dolly!” Trillo held up her hands as her wings pulled back at the same time. She skidded to a stop in the air, her head smacking into Dolly's forehead, shattering part of it like glass.

Pieces clattered to the floor.

I stared, horrified. I just witnessed a murder.

Sophia started laughing, a loud, ear piercing laugh. O man, these crazies were going to have me be an accomplice. I debated the merits of catching the girl's body so she didn't shatter anymore or letting her fall so my finger prints weren't on the body. But on the off chance she's okay I didn't want her to be in worse shape. I mean, I'm right behind her anyway. I braced myself, prepared to catch her, and possibly witness what could be her final breath to report to the authorities.

She staggered but otherwise remained completely upright. “Really.”

Trillo looked pale, “He slipped and fell before I could explain anything, honest.”

“That's a lie,” I added helpfully.

She signed before turning around and walking to the desk behind us. Her golden hair framed the hole in her head, revealing nothing like a skull or brain, only the empty head of a porcelain doll. She shook her head slightly as she went, pieces falling out.

I dove to catch some so they wouldn't shatter anymore on the ground.

I missed and sheepishly offered them back to her. I imagine people here at least need a part of the skull. She might need glue or something if she operates like a doll. The more the pieces the better, right?

She raised a single eyebrow at me. Or maybe they don't here.

She chuckled before taking the pieces and tossing them back in her head, not even slightly worried. She held out her other hand. I could see that her middle finger and whatever the finger next to the pinky was called were glued together.

Trillo came up behind with the other pieces. “I am really sorry Dolly,” she said, forking them over.

Dolly again simply tossed them in her head. The pieces clinging around.

“Are you also sorry about the car hijack you did over the dystopian district?” Somehow Dolly spoke without ever opening her mouth. On closer look, I’m not sure she could open her mouth if she wanted to, her lips looked like they were fused together.

Trillo startled “Who heard about that? Ho-.”

“Penelope.” Dolly said matter of factly, “Now go sit.” She gestured to a nice plush brown couch on the edge of the room. “You too.” Her voice was much sweeter when addressing me.

“It’s about time we introduce you to your new family.”

She said everything so firmly, so matter of factly, for a moment I knew exactly what she was talking about. I understood everything. Then it hit me.

“FAMILY!”



## Chapter 5. We Are Family! Wait do I get a say!

“FAMILY!”

I wasn't the only one who shouted.

Sim said the word with such indignation you would think I was trying to kill him earlier.

Trillo said it in a tone I can only describe as an older relative realizing they'd have to pay for their mistake.

Sophia seemed genuinely happy.

Even the sound of a record scratch rang out. I glance around the room quickly before asking my question. No, there was no record player. “What do you mean by family?”

“Everyone sit and I'll explain.”

I finally got a good glance around the room. It was a grand room, an absolutely giant circle of a room. The walls were normal enough, white with a few what might be family photos spread around it. There was no way to get close enough to look without wading through the moat that surrounded the room. The windows were very high up, almost like this room was once a tower with multiple floors. The floor almost looked like marble, but you could see through it to where the fishes of all colors swam below.

The couch felt incredible as my legs sank in it. I felt like I could sleep forever, but that might just be because of today's events.

I noticed Trillo was sitting beside Sophia and Sim on the arm of their relatively small couch position across from mine.

“Raz asked for the gift of knowledge.”

Several groans rang out.

Sim shifted position, leaning on his knees as he sat, instead of having his arms draped around Sophia. "I'm pretty sure that's just your old age catching up to you." Sim grumbled. "No one's been stupid enough to ask for the gift of knowledge in years." Old? I looked at my savior, she looked no older than ten. Who was Green Bean calling old. He looked twice her age.

I realize that's rather rude, but I haven't eaten yet and his hair really was starting to look like green beans.

"We'll get you food soon Raz, I just want to explain a few things first."

I froze, I didn't realize I said that out loud.

"You didn't, Raz. I'm a telepath." Dolly said as if that was the most common thing to be in the world.

Trillo huffed, crossing her arms. "This seems like it could be an orientation for newbies Doll, why are we all here?"

"Raz chose the gift of knowledge, that means he has no choice but to live here. I want you each on your own time to get to know him."

Viola snorted as if to say is that all?

"And as far as my very brief overview revealed, he is utterly human. He's not part Harpy." Dolly glanced at Trillo, "He's not indestructible." She glanced at Sophia and Sim. "Why he may prove to have some odd quirks like any OC, he has no magic to mention of." She quickly glanced over a blue-haired girl before her eyes settled on Quote and Viola. Dolly was quiet for a moment, letting her words sink in. "If you're not careful you'll send him to the erase, do I make myself clear."

To the erase, not erase him. This place really has some weird ways of speaking. I wanted to speak up to say she was in fact not making herself clear. Harpies, indestructible, magic, while

that does explain a lot of the weirder aspects of this place, it all seems more like something out of a story than reality. Then again... I suppose that makes sense... I still have questions though.

Either way it didn't matter because Sim beat me to the punch. "Yeah, yeah, we all got it. Stop talking to us like we're Sophia."

"Yeah, stop talking about them like they're me." Sophia crossed her arms in agreement.

"Sim this is important."

"Let me speed this up then." Sim looked at me, his eyes intense. I decided I was better off staring at his bright green hair. He mentioned burning holes in heads earlier and I wasn't sure if I wanted to find out if that was a talent of his.

"I'm Sim. That's Soph and Trill." He gestured to Sophia who gave me a stink eye and Trillo who smiled. He gestured his head to the right of him. "Those are the twins Quote and Viola. Neither can speak so feel free to ignore them." Both of them gave Sim a gesture with their fingers that I'm familiar with.

"That's Penelope, she's a dream stealer. If you stay in a room too long with her, she starts to control your mind." Sim made spooky fingers which I'm pretty sure is the universal sign that someone is lying.

Across from the twins sat a small, ocean-haired girl. The Penelope in question simply shook her head and smiled in my direction, her eyes remaining closed. Small dream catchers hung from a purple headband around her face. Her hair hung off the couch despite the fact her own feet didn't even touch the floor, dream catchers also hung off her hair tips. She even had a necklace, three bracelets, and earrings to match her other dream catchers. Would it be rude to say she seems a tad obsessed?

“Last I checked I don’t steal dreams, but I do have the knowledge of everyone's dreams in OC World and I can store them in my dream captures.” Her voice was light, melodic almost, like she was trying to lure me into a dream.

“See, she wants to capture us.” Sim said.

“Sim, you're freaking out poor Sophia again.” Dolly sighed.

“She does.” Sophia's voice came out barely above a whisper.

I tried to comfort her, “I don’t think that.”

“Yes she does!” Sim interjected. “It's already too late for them, it might even be too late for me.”

Sophia’s eyes started to fill with tears but Sim continued. Why is he doing this to her? By the way he was talking it seemed like he knew she was going to cry.

Dolly must have read my thoughts and moved closer to me. Wait, when did she move from behind the desk to next to me on the couch? “He has a headache so he’s going to use Sophia as a way out.”

“Why would he do that?”

I glanced around the room, my eyes landing on Quote who cupped her ears along with Viola who tossed her headphones on. Before I could examine more, Sim jumped up pointing across the room at Dolly and me. “You see that Soph they're already plotting to delete us and your toys!” His acting was a little over the top but apparently that doesn’t matter to Soph because she broke out sobbing.

If you could even call it that. It was more like a siren's wail. The sobs coming out her mouth demanded one thing and that was for my ears to implode on themselves. All my attempts to block her out were futile. Dolly and Penelope seemed completely unbothered while Trillo

practically flew off over to my couch, hands on her ears. The Twins squirmed but made no effort to move, although a sound of a disc scratching rang out which didn't help with the overall noise in the room. And Sim, well, Sim just looked smug.

Sim gave Dolly a fake apologetic smile and pointed at Sophia. Dolly rolled her eyes and waved her hand as a thing of dismissal. Sim gave her a crooked smile before standing up, grabbing Sophia princess style. "It's ok baby. I won't let them hurt you." Sim jumped into the pool behind us and did not come back up.

"Well," Trillo stood, brushing herself off, "I better go too, sorry about earlier Raz I didn't know you were human." Before I could respond Trillo tossed herself over the couch and jumped into the pool behind us. She's not coming back up either, did she drown?! No, they're not human, "They'll be fine. Right?"

Penelope smiled, eyes opening. I didn't realize before but her pupils seemed to be made of a brown crystal. "Yeah, they're fine, they simply took Sophia to her room. Think of any waterways here like a teleporter."

"A teleporter." I trailed off, "So where does it take them?"

"To anywhere in this house." Dolly stood up and gestured to Viola. Viola rolled her eyes giving a finger gesture to me before walking into the pool. Now that wasn't very nice, I haven't even said anything to her.

Dolly shook her head at Viola, and turned back to me. "Raz, despite everyone's unique behavioral charms, I do believe I speak for everyone when I say it's a pleasure to have you as part of this family. Penelope will show you how to get to your quarters and bring you some food."

"Wait, I have a question."

“Of course Raz, what is it?”

“Apparently the Author and I made a bet and I was wondering if you know how I can find out what it is.”

“Pardon.” Dolly said.

“The Author, when they were making me from a weird void thing into me, mentioned something about us having a bet. Is this common for the Author to do with OCs?”

All of the girls in the room shared a look. If it was possible, Dolly's skin seemed to become even paler.

“Raz, honey, are you sure that’s what the Author said? Maybe they said something else like wet. After all, Quote informed us you fell into the ocean.”

I shook my head. “They definitely said, good luck on our bet Raz. That much I’m certain.”

Quote shot Dolly a look that I couldn’t quite place, “Dolls can not avoid the hands of fate that guide them. Any more than a child can avoid bedtime.”

“Quote it is not the time for this discussion.”

“Nothing in this world, tragic or otherwise, is accidental.” Quote countered, at least I think that’s what she was doing by her tone.

“We can not jump to conclusions. You know this.”

“You would not watch a gunner shoot your loved one and claim it was coincidence when it happens twice.”

“Quote.” There was something cold in that tone that didn’t quite match her pastel dress.

“You must hold onto the good memories with all your might, it’s the only way to ensure they don’t get erased.”

“Quote!” Dolly snapped making both Quote and Penelope flinch.

Dolly sighed, her porcelain skin slowly morphing into plush sewn fabric. The empty hole in her head now filled with stuffing. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to yell. We’ll talk about that later.”

Her mouth didn’t move but her voice was plain to hear throughout the room.

Quote nodded. Her face tense.

“Are you sure that’s what they said Raz.” Penelope asked, her voice shaking ever so slightly.

“Certain.” The girls seemed so taken aback that I added, “I’ll take this to mean they don’t make bets often.”

“Not in all my years.” Dolly sighed. There was no mistaking the exhaustion in that tone as she played with a stitch that seemed to be poorly done on her arm. “Let’s talk about this at breakfast. I must deal with the others right now.”

I nodded because I didn’t want to push her hospitality. She looked more worn out as a plushie, frayed at the seams, the color off not only in her body but her clothes became more tattered too. She looked so much more exhausted that I sort of felt bad for bringing up the bet in the first place.

I really hope Dolly didn’t hear those thoughts as she waved at me and left the room once again through the water. There was just no avoiding this stuff.

I turned to Quote and Penelope. They eyed me with a mixture of distrust and disbelief. Perhaps the bet isn’t the most kosher of topics. “I promise I’m not lying.”

Quote’s face didn’t relax but she gave me a small nod.

Penelope's smile was a little more strained. “It’s not that I don’t believe you. It’s just that Dolly has been around for a long time. I think she’s in the running for oldest OC in OC world. If she’s never heard of a bet before, well,” She hesitated, her voice hitching slightly, “I’m not sure what the implications would be.”

“Old records only replay what they want to hear.” Quote mumbled.

Penelope ignored her. “Anyways, let me show you to your room. Quote will get you some food.”

Considering the tension in the room, it's probably best if I drop the subject for now. Especially since I felt like I needed a tape recorder and the internet to decipher what exactly Quote was trying to say. I sighed, unfortunately there was something I didn't need the internet to figure out. “We have to go through the water don't we. There's no other way.”

Penelope seemed to ignore my sorrow as her voice perked up. “This house is constantly changing, the waterways are the most reliable way to travel. Just think about going to your room and the house will give you one.”

“The house will give me one?” Is the house alive! Like actually alive or smart house alive. I eyed the water, perhaps that's more like intestine juice than water. All the more reason to avoid it.

Penelope nodded. “Just picture a place you'd want to sleep in, or focus on your exhaustion.”

Well I guess this should be nothing considering all I've been through today. I tried to picture a room full of comfort, safety, and a window or something so I can try to see you beyond this world and the words. Although no idea how that would work. Still, it was worth a shot for my first friend as far as I'm concerned.

I took a moment to finalize the image in my head before walking into the pool.



## Chapter 6. Whelp I'm not getting any sleep.

I half expected to bruise another part of my body, but instead of crash landing, my body gently sunk down right outside a white metal door, laced with what appeared to be blue electricity zapping it every few seconds.

“Well this is something you don't see everyday.” Penelope appeared next to me, eyes wide. Quote was nowhere to be seen.

“This isn't normal?” I asked.

“Everything is normal to some degree, especially in this house,” Penelope hesitated before saying, “But no. I've never seen a door quite like this.”

The two of us stood there eyeing the door like we thought it stole something from us. And with the way this world has been going so far, I would not be surprised if the door came to life and demanded a wallet I don't have.

Penelope clapped her hands together, “At least it matches your hair.” Again with the hair out ranking obviously more pressing matters. I really don't understand the importance. Do you?

Right. Still can't speak. Well it's no matter, we'll figure that out. The question of the moment is, “How do I get inside?”

Penelope shrugged, “Try opening it.”

“Helpful.” I said with a bit more bite than I meant. “Sorry, it's been a long day.” Penelope waved me off, her smile patient and kind.

She really didn't seem to have a cruel streak like the other guys so far, it really wasn't fair to be mean to her when she didn't have to be here. I don't know how to make it up to her.

Without thinking too much deeper, I reached out my hand and grabbed the door handle. The electricity surrounding the door started zapping my hands but it didn't hurt. I turned the handle and slowly the door clicked open. "What in the Author..." Penelope said

This is not how I pictured my room.

Not only was the window missing but, how to put it...

This looked like a prison cell made for Frankenstein. Blue electricity streaks ran around the top of the room randomly striking objects like a metal desk, table, and floor. I didn't see a bed in sight. Not even a plush carpet. I just want to rest, is that too much to ask?

"By any chance, is this the generating room?" I asked Penelope.

"Highly unlikely, considering I don't know what that is." She responded.

I watched the electricity zap on the floor. "Is this safe?"

Penelope stared at the electricity striking my floor. "Probably.... for you anyway.."

"For me?"

"Well, you did open the door, so you're probably immune to electricity."

Immune? "I didn't ask for that gift."

"Trillo never asked for wings. Sophia never asked for her sonic screams, the Author sometimes gives us extra they don't tell us about."

"That's nice of them."

Penelope pursed her lips, "It can be."

Despite that reassurance, I was still hesitant to enter the room, but the Author probably wouldn't permanently hurt their creations...probably.

"I'll let you get acquainted with your room, someone will bring you food soon."

"Thanks."

“I’ll see you at breakfast. If you need anything, scream, I’m usually up and always listening.”

She smiled at me and walked away, hair swaying behind her.

Outside of the electricity, there were no lights and no windows in the room, just sound flashes of electric-blue lights every couple seconds. Staring into the dark, forbidding space it occurred to me I could just sleep in the hall.

But I suppose that’s not very interesting for you, my friend.

I sighed and reached for the door handle again. When it didn't hurt me, I took a step onto the freezing metal floor and waited for the zap to come.

It didn’t.

So I took another step in the room, leaving the door open so I could have some source of constant light. Again, I waited for the zap. Perhaps it could have a delayed reaction, but nothing happened. So, I am immune to electricity.

Well that’s nice information to have. Now if only I knew how to turn on the lights?

I walked to the wall and eyed the flow of electricity. Yeah, I still don’t want to just touch that. Maybe there’s a switch by the door.

I turned back around in time to see the door swaying. I watched for a second before I realized what was going on, I lunged for it.

But the door slammed closed, trapping me in darkness.

Well that’s just great. Any suggestions?

Personally, I’m thinking about just sitting with my thoughts in the darkness, it's been a long day. Maybe become the void again. In fact-

A woman stood inches away from my face. “Who are you?” I exclaimed, flinching back instinctively.

She didn't answer.

"How did you get in my room?"

She didn't move, not even as the electricity struck the floor near her. I sighed, verbal communication really wasn't this world's strong suit, was it.

In the darkness, I couldn't make out any physical features of the woman but she seemed familiar somehow.

"I don't suppose you'll leave if I ask nicely?"

When she didn't respond again, I decided to walk past her. I know that's not the most polite thing, but it didn't seem like anyone else I met so far was too pressed for it.

As I walked to the wall, the electricity seemed only to strike around me. I half expected to need a chair to be able to reach it, but it turned out I could reach the electricity just by standing on my toes. I must be decently tall, that or the ceiling is just low.

I reached up, somehow managing to grab the strands of light in my hand. Something I believe should be scientifically impossible. I gave it a tug and some of the electricity broke away in the palm of my hand. It was warm and kind of tickled. I smiled as I rolled the light into a ball and tossed it back and forth. It left a little trail in the sky that dispersed as it went.

Satisfying.

"Now what?" I turned to the woman like she would have the answers. Only to find her once again centimeters from my face. I fell right on my butt, dropping the light ball to the floor where it dispersed, lighting up the room for a second revealing her long flowing dress.

She moved her head ever so slightly but I managed to barely make out where she was gesturing to. In the corner of the room, hidden in the shadows, was a long, dark tube. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

Like most people so far, she didn't respond.

Moving closer to the door, I could make out the clear tube around it. One end of the tube stuck out while the other seemed to go into the wall, maybe to another room where another bed would be.

I only jumped slightly when I turned around and she was behind me again. If I didn't know better, I would assume her expressionless face was amused when I skittered around her, this time not taking my eyes off of her as I pulled on the electricity again, got a light ball, and deposited it into the tube. The light slowly disappeared to the otherside.

A crack in the dark. Light flooded the room. I quickly brought my hands to my eyes. Is it always this painful when the lights turn on? Don't answer that, I don't want to know. Better question, I cracked open my eyes ever so slightly, where's the girl. I fully expected her to be in front of my face when I opened my eyes again.

But she was gone. For now.

In her place were thick white carpets and blue walls, allowing the electricity strains to blend in creating a wave effect. A giant bed, a night stand, and a couch at the foot of my bed appeared at some point.

As much as I longed to face-plant on the bed...

Where did she go?

I checked under the bed. Nothing.

Behind the couch. Nothing.

She was just gone. I'm not sure how I feel about that.

She couldn't have just disappeared. I thought about Viola appearing earlier, okay on second thought it might be a possibility, but what if she was still here. I eyed the dresser in the corner of the room. She could be behind that.

I tensed my arms while I tried to move the frankly oversized dresser. "Just got to scootch it, just a bit-"

There was a knock at the door. The noise startled me, causing me to yank the dresser with all my might, the heavy wooden frame hitting the floor with a mighty thud. Well that's not good.

There was another knock.

"Coming." I called out as I moved towards the door. Unfortunately I moved a little too fast, and I tripped over the edge of the dresser, face planting on the ground. It took a second of me tripping over my own feet before I could finally get up and open the door.

Quote stood in the doorway, the hood of her cloak on top of her head. In one arm she held a little blue container. She took one look at my disheveled appearance and heavy breathing and raised a single eyebrow. I don't think it would be far off to assume she probably heard my fall.

"Umm I was just reorganizing a bit." I said.

She didn't look like she brought that for a second, but she handed me a tupperware. "Nutrients for the journey ahead." There was something in her tone that made me think she might be joking with me as her eyes flickered around my room.

"Um, thanks." I said.

She bowed her head slightly before she turned and left, her cloak flowing behind her.

While I still wasn't completely sure what she meant when I closed the door, I was relieved to see there was food, noodles I think, and a juice pouch in the container. After the day I had, something told me this was just what I needed.

As I sat down on my bed, about to tear into the food, I couldn't help but look around. Where could she have gone?

## Chapter 7. The Future is Violent

“Good morning everyone, there’s a lady in my room,” was the first thing I said to my newfound family first thing in the morning. Or rather not the first thing I suppose. I spent quite a while before sleeping last night looking for whatever hole that lady appeared from. When I finally passed out from exhaustion and woke up again, I half expected the girl to be in front of my face. But instead there was banging. Loud, excessive banging. The type you expect a landlord to do if you owe them money. In this case, a giant of a landlord.

“There was also banging.” No one was at the door btw, I kept opening and closing it, but no one was there.

“I’m pretty sure the girl is living in my walls.”

Trillo and Sim started choking. Meanwhile, Sophia froze mid-bite of what appeared to be oatmeal and Viola missed her mouth. Then everyone started laughing. Or howling in Sophia’s case. The paint would have come off the wall if for some reason breakfast wasn’t in a log house cabin. How did we even get here?

“You’ve been here one night. How’d you manage that?” Trillo laughed.

“Are you sure you weren’t looking in the mirror.” Sim said.

Without looking, Quote hit Sim upside the head without even pausing in shoveling oatmeal in her mouth.

“What! He has long-ish hair.”

Quote hit him again. “Beware women with short hair, they are warriors in disguise.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Sim retorted.

Trillo smacked him. “She’s saying don’t be sexist Sim.”

“It’s not sexist, it’s just a fact he has a face like a girl.”



“Women have a better sense of smell than men on average.” Sophia said.

“Again what does that have to do with anything?”

What is happening here? Their conversations are just constantly confusing.

It was at this moment a door appeared beside me and Dolly emerged, her skin once again smooth and porcelain. “Good morning Raz. What are they worked up about?”

“There was a girl in my room.”

“O really, good for you, did someone take you out on the town.”

“What no, I don’t know where she came from.”

“Interesting. Well weirder things have happened here. In any case, I’ve started to look into this bet business and have scheduled a meeting for you in the capital.”

“There’s a capital city here?”

“Unless it was blown up in the last 24 hours, yes, probably. We’ll go down there tomorrow, show you around, and get you a bit more acquainted with the knowledge of this world. I would have taken you today, but unfortunately the record keeper doesn’t always understand urgency.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course.” Dolly smiled, and suddenly the whole breakfast room seemed brighter.

“I wouldn’t thank her if I was you.” Trillo scowled, “That place is filled with nothing but all the boring OCs who can only be given boring straight-laced stories.” She sneered like it was an insult but I don’t know, I wouldn’t mind having one of those myself. Perhaps it would involve a lot less water and ghost girls in my room at 3AM.

“If you think that section is so boring, why don’t you and Sophia take Raz shopping in one of the more exciting districts. Show him a good time.”

“But Doll...” Trillo whined as Dolly took her seat in the middle of the table.

Viola snorted.

“And you too Viola.”

A sad trumpet rang out.

“Walking into the same door a thousand times doesn’t lessen the pain.” I had no idea what Quote meant, but judging by her expression towards Viola, and Viola rudely placed middle finger, it was probably something like *walked into that one*.

“Enough with the complaining. Raz come join the rest of us. Trillo get him a bowl.”

Trillo groaned, “Why do I always have to do shift like this.”

“Language.” Dolly said.

What exactly did she say that would imply improper language? I decided not to ask? “Umm where’s Penelope?” I asked.

Dolly clapped her hands and a bowl of oatmeal appeared before her. “Sleep most likely. She hardly ever joins us for breakfast.”

“The raven that was knocking on my windowsill.” Quote said.

I racked my brain for metaphors. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what you mean.”

Sim retorted. “Exactly what she said capslock, Penelope is who causes the knocking every morning.”

“Sim Language.”

Trillo tossed the bowl in front of me, some of its contents sloshing onto the table. “Eat fast, I have things to do today.”

“O and do be careful not to blow anything up today.” Dolly said.

That sentence doesn’t exactly inspire confidence, especially after yesterday. Maybe I should ask Dolly to take me instead. A quick glance at Dolly revealed that while she did look porcelain

today, and her forehead had miraculously healed, something in her appearance still looked utterly exhausted. I'm probably better off not asking her.

On the bright side, the oatmeal tasted pretty good, like oatmeal and maple syrup which I'll take as a win after last night.

~

From the kitchen, Trillo and Co led me down a series of winding halls not bothering to tell me where each hall went or where we were going. Just like the night before, the hallways were nothing special, just white walls and green floors that seemed to go on forever.

"Trillo, how much longer?" I asked, not trying to sound rude.

Trillo chuckled. "So impatient, come on, you're going to love this."

She opened up a door to reveal rows and rows of clothes. They hung from the ceiling on little conveyor belts and sprouted up from the floor, the clothes resting on literal tree branches. There were shoes on rocks and jewelry in treasure boxes. Despite being inside, somehow, it appeared as if we were in a clearing outside.

"Remind me again why we have to go shopping." I asked. There seemed to be more clothes in here than anyone would ever know what to do with.

"None of us learned how to sew, we're not allowed to touch others dibs, and Doll thinks you'll have fun," Trillo listed on her fingers before walking up to a stump with a pile of clothes on it. "Here, try this on." She reached into the pile seemingly at random and threw some clothes at my head, the sleeve smacking me in the eye.

"Ouch!"

"Bless you." Sophia said.

I tilted my head slightly at that. Did she think I sneezed? Who would sneeze like that?

“Five minutes and we hit the road.”

Viola made a chirping noise before she disappeared behind some trees.

“That was more for you, Soph.”

“It’s not my fault shirts are difficult to put on,” she said, lifting up her shirt.

“Soph, seriously.”

I was probably blinking too rapidly to see anything, but Trillo still grabbed my arm and tossed me behind a tree. Like the tree could give the level of privacy she-

Actually, let me just stop there. I don’t need her reading my thoughts like Dolly and tossing me into a box or something.

I got dressed quickly enough. Trillo was the only one still in the clearing of trees when I came out.

I don’t want to be rude but I’m going to be honest here, I don’t understand why she’s wearing such a sparkly dress. The dress itself was basically a mirror and her head band was like a wearable glow-in-the-dark stick from Disneyland or some other amusement park. Fun to buy, but no point in wearing them in public after the trip.

I suppose I don’t look much better. The green shirt with a white diamond in the middle that said Plum Bots, style ripped sweatpants, and checkered I believe they’re called moon shoes, made me look like an abomination of the ages.

I looked around for the others, curious if they were wearing something equally interesting. Trillo gestured behind her. “Soph got her head stuck in the arm sleeve, Viola’s helping her.”

“Ah.” I don’t even want to know how that happens. I’m going to hope that’s purely a Sophia thing and not something you or I ever have to deal with.

“Well,” an impatient Trillo stomped her foot, waiting for me to answer.

“You look good.” Okay, so maybe we’ll just keep what I said a little secret between you and me. I know a lot of the rules in this world are different, but I think people would still get upset if I said something negative about them.

“Thanks,” Trillo smiled at me. I was trying to go for an old-school, futuristic retro look so I could fit in with my age group but still be an old, slightly crazy hipster like I am here.”

“What?” Does this make any sense to you, or is she just speaking gibberish?

“Forget about it. I don’t expect you to appreciate fashion. You don’t look half bad, though. I picked good.”

“Umm thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. It was more a compliment to me anyway. So-”

Sophia let out a small scream that shook the trees.

“Is she okay?”

Trillo continued like Sophia’s scream didn’t just shake the trees. “What’s up with you and this Author business?”

“Honestly, I don’t know.”

“So what, the Author created you and was like, wanna make a bet?”

“More so like we already have a bet, and I hope you lose.”

Trillo eyed me, “How can you already have a bet if you were just created? It seems sus.”

“The Author has seriously never made a bet with any of you before.”

“Not that any of us can remember. I wouldn’t put it past them to do weird stuff, though.

Rumor has it that the author has been weird these last couple of years.”

“Weird how?”

“Don’t tell the others, but I’ve heard rumors though the thought trains that-”

Sophia cried out, and Trillo pulled me back some to move me out of the range of a falling tree.

“Do you guys just break everything here?”

Trillo shrugged. “Mostly. Come, we better go help those two before Viola gets upset.”

“What about the rumors?”

“It’s why we’re going to take you shopping in the Utopia District.”

~

The car hanger Trillo dragged me through was amazing. I wanted to spend more time there but the girls were having none of it. Apparently, they already had a car in mind. “The Micro Matrix 26 is currently the fastest flying car in this history.” Trillo said proudly.

“Flying car! You mean like through the clouds.” I asked once Trillo had the car on the road.

“Did you use that big brain of yours’ to figure that out all by yourself?” Sim quipped.

Sophia laughed, “Raz has a normal-sized brain judging by the size of his cranium.”

I couldn’t help myself, “Do you ever respond to things normally.”

“Yes.” Sophia hummed in the back seat before she went back to poking Viola.

Trillo snapped her fingers. “Raz focus, that’s not important.”

“Right the bet.”

“That’s also not important, you see that red button.”

In the middle of the dashboard there were multiple nozzles and buttons, the biggest one being bright red. “Yeah.” I said, hovering my hand over it.

“ Never press that one.”

I snatched my hand back. Trillo laughed. “Do you see the green button next to it.”

“Yeah.” I moved my hand towards the button.

“Don’t press that one either.”

I jerked my hand back this time with enough force that my wrist hurt.

Trillo laughed again, this one more boisterous than the last. “Okay, okay, do you see the gray one next to it, press it.”

“You sure?” I asked suspiciously.

Trillo glared at me like she didn’t just trick me twice. From the back of the car I could hear Viola groaning while Sophia chanted, “Press it! Press it!” I forced myself not to ask her again and pushed the button.

I closed my eyes as the car shuddered and shook, gripping my nice leather seat. I kept my eyes closed for who knows how long before I finally had the courage to open my eyes and notice that the view was no longer green trees but of vast, colorful sky. The sky was bright despite there being no sun in sight, and all the clouds had a different color. There were reds, greens, purples, and gold. If I looked carefully, I could almost swear hidden in the sky was a faint blue outline of the sky. The clouds were all different shapes and symbols. Some of them were similar to an hourglass, or a pen. Others were more complex, and could be attributed to full pieces of artwork than clouds.

I watched a bit up ahead as the clouds took the shape of a person spinning, almost as if they were dancing while a bull charged them. Before I could see how that image played out, black lines flowed through the cloud-painting, erasing it from the sky. It took me a moment to realize that those were wind currents, shaped the way wind might be doodled in a notebook or a child’s picture. Some rolled and crashed like tiny waves in their own secluded part of the sky, while others raced to erase paintings from one part of the sky to the next. The clouds, once dispersed, reformed into more pictures and images, it was beautiful.

“Remind me to take you windsurfing,” Trillo said.

Wind suffering it might as well be called. I shuddered. “Like what you do on water?” I asked, my other worldly knowledge informing me of the concept of a sail that you guide through the waves with the help of the wind, something I’m not entirely sure I’d enjoy.

“More like the kind you do in the sky. Hint the name windsurfing.”

“Then why isn’t it called skysurfing?”

“Not important. What is important is we’re going to see what’s happening in this district.”

“Dun dun dun.” Said Viola or rather played, it was less like she said it and more like a piano spoke.

“Exactly, but first we have to get in.”

“Is it hard to get into districts?”

“Ordinarily no, but we have to sneak Viola and Sophia in. They’re banned.”

“From Utopia?”

“Blowing up things is against the law.” Sophia giggled.

Viola gave a singular nod and carelessly waved her hand like it was no big deal.

“If we’re lucky we’ll just run into some cops, we’ll provide a diversion, and Viola will keep everyone hidden in the back.”

“And if we’re not lucky?”

“Raz!” Trillo and Sophia screamed.

Viola faced planted.

“What.”

“You never ever say those types of questions outside of the knowledge district. Silly.”

“Why, what happens?”



“Shut up.” Trillo started driving faster, the outside sky passing in a blur of color.

The tension in the car was so thick you could cut through it with a knife. I’m starting to get the feeling I made some type of mistake.

“Are we in the clear?” Trillo asked.

Viola and Sophia looked out of the back window right as blue and red lights started flickering outside.

Sophia giggled, “Nope. I thought birds 5, 6, and 7 and a 8, 9, 10, and 11.”

“Great, now the fun begins. Viola, music.”

Soft violin music playing, the car seemed to slow with each string, the clouds no longer looking quite like a blur.

“Viola!” Soph and Trillo shouted. I could see Viola smirking from up here. She cracked her neck and started waving her hand around like a conductor. Loud, fast pace music which I could only describe as chase music played throughout the car.

With every bang in the song, Viola jerked her hand, and Trillo jerked the car away from whatever direction she put her hand.

“Have they begun firing?” Trillo tried to look out the different mirrors, even leaning over me at one point. “I didn’t adjust the mirrors before I started driving!”

“Why would they instantly start shooting!?” I started lowering myself a bit in the seat just in case.

“It’s the police force.”

“That kind of seems the opposite of a utopia!”

“Exactly, they weren’t always like this.” Trillo jerked the wheel to the left.

I fell over the gear shift.

“These are the rumors I’m talking about.” Trillo jerked the car again right as I tried to sit up and my face was pressed against the window. I saw golden looking birds flying on the side of us. Flashing red and blue lights blared from the cracks inside of them. I watched what appeared to be a missile appear in one of the bird’s mouths while it stared me down.

“Trillo!” I screamed as the missile fired.

Trillo dived the car down, the missile barely missing us.

Trillo continued, “Cracks are starting to show and if your bet has anything to do with it...”

I couldn’t care less about what she was talking about. There seemed to be more pressing issues. “Why are they chasing us!?”

“Could be any number of reasons. Wanna place bets?”

“Ransomes!” Sophia cried out from the back excitedly.

“That’s a good one. Viola?” I couldn’t see Viola, I was too busy watching three giant metal birds of death dashing after the car in the rearview mirror. I didn’t like how the music was picking up. “Trillo.” My voice shook unintentionally with fear.

“Don’t worry, they only shot at us a few times.”

“That seems like too many.” I yelped.

I made eye contact with the white mechanical sky bird and its eyes turned green with the other birds following in suit. “Um guys. Their eyes just turned green.”

“Delete!” Trillo cracked her neck, “Alright everyone, as Quote always says, hold onto your butts. We’re crash landing.”

“But the car is fine.”

“Not for long.” Right as she said that, gold talons ripped through the roof of the car.

“Everyone grab onto Viola!” I didn’t have to be told twice. I practically lunged over through the middle island to grab her hand in a death grip.

Viola glared at me. I loosened my grip only slightly.

“Raz, you can do the honors. Press the red button.”

“You just said not to,” I mumbled, as I pressed the button with my other hand.

Viola closed her eyes and I felt a tingling sensation go through my body and a rumbling beneath my seat before it dropped us through the air.

I wasn’t sure what was worse, falling through the air or drowning. Drowning was awful, you didn’t know what way was up or down but here, you knew which way was up and down. Up was where the metal birds chased after the car. Down was where the ground was fast approaching. A terrifying thought when you realize there’s no parachute on the seats. Viola’s music became faster paced, like a timer counting down to what I will now think of as the big splat, a only slightly more enjoyable title for what was about to happen.

Trillo smacked me across the face. “Raz be quiet!”

“Too late.” Sophia sang, “Missile friends are coming.”

I managed to open my eyes slightly to the sight of hundreds of those missiles from earlier. Free falling through the sky. Missiles baring us down. All I could do was scream.

~

“Raz stop screaming, we’re on the ground.” Trillo rasped.

I didn’t trust that for a second, not while my whole body felt like it was still falling. I’ll keep waiting for the boom.

I flinched away when I felt something move around me. Slightly opening my eyes, I caught a glimpse of purple feathers and a dark alleyway.

I followed the feathers as I came to my senses. Some seemed singed and out of place but other than that they seemed fine. Slowly they shrunk down behind Trillo.

“Everyone check for all appendages.” Trillo rasped before turning around and throwing up.

Quickly, I checked my arm all the way down to my hands; I took off my shoes, and I still had all my feet; I patted behind for good measure. I don’t think I’m missing anything. What about you? All good?

What, just because I can’t hear you doesn’t mean I’m not concerned about your well being.

Behind me, Viola coughed, showing her hand.

“O no, Vi’s hand.” Sophia started, fumbling around, “Quick we have to find it before it runs away.”

I don’t understand. She wasn’t missing anything. She just bent all her fingers but her thumbs.

I was about to say something when Viola’s eyes shot daggers at me, in the figurative sense. I decided to stay quiet.

Instead I turned to Trillo. The retching seemed to have stopped while everyone checked themselves and she had propped herself up against a grimey wall. Her wings, still a little bit too big for her body, her eyes, a fiery purple.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded. “Just takes a lot out of me is all.”

“Teleporting?” I asked cautiously.

“Yeah, that too. Making my wings that big is always killer. Making us momentarily invulnerable so we all don’t end up in the erase, now that’s the real pain. Doesn’t always work either.” She limply lifted up her wing showing me the burnt edges.

“Anything I can do to help.”

“Nah.” She pushed herself up. “Let’s get going.”

“Where are we exactly?”

“Welcome to Utopia Futre District!”

I blinked. The garbage strewn through the alley, the cracked windows, and the pungent smokey smell seemed to say otherwise. Thankfully I didn’t seem like I was the only one confused. Viola and Sophia both stared at Trillo like she grew a second head instead of bigger wings.

Trillo snorted at the three of our expressions. “Come on.” She strode down the alley way. Her wings just barely shrinking and lifting off the ground in time to avoid some glass shards.

Sophia bounded after Trillo. Meanwhile, I glanced at Viola, gesturing with my eyes. *Should we be concerned?*

She shrugged, hands up in a comical fashion.

I’m starting to think concussions are considered mild injuries around here.

We didn’t have to follow very long until we literally saw the light at the edge of the alleyway. Stepping out onto the street, I was instantly met with bright lights and towering skyscrapers.

Trillo gestured towards the skyscrapers. “Welcome to the city of light.”

City was an understatement; this was a city straight out from the Jetson universe. Every skyscraper was crystal clean, literally looking like they were made out of crystals instead of the typical glass. The skyscrapers were tall, but a floating island stood over them, somehow not casting a shadow on the buildings below. Purple luminescent lights spiraled down from the islands like some grand staircase. In the distance I could see people walking up them. All the cars hovered slightly off the ground while they waited for the purple and blue lights to change. On closer inspection, I could see that clouds formed the street tunnels and the outlines for roads,

different from the multi-colored ones that filled the sky. Kids of all ages rode on hoverboards, scooters, and bikes over the tunnels on a pedestrian walkway that didn't interrupt the cars or the walkers below.

"I don't understand. Why is there one dingey alley in the middle of this metropolitan paradise?" I watched the sun bounce off the colorful buildings, making the entire area look like a kaleidoscope. The colors were pleasant and not overwhelming. Not a single mistruck sun ray ended up in my eyes.

"Exactly." Trillo said.

Sophia squealed. "O! O! I know what this is about."

"Do you?" I couldn't help but ask.

Trillo pulled me and Sophia back in the alley. Viola was already there relaxing on top of some garbage.

"This place isn't supposed to be here. It belongs to a different section. Apocalyptic, dystopian, horror, pick your poison."

"Dark fantasy?" Sophia asked, plopping down next to Viola.

"A bit too modern, the whole point is the more cracks like this, the more OCs from this sector will notice."

"And that's a bad thing?" I asked. I tossed an old pillow out of the way to squat down next to Sophia and Viola, I didn't quite want to sit on the garbage.

"Very bad. When something happens that's not supposed to, like say blowing up a building, we can just erase memories. On OCs that can't work on for one reason or another, we relocate to a different sector. Help the archive office edit them out of wherever they came from before, but in worse case scenarios..."

“Bye bye.” Sophia chimed in. Viola nodded.

“One way trip straight to the erase and there’s not many ways out of that place. None that are good at least.”

“The erase?” I asked.

A ticking clock started playing loudly in my ears.

“Vi’s right we don’t have all day. Just know it’s a very bad, very awful place, and with so many cracks starting to pop up here it’s only a matter of time before... well before we can’t save them all.”

“So you think my bet has something to do with these cracks?”

“Not sure, let’s find out. If all goes well we’ll celebrate with ice-cream.” Trillo said cheerfully, “Soph knows the one.”

Sophia nodded. “They have fire ice-cream there.”

“Me and Vi will go this way. You and Sophia go that way. We’ll keep the criminals in line. If you see anything funky, investigate, and try to buy some clothes while you’re at it.”

“Who’s going to keep you in line?” I couldn’t help but ask.

On cue, a loud caw rang out as this time six metal birds flew in formation overhead.

Trillo glared. “Any more dumb questions.”

I shook my head. I think I might just try to keep my mouth shut.

## Chapter 8. Trauma the Preferred State of Raz

Sophia skipped down the street, humming several off-key notes. Occasionally, she randomly said facts like, “Glass can be formed by lighting.” and “Glass is like liquid.” I was just thankful that the humming didn't crack the glass as we went past.

The city was a sea of sparkles and reflections. It was so clean despite the bustle of the crowds. The sidewalk didn't have a single part that wasn't glistening. Honestly it was almost blinding.

As we walked, unlike what my knowledge told me should be a staple in cities, there were no roads or parking lots. The cars all flew in the air. Occasionally, when they felt like landing, they did so on a white square, fenced off from the rest of the sidewalk. OCs would pop out before the cars disappeared into the ground. If I didn't see that happen more than once, I would be convinced that the sidewalk stole their cars.

Don't judge me, weirder things will probably happen.

“Sophia where do the cars go?” I asked, interrupting Sophia's rant about...well honestly I started tuning her out. Again don't judge me, and maybe don't tell her if you ever get the chance.

Sophia continued to skip, unaware I haven't been listening to her infodumps. “Underground. Sim likes cars lots and so does Ani.”

At least she managed to answer my question. Let's see if we can go for two. “Ani whose that?”

“She used to live with us but she left like everyone else..” Sophia's voice was surprisingly monotone for her, losing some of the energy that makes her sound younger than she actually looks.”



“Everyone?” I asked, hoping we could go for three. If there were more OCs in the Knowledge Household, perhaps this would explain the weird girl in my room.

“Iunno,” She said. “I do know that leaves turn different colors in the fall. You know that?”

“I did know that.” Two for three, not bad I supposed. Especially considering how easily distracted Sophia seemed to be.

At an intersection of multiple building blocks, Sophia suddenly stopped skipping.

I yelped in surprise as I ran into her back.

“Sorry,” I apologized.

“Birdie.” Not the typical response, but when I looked past her I could understand why she said it.

Across the way, one of those giant mechanical police birds stalked through the crowd. Children with a little ball played catch in between its feet, but it never once stopped scanning the area, no doubt looking for us.

“Should we hide?”

Soph was ahead of me on that one, as she had already ducked behind me, peeking behind my arm like a scared child.

The bird swiveled its head, constantly searching the crowd. I doubt doing my best statue impression would stop it from noticing us. “Sophia we should probably-”

It looked in our direction.

I did my best statue impression putting my arms up like I was a robot for some reason.

The bird kept walking. I let out a breath and dropped my arms. “Alright, we should leave.”

Sophia shook her head. “Behind it.”

Just past the bird was another dark alley. Great.

We probably have to find a way to sneak past the bird, huh. I eyed the area. There was a group of OCs hanging out on the corner of a building, a bit farther from the alley. Among their brightly colored hair, Sophia's wouldn't stand out at all. Maybe from there we could scoot along the side of the building until we get there. Sophia could hide behind me and I'll use an object, maybe that kid's ball, to hide my face. Sounds like a plan? I'll run it by Sophia.

Before I could, one of those kids threw the ball they were playing with right into the bird's face. Its neck snapped to the child in a way only a bird's can.

Its eyes turned red. Letting out a loud caw that shook the buildings, it took off down the alleyway. Its enormous wings left scratches in the glass somehow without shattering it. "Whelp time to find a new alley." I said.

Sophia was already dashing after it.

So it wasn't like I had much choice now. I dashed after her, apologizing to the OCs and kids that I bumped into on my way over. The second my foot crossed into the shade it went from a pleasant mid-summer afternoon to the arctic. The cold blast freezing my blood. I had to resist the urge to curl my toes as I pounded after Sophia.

As we dashed through the frosty maze of buildings, I noted the scratches on the buildings began to deepen. Pieces of what looked to be metal beams littered the ground, and in some areas it looked like the bird had completely tunneled through sections of the buildings, again without shattering the glass. Without the trail of destruction left by the bird, I would have been completely lost, but maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing if it led me away from the mechanical menace.

Sophia turned a corner and stopped abruptly. Barely stopping myself from colliding with her, I turned the corner and there was the bird. It was looking at its reflection in a building, its red eyes glowing just a little brighter.

“Wha-”

SCREETCHHH

The bird dragged its large head against its reflection in the building creating a deep scratch. It continued banging its head into the building staring itself down.

Welp, this seemed like a good time to go. I turned to Sophia, “Lets-”

CAWCAWCAW

The bird squawked manically and whirled towards the offending building. With every flap of its wings chunks of the structure crumbled. Then there was a red light and something was raining down from the sky.

I turned stunned to Sophia,

“Why are we following it?”

“Iunno. Seemed fun.”

“You're crazy.” That slipped out before I could stop myself

She shrugged, “Birdie could know secrets too, it shouldn't be able to see places like these.

The bird made a clicking sound and turned its head an unnatural 90 degrees to look in our direction.

We both froze, “Do you think it saw us”, I whispered.

CAWCAWCAW

Yes. Definitely was a yes.

The bird launched itself towards us, its eyes glowing, the ground shaking.

Sophia screamed, the force of it just powerful enough that the bird froze, long enough for her to grab my arm, and yank me back around a corner as a blast echoed behind us. Gasping for breath, I sprinted alongside Sophia as we followed the trail of destruction back the way we came.

“We’re not gonna make it!” I screamed through the debris and smoke pushing us from behind.

Sophia turned a corner up ahead and gestured towards a pile of rubble sitting a little ways from the exit to the alleyway, and in a split second we both dove for it.

Sides heaving I tried to be as still and quiet as possible, hoping we lost the bird in the maze of buildings. “Do you think we lost it?”

“Not for long.” Sophia heaved, before sprouting some facts about rulers.

“Should we make a break for it?”

Sophia eyed the exit. “May- O no.”

I followed her gaze to where three young children appeared in the alleyway from the street. They all wore bright color clothing and walked with more pep in their step than caution. One of them was missing a face, like someone took a blur tool and removed it. It was a little disconcerting, but who am I to judge weird facial features with my hair color.

I made to stand up and wave the kids over before the giant bird could come back. But Sophia clutched onto my arm and pulled me down.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

But Sophia refused to look at me.

“Why is this place all messed up?” One of the kids with a face asked.

“It doesn’t look finished.” The faceless kid giggled.

I heard the mechanical cling of its claw against the ground before I saw it.

“Sophia let me go.” I started struggling, but her grip didn’t fade. “We can save them.”

The area around the kids started to glitch. With every step, the one without a face looked more and more see-through.

Cling.

Clang.

“Hey!” I tried to yell, but Sophia quickly slapped her hand over my mouth. I squirmed but to no avail. The bird turned the corner, still banging its metal cranium along the walls as it went.

“O Mr. Police Birdie, do you know where we are?” The faceless kid ran up to it, the others right behind him.

I thrashed.

The bird saw the kids. Its beak opened wide, revealing a bright light before a giant beam shot out its mouth right at the kids.

I screamed.

I fought.

But it was too late. One second, they were there. The next, there was nothing but smoke and falling letters.

## Chapter 9. You Like Shopping so do I! Let's Blow Things Up!!

I couldn't help myself, I sobbed, I wheezed. "I could have saved them, I could have saved them." I mumbled into Sophia's hand.

"Shh shh shh, look."

She loosened her grip enough that I could turn my head ever so slightly back to the end of the alley way. Two of the kids stood there now holding a ball in hand. They were running around playing catch as if nothing had happened.

"They're safe. They're reset. They don't remember anything bad, they can't see the alley anymore."

"What happened to the other kid?"

I searched Sophia's face for a sign that the kid was safe and sound as well.

She avoided my eyes. "We need to leave before the birdie senses us."

My heart sank. "Where's the other kid Sophia?"

She looked like she was struggling to remember that there was a whole person in front of her a second ago.

"They're gone. They were already in the process of being forgotten. What's left of him is in the erase."

"Raz," Sophia's voice sounded weirdly apologetic, "The word lachrymist is a latin word used to describe someone who cries a lot. Humans produce 15 gallons of tears-" Sophia's body shuddered against mine, completely tensing before she continued again, "They never ever met that OC. He basically never existed. I know it's sad, but in a few minutes we won't even remember him."

"But-"

“We're not like these OCs, we can't get blasted, we have to go.”

“And if it makes its way to the streets?” I tried to think back to how many OCs I saw without faces earlier. I couldn't recall any but that didn't mean they didn't exist.

“Most will be fine, the bird will go bye bye soon. It will be written out just like the kid.”

“And what about everyone else?”

Sophia looked like she was about to hit me before she sighed. “I'll help.” She quickly twisted her hair into a bun. “I'll keep it distracted until you can figure out how to take it down.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

She was already moving, she vaulted from behind our hiding space. Dashing between the bird's legs. “Here birdie birdie birdie.”

Its head snapped to Sophia, its neck looking like it was starting to dislodge itself from the rest of its body like a stretched-out electrical slinky.

The bird screamed at Sophia.

Sophia screamed back. I covered my ears.

All the glass around us shattered, and I quickly went from protecting my ears to my head as glass sprinkled down.

“You can't catch me!” Sophia yelled and took off.

The bird twitched, electricity spraying from its neck before it bounded after her.

“I need to go after her.” I tried to raise myself to my feet but everything was wiggling.

My whole body wouldn't move.

What am I supposed to do against that monster? It was not like I had the instruction manual. How to turn off your giant killer bird before it erases someone else.

I don't think I can breathe.

I huffed and heaved, completely aware that with every second I spent freaking out, Sophia would be losing stamina. And then, I shut my eyes tight, I didn't want to think about what came next.

"Move." I rasped. "I have to move."

What would I even do if I moved? What could I do other than shout and scream and hope Sophia could take it down or that Trillo and Viola would find us.

*And maybe they'll be erased too.*

I felt like I was being consumed back into the blob. There was nothing I could do but wither in this back alley and listen to my breathing slowly spiral out of control.

I opened my eyes and a strange woman stood in front of me, similar to before. This time she wore a long, flowing dress, her hair pulled back in long, tiny braids. I didn't care about who she was and why she was there as I forced my breath to go in and out.

She knelt down in front of me and let out a deep sigh over and over again until I looked at her. Her eyes were unyielding, the eyes of a queen. She made a gesture to tell me to rise.

I shook my head. I couldn't. Everything today was just too much. I was done.

She held out her hand to me.

I eyed it for a second before I took it.

I expected her to drag me along till I recovered.

But instead she squeezed my hand softly. Over and over again. It was so weird I started squeezing back, eventually my own breath started to slow.

I still felt shaky, everything ached, but I no longer felt like I was a blob.

She let go of my hand when I stopped. There was a fire in her eyes as she made the motion for me to rise.



I clenched my teeth. I don't want to do this. I forced myself to my feet. But I think I might have to. The woman rising with me. She smiled at me and I was reminded of the kid's carefree smile, of Sophia's.

I took a step.

The woman moved out of the way.

Then another.

Again and again.

Until I was sprinting, following the destroyed glass and the sound of metal clinging down the branching alley ways.

I have no idea what I'm going to do when I get there, but I can't focus on that. Being a distraction to buy Sophia even another second would be worth it.

It wasn't long until the bird's golden tail was in sight. For a second I thought Sophia was handling it. She hung from its neck, stabbing an umbrella in between its different creases.

No, I don't know where the umbrella came from either.

Wire upon wires were sticking out, electricity spraying from the seams. The bird bucked but Sophia held on with all her might, yelping whenever the electricity got too close.

"Hey!" I screamed for some reason.

The bird ignored me in favor of flinging Sophia off into the wall. She let out a yelp.

Before the bird could even think of blasting her I leaped onto its neck.

It roared. Flinging its head with reckless abandon into the wall narrowly missing me. It was like being on one of those mechanical bull rides. It did its best to knock me off its head, even whipping around 360 degrees so I would let go.

At some point I did let go of the cold metal neck and grabbed onto something warm and familiar, still being flinged around.

“Keep at it Raz.” Sophia screamed like I had any choice.

In between getting crushed, I kept pulling more and more of the electrical strand to me, wrapping it around my arms.

From the corner of my eyes I could see Sophia rile herself up before she charged, knocking the bird off balance. I had only a split second to let go of my long strands of electricity and drop to the floor before the bird crashed into the wall.

“Did we do it?” I was breathing hard.

Sophia bounced up from the ground and grabbed my hand. I had to resist the urge to flinch as she dragged me back before the bird exploded.

Metal was flying through the air along with the little strands of electricity, creating smaller fires.

Sophia’s and my breathing was loud in my ears. “I know this might be a dumb question,” I asked despite my better judgment, “But why did it explode?”

Sophia smiled at me, “You’re the one who grabbed the bluey thingy.”

“The electricity. I did that.” My voice sounded more monotone in my ears than I wanted. I wanted to celebrate with Sophia and you but what was the point? I could have stopped that bird the whole time, I could have saved the kid.

Sophia poked me in a deep scrape on my arm, I screamed. “Come on, we need to get you some ice cream.”

~

We sat in front of the ice cream place, not very creatively named Ice on a Cone. Trillo let out a long whistle after Sophia caught her up on our bird adventures. “Man, we should have gone with you guys. Vi and I literally found nothing interesting outside of trash.”

Vi nodded and made the whaa whaa whaa whaa sound.

“I don’t think you guys missed out.” I said. They only heard the “fun” action parts. Sophia left out when a kid was blasted into oblivion or the erase or whatever. Whether that’s because she’d already forgotten about them or she just didn’t want to make the others sad, I didn’t know.

“Don’t be so down Raz, taking down your first monster is no small feat. Especially when you’re not mostly invulnerable like Sophia here.”

“Hmm hmm,” Sophia said, “I fought birdie for a long time and I only have small boo boos.” She pointed to a bruise on her elbow.

“She’s right, you should really eat your ice cream.” Trillo added. “We still have to go shopping and we can’t have you or the ice cream dripping on everything.”

“Yay,” Sophia clapped her hand together, “Shopping! Shopping! Shopping!”

The thought of being here any longer actually made me start to feel queasy. I’m sure this is my least favorite place so far. “Actually, guys, can we go home? I’m not feeling so good.”

Vi nodded in agreement tapping her wrist like there was a watch on it.

“Awe, but shopping’s her favorite thing.” She pointed to Sophia who nodded excitedly, her hand going so fast it was almost concerning. “And I like it too.” Trillo continued.

I don’t want to disappoint them but I felt like I was going to start suffocating again. “Guys, can we just go home.”

“Studies show you can start to feel sick if you don’t eat!” Sophia chirped.

“Soph is right, Raz. We can’t take you back to Dolly like this, we’ll be grounded for weeks. Literally she’ll put weights on my wings.”

Viola clapped her hands together, drawing all of our attention. She pointed at Trillo and Sophia.

“Alright,” Trillo said, “You guys stay here, me and Sophia will go grab stuff and be right back.”

I waited till Sophia and Trillo entered the shop across the street before I let out the breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “Thank you.”

Her face was completely indifferent as she mimed eating to me.

My ice cream cone looked like Vanilla but it sparked in a way that uncomfortably reminded me of today's events. So I ate it fast. The coldness did little to warm me up, but my wounds instantly closed. As far as I could tell, not a single scratch remained just like-

It's moments like these I wish you could respond to me.

Instead of staying alone with my thoughts, I turned to Viola who stared off into the distance. “So, what exactly is your knowledge set?”

A moment passed and I thought Viola was going to sentence me to my thoughts before she looked at me and started nodding her head. Music, a bouncy dancing tune, played from nowhere.

Around us, OCs seemed happier than before, all of them walking with a bit more pep in their step.

“Like music in general or music the Author knows.”

She shook her head and made a heart with her hands.

“Music the Author likes.”

“Ding ding ding” The sound effect came out of Viola's mouth.

“So why can’t you speak. Don’t songs have lyrics?”

Viola shrugged before falling out of her seat because the ground started shaking.

People fell all around me or were trying desperately not to. Smoke rose in the air from the shop across the street, tainting the sky black. The clouds started to take the shape of handcuffs as Trillo and Sophia came running, both with an arm full of clothes.

“All right time to go!” Trillo shoved the pile of clothes into my hand, stretching her wings until they were bigger and bigger.

“What happened? More birds.”

Sophia came over, also shoving more clothes into my arm, “Some meany lady didn’t like my story.”

“What does that have to do with anything!”

“The story wasn’t worth enough for all the clothes we wanted. Sophia started crying, things caught on fire, we stole the clothes. Any more questions?” I blinked. I feel like a few details were missing but at this point there was only one thing I wanted to know.

“Did you guys steal the ice-cream?” I asked, suddenly feeling guilty, although I’m not entirely sure it was really the ice-cream making me feel that way.

Several loud caws echoed around us, shattering some of the glass from the nearby buildings, narrowly missing an older woman without a face.

I can practically feel the ice-cream trying to climb back up.

“On second thought, it's not important.” I let Trillo wrap us all in her giant wings while chaos rang out around us. In the moment it took Trillo to teleport us, Sophia grabbed my hand and gave it a quick squeeze.

When she opened her wings again, we were in the sitting room I first met them all in. Trillo stumbled back and I tried to catch her, but thankfully she fell onto one of the couches.

“Welcome home.” Dolly removed the glasses she was wearing as we appeared in the room.

“We got you a bracelet Dolly.” Sophia cheered, holding out a bracelet.

Dolly smiled but it was anything but appreciative, “That was very nice of you Sophia, but considering it was stolen from the very place you’re not supposed to be-”

Sophia flinched.

“-we’re going to have to return it.”

Sophia leaned down to Viola, “I think she knows.” Viola snorted.

Dolly turned to me, “Unfortunately Raz that means any clothes you acquired today as well.”

“Yeah no problem.” I mumbled.

“I may not know your exact knowledge set but I assume you know that stealing is not typically permitted. That there are going to be consequences for your participation in today’s activities.”

“Consequences.” Sophia echoed.

“Hold on a sec Dolly, Raz literally had nothing to do with today. He didn’t even watch us shop, we went without him.” Trillo said, moving in front of me so her giant wings obstructed Dolly's view.

“I assumed as much,” Dolly said but there were reports of a young man with white hair and a red haired woman chasing after one of the police birds. No one knows where they went or what happened to the bird, but one of those birds went offline this afternoon. Care to explain?”

I opened my mouth to explain it was in self defense when Trillo spoke up, “Do you really think Raz could do such a thing? Come on Dolly, that’s bonkers even for you.”

“Yeah we left Raz at the ice cream place all day.” Sophia chimed in.

Vi stood up and behind her back pulled out a hoodie and put it on. With the hoodie, her form was a lot more androgynous and the white part of her hair was the most visible.

Dolly let loose a long breath. “I see. It was Viola. That does make more sense.”

I don’t understand. Can’t she just read our minds, what’s the point of lying? Why not just tell her the bird malfunctioned? I met Viola’s eyes and she gave the tiny shake of no. Why wouldn’t they want me to tell Dolly?

Dolly sighed, “I apologize Raz, it’s unfortunately been a long day.”

“I understand.” You have no idea.

“Tell the others to start dinner without us, the four of us will be a bit late.”

I nodded and started walking to the waterways, the energy in the room seemed to leave as I made my way to the edge. All of them reminded me of how I felt a few hours ago. Perhaps I’m just projecting.

I almost wish I could stay when I realized I had to travel through the water again. This was just not my day.





## Chapter 11. Thievery is Wrong but Better than Death

I've never been in a limo before, obviously, so I was pretty excited when Dolly announced we'll be traveling to the capital in a limo during breakfast.

After a terrible night—nightmares, you know—I all but stumbled into the breakfast hall this morning, pain radiating through every part of my body. Hearing that I might learn more about the bet today gave me a sense of relief.

If only others shared my enthusiasm. Trillo has been glaring at Dolly for the past 10 minutes, Soph has been glaring at Trillo (for some reason, I don't really want to know), and Sim has been glaring at me. The only people who seemed unaffected by the air in the car were Quote and Viola, who were talking to each other through hand movements, and Penelope, who was fast asleep.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. I wish there was a way I could get Sim to stop staring at me. It's starting to weird me out. "So," I said trying to break the tension in the air, "What's the capital like?"

Everyone glanced at each other. Dolly let out a sigh, Sim closed his eyes, and the girls stared at the ground, like they all made a mutual agreement to deal with each other later. I can't believe that worked.

Trill turned her attention towards me, "The capital is a boring, overrated hall of records slash court."

"Really?" I would think there'd be festivals there or something.

"On occasion Raz." Dolly stared off into space like she could see them. "Festivals are held there weekly for different events or concepts the Author enjoys. But the main point of this region

is to keep track of OCs and to pass judgment on the OCs who break the law.” She tilted her head towards Trillo, Viola, and Sophia.

“I plead innocent.” Trillo said.

“Me too!” Sophia crossed her arms, seemingly back to normal, with no trace of her anger towards Trillo or yesterday's fear of her. I didn't see Sophia or Trillo after yesterday's events. Both of them seemed content with pretending nothing happened. Or perhaps they couldn't remember. Vi didn't seem like she had any care about yesterday either as she flapped her hands at Quote. Honestly, this is the first time I've seen her, and it was after a kid-

I shook my head. “So, are you guys going on trial today?”

“Not really,” Trillo stretched, hitting Sim in the face, who growled. It's more for show for the people who know about the Author and us. If anything, we're probably just going to get community service.”

“You guys do illegal stuff a lot don't you.”

“Yes.” Dolly interjected before Trillo could even open her mouth.

“It's only illegal if you get caught,” Sim mumbled into the door. No one responded. Either they didn't hear him, or they chose to ignore him.

The tense air in the car slowly started to return. I need to ask another question and fast, "So what are the laws here?"

"It varies from district to district," Trillo waved her hand dismissively, "Don't worry about it, they're hard to keep track of anyway."

Sim snorted, "Don't tell me that's your defensive argument for today."

"It's the truth." Trillo crossed her arms, "Isn't it Soph." Soph nodded, resting her head against Sim's shoulder.

I have to keep this conversation going. "But what about- Wow." I couldn't help but stare out the window. Parks, unlike any parks I had knowledge of, surrounded us. Black, red, and gold tree leaves decorated the floor and the sky. The trees swerved and swayed upward to the sky until I couldn't even see the clouds. All the trees surrounded an area with dancing fountains, spouting out fire, music notes, and water droplets with a dome in the center.

"The Author absolutely loves Greek mythology," Penelope yawned as she woke up. She designed this area to imagine what she thought the Library of Alexandria should look like. However, it ended up looking more like a leaning tower of pizza, yes I mean pizza not pisa, with its color scheme despite Greek architecture.

"Thank you Sophia, our walking encyclopedia." Trillo sighed.

"Hey she's not me!"

I could faintly hear Sophia protest, but I was too focused on the parks. OCs of all types played and walked here. Children with wings, tails, claws, multiple heads, you name it, were playing on the moving playground sets. For example, a pirate ship that actually moved, rocket ships that levitated a safe distance off the ground, and sand that moved like fire in one park.

Older OCs of all types walked the streets watching the children. There were OCs with ears and tails. OCs with wings just like Trillo, some OCs sparked and glitched as they moved. Others only appeared for an instance, disappearing entirely before reappearing a few feet later. There were children that danced on through the air, floating in the air as their dances became more joyous and elaborate.

I was so focused on the people that I didn't even notice the limo stopped until Dolly clapped her hands together, making a little ding sound through the car.

“Okay, criminals with me. Sim and Penelope will go with Raz to meet Jasper in the hall of records.”

Something flashed through Penelope's face at the mention of his name, but it disappeared just as fast as it appeared.

Sim sat up, head still in his hand. “Why do I have to go?” Sim tried to argue, but even to me, it sounded half-hearted.

Sophia rested her hand on Sim's leg, and he sighed. “Fine.” He kissed Sophia's forehead before flinging open the door. “Caps lock, dream stealer, let's go.” Penelope shared a concerned look with Dolly.

Dolly gave her usual soft smile, unlike the one she had the night before. “He should be fine for now.”

Penelope nodded, “Let's go Raz.” I gave a short wave to the girls before following Penelope out of the car.

~

The hall was even more impressive inside. White and black decorated the floor with different symbols. It was similar to the checkered floor I was first greeted with, but instead of squares, the colors swirled together, leaving highlights of gray.

The lighting was also dimmed, giving the whole place a calming evening feel. “This place is so calming,” I said to no one in particular.

Penelope nodded, “It is. Everything here is designed to keep people calm while they read the doublers of different OCs and occasionally submit stories for approval.”

“Submitting stories?” Why would they need to do that?”

“Well, stories are the universal currency across all the different districts and sectors except for maybe apocalyptic sectors. If you come across some good stories or are one of the lucky few that can make some up, you can choose to deposit here. Where it can be stored in your file for later retrieval.”

“And any OC can just do this?”

“If they know about the capital, yes. There have been initiatives by some OCs to get story collectors out to the districts that wouldn’t know about this place. None of the bills have ever gone through, it’s tragic really. So many poor people never even have the chance to save themselves.”

“What do you-” I halted at four statues that stood in the center of the room.

Each of them looked like the girl from the future district. The first one was made of stone. She looked like the girl from the district, but her demeanor and hair was all wrong. Her straight hair was pulled back into a ponytail. Her hand rested on a staff with a firm look of power and command. There was nothing kind behind those stone eyes, no hint of understanding. Although, that could just be a side effect of the material it’s made out of. The word Discipline etched into the platform in front of her.

The second statue was made of amethyst and was undoubtedly the girl from the utopian city. Even in crystal, that kind and understanding look she offered me was captured. She stood with a gracefulness that a stone crystal shouldn’t be able to capture, a long ribbon hanging from her side. Here, her braids flowed all the way down to the floor next to the plaque Leadership.

The next one seemed to be made out of metal. Steel. Her fist was raised in the air. A mischievous smile took up her whole face. Everything about the statue said fight me, I’d win. Protection.

The last one was the smallest and appeared to be made out of crystal. Almost like she's a younger version of the girl from the future district. Her braids were much shorter and her expression much more playful. She held a jump rope in hand that looked like it dented the ground. On closer inspection, the statue wasn't made of crystal but tempered glass. Happiness.

Play with me, Raz. The statue seemed to call.

"No thank you" I mumbled.

"What!" Sim snapped.

I shook my head. "Nothing." I'm really starting to lose it, huh?

"Then stop circling those statues and let's go!" Sim stormed into a room across the hall.

Penelope gave me an apologetic smile as she gestured for me to follow Sim.

I, having no choice, as usual, followed Penelope and Sim to a small office room. It was certainly cozy with its wall that seemed to be closing in on us, as well as its two guest chairs.

Sim sat down without a word, and I let Penelope sit in the leather chair next to Sim.

"Penelope." I tugged at her hanging sleeve from where I sat on the floor. "Who were those women?"

"They're," Penelope hesitated, looking confused. "They're," She furrowed her eyebrows, "Sim."

Sim groaned in response.

"Who are those statues supposed to be again?" Sim didn't respond or give any sign of still being alive. He just sat there, body folded in on itself.

"Sim?" Penelope tried again, voice gentler this time.

"I don't know." His voice was rough and tired.

I leaned closer to Penelope and whispered, "Is he ok?"

“He’ll be fine for now.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s being punished for constantly eavesdropping,” a joyous voice chuckled. A tall man stood in the doorway. He easily towered over Sim and me. Compared to Penelope, he was practically a tree.

Penelope stood up, “Good afternoon, Jasper, it's very nice to see you again.”

“It’s nice to see you again too, Penelope.” He looked down at me, his mopy hair hanging in his eyes. “And you too...,” He trailed off as if trying to remember who I was.

“This is Raz.” Penelope gestured for me to stand up, so I did. “He’s new.”

“Ah I see,” but that did nothing to get rid of his confused face, “It’s nice to meet you Raz, I’m Jasper.” He stuck out his hand, which I shook firmly.

“Likewise.” I said, trying to imitate Jasper's coolness.

Penelope smiled, “Jasper is one of the older OCs from the knowledge household. He moved away shortly after I was born.” So, he was one of the mysterious “everyone's” Sophia mentioned earlier. I almost wanted to ask how many more were in the knowledge household, but something Penelope said caught my attention.

“Born not created?” I asked.

Jasper laughed “Ah you are new.”

“I mean, yes. It's not like that’s a secret or anything.”

What exactly does he mean by that?

Jasper smiled, sitting down behind the desk and clanging a stack of paper together. " New OCs always have so many questions about semantics. Candy?" He pulled what looked like mints from the drawer in his desk.

Penelope gladly took one. “To answer your question, not every OC knows about the existence of the Author so it’s better to say born. Never know who’s listening.”

It seemed weird to me that not every OC would know of the Author after literally being created by them, but I digress. What do I know? I’m sure there are things I have already forgotten too.

“Now Dolly informs me that you have some type of bet with the Author. Unfortunately I couldn’t find anything.” He reached behind him and pulled out a whole stack of paper. “There is no record of a bet let alone any bet ever being made.”

There was something in the way he said that. “You think I’m lying.”

“I did.” He admitted. “But there are some oddities about you.”

Sim mumbled something that I could only assume was an insult. Thankfully, everyone chose to ignore him.

“See, being a brainiac myself,” he chuckled, “I’m dating myself a bit with that old name- but regardless, as a member of the knowledge household my knowledge set is OCs. I should know every OC the author knows and yet...”

“You don’t know who I am.”

“Now that’s interesting.” Penelope complimented, speaking around the candy in her mouth. “Has that ever happened?”

Jasper shook his head, “Not before. I was originally going to show you these documents as proof there is no bet but now I’m thinking. You should follow me to the Hall of Records.”

~

The Hall of Records didn’t live up to its name.



I was expecting a library or an archive. I don't know why I keep expecting things here to be normal.

It was more like the maze of records.

From the balcony, I could see rows upon rows upon rows of library shelves, some towering just slightly below the balcony while others were a mere speck from where I could see. Vines hung from the rooftop, occasionally putting scrolls, books, or pieces of paper on the shelves.

“Wow!” I said.

Jasper seemed amused by my excitement. “It's pretty cool, isn't it?”

“Impressive even.” Penelope added with that look on her face again. “It's amazing that you don't get lost down there.”

“Not really, while this looks like a maze it's actually a thought trail.”

“What's a thought trail?” I asked.

“Something that looks like a maze but it's really just a long winding trail that you can follow as you think.”

“Sounds relaxing.”

“It can be.” Jasper clapped his hands, and vines slowly came down from the rafters.

Wrapping around our hands and slowly lowering us down into the not maze.

“There are no stairs?” No one decided to answer that obvious question with a response.

“We'll spread out and search for Raz's scroll. It should be here somewhere.” Jasper said.

“It's not in alphabetical order?”

This time I did get a response as Jasper sighed, his shoulders sagging slightly. “The Hall of Records is mainly formatted in terms of vibes and vague keywords. I've been trying to get this

place updated with a better system to take some work off of my shoulders but my proposal keeps getting rejected.”

“If you ever need help, I’d be more than happy to volunteer.” I offered.

Sim gagged from where he sat on the floor going through the scrolls closest to the bottom. “Stop being a simp dreamstealer. The sooner we find the Wasd file the sooner we can go home.” He threw scrolls out without much thought. I’d be surprised if he could even see my name written on them.

He’s really the pinnacle of helpfulness.

It didn’t take long for us to all spread out or for Sim to stop being helpful. That happened about 30 minutes in, he laid down on the floor and refused to move. Jasper offered to take him back while Penelope and I continued searching. Sim kind of just groaned in acceptance, apparently cursing me the whole time Jasper and the vine carried him back up.

“He’s an interesting OC.” I said instead of what I actually wanted to say. Why couldn’t it have been him instead of-

Penelope gave a tense smile. “He’s really not that bad, he’s just easily agitated.”

“It’s a wonder him and Sophia get along.”

“No, not really.” Penelope’s smile became much more sincere. “They get each other. Look at this, I found Trillo’s file!”

Trillo’s file was a brownish looking scroll with the words Trillochana on top. “Her full name is Trillochana?”

“O, yes, but maybe don’t bring that up, she hates her full name. Best put this back, I’m sure she wouldn’t want us reading her file.”

“So what exactly are in these files?”

“Ah, information like character descriptions and what not, occasionally AU’s or short snippets the Author has associated with a character. Lots of OCs come here to learn what type of stories the Author has for them, and try to expand them themselves in an effort to get the Author to write about them.”

“Does that ever work?” The Author didn’t seem like the type of person who would get to them all, especially if every file, scroll, and book represented different OCs. There had to be at least a few thousand.

“Used to, I’ve been told, but not since I’ve been around. Anyways, since there are only two of us now, we should split up. I’ll go farther down the trail and meet you towards the middle. Sounds good?”

“Works for me.” I waved to Penelope as she disappeared around the bend and went back to scanning the aisles. There really were a lot of documents here, and there truly didn’t seem to be any system. Names like Adrianna and Zairra were filed into books, and scrolls on the shelf right next to them had names like Sarah and Scott. There might be a reason so many OCs are getting eras—maybe I should help Jasper get his proposal approved through.

Actually, yeah! Maybe I should. That might be a practical way to help. You’ll give me moral support, right?

Before I could get too proud of myself, I heard a few thuds in the distance, and a slithering, swift-moving noise filled the not-maze. O no.

I clenched my fist together to stop it from shaking. This couldn’t be happening, not again. The thudding got closer. I walked faster.

I’m just being paranoid. There’s no way something was in here.

But I could feel the vibrations in the ground. I could smell the stench of something truly horrid. Could see how the bookshelves shook, documents of different OCs flying everywhere.

Thud.

One of the bookcases fell and I dared to look past it to the other side. Something slinged along like a worm or a snake. A very scaly worm.

Nope.

Not dealing with that. I ran.

I was hoping I could turn the corner before it spotted me.

But the thudding started picking up. It was no longer Thud. Wait. Thud.

It became thud thud thud thud thud.

I made the mistake of looking back. A giant serpent with razor-sharp teeth barreled towards me, its red-pinkish body surging over the fallen shelves with ease.

My shoulders rose to my ears as I tried to pump my arms faster. As the creature sped up, more shelves began to fall. I hurled myself over them, trying not to slip on stray papers. The whirling and gnashing noises grew closer, but this time I didn't dare look over my shoulder.

I need to get as much distance as possible so I can call down one of those vines, get out, and make sure Penelope is okay.

I quickly realized that plan wouldn't be happening when I felt a hot huff of air on my back, and quickly pressed my body as close to a bookshelf as possible. It's teeth, barely missing me. That didn't stop its body from knocking down the bookshelf I was tossed against. Thankfully, it went backward, tossing documents up in the air instead of collapsing on top of me.

Not so thankfully, the shelf landed on the back of the creature. From here, I could probably see how far the balcony was. Just how long- I eyed the beginning of the not-maze, most of those

bookshelves had also fallen. The body of this monster was still coming out of a hole in the ground with no end in sight. Alright, going back would not be an option. I got to make it to the end first then.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something glisten—a scroll with the words Raz branded into it, falling from the sky. It must have gotten tossed up with the other documents.

I lunged for it, leaping over the monster's body to the next row in the maze. The second my fingers touched the scroll, there was a spark. Documents and papers around me started glitching, some of them rising up and shattering into millions of pieces.

What had I done? I felt my breath begin to come quicker, and pieces of those papers fell down around me. Did I just sentence all those OCs to the erase? The thought was unbearable. That couldn't be the case, could it?

There was no time to ponder that as the creature maneuvered off fallen shelves to realign its mouth with my body.

I took off, scroll still in hand. I did my best to ignore what was happening to the papers around me by squeezing my other hand. It didn't help, but it helped me keep my rhythm as I raced to the center of this not maze.

When I finally turned the last corner, there was nothing but a single door. I ran to it, trying to turn the handle.

Locked. Shoot.

I started banging as the worm came closer. I eyed the vines from above. Even if I knew how to call one, it wouldn't move fast enough to save me from becoming worm food.

The door opened, and I was pulled inside, the door quickly shutting behind me. Penelope was there, looking no worse for wear. “I’m so glad you’re okay,” my voice cracked as the panic finally settled in.

“Raz what’s happening?”

I don’t even know where to start with that question- BANG!

The wormy thing slammed into the door like it was trying to destroy it. I broke into tears. I started mumbling about being a killer and erasing OCs. “Hey, it’s okay. I’ll handle this.” She closed her eyes for a second, and the banging stopped.

She flung open the door without hesitation, the creature fast asleep. “There. So what’s this about erasing OCs?”

I told her everything that had happened since I last saw her.

When I finished, she stared at my scroll, “And you’re sure that holding it caused all those documents to shatter?”

I shook my head, no, I wasn’t sure, but did that matter? “Please Penelope, you have to hold onto the scroll and not tell anyone that you have it.” I didn’t want to know what would happen to me if I was charged with the demise of all these OCs.

“You should keep it.”

“But-”

She stopped me, “Some of the files might be destroyed but it doesn’t mean the OCs are. Jasper will probably spend days fixing this mess, but if any file is destroyed he can fix it. No worries.”

“Even still.” I sobbed.

Penelope grabbed my hand with the scroll and moved it behind my back. “Just think of it being in a locker or some type of storage equivalent and let go.”

“Let go?”

“Just drop the scroll.”

I did what I was told, but it was harder than it seemed. It took a second before my shaking hands could let go of it. When I finally did, it wasn't on the floor behind me.

“Where did it go?”

Penelope laughed, “Even as petrified as you are, you still have questions. I don't know how it works but now it shouldn't mess with any OCs or papers. Come, let's get Jasper.”

I grabbed onto her sleeve, “Can we please keep me finding my file a secret?”

She seemed to be thinking about it. “Did you let the worm-dragon thing out of its cage?”

I shook my head.

“Then no worries. I won't tell a soul.”

There was nothing more I could ask for, as I did my best to push down all the emotions I was feeling until I could deal with them later in my room.

~

“Again Raz, I'm so sorry about Mittens. I'll personally make sure that their enclosure is checked.” Mittens was apparently the giant worm who was tasked with guarding the Hall of Records at night. Somehow they got out and assumed I was trespassing. An interesting story, but I didn't have the brainpower to dissect it. Instead I said, “Thanks, Jasper, it was nice meeting you.” He offered me his hand which I shook, probably a little more shaky than I'd like.

He clasped my hand. “If I find your file or anything about a bet I'll send it your way.”

“Thank you, Jasper. That would be very helpful,” Dolly said from where she stood next to me. Pretty much everyone else was piled into the car, waiting to be taken to lunch. Apparently, Raz's take on the giant worm wasn't of any interest to them. Only Penelope and Viola waited by the door.

Jasper smiled. “Always Dolly.” Jasper let go of my hand but made no move to hold Dolly's I noticed, before he swiftly left the room.

Dolly sighed, “You've had an eventful last couple of days, haven't you Raz.”

Eventful wasn't even scratching the surface of how I felt. “It certainly has been a lot.”

“It would certainly be a lot for even the most weathered of OCs. Are you sure you don't need to talk about anything?”

For a second, I thought I could feel the scrubbing sensation brush against my mind before it quickly disappeared when Viola made a ticking clock noise.

Dolly shot Viola a look, but Viola only tapped her wrist. Dolly's face looked especially expressionless at that moment, like she was thinking of all the ways Viola had annoyed her over the years.

“I'm fine Dolly. I promise.” If fine included seeing someone basically die and almost dying a handful of times in the last day. “I'll come to you if I ever need to talk.”

“Alright then.” We started walking towards the door. Viola gestured for us to hurry up, disappearing through the exit. Penelope stood there with Dolly's little pink jacket and helped her put it on.

Dolly clicked her tongue, “Are you sure you didn't see any documents with your name on them? Not one stray R or Z anywhere?” I blinked. Did Dolly know I had the scroll? Shoot, I forgot she could read minds.



Do I need to come clean? It's not like there was a good reason I was keeping it from her.

"We looked all day. If the scroll was there, one of us, especially Jasper, would have found it."

Penelope said.

"I suppose you're right." Dolly adjusted her jacket. "Come now, let's go get lunch." Penelope and I followed Dolly through the exit, back to the streets of the capital to where the limo was waiting.

I grabbed Penelope's hand, slowing her down a little bit, just till Dolly was out of ear shot. "Thank you, but won't she know sooner or later." She could read minds after all. Thankfully, I didn't have to elaborate any further.

"No. There are ways to stop such privacy violations. I'm one of those ways. Nothing but what you said was revealed to her right now."

"How'd you manage that?"

Her eyes sparkled. "Not important and you're welcome."

I'm really thankful everything worked out today, but I can't help but feel guilty at the thought that Jasper is going to spend a lot of time looking for something that's not there. I feel even more guilty about the fact that...that... more OCs might go to the erase because of me.

## Chapter 12. Bromance

You know, three days in, you'd think I'd be used to everything by now. Actually, is three days enough to get used to something?

I don't know.

I don't know a lot of things as I'm sure you've seen.

I paced around my room, my feet barely able to find the ground with each step. I have more pressing things on my mind.

Starting with, why can't I stop shaking? Since this afternoon, it hasn't stopped. Once we got back, I made it to my room absolutely soaked, thanks to the water teleportation system. It didn't seem to care that it wasn't supposed to do that. It took a special pleasure in messing with me, apparently. At first, I thought the shaking started because I was cold. I tried wrapping myself in my plush comforter to no avail. The chill seemed to radiate from my bones.

Nerves would be the logical thing to conclude, but so far, nothing in this world has been logical.

Absolutely nothing. From the moment I met you until now, there hasn't been a single normal thing.

I wouldn't be surprised if the scroll cursed me. I wouldn't be surprised if lying to Dolly cursed me. It seemed wrong somehow. Like some part of me rejects the very notion of lying to her.

I wish you could respond.

It would be nice to talk things out.

I plopped on my bed, eyeing the wooden scroll. Raz seemed to glisten slightly as I read it.

“I’m supposed to open it.” I said to no one in particular. “The bet might be written there.” With a huff, I stood up again and made my way to it. Slowly, I raised my shaking hand above it, feeling the static in the air.

Before I lowered my hand back to my side and left the room.

My pounding heart reminded me of Viola. I could practically see her in the shadows mocking me. Drums to march to my defeat.

I shook my head.

I suppose that’s not fair. I don’t know her well enough to judge. Maybe she’d listen to my woes and offer me sympathetic music. Whatever. Forgive me; I’m being a downer. Come on, let’s go to that dress-up room. Despite the dangerous shopping trip, I still don’t have any different clothes.

~

To call the halls confusing would be a disservice. After wandering for a while, the first door I opened up revealed a giant chessboard. The pieces were moving on their own with a blatant disregard for the rules of chess, slashing each other left and right. Some were even hanging from the rafters. By the time a queen finished tearing a pawn in half, I was already on to the next doors. There was a room with nothing in it but storm clouds and lighting. Weird enough on its own, but all the clouds looked like pink tutus and gaming consoles. There was a room with nothing but ducks in it, and a room with nothing but western snowy plovers. I don’t know how I know that. There was a pretty room with glass blue floors and hanging chandeliers, although, on closer inspection, there was really a large-scale ocean underneath the floor. No thanks, that’s just asking for trouble.

There was a room with nothing but weapons that didn't look like any weapons that could ever exist in the Author's world. The only reason I knew it was a weapon room was because of all the holes in the wall and floors, and the giant signs that said Weapons: Mallets in front of two giant bananas and a giant-looking bat. Frankly, I don't think these are mallets, but how would I know?

I might want to give up.

After one last door. There's only one more in this section so might as well.

Thankfully, this one opened up to the car hanger Trillo had shown me earlier.

I didn't really get to look at it earlier, but it really was nothing special considering everything. It looked like your normal car hanger. A type you might see a millionaire obsessed with cars to have. Typical cement floors and normal white garage doors. Tools and keys lined the walls. The only thing truly unique was that there was a second floor with even more cars and, from the looks of it, jets, planes, helicopters, and a TANK! Perhaps I spoke too soon, there are enough vehicles in here to supply a small army.

Either way, this must be one of the secret things the author gave me, because I felt instantly at home as I walked along the rows admiring all the different colored mustangs, jaguars, and camaroes. They appeared to be older models from the Author's world. They were all so sleek and polished. My favorite was a sleek, black, two-seater Mustang with orange and red flames painted on the side. It kind of reminds me of an old toy brand from the Author's world, Hot Wheels. Are you familiar with it?

I couldn't help but drag my fingers along the flames, tracing the outline.

"You got good taste for a Wasd."

I jumped, following the voice to the second floor, where Sim watched me. I didn't know what Wasd meant, but how he said it sounded insulting.

"Is this your collection?" I may have only spoken to Sim a handful of times, but I could tell that the insult lacked his normal bite. Besides, what was he going to do, erase me? At least, that would mean I could check on that one OC. Man, I don't even know their name.

"You'd like to know huh."

"That is why I asked."

Sim raised his brow ever so slightly before flinching. I guess his head was still hurting him.

"You good?"

"Alting Peachy." Sim grabbed his head, massaging it for a second before he bolted over the second-floor railing, landing a bit from me. "What are you doing here?"

"Wandering, trying to clear my head. You?"

"Wouldn't you-"

"I want to know yeah, yeah. I get it, this is your space, I'll leave. No need to point the sword this time."

For a moment, I swear he looked guilty as he ran his hand through his hair.

I started walking down a row I didn't see, towards the exit. Bikes lined this row, both motorized motorcycles and normal bikes. There were even purple and pink little kid tricycles with streamers that also look motorized. They must be for Dolly.

"I'm hiding from Soph. Even if she wanders in here she'll get stuck sprouting facts about cars before she can find me."

"Why hide, don't you love her?"

"Course, I just don't like hurting her feelings is all. Her voice is just shifting sharp. "

“Sharp? What, is her voice literally summoning knives now.”

He chuckled. “I could handle that. Sometimes it's just too much.”

“What ya mean?”

He opened his mouth then closed it. He chuckled again. I swear he mumbled, summoning knives. It's like he's weighing whether or not my statement covered the cost of the information he was about to give me. “The pitch she hits along with all the sounds from the Author's world, it hurts. Soph understands but it still hurts her feelings when I tell her her voice is hurting me. Not to mention it's not like she can stop talking for long. That's too painful for her.”

“You can hear the Author's world.”

“It's my knowledge set. Didn't we tell you all of this.”

“Someone kind of sped through introductions.”

“Watch it capslock, just because I'm in a good mood doesn't mean I won't blast ya.”

“If you're in such a good mood, how about doing me a favor.”

“No.”

That was quick. “Why not.”

“I'm not going to tell you what the Author is hearin.”

Well, there goes that plan. “I wasn't going to ask that.” This lie came easier, probably because it was Sim. “I was going to ask you to teach me how to drive one of these things.”

Sim leaned against a black and green bike, somehow it didn't move an inch.

He let out a long-suffering sigh. “Pick something. I'll teach ya. Just don't take too long.”

I had no idea where to start. I'd like to drive any of these cars. They all seemed like they'd be fun. Still, as I ran up and down, checking out different cars and bikes, I couldn't help but think a two-seater might be best. It would give me a chance to possibly get Sim to talk about the Author.

I had a feeling that idea wouldn't work as well if he was spread out in the back seat ordering me around like his private chauffeur, but what color to pick? Blue Camaro, green race-looking car, Pink Convertible. None of them were really calling my name, you know.

I kept going down the rows until I saw it. Metal-black paint, silver accents, dark blue rims.

It was absolutely a beauty.

"Sim I found one."

Sim let out a long whistle making me jump. He rolled his eyes at my reaction but otherwise chose to ignore it. "Well you have good taste for bikes too, unfortunately this bike hasn't moved in years."

Now that he mentioned it, the bike was coated in a thick layer of dust, "What's wrong with it."

"Who knows?" He shrugged. "It's been here long before any of us were created except maybe Dolly. Maybe Penelope." Sim walked away, gesturing for me to follow. "It can't be hotwired, and the keys have been missing forever. Shame it's a nice one. Quote has been trying to get it to start forever."

In the end, Sim showed me a slightly beat-up blue car, that apparently no one will mind if it gets dinged up.

Sim drove us out of the garage. He got noticeably paler as we went, but with the air in the car so thick, either from Sim's natural aura or the fumes, I decided just to keep my mouth shut. See, I can learn.

He took us to a little practice track. The sun was just starting to set by the trees, and the lights were turning on. Sim stopped the car and came around to my side of the door, "Switch."

Once I was firmly behind the driver's seat and properly buckled up, you can never be too safe, Sim face planted against the window.

"You good?"

"You see those pedals?" He ignored me. I nodded. "The one on the right is gas, and the one on your left is break. The harder you press, the faster you go or the harder you break. Turn the steering wheel so you don't hit stuff. Don't crash."

I glanced down at the steering wheel, "Isn't there a certain way you have to hold it?"

Sim didn't say anything, so I decided to put my foot on the gas. The car engine roared, jolting Sim off from the window. He looked ready to kill me.

I put up my hands in mock surrender. "It was an accident."

His eyes twitched. I could see the debate of whether or not to choose violence dance in his mind. "One, for normal driving, you almost never need to put the pedal fully down. Two, see the stick in between us. You got to move the P which stands for park to D which means drive. Otherwise we ain't moving shift, understand."

"Yes sir."

"Try again." Sim leaned back in the passenger seat rolling his neck from side to side.

Gently, I put my foot on the gas and the car flew. The car bumped and shook down the road at first, so I eased up on the gas. Sim made a sound of approval.

After a few close misses, I was able to figure out the control and stay on the winding road.

Even though I was moving at a slower pace, I couldn't help but think it was actually pretty easy, really easy.

I picked up the speed a bit, coming off a turn and straightening out of the car. I felt a smile form on my face—this is easy. I sped up the car even more, rolling down the window, letting the



wind whip through my hair. It felt like with each turn and bump, my body became one with the car. The sound of the engine replaced my pounding heart.

The blur of the trees replaced the image of the kid's blurred face, and the lights' glare replaced the glimmer of the scroll in my mind. Everything just felt right.

“Raz.” Sim rasped out. When I glanced at him, I saw that he looked more than a little green. Sweat beaded his face, and his whole body was tense.

As the road straightened back out, I slowly put my foot on the brakes, easing it down as I let go of the accelerator.

Sim all but heaved as we slowed to a stop.

“I’m sorry.” I said once I put the car in park.

“Not you. You drove. Like a natural. Turn off the car.” Sims' words came in gaps. “worse than I thought.”

Sim noticeably relaxed once the car was off.

“Anything I can do?” I asked.

Sim flinched.

I lowered my voice. “Be quiet probably.”

Sim groaned, and I took that as a yes. He seemed to be folding in on himself as he gripped his head. He probably needs to get out of here, right?

As quietly as I could, which wasn’t very, I got out of the car and went to Sim’s side. “Will the car be fine here?”

He didn’t say anything. I don’t know what to do.

“Just as a lantern lights the way in the dark, returning what's borrowed illuminates the path.”

“Quote!” I didn’t notice her kneeling down next to me. “I don’t know what to do.”

"Sickness is the body's whispered plea for rest, a gentle nudge to slow down in a world that never stops."

She pried Sim's arm from his head and pulled him up. Together, we worked to get him on his feet. His breathing was heavy between us. Once he was situated, she removed herself from under Sim's arm and let him lean heavily against me. She moved in front of me and held out her hand. Her eyes danced from me to the car.

"O, I left the keys in the ignition."

She nodded. And pointed to the house. *Get him inside* seemed to be what she was saying. Maybe if I was lucky I could get him to his room.

Slowly, Sim and I made our way toward a side door to the house. Just before we hit the door, I could hear the faint rumblings of the car engine starting. Sim flinched.

~

Somehow, Sim managed to stay upright and guide me to a water pit where we teleported to just outside Sim's room.

His door didn't have a lock, unlike mine, and it looked nothing like I'd have guessed. There were very minimal items outside of a computer set up, bed, microwave, and mini fridge. And it was so dark.

Sim practically collapsed on his bed.

I opened Sim's mini fridge. Okay, quick, are ice packs good for headaches? There are about half a dozen frozen water bottles and ice packs, so I'm going to assume yes.

I half haphazardly handed one to him.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize how bad it was." I whispered.

Sim didn't respond.

Closer inspection made me realize he was asleep. I wish I could fall asleep that fast.

Honestly it feels wrong to leave him alone when he's like this. I think I'll just...

I sat myself down on the floor by his door. In case he wakes up and he's not happy to see me.

After a while I woke up to a mostly dark room. I must have fallen asleep.

"Capslock." Sim groaned.

"O you're awake." I yawned. "Here." I grabbed the medicine off his desk. "You fell asleep before you could take it before."

I couldn't see his expression in the dark, but he took the pills and didn't try to slice off my head, so I'm going to assume he was grateful.

"I-I didn't just want to leave you when you were like this. If you want I can get Sophia. Send her over on the way out."

He didn't say anything, and I felt extremely awkward standing in his room in the dark. Maybe it would be best if I just left. I tried to make my way to the door, but before I could, I fell backward on my rump. "Ouch!"

Sim clapped once. A dim light came on just bright enough that I could make out the plushie I tripped on. Sim's gaze seemed to pierce through me. "I'm sorry."

"You stole something from the hall of records earlier."

I blinked. "How you-"

"Heard ya thank Penlope." I must have looked confused because he continued, "It's not just the Author's world I have good hearing in. What ya take?" He rested his head on his hand like it was too heavy to keep up.

"A scroll with my name on it."

"Isn't that what we went there to get, why hide it?"

“I’m scared. If this has something to do with the bet, well... I don’t know if umm... I mean what if...”

“What if opening the scroll is the best?” Sim snorted. “Doubt it.”

“And if it is, Trillo showed me what’s happening in Utopia. People are being erased Sim. I just don’t want to make things worse.”

“OCs will always be erased. There’s simply too many of us for the author to remember us all.”

“Even so. They shouldn’t be sent to the erase, whatever that is, just because I decided to open a stupid scroll.”

Sim sighed and swung his feet off the bed. “Hand me my coat.”

Frantically, I looked around the room, seeing a dark-green leather jacket haphazardly tossed over the computer.

“Did you want me to grab you another ice pack or something?”

“No capslock we’re heading out.”

“Are you sure you're well enough for that?” *Are you sure it's a good idea for me to head outside?*

“aRe a SURer weLl enOUGH fOr tHI. Shut up.”

“It’s the middle of the night.”

“Do you want to learn about the bet or not? Now come on, you're driving.”

I didn’t need to be told twice.

## Chapter 13. Drink Your Sorrows That Doesn't Sound Very Healthy

My driving prowess did not, I repeat, did NOT, translate well into the air. Sim said it would be easy as he slumped against the side window. *Just hit the green button.* It was not.

Let me ask you this: how do you fly a car when the steering wheel has no up or down capability? The steering wheel was the exact same as when we were on the ground. It didn't suddenly become like a jet or anything.

How do you fly it so it stays higher than the trees if you can't go up? How do you land if there's no down button!

That's an actual question. "How do we land!"

Sim, who somehow managed to stay asleep the whole ride despite my cries of panic as I followed the GPS, woke up and hit a button I was a little too preoccupied to see. Unfortunately for me, that meant the car stopped flying and fell.

The force of the fall put my stomach into my throat, it only returned to its rightful place with the impact of the ground.

"Take this next off ramp."

It took me a second to realize that the car landed in the middle of a busy highway, somehow narrowing avoiding all traffic as it landed.

"Don't slow down on the highway you idiot." I fumbled for the steering wheel and gas, barely getting us to the next off ramp.

"Take a left, then another left."

I turned.

"Your other left, delete, I thought you're supposed to be one of us."

After a series of confusing directions, we arrived in front of a rundown building with neon lights. *EMO DRI* flashed, the last few letters seemed to be missing.

“You’re a terrible driver. My whole body aches.”

“Where are we?” I managed to croak. I did my best to rail in my shaking and the intense feeling that I was going to die. “Nautropia a section in the Future District.” Sim unbuckled. “Let’s get some drinks.”

It took Sim coming around the other side of the car and peeling my fingers off the wheel for me, before I finally came along.

I’m starting to realize I’m the only one panicked by such things, unless you’re also a bit scared.

Looking around, this place looked nothing like the Future District from earlier. In fact, it almost looked normal—not normal for this world, but normal in the Author’s world. Concrete buildings were painted in blacks and grays, some with fading paint. The infrastructure didn’t look like one giant mirror; instead, it looked like a slightly cleaner version of a traditional city. Few OCs lined the streets, most hanging out just outside of Emo Dri.

Once inside, an OC with no face showed us to a table. It was a little dark inside here, but otherwise the place looked totally normal.

“Have you been with us before?” Her voice came from nowhere. “I don’t think I recognize you.”

“I’ll show him the ropes.”

“Let me know if you need anything.” As she walked away, her image almost seemed to disintegrate before returning to normal.

Sim shook his head, “Sucks. I’ve always liked that server.”

“What's her name?”

“Uh, it's umm...” Sim tensed for a moment before shaking his head “Can't remember. It's too late for her anyhow. Without an official story, she'll be in the erase soon.”

“Isn't there something we can do?”

“Yeah.” Sim grabbed the nozzles that were connected to the table. And pulled one to me.

“Take a sip.”

At this point, why do I even bother questioning anything. I took the nozzle and took a sip. Tart bitterness filled my mouth. The feeling felt like it spread to every part of my being.

“What is that!” I yelled.

“Anger. It's not the best drink, but there's nothing better for getting lost for a few hours. You probably need it.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Vi.” Was all he offered as he mixed the yellow and red drinks. “Personally, I like to take anger and happiness and mix them just right to get adrenaline. Now that's a good drink!”

I felt irritated as I glared at Sim. “I'm really debating taking the car and leaving you here.”

“And go where?” Sim swirled the table. I didn't even realize he could turn it until a different set of nozzles was in front of him. Smoke rose ever so slightly out of these. “Besides, I took you here for a reason.” He put a nozzle up to his mouth and took a long inhale.

The anger drink must have really been working because all I wanted to do was snatch the nozzle right out of his hand and do something with it. I don't know what, but I'll figure it out.

Before I could act on my intrusive thoughts, Sim finally exhaled purple bubbles.

With each one that popped I found myself growling. “That. Doesn't. Make. Sense.”

“It’s playfulness.” He said that like it explained everything. Before I could snap, he continued, “See the OC behind you. The one with the giant scythe.”

I glanced behind me. A woman sat at a table in a darker corner. The tip of her weapon gleamed as I watched it, possibly for dramatic effect. “Kind of hard to miss.”

“Go talk to her.”

I eyed her, “You just want to get me beat up.”

“Awe, someone’s a little pissy when he’s angry.” More bubbles made my eyes twitch. “Sides I’d do that myself if I wanted to. Her name is Hellbringer. The Author’s apparently been talking about her in their sleep, got chastised by their mother real good for it earlier. If she’s being mentioned, she must know something. I see her here all the time. She stirs up more trouble than Vi, Trill, and Soph combined, but she’s old, powerful, even has herself a few stories. Doesn’t matter what rules, there’s nothing that can be done to her.

“What makes you think she’ll know about the bet.”

“No. She’s a creepypasta OC though.” He said that like that answered anything. “She’ll know where to find the Oracle. Another OC, the one who knows everything. You find him, you find out what the bet is.” Sim explained, “The only issue is he changes locations constantly and he’s been missing for a while.”

“What if he’s been erased?”

“You witness one erase and you become so bleak. Just go talk to her, see what you can find out. Beat around the bush, don’t mention we’re looking for the Oracle, just stick to the bet. She’ll literally give us hell otherwise.”

I mean at this point, it’s not like this can hurt.



Her eyes stalked me as I walked up to her table. “Hellbringer.” I said with more bravado than I felt.

“Something you want fresh-ink.” The nicknames in this world make me want to pull my hair out.

“We need to talk.”

“Considering we are talking,” She glanced at me for only a second before returning to her drink, “how about you get on with it.”

“I need to know about a bet.”

“You're going to have to be more specific. Making bets, that's kind of my whole shtick kid.”

“You know about the Author.”

She seemed to laugh to herself before she kicked out the chair across from her. “You really are fresh-ink, take a seat kid.”

I glanced back at Sim and he gave me a thumbs up. Alright then.

Hellbringer leaned back in her seat, the dim light from the establishment only making her shadow seem that much more encompassing. I think normally I would have been scared, but right now all I felt was angry. Her eyes gleamed as if reading my thoughts. “You know, you're supposed to be hush hush on the Author's business.”

“Just tell me what you know. It's been a long day.”

“I'm flattered that you think I know about you and this little Author business.” She took a long sip of her drink.

A very long slurp.

Slurp.

Slurp SLurp.

I can't take this anymore! Before I could even register, I grabbed her drink and pulled it out her mouth, forcing her to meet my gaze.

The burning sensation of her drink hitting my skin wasn't enough to stop me.

“Look, it's been three days since I got here. In that time, I've been tossed from a door into an ocean. Almost drowned several times. I watched a little boy get disintegrated by a giant metal bird with no one to mourn him but me. I have not been afforded a moment of peace, comfort, or understanding, and the only person I'd trust to give me that comfort can't even respond to me. So, please, if you know anything, anything at all, tell me.”

The longer I met her gaze, the more I felt heat burning my skin. Not the type of heat that often comes at love at first sight, but an itchy type of heat. Like fire ants invading every pore. They're building a colony under my skin, tap dancing on my blood cells. I had a feeling I'd be staring at her long after my cells turned to mush, when suddenly I was yanked back.

I half expected it to be Sim with surprisingly dainty hands. “Stare at darkness too long, don't be surprised when it stares back.”

While I still felt like the universe was reforming underneath me, trust me I know what that feels like, Hellbringer looked completely unfazed.

She didn't even bother to pick up the glass herself, instead, it righted itself before flying back into her hand. “It's been a second, confusing one. How you've been.”

Quote tilted their head at her, “I wish there was a vast desert between us and that you were weeks away from water.”

She chuckled, giving us a smile that showed her sharp teeth. “Unless this one proves to be more entertaining,” She gestured her cup to me and it sent a shiver down my spine, whatever

courage I had earlier was completely gone. “You're still my favorite.” She looked past us to where Sim was trying and failing to look like he was whistling.

I'll never understand that concept. How does whistling seem natural to anyone?

Sim said to Quote as a way of greeting, “You just had to interrupt the stare-down, it was just getting good.”

“So you were trying to erase me.” I wanted to snap but my tone sounded weak and shaky even to my ears.

Sim had the nerve to look sheepish. “I was going to step in...after a few more seconds.”

“As amusing as it is to watch the next generation of smarty-pants take the piss out of each other, I do intend to have a relaxing night tonight.”

“Well, you heard the Wasd, answer some questions and we'll leave you alone.”

She wagged her finger. “No, no. That's not how this is going to go.”

“Why call us all over if you're not going to help?” I asked.

“You should learn not to ask so many questions, you're going to make the wrong people want to Ctrl Z you. I'll help for a price.”

“How much money do you want?”

“Money, huh. This isn't a dystopian district, cash does nothing here. Tell me a story, one good enough to cover all the drinks I want for the night.”

Quote snorted. “Greed not only rots the soul but rots the fibers of your very being.” From her tone, I could tell she didn't think this was a fair deal.

“What he told you earlier was good enough.” Sim snapped.

“No,” Hellbringer said, “I want a story about me. Give me your best AU and I'll give you some info.”

Quote shook her head. “Imagine being desperate for love, couldn’t be me.”

“I got one for you.” Sim started. “An old hag who scares all the kids in the forest off with her weird teeth and shifting awful behavior.”

“Try again.”

“An old-

“Nope.”

“Evil Witch-”

“Could be.”

“H-”

I interrupted before Sim got us all erased. “I don’t understand, you just want a story?”

“Stories are power after all. It’s been a while since I’ve had a good one from the Author, I don’t want to end up a faceless waiter in a lackluster town.”

Sim perked up.

“No, that can’t count as your story.”

Sim grumbled.

“So that’s it, a story about you that you can give the Author, however that works, and you’ll tell me what the bet is.”

Hellbringer scowled. “I don’t know the bet. I know someone who does though.” She grabbed one of the tubes from the table and poured a dark red liquid into her mouth.

I surveyed the woman in front of me. It was very possible she could be lying, but on the off chance she wasn’t...

“So are you going to come with a story or are you just going to stare at me all night.”

I glanced at Quote and Sim. “I want a second with my council.”

“If you must.” She waved her hand and our small group quickly scurried back to Sim’s table.

“Wasd head, do you know how hard it is to think of the type of story she’s asking for.” Sim huffed.

“Impossible for feeble minds to imagine beyond the outskirts of their eyes.” Quote added.

“She’s right, without knowing what details are in her file, there’s no way to give her the type of story she wants.”

“Fly little birdies fly.” Quote suggested.

Sim shook his head. “I doubt she’ll let us go back and get Trillo.” I failed to see what Trillo had to do with this situation, but that’s not really important right now, at least I hope.

“What’s the big deal, if we come up with a story she doesn’t like we’ll just make a new one.” I questioned.

“If we come up with a story she doesn’t like, we’ll need new heads. Why do you think she has the big Alting scythe for?” Sim snapped.

That didn’t stop him from insulting her earlier with his terrible stories. “All right, any ideas,” I said, looking at Quote. She probably has better stories...if you ever get the chance, maybe don’t tell Sim this.

Quote just shrugged before tucking her hair behind her ears as if she was saying *I’ll just listen*. Right, she probably couldn’t tell us a story even if she had one.

Sim grabbed a nozzle from the table pouring green liquid into his mouth. It was a little bit funny how the drink matched his hair, I almost snickered.

When he finished, Sim wiped his mouth rather dramatically, flicking off the excess liquid. “Ight, check out this one. An old farmer that goes on a revenge quest to avenge her husband. Her scythe used to be for wheat, now it's for reveeeenge.”

I really don't think any mention of her being old is going to win us any points. Correct me if I'm wrong, but a lot of people really don't like their age to be pointed out. Besides, despite Sim's insistence, she really didn't look that old. She could easily be in her early thirties.

Quote shook her head. "It belongs in the trash."

"Why you always got to shoot down my ideas?" Sim snapped.

"I can not shoot down what's never taken flight." Quote sassed.

"You know what-"

These two weren't getting us anywhere. I wished you could tell me your ideas. They have to be better than what Sim is thinking up. Calling her old is only going to get us so far.

Stories. I'm supposed to have knowledge of the Author's world, but when it comes to books or other stories, I could practically hear the crickets rummaging through cabinets in my mind.

The deeper the crickets rummaged, trying to find anything, the more the faceless kid and waitress popped into my mind.

The kid running after his friends, enjoying all the district had to offer. He literally lived in paradise, I have to believe he had a good life. What about the waitress, does she even know that her time is coming to an end? Would she care? If I could just think up something, anything, would that save her? Would she even want to be saved? Maybe her life here sucks, and the erase, whether she knows it or not, is her only way out?

I saw the letters of what was left of the kid fall to the ground. His friends completely forgot about him before the letters even fully fell. No one would want that, not really.

Pulling myself out of my thoughts, I came back to Quote and Sim insulting each other.

"There are no strings on me. Just chains as I'm a slave to expectations and pain."

“Well at least I can actually talk. Talk talk talk. Bet you wish you could just say a single word.”

“Your pride is a fleeting ember, flickering briefly before being consumed by the flame.” Quote snapped. O, my Author, they were still arguing.

“We don’t have time for this. We need to-” I trailed off. This could work actually.

I strode right back to Hellbringer, Quote and Sim falling silent. Looking at her now, past her scary aura, I could see words hidden in the darkness that wafted from her skin as she watched the waitress. Forgotten. Pain. Denial. Anger.

I know those emotions. It was how I felt watching the kid... When her eyes finally relocked on mine, there was nothing but indifference there. *A lie*. Something told me that there was more to her cold demeanor.

“Are you sure you don’t need more time?” She asked.

I shook my head. It was like the story was plucked from the ethos and stuffed in my mind. My tongue began moving on its own accord.

“A young woman works hard to provide for her family, even making the journey everyday from a paradise city to a ghost town where she works at a bar. Serving magic drinks to spirits who want to hold on to the world a little longer. She knows working at this bar will shorten her existence, send her to the beyond, and then erase her from her loved one's memories, but she can’t find the will to care. If it’s what needs to be done and for her family she’ll do it. Besides, she’s just not cut out for utopia. She’s been told her whole life that a place like that was wasted on a person like her. One day she wakes up and notices she’s starting to unravel. Slight smoke seeps out of her pores, giving her an aura of death. She puts a plan in place for her family after she’s gone, and continues life like normal. Until one day her kid brother follows her to work. He

angers some powerful people in an effort to save her, which gets him killed. He wakes up a ghost and the people destroy his spirit again right in front of her. She swears to save him from the beyond before her time is up. Her wrath and determination to find her way to the beyond and bring him back earns her the title Hellbringer. To most, she's a creature of death, barely hanging on to life, but that doesn't matter to her. She just wants to save her brother and restore her family before her passing. So she makes herself remember even when no one else does."

There was so much anger in that last sentence that I didn't know I had.

Erasing was wrong. I don't want to watch more OCs go through that. If there's somehow a correlation between the bet and more OCs being erased, if this is somehow my fault, I didn't have to fake the anger and resentment when I delivered the final line, "I won't let him be forgotten."

I watched Hellbringer, ready to move out of the way if she started swinging.

"That was worth more than I can offer you right now. I hate owing anyone but, a deal's a deal."

"You're looking for the Oracle right?" I didn't question how she knows. "He's in the mirror dimension, somewhere towards the center."

"Where's that"

"I know where it is." I didn't even notice but Sim and Quote were flanking me. A sword in hand for Sim and a staff in Quote's.

"I'll pay the rest at a later date. Now go away."

I eyed Quote and Sim to see if I should push her for more info now. Quote shook her head.

"Thank you for your time." I said.



Quote took the keys from Sim as I got into the back seat. I had enough driving for today. Whatever the mirror dimension was, I could tell it wasn't good. Neither Sim nor Quote offered up an explanation but that was fine. I was still coming to terms with everything that happened the last couple of days. I tried watching the sky, most of the usual color clouds were missing, but there were dark blue clouds almost invisible in the night. To me they looked like cups and scythes. There might even be one that looked like two figures hugging, honestly it was hard to focus.

It's hard to accept responsibility for something that may or may not be indirectly my fault.

As we left, I could see Hellbringer through the rearview window. She handed a note card to the waitress before she grabbed a nozzle and started surrounding herself in the red, smokey anger flavor, never letting up.

## Chapter 14. We Sort of Kinda Maybe Come Up With a Shifting Plan

When we made it home, Dolly stood in the middle of the forest path before the pathway that took us to the garage.

“What trouble did you get into this time?” She said, already rubbing her temples together like she was preparing herself.

“None, just took the caps lock out for some fun.” Sim said.

“Great, did you have fun Raz?” Dolly sounded exasperated but still I answered.

“Ummm sort of.” If you can call deathly storytelling and consuming a physical essence of anger fun.

“You took him out to consume emotions!” Dolly said, exasperated.

“Kid needed a break.” Sim said.

“From what?”

I butted in before Sim could say something incriminating. “The whole bet. Not knowing what it was was stressing me out, so Sim said this would help me get my mind off things.”

Dolly stared at me. Despite having no pupils, or even real eyes, I could have sworn she was examining every inch of me, looking for the lie.

Dolly sighed. “Right. I’m sorry Raz, a lot has just been happening the last few days. The girl’s shopping spree made everything worse. I should have known it would be fine if Quote went with you.”

Quote nodded like she indeed kept us out of trouble. I guess she did save me from Hellbringer.

“Hellbringer.” Dolly said. “What was she doing there?”

“A mere mouse does not understand their desire for cheese.” What?

Dolly swirled around, “Did you think she would know about the bet. Whatever she told you is a lie.”

Sim’s eyes narrowed. “We didn’t ask her nothin’ about the bet. Stop accusing me of stuff.”

“I wouldn’t have to accuse you if you and this whole lot was trustworthy.”

I flinched, I wonder if she’s including me in that statement.

“You act like the last lot was trustworthy,” Sim sneered. “Park the car for me, will you Quote.” Quote did a slight bow, hand over her chest, although Sim didn’t seem to see it as he walked away. Well, there’s definitely more there.

Quote gave me a look like *don’t you dare ask* and tilted her head towards the car.

“I’m going to accompany Quote back to the garage if that’s ok Dolly.”

“Have a goodnight Raz. Next time they want to drag you somewhere, maybe let me know.”

I nodded. I’m not exactly sure I can keep that promise, but-

She was like a stuffed animal right now. Strings and fabric fraying at the seams. She was not nearly as put together as she was a couple of days ago.

~

I returned to my room, showering, washing the dirt out of my hair and cuts, and redressing. Thankfully, my room magically cleaned and folded my clothes neatly on my bed.

I managed to get a few hours of sleep. Surprisingly, my dreams weren’t haunted by a disappearing waitress or boy. Instead, I saw a young girl. Similar to the glass statute I saw at the Hall of Records. She sat on a tree, swinging her tiny legs off a giant tree branch. She was wearing nothing but a dress made of vines and leaves. Red streaks danced in between her long, braided black hair, like fire in the wind. “Swingy swingy swingy swing!” She mouthed.

I watched her for a while before she fell. I reached for her, but I just missed.

There was probably a meaning to this, one that I was much too tired to figure out.

When we can finally talk to each other, tell me one of your dreams, okay?

The breakfast room was like a patio buffet in Paris. It looked like a beautiful garden with all types of trees. Maple, Brasil, Japanese Sakura trees. Some of the leaves from the Sakura trees blew up onto the patio, giving the floor a fantasy look. There were small lights hanging from the outside of the building to a tree right past the railings, which were wrapped in vines. There were also little round tables for two or four people, each one with a heater stand behind it. A breeze blew softly above my head, bringing with it the sound of light violin music.

Everyone but Dolly was already sitting down in a chair, except for Sophia, who decided to take residence in Sim's lap. They had pushed three tables side by side, allowing them to eat together. Sophia saw me first. "Razzy!" She jumped off Sim and ran across the patio as fast as she could in a lacy red dress. Sophia jumped into my arms, nearly knocking me down to the floor as she wrapped her legs around my back. She looked up at me and smiled, "Good morning."

"Good morning," I replied, trying to unwrap her legs from around me.

She tightened her arms around my neck to stay on. "We were just talking about who's going to wake you up, sleepy head."

"Really?" I started walking over to the tables, Sim glaring at me with each step I took as Sophia laughed. I stood in front of Sim. "Umm, here you go, Sim." Sim held his arm out for Sophia, but she didn't let go. She hung on and looked at him upside down.

Sim made a sound like a growl, which made Trillo laugh. "Ignore him. He's just being a baby because his head hurtin."

"Am not." Sim grabbed a muffin off his plate, throwing it at Trillo's head.

She caught it with ease. “Are to.” She took a bite out of the muffin and tossed it back at Sim. Sim just moved his head slightly, letting the muffin roll onto the floor. “Hey, Soph, Razyzy has cooties before he eats breakfast in the morning,” Trillo said.

Her eyes went wide as she let go. “Cooties originated from similar sounding Austronesian languages that meant parasitic insects.” She said before jumping on Sim.

Quote snapped her fingers, getting everyone’s attention. She pointed at me, at the food, and then at the building behind us. “Is there food inside?” I asked. She nodded and returned to her eating.

“I’ll be right back.” Nobody said anything, with the only three people who could speak engaged in a mental conversation, I would assume.

Inside the building, it was like walking into Starbucks. That’s a popular coffee place in your world, right, Reader? Pastries were sitting under heating pads, keeping them warm, and breakfast sandwiches were sitting in cold cases, keeping them from getting dry or too wet.

There were little green trays next to the entranceway for food to be piled on, which I gladly took. I got at least three different sandwiches, a chocolate donut with colorful sprinkles, a maple bar, lemon loaf, a cinnamon roll, and a tri-tea latte. Hey, don’t judge, it’s my fourth day of life, you know. I kind of want to try everything.

As I walked back outside, I pulled a chair up across from Trillo, who laughed when she saw my plate. “Well, someone is hungry.”

I shrugged, “It was a long day yesterday.”

“I’m sorry about that, Raz. I did my best last night to keep some of those nightmares at bay for you.” Penelope gave me a sad smile.

“You can do that?” I asked, shoving bacon in my mouth. “So Sim wasn’t lying earlier, you really are a “dream stealer?””

“I guess in a way, I can influence dreams to take a more positive outlook, or repress memories from the conscious to the subconscious.”

“Yada yada yada.” Sim mocked.

Viola chimed, which I could only assume was her laugh. This quickly turned to a whistle as Quote used her speed to steal some of her food, citing something about love and war.

“What I was mainly doing was making sure Dolly couldn’t get into your mind all night. She was trying really hard. I guess she really wanted to know what happened last night.” Penelope continued.

My grip tightened on my fork for some reason. “How did you know about that?” The idea that Penelope was also peeking around in my head didn’t exactly bring me comfort.

If my concern showed on my face, she pretended not to notice. “Quote came last night and told me. If you want any chance of making it to the mirror dimension, Dolly absolutely can’t know.”

“Why not.”

Trillo chimed in. “She’ll stop us. That place is so dangerous it was closed off years ago, before even Penelope was created.”

Before I could ask, Penelope continued, “Something went wrong there. Now only the caps lock of this society hang out down there.”

“Bugs, buggy bugs.” Sophia added.”

“And there are lots of buggers.”

I blinked. Buggers? What? I almost didn't want to know. "You guys always say these words like buggers and caps lock and expect me to know what they mean."

A piano equivalent of dun dun dun rang out courtesy of Viola, who also drew a finger along her neck. I took that to mean both things are bad. Well, what else is new.

"Are you done eating Raz, because it's time for this war meeting to begin." Trillo gripped onto the table with more excitement than I was comfortable with especially surrounding the words war meeting.

Yeah, I'm not sure I liked the sound of that.

~

We compiled all the information that we had. Stuff like

- Increased number of OCs disappearing!!! Why??
- Bet. What does it even mean?????
- Raz creepy chick magnet confirm? :(
- Monsters keep showing up were Raz is (I'm not happy about this realization)
- Oracle is a massive TAB have to find :( why
- Glitchy, creepy Raz scroll.

"I don't understand," Sim said when we reviewed the information about the scroll. "Why not just shifting open it?"

"I don't have the time or crayons to explain this to you." Quote snipped.

Thankfully for Sim, I did. Well, not the crayon part. "You don't understand. You didn't see how those other documents glitched. Some even straight up shattered. If OCs are going to the erase because they can't be remembered, I rather not touch the scroll that might cause OCs to just disappear."

Trillo smoothed out her note paper like it was a war map. “So scroll is out, the only other option is the mirror dimension.”

“A panda stands in the way of you and your destiny.” Quote offered, whatever that meant. Viola nodded in agreement, and everyone looked serious for a second.

“Well there’s not much we can do if the Author is intentionally making Raz’s life difficult.” Trillo snapped.

Was the Author intentionally making my life difficult? I haven’t really thought about it till right now. I suppose that might be part of the bet.

“I don’t think we have to worry about that,” Sim said. Everything in the Author's world is just getting worse right now. In a day or so, I’ll be out of commish. If I’m out of commish, they’ll be down for the count. Low chance of them perking up to mess with those alting mirrors.”

This was the first I was hearing of such information. “What exactly is happening to the Author?”

Sim shrugged “Couldn’t tell you even if I wanted to. Not in my design, Wasd.

“Stop calling him stupid Simy, Razy is very smart.”

Viola clapped her hands together in a way I could only assume meant *stay on topic people*.

“So it’s settled. Penelope will stay here recovering and making sure Dolly doesn’t catch wind of anything.”

Penelope lifted her hand barely off the table to give a thumbs up.

“Sim and Soph also have to stay here.”

“Sophia?” I thought for sure she’d help.

She shook her head. “I don’t like mirrors, Razy.” She looked saddened by this fact, but she didn’t offer any info.



“Not to mention if she freaks and shatters them all you’ll never find the Oracle.” Trillo added.

Right, glass and Sophia don’t mix. Maybe it was for the best she didn’t come, she might stop me from saving someone again.

“I’ll distract Doll with some booms.” Sophia offered with her usual smile.

I’m not sure what good that will do, but I silently sent an apology to Dolly anyway. “So the rest of you, are you coming? I need the help,” I said, shoving the last of my maple bar in my mouth.

Trillo huffed, “It’s not like I got much of a choice. I got to teleport you there after all. I’ll be pretty much useless after that. It will take me a few hours just to recover, and I’ll head back after that so I don’t get in the way.” She stretched her wings like she was already anticipating the pain, “But of course I’m coming.”

I nodded. It would be better if we could wait until she fully recovered, but according to Sim, we can’t wait for the Author to recover.

“Quote? Viola?”

“No sacrifice, no victory.” Quote quipped.

Viola took her fist and slammed it into her hand with a determined look.

“Thank you.” Sophia looked sad, so I added, “No take backsies.”

She laughed at that.

A lot more jokes were exchanged at breakfast, and despite the looming risk that I might get them all erased with me, I found myself laughing along with them. Perhaps I was just nervous.

There’s something important I need to do, but I waited.

I waited till everyone went off to do their own thing, since we still had a day before we needed to leave.

Trillo tried to suggest going to the race track at one point, but neither Sim nor Penelope were up for it today. So Viola offered to take Trillo to a concert. She seemed excited as she rushed off to get ready. Soph wanted to help Sim relax today, so the two of them left shortly after Trillo.

Quote said she was going to the library, I think. It was very dramatic, something about expanding the circumference of her mind before picking up Penelope, who had fallen asleep, and leaving.

It wasn't long until everyone else followed suit.

Viola made a clicking sound at me before she left. She gestured behind her.

“Do I want to come?” I interpreted.

She nodded.

“Thanks, but I think I'll just rest for a bit. Maybe explore the house.”

She stuck out her tongue, almost like she was saying *I didn't want you to come anyway*.

Then she was gone, and I was left with nothing but empty plates, Trillo's plans, and you.

I eyed Trillo's plan. Her chicken-scratch writing made all the points blur together slightly. I didn't bring it up during the meeting, but I added one more point.

- Who are you?

“Well?” I said out loud for no other reason than I could. “I didn't want to ask in front of the others; there is enough weird information here as is, but are you with me? There's probably not much you can do in the mirror dimension, but perhaps there's something you can do from out there. I don't know. I don't even know why I'm saying this out loud; it just feels more...”

Well, respectful.

You've been with me since the start, so it only feels right to ask you too. I shouldn't assume what you're thinking, but...

I hope you're with me.

Wish me luck.

## Vita

Zani Meaders has lived most of her life in Southern California. After Graduating from Chino Hills High School in 2018, Zani attended the University of California Irvine (UCI), where she double majored in English and Film & Media studies with a minor in Creative Writing. Immediately after graduation, Zani began her studies at the University of Texas El Paso (UTEP) to refine her studies and continue her craft in the Creative Writing MFA Program. Focused primarily on YA fiction and poetry, this remote program allowed her to strengthen her writing abilities and nurture her creative spirit.

During her studies, Zani remained part of D1 collegiate track and field teams for both UCI and UTEP, where she achieved academic awards such as the Commissioner USA Award (UTEP) and the Humanities Academic Unit Award (UCI). Outside of her colligate responsibilities, she remained an adamant participant in school clubs such as The Video Game Design Club (VGDC) at UCI and the National Alliance on Mental Illness on Campus (NAMI) at UTEP. She spent some time as a freelance sensitivity reader and writing consultant during the duration of her studies and worked at Birkram Yoga Chino Hills, where she gained experience as a front desk clerk and social media manager in her undergrad days.

Zani is currently looking to relocate and work remotely in a role that allows her to continue to grow as a creative.

Contact Information: [zameaders@miners.utep.edu](mailto:zameaders@miners.utep.edu)