

THE ATHEIST WELCOMING COMMITTEE

Mort Gloss

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The characters and events portrayed in this book are sometimes fictitious.
Any similarity to real persons (living or dead), neverborn demons, or
Divine beings is often designed, but sometimes coincidental.

The author pretends to no private revelation or specialized knowledge
regarding the afterlife. Rather, the setting for this work of fiction is loosely
based on the prophetic word generally available to all.

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*To Dawn, Duck, Nox, and all those who have gone before.
We will meet again.*

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“Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.” – C.S. Lewis

Part One

1

There is no question that being run over by a train is the most ignominious form of death. And it's not close. All an animate being has to do to avoid being brutally killed by one is successfully navigate a four-and-a-half-foot space while a train doesn't happen to be speeding by. It gets worse when considering the various safety devices in place to prevent such mayhem. There are crossing guards that physically block the path of an oncoming train; there are red blinking lights; there are blaring horns. This list goes on.

It doesn't help that everyone in the World of the Dead greets you by first asking your name and, almost invariably, next inquiring: "how did you die?"

So let's get this out of the way right from the get-go. My name is Atticus. I was killed by a train.

2

The details of my demise are a potent cocktail of shame and embarrassment. If I had to blame something—which is probably a precarious proposition—it would have to be a smudge. Yes, a smudge. I had just picked up a brand-new Lexus from a local dealership and was engaged in the fleeting thrills of a shiny new thing. I guess there are worse odors than new-car smell that could inhabit the senses in those last precious moments of life. But what a waste!

Like everything else I experienced during mortality, and I mean everything, I have a perfect memory of that fateful drive. I've relived it dozens of times, but the sharp sting of the utter stupidity of it all never seems to leave me. I was blissfully driving on clear dry roads, confidently telling myself that this was the best vehicle ever manufactured by mankind. *It has eight cupholders for the front seat passengers! But why would I ever need eight? Wow, the brakes are so responsive. A slight nudge and this thing stops on a dime. What's that button do? Does it really parallel park itself?*

I couldn't help but feel a sense of pride at the immaculate state of this brand-new car. *This thing is so clean inside. I'm going to keep it that way for good—not like my last car.* And that's where it all went wrong. *But what's that on the windshield? It looks like maybe they forgot to take off one of those new-car stickers.* So, like a buffoon, I reached toward the windshield and pulled that unsightly yellow rectangle from the pristine, unblemished glass of my new Lexus. So far, so good. I was still breathing at that point. But all was not yet right. The spot where the sticker had so recently been was now inhabited by a smudge, a smear, an uneven mound of leftover adhesive. It had to be removed at that very moment; it couldn't wait.

I licked the thumb on my left hand, leaned forward in my seat, and went to work on that smudge. *Ugh, what a mess. Why do they make this stuff so hard to get off?* As I then perceived it in my mortal mind, I was only taking my eyes off the road for a second or two. But I now know I was solely focused on that smudge for ten to fifteen seconds at a time. And when I did glance at the road, my fleshy brain wasn't processing any information. But despite all that, I was still heading straight down the road, staying in my lane, and—most importantly—breathing.

But not for long. As I kept rubbing and smearing that smudge, I heard a ding from my smartphone. My eyes went from the lower left corner of my windshield directly to the device, which was sitting in one of the numerous cupholders in the center console. As I review the memories now, my eyes briefly saw the crossing gates in the down position. My eyes also saw the red glow of the warning lights. The focus of my cognitive thought, however, jumped straight from the smudge to a text message on my phone. It read: “Are you still picking up the boys tonight?” *Oh no. Am I late again?* My eyes then jumped to the center console, which displayed the time. *Yup, late again. Wow, that is a good-looking display. That screen is huge.*

That profound gem was the last complete thought that formed, fired, and rattled around the space between my ears during mortality. While everything else is a jumble, I've been able to somewhat piece it together. As I lovingly gazed at the technological luster of my new digital dash, the shiny hood of my Lexus crashed through the crossing gate with a grating bang. I instinctively looked up and to the left as I heard screeching brakes. The locomotive was right on top of me, and I had no time to react. I felt a significant impact from the left and a sudden, resolute darkness. Fortunately, there was no time for much pain. I descended into an abyss of confusion almost instantly.

I was a dead man.

3

Although my physical body was now scattered across the railroad tracks, and despite my long-held beliefs and expectations to the contrary, my consciousness continued. That continuation was so fluid, in fact, that I didn't even realize the seriousness of my situation. I remained in a dark roller coaster of unawareness for what—as far as I could perceive—was only a brief time. I soon emerged to find myself in some kind of thick, white haze. There was no discernible floor upon which I stood—no obvious walls or ceiling. Just vapor.

What is this? Where am I? I extended my arms and fingers out before me, trying to orient myself. My arms were somewhat visible to my eyes, and appeared to be wrapped in a faint glow. But my outstretched fingers could only be seen as wispy shadows in the mist, subtly redirecting the light as they moved through the vagueness.

What is that noise? I blinked hard and squinted, trying to focus on what sounded like faint chatter. I couldn't be sure, but I thought I saw movement in the brightness, as if someone were seated before me and gesturing while speaking. I felt an intense warmth enter the space around me.

"Who's there?" I said out loud, more as a demand than a question. *And what's wrong with my voice? Why does it sound so strange?* Whatever was out there in the light did not respond, at least not in any way I could understand. But I thought I could still perceive movement and muffled words.

"Is someone trying to talk to me? If you are, I can't understand what you're saying." *My voice. Maybe it's this fog. It's like I can barely feel anything in my throat when I talk.*

But still nothing. I stood motionless and ceased my efforts at communication. After a few more seconds, the faint flickering before me seemed to altogether dissolve into the light. The comforting warmth was gone. I perceived that I was totally alone. *What is this? And what do I do now? Am I trapped here?*

“Hello? Is there anybody there? Can you hear me?” But my pleas for some kind of explanation, some kind of anything, went unanswered. Only the seemingly endless fog remained visible.

And then suddenly, with no warning of any kind, I was plunged back into the darkness. I had the sensation of falling, but not a solitary visual cue told me I was. Although I didn’t know how, I was very much on the move.

4

After a few more twists and turns in the blackness, I again stood upon my feet. In place of a blinding white haze, however, I found myself facing a thick forest of trees. The foliage was a deep shade of green, with upper branches shifting methodically due to a pleasant breeze. But something about the scene was strange, almost as if there was a subtle translucence to each tree. I shifted my gaze around, and saw a round lake of deep blue directly behind me.

At least I can see now. I again stretched out my arms and hands, confirming they were intact. I looked at my feet, reached down and patted my legs, and rubbed my hands over my stomach and chest. *Everything is still here. Maybe I wasn't injured in the wreck. But whose clothes are these?* I was wearing a simple collared shirt and khaki pants. I wore no socks or shoes of any kind, and my smartwatch was no longer attached to my wrist. *It could have been damaged in the accident.*

And then I noticed it. *Okay, what is going on here?* My arms and hands, which were altogether bare, had that same hint of translucence I had observed in the trees. I shook my head and blinked hard, hoping the answer to the riddle was either in my head or eyes. I brought my hand close to my face and, while doing so, distinctly saw a hint of the forest green shining through my palm. And something else was different. My hands—previously full of middle-aged-man wrinkles, freckles, and small scars—were flawless in appearance. Even the tan line from my watch was gone. Everything seemed ... perfect.

I again shifted my gaze, this time hoping to find someone, anyone who could help me. *How did I get here? Where is everybody?* But I was totally

alone. I looked out across the lake and could observe no boat—no indication whatsoever of how I might have arrived at its banks. *Whoa, that's incredible.* As I looked over the water, my eyes seemed to possess a level of magnification I had never before experienced. I was able to discern minute details on the opposite shoreline. Despite that visual clarity, I could see no one.

Well, I can't stand here forever. I started exploring the terrain with my new and improved eagle eyes—looking for something, anything, that might hint at civilization. And then I saw it. In the tall grass that bordered the forest, there seemed to be a little-used trail. *Finally!* I immediately set out for the path, taking my first steps since the crash.

I stopped almost as quickly as I started. *What now?* I looked down at my feet; they were definitely there. But it was almost as if there was nothing on top of them. *I feel ... empty, like there's no weight on me.* I picked my right foot up off the ground and examined it carefully, rubbing it with both hands while I shifted my weight to the other. Other than the strange appearance of perfection, everything looked fine. *I'll deal with this later.*

I set out again for the trail, determined to get some answers.

5

The path wound itself around the forest for a time, and then took me directly into the woods. Instead of the darkness I expected under the canopy of trees, there was a faint glow from every living thing I saw. *Here we go again: more surprises.* And, sure enough, I noticed that my arms, hands, and feet had a similar sheen. *I must have missed that out in the sunlight. This is just great.* I made my way along the trail at a good clip, based on both my eagerness to get to the end and my near-weightless state.

After what seemed like a few minutes of walking, the path twisted and turned its way out of the forest. Emerging from the canopy, I encountered a charming meadow filled with spring flowers and soft grass. At the very center sat two white pods, only a few feet apart. They looked like vertically elongated eggs, with openings for someone to sit inside. I saw what appeared to be legs extending from one of the pods, clothed in a light, floral dress. *Thank you!*

“Hello! Can you help me, please?” I said, walking swiftly toward the pods. But there was no response. The bare feet beneath the dress, which were crossed and sitting casually atop the turf, did not move. *Really?* I quickened my pace to a run, nearly fell over trying to keep my balance, and finally reached the space between the pods. For the first time since my wreck, I clearly saw another human being. But she didn’t look like any adult woman I had ever seen. She was beautiful, every curve and contour of her unblemished face in total harmony. Not a strand of her dark brown hair was out of place. She wore a caring smile, which displayed perfectly straight

teeth. *Whoa.* She shifted her luminescent face upward and made eye contact with me.

“Mr. White,” she said calmly, “please, have a seat.” She gestured toward the empty pod and lowered her head in its general direction. “You probably have a few questions.”

“Yeah, maybe a couple.” *Understatement of the century.* I accepted her invitation and sat down in the pod. I couldn’t tell whether its shocking comfort was due to the plush padding or my newfound thinness.

“Well, don’t fret, we’ll get you all situated.” She shifted in her seat, the soft smile never leaving her face. “My name is Dawn, and it is my pleasure to give you an introduction of sorts and provide you with some basic information.”

An introduction? An introduction to what? “Thanks, I think.”

Dawn moved in her seat again, as if preparing to give a well-rehearsed speech. “Well, Mr. White, if you haven’t figured it out yet, you are very much dead.” She paused and kindly looked at me for a response.

This lady’s crazy. Absolutely stunning, but crazy. “That’s a bit hard to understand,” I responded, trying to sound measured, “especially since you and I are sitting here talking.”

“And yet, your physical body was just dropped off at the morgue after being pulverized by a locomotive.” She recrossed her feet and continued. “We are sitting here talking, Mr. White, because the part of you that thinks, the part of you that acts, the part of you that is really you could never be hurt by something like a speeding train.”

Can’t be true. Consciousness is a product of evolution; that’s been known for decades. “I’m sorry, but I don’t believe in any of that. There’s no such thing as a soul or a spirit. I must be sleeping in a hospital bed. Maybe I’m even in a coma.” *But what if I don’t wake up?* “This must be some kind of delusion.”

Dawn continued with patience, not at all frustrated by my protestations. “You’re not in a dream, Mr. White. You’re not in a coma; you’re not in a trance; you’re not hypnotized; and you’re not intoxicated or otherwise under the influence of some medication that would cause hallucinations. In fact, you are no longer tethered to the flesh. And you are seeing the world with a different set of eyes, a set of eyes not overlaid by the physical.”

“Can you prove it to me? How can I know you’re telling me the truth?”
This is impossible. And I’m not falling for it.

“I don’t need to prove it to you. You’ll know soon enough. But, did you happen to notice anything different as you walked along the path?”

“Like what?” I tried to buy time, not wanting to admit what she seemed to already know.

“Let’s not be coy, Mr. White. By now you’ve seen; you’ve spoken; you’ve walked. You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

“I will admit that things have been a bit ... strange.” *A bit?* “I expect that’s a product of whatever head trauma I experienced during the automobile accident.”

Dawn’s smile sharpened into a laugh. “You certainly experienced some head trauma; I’ll give you that much. But that old, wrinkled pile of meat isn’t going to be providing you with any more cognition, delusional or otherwise.” She paused, clasped her hands together, and continued. “But I don’t have time in my schedule to try and convince you of your newfound state. My assistant, who will be along shortly, can continue in that effort. I have three instructions to provide, and then I’ll get you on your way.”

“So you just want me to pretend I’m really dead?” *I can’t be dead!*

“Exactly!” she responded with enthusiasm. “Take it as a hypothetical. Once you’re convinced you’re really dead, you’ll remember these instructions and be right on your way.”

Great. My subconscious is making deals with itself. “Sure, I guess. This is all just some kind of fantasy in any event.”

“Go ahead and comfort yourself with that thought and I’ll continue.” She raised a perfect finger to her head and appeared to tap her earlobe twice. She then looked me squarely in the eyes and resumed her speech. “I am the Chair of the Atheist Welcoming Committee. My job is to help people like you acclimate to the World of the Dead. I’ve served on the Committee for the past 25 years, so I have a bit of experience in the matter.”

“The Atheist what?”

“The Atheist Welcoming Committee. You see, Mr. White, historically many of your peers have ... struggled ... when arriving in the World of the Dead. But I must congratulate you. Thus far you’ve kept your wits. I’ve seen many lose all sense of reason and whimper like animals when true reality has come crashing down upon them. But you, you’re doing a fine job thus far.”

I’m not sure this is a compliment. “Thanks, I think. So all you do is help people like me?”

Her never-ending smile broadened. “It’s certainly not all I do, but it’s quite a bit of what I do. Atheists, and everyone else for that matter, die every day. There are numerous atheist welcoming committees spread throughout the world to divvy up the acclimation work, but we all seem to be busier lately. Back to the instructions, though. I’m about out of time here.”

“Umm ... of course. Whatever you say.” *I should be waking up anytime now.*

“Excellent! Let’s first talk about that real brain of yours, Mr. White—the one you’re using now. It’s not inhibited by the frailties of the physical. If you haven’t already, you will soon notice that it’s a marvelous machine, marvelous beyond anything you could have ever imagined during your mortal existence. One of those marvels is your ability to remember everything in a shocking amount of detail.”

“What do you mean, ‘everything?’”

“I mean it in the fullest sense of the word, Mr. White. You will remember everything you experienced in mortality, and everything you experience here, in perfect clarity. For example, you read books in your former life. I even understand you wrote a few books. You will remember every word exactly, every smudge or smear of the printed text, every wrinkle in the corner of a page. Literally everything. And, as it turns out, there are some risks to that.”

“Like what? Eternal boredom?” *Am I seriously getting snarky with my own hallucination?*

“Quite the opposite. You will be so enamored by your unfailing ability to remember, that you may be tempted to ‘live’ inside those memories. Rather than embracing your new existence here, you might feel an impulse to escape to what you knew back then. It’s like watching a movie, but with a thousand times more detail. And we can’t have you living in the past, Mr. White. It can be a vicious waste of your time here, and expose you to danger.”

“So you don’t want me to remember things, but you’re telling me I’m going to remember everything? I guess I don’t see the risk.”

“That’s because you’re a natural skeptic. And I never said we don’t want you to remember anything. That would be absurd. Your memories are a great asset, and they should be used as you begin here. But don’t let them overcome you, Mr. White. Don’t be consumed by the past.”

I wasn’t expecting this. But what was I expecting? “Fine. I’ll try not to be consumed. I’m not sure I understand why it much matters.”

“Just trust me on this one. By the way, we will give you a week. One week in near isolation so that you can come to grips with your newfound memories. But mark the time well. And pace yourself as you remember. Don’t get trapped there.”

“Great. I’ll do my best.” *Trapped there?*

“Second: stay very close to your mentor over this first little while in the World of the Dead. He will show you around. He’s a veteran member of the Committee, and he was like you when he first arrived here.”

“Like me?”

“Of course I mean he was an atheist during the latter part of his mortality. And he has acclimated well and become an important contributor to society—which is exactly what we hope for you, Mr. White. So, listen to him. Take his advice. Heed his warnings. He will take you under his wing.”

Is she talking about real wings?

“And don’t hyperventilate; none of us have wings here. I was just using a well-known expression from the World of the Living, or at least it used to be. We are human beings, my boy.”

“Of course,” I responded. *Try to stay logical.* “What else would we be?”

“You’d be surprised,” she responded, rolling her eyes. “Many arrive here and expect winged angels and baby-faced cherubim. And they’re always trying to find pearly gates. We have welcoming committees to assist those individuals as well. But that’s easy work compared to what we’re about.”

“So, this isn’t heaven?” *As if.*

“Certainly not,” she responded, a furrowed brow replacing her smile for the first time. “If it were, you wouldn’t need a mentor to protect and train you. There are pockets of spectacular wickedness in the World of the Dead, Mr. White. Which, by the way, leads me to my final instruction.”

Spectacular wickedness? Never heard that one before.

“Beware of the neverborns,” she said with severity. Her pleasant demeanor was very much gone. “They will hunt you, especially given your prior status in the World of the Living. And if they can, they will attempt to

enlist and enslave you to their cause. Avoid them at all costs. They are liars, thieves, and scoundrels through and through.”

So maybe I'm in hell? “What do you mean by ‘the neverborns?’ And how am I supposed to avoid them?”

“Although there are endless debates about who they really are, the neverborns are just that, Mr. White. They were never born into the World of the Living. Unfortunately, they look just like those of us who once lived. No difference whatsoever! They can only be discerned by their lack of knowledge about mortality. Your mentor will tell you more. Do not trifle with them; do not underestimate them.”

“I guess I don’t understand,” I stammered out, somewhat in a daze. I felt a sense of nausea, but somehow more hollow inside. *Usually this is where the dream collapses and I wake up.*

“That’s okay, Mr. White. It’s a lot to take in. You’ve only been dead a few hours.” She suddenly stood from her chair and put her delicate hand on my shoulder. She was even more majestic at her full height. “But we have big hopes for you. Follow the instructions I provided, and you’ll be right on your way to good things.”

“Uh... okay,” I said, awkwardly leaving my seat and standing next to her. “Are we going somewhere now?”

“We are not,” she answered. She again tapped her earlobe and nodded her head, as if she were communicating with someone else. “But I will need to take my absence, as I have other work to attend to. Your mentor has arrived, and he will take it from here. Good luck, Mr. White!”

6

“Welcome to the World of the Dead. I’m Duck.”

I blinked hard, trying to get my bearings. *Where’s Dawn? Did he say “Duck?”* Dawn was very much nowhere to be found. In her place, a young man in his mid-20s with dark brown hair and a perfectly-manicured beard stood before me. *Another flawless human being.* He was dressed casually, wearing what appeared to be Levi’s and a flannel shirt. Like Dawn—and me—he wore no shoes.

“Got a name, newbie?” the man asked, flashing a sarcastic grin as he looked me over.

“Yes, I’m Garry. Garry White. What happened to Dawn?”

“Garry, eh?” He laughed a bit and stroked his beard, ignoring my question. “It’s a dated name for sure. I’d guess you were, what, born in the mid-1950s or so?”

“1978.” *He’s quite a bit different than Dawn.*

“Fascinating,” he replied, laughing again. “I was born in ‘77 and hardly knew anybody named Garry, unless they were old. Your parents must have been huge Gary Cooper fans. Well, good for them. Everyone needs a hero.”

“You couldn’t have been born in 1977. You don’t look a day over 25.” *I must be having another delusion.*

“Dude, get used to it. You don’t look a day over 25 either. Nobody here does. Your soul don’t age like your body. It’s a pristine machine, if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, a bit of protest in my tone. *He thinks I’m dead too.*

“So how’d you die, Garry?”

Yup. Here we go again. “I tried to tell the other nice lady; I can’t be dead. Dead people don’t talk to each other. And it doesn’t fit with my worldview. You’re just a figment of my imagination.”

“You’ve never imagined anything this amazing,” he laughed, gesturing to himself. “And I couldn’t care less about your ‘worldview.’ But go ahead, keep thinking you’re not dead. I don’t have time for that crap.”

That’s the same thing Dawn said, sort of. “Yeah, okay.”

“But seriously, tell me how you died. I promise I won’t laugh.”

I’m not dead! “I was driving in my car and—well—I got distracted. And I’m not entirely sure but I think I might have been hit by a train. And I’m positive I’ve got some kind of brain injury because everything since then has been crazy.” *He’s not going to believe me.*

He burst into laughter, rocking back and forth with his eyes closed. “Ah, that’s the best, dude. I love it! We’re going to have a lot of fun with that one.”

“What do you mean, a lot of fun?” *What’s funny about getting hit by a train?*

“Well, I mean, I’m going to have a lot of fun with that at your expense.” He put his hand on my shoulder, as if he wanted me to follow him. “Like I said before, I’m Duck. I’m the mentor Dawn told you about. And I got news for you, Garry. Your soul is now property of the A.W.C. I’ll be taking care of you for a while—making sure you don’t do too much stupid stuff; showing you around; teaching you the rules. So let’s get going.” He started walking away from the egg-shaped pods without another word. Looking around, I saw nobody else in the meadow. I chased after him, almost in desperation.

“Wait!” I yelled. “Where are you going?”

“**W**hat?” answered Duck, turning around. “You think we’re going to hang out in this field for the rest of eternity? This is just some quaint little landing spot, so people don’t freak out too much when they first get here.”

“I don’t know what to expect,” I answered in exasperation. “I’m not even sure any of this is real.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that,” he said, turning back around and beckoning me to follow. “I’m taking you into the city. That’s where your living quarters will be. You’re going to spend the next few days there, freaking out about everything you remember from mortality and still questioning whether you’re really dead. You’re gonna love it.”

This guy’s kind of a jerk. “Yeah, sounds wonderful.” I felt in my pants pockets and, predictably, couldn’t feel my wallet. “But, I’m not sure how I’m going to pay for a hotel. I seem to have misplaced my credit cards and ID.”

“You don’t need any of that garbage,” answered Duck, again stopping and turning around to face me. “The A.W.C. has a nice place all set aside just for you. Cabinets fully loaded with plenty of snacks. A good view of the city. All the modern amenities to make you feel right at home.”

“Snacks? Everyone’s been telling me I’m dead. What would I need snacks for?”

He laughed at me again, a knowing look in his eye. “Take that new glowing finger of yours and stick it in your mouth. Don’t look at me like that; just do it. There you go. Can you feel those perfectly straight, bright white teeth? Feel that tongue? You have an esophagus, too. And a stomach.

Dude, you're still going to eat in the World of the Dead. That's not going to change. So we're giving you some snacks—free of charge!”

“I have to eat here? Am I going to die again if I don't eat? You can die twice?” *What am I talking about?*

“Nah, you're not going to die again, even if you're stupid enough not to eat the snacks. You're an immortal now, dude.” He paused, one side of his mouth curling up into a knowing grin. “Can I just say how much I love the word ‘snacks?’ I can't get over the way it sounds. ‘Hey, Garry. Want some snacks? Let's go down to the store and pick up some snacks.’ It's pretty much my favorite word.”

“Yeah, it's a pretty good one.” *The hallucination is just getting weird now.*

“Okay, back to business, Garry. We're going to walk through this trail for a bit, and when we get toward the end, I'm going to put my hand on your arm. And I'm not trying to invade your personal space or anything like that. It's just to make sure we make it to the city.”

“Sure, yeah. You're my mentor.” *What does putting his hand on my arm have anything to do with going to the city?*

We entered another forest trail on the opposite side of the meadow. Just like before, the trees lit up under the canopy with a faint glow. My guide didn't stay silent for long.

“So what'd you do for work before you were unceremoniously hit by that train?”

“I'm a trial lawyer,” I said, making sure to speak in the present tense. *Maybe he'll give me a bit of respect if he knows what I do for a living.*

“You were a lawyer,” he said, making eye contact with me as he corrected my response. “But not anymore.”

“Well don't they have lawyers in the ‘World of the Dead,’ as you call it?” *They have to have lawyers here.*

“Sure, in a manner of speaking. But that’s a job for long dead—*not* newbies like you.”

I’m not even going to bother. “What about you? What’s your job?”

“We’ve been over this, Garry. I work for the A.W.C. I’m your mentor. Try to keep up, okay?” As he finished speaking, he was suddenly a few yards ahead of me on the well-worn trail and laughing again. I picked up my pace to an off-balance run and was soon by his side again.

“I mean, what did you do in the land of the living?” *He’s probably going to lie and tell me he was a neurosurgeon or something.*

“Those were the days, Garry. Right there at the end I was pretty much an aristocrat, except I had to work. Oh, the responsibilities of being a fry-cook. Right before I died, I made french fries.” He stopped, turned, and looked at me intently. “To pay the bills, I secured employment in frying french fries. I cooked them for a living.”

My mentor was a fry guy?

“I’ll tell you more about it later,” added Duck. “We’re here.”

Spread out before us was more forest, but the trail abruptly ended. “I don’t get it,” I said. “The path just ends here.”

“It’s time for that awkward arm touching I told you about,” said Duck. “And try to keep your eyes open. It’s a trip the first few times you do it.”

Without any additional warning, he grabbed my arm. Instantaneously, we shot up into the air through a clearing in the treetops.

8

I *am going to die!* “What are you doing?” I screamed in terror. “And how are you doing it?” Duck clutched my arm with firmness, but—somehow—the pressure from his grip still felt hollow. I looked below my airborne feet and could see the deep green forest roof below. Although everything told me I would fall at any moment, we sat stationary in the air.

“Forgot to mention,” said Duck, looking out into the distance of the blue sky, “you can fly now, dude. We’ll teach you how later. But for now, just hold on.”

So it is a dream; what a relief!

“Here we go!” he added, and away we went. We shot through the sky at an incredible speed, so fast that the ground beneath us almost seemed to blur. My fear soon subsided, and gave way to a sense of euphoria. I could feel what seemed like wind on my face, but it wasn’t nearly as loud or intense as I expected. It was more like a soft breeze on a spring day.

“This is incredible!” I said, unable to keep the thought to myself. “Do you always travel like this?” *As soon as I have that out-of-control feeling, I’ll wake up.*

“Nah,” answered Duck, his eyes fixed intently on our path through the sky, “I usually just walk. But the welcoming stations are so far outside of the cities that we typically fly. By the way,” he said, briefly looking toward me, “we’re not even going that fast.”

“How is that possible?”

“Dude, you’re a luminescent now. If you didn’t notice under the trees, you actually emit light. There’s more to you than photons, for sure, but the laws of physics interact with us a bit differently than the living.”

“I don’t understand,” I muttered, still wowed by the experience. *And I haven’t woken up yet. What’s that ahead?*

“Yeah, I’m not a physicist, bro,” said Duck with impatience. “But I’m betting your mom didn’t explain the science behind walking when you were a toddler. Same deal here. You figure out the balance of it all, and then you’re golden. We’re almost there.”

I could see a city off in the distance. My eagle eyes allowed me to focus on an incredible amount of visual detail. It was an almost never-ending labyrinth of tall buildings, pathways, and people. People everywhere. *That’s a big city.*

“What’s it called?” I asked. We continued to effortlessly speed toward its borders.

“I call it Newbie-Ville,” answered Duck with a smirk. “But its proper name is Newfoundland. It’s where most of the new deads live. Well, the new deads from around here anyway.”

“Never heard of it.” *There must be millions of people down there.*

“Not surprising,” replied Duck, shaking his head. “You’ve never been dead before. We’re about to land. Keep your legs straight as we descend. No need to flail them around like an idiot. I’ll take care of everything.”

9

As we flew into the city, Duck squinted hard and slightly adjusted our trajectory. A few seconds later, he went from a flying Superman pose to a posture similar to sitting in a chair. Although I didn't do anything—at least not consciously—my weightless body seemed to follow right along. Through some mechanism I couldn't perceive, Duck slowed us down gradually until we were right above a cobblestone sidewalk. I stretched out my legs, as instructed, and experienced a landing so soft I barely felt it.

"See, nothing to worry about," said Duck, letting go of my arm the moment we landed. "And good job not kicking your legs around like a toddler. You'd be surprised how many people do that."

"That was amazing. I can't wait to do it again." *I'd like to do it again right now. I've never actually landed during a dream.*

Duck nodded in agreement. "Yeah, it's pretty cool the first few times you do it. But it gets boring pretty quick. Just like anything else." He looked up toward the sky and made a wide gesture with his right arm. "Welcome to Newbie-Ville, Garry. Your place is right inside this building."

We started traveling down the sidewalk, making our way toward an entrance to the high-rise. I couldn't help but notice several people giving me knowing glances as they passed by. Similar to Dawn and Duck, everyone looked to be 20-something and in flawless condition. *Where are the old people?*

We walked through the main entrance to the building and approached a red-headed woman behind the greeting counter. *Seriously, I'm going to*

develop a complex. “Welcome to The Diamond Hotel, serving the needs of the newly dead. How can I help you today?”

“Check in for one Garry White,” answered Duck. “He’ll need one of the A.W.C. rooms, please.”

“I’m happy to help with that,” replied the woman. “And are we your first stop, Mr. White?”

First stop? “Well,” I answered, unsure how to respond, “I talked to this nice lady in a meadow. And then, uhh, Duck brought me here.”

“Wonderful,” she said, entering information into a screen before her. “We are definitely your first stop then. How did you die, sir?”

“He was mowed over by a train,” laughed Duck as he answered on my behalf. “Tragic event, really, but nice and quick.”

She continued working on my reservation without responding. But it seemed like she started smirking after Duck told her about my train. “We have a wonderful room on the 27th floor, which will do nicely. There are stairs on the west end of the building for the newly dead. The room is well-stocked with snacks, water, and other wants.”

“Snacks,” repeated Duck, giving me a knowing grin. “Perfect.”

She went on. “I expect you don’t want him accepting any other visitors over the next week or so?”

“Right on,” answered Duck. “You know the drill.”

It sounds like they’re throwing me into a prison. “What am I going to do here for a week?” I protested, mostly to Duck.

“You’re going to get settled, Garry,” answered Duck. “And don’t worry; it will go by much faster than you think.” He turned his attention back to the front desk lady. “What room number?”

“2754,” she responded. “Please do enjoy your stay, Mr. White. We’ll be here if you need anything.”

“Thank you,” I mumbled. *I’m going to need something for boredom.*

“Right this way,” said Duck, once again beckoning me to follow him. We left the front desk and walked down the main hotel corridor. We approached a shiny metallic door with a bright button to its side. Duck pushed it with deliberation and the door slid open, revealing a well-lit corridor that appeared to ascend to the top floor of the building.

“I don’t get it,” I said, stepping inside and looking around the empty space. “Where is the elevator?”

“Remember, Garry,” answered Duck, taking my arm again without warning. “People in the World of the Dead can fly.” We shot up through the empty shaft, arriving at the 27th floor almost instantaneously. “Here’s our exit!” He said, pushing another bright button as we stood motionless in the air. Once the doors opened, Duck moved us forward and immediately let go of me.

“Oh yeah,” I stammered. “Thanks for the lift.” *I gotta learn to do that.*

We followed the nicely carpeted hallway until we arrived at room 2754. The marble door had a carefully manicured sign that read: “Reserved for Guests of the A.W.C.” I looked around and noticed that all the adjacent rooms had similar signs.

Duck waved his hand over the door handle, which resulted in what sounded like an unlocking mechanism. He twisted the handle, pushed open the door, and motioned for me to enter. “Home, sweet home, newbie,” he said. “And believe you me, it’s as cozy as they come.”

“Thanks,” I muttered. *A week just sitting here? What a strange thing to conjure up in my mind.* I looked around and instantly noticed that something was missing. “Where do I sleep?” I asked. “There’s no bed in here.”

“You don’t sleep, dude,” answered Duck. He entered what appeared to be the kitchen area and started opening the cupboards. “One of the perks of

being dead. None of that wasted time. Sleep is a physical necessity. Mind if I have some of your snacks, Garry?”

“Go ahead. I’m not hungry. And I know what a fan you are.” *I’m not going to sleep?* “But I still have eyelids,” I protested.

He unwrapped some processed food, popped something that sounded crunchy into his mouth, and started chewing. “Yeah. So?”

“When I asked you about eating food, you told me I still had a tongue and a stomach, so of course I would eat. Well, I have eyelids. I can feel them. So why don’t I sleep?”

“The eyelids are for closing your eyes,” answered Duck with a laugh, apparently amused by my attempt at logic. “And that does happen here. But sleeping? Not a thing. If you want to lie on the floor and close your eyes for eight hours a day, be my guest.”

Duck finished his snacks and sat down on the sofa. I stood in the room awkwardly, looking at all the furnishings. It seemed to be exactly what I would expect in a normal hotel room—minus the bed. *So what now?*

“Parting is sweet sorrow,” said Duck, interrupting my visual inspection, “but I’m going to leave soon. A few tips before I go.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t forget what Dawn told you about the memories,” said Duck, crossing his legs and getting comfortable on the couch. “It’s going to be a real trip. This room is going to get dull in about 15 minutes; you’re going to eat a snack—don’t worry, I left you some; and then you’re going to start diving into your mind. Remember, don’t get lost in there. I recommend you set a timer—every clock in here has one. When the timer goes off, get out of those memories and take a breather. People get lost in there, so be careful.”

“It just doesn’t make sense to me,” I answered. *I’ve been able to remember my whole life. Why would this be different?* “And I don’t understand the risk.”

“Just trust me. I’ll come back to check on your tomorrow. If I find you rocking back and forth in the corner with drool dripping out of your mouth, I’ll know you didn’t listen to me. Set a timer; take breaks. Remembering is fine. But re-living everything for eternity will make you crazy. Believe me, there are plenty of people here trapped in the past. It can get ugly.”

“Got it. I’ll set the blasted timer.”

“Have some fun with it though. Don’t go right to the worst moments of your life. Check out some cool stuff you couldn’t have possibly remembered. Keep it positive if you can.”

“And stay positive. Check.” *Sounds like a self-help book.*

Duck paused and considered me with a furrow in his brow. The odd look soon passed. “The only other thing to watch out for is any kind of visitor. Nobody gets in here but me. No one posing as a housekeeper, no one pretending to be your mom, no one offering more snacks. Only me. Got it?”

He’s paranoid. “Everyone keeps telling me I’m dead.”

“You are dead.”

“Then why should I worry about seeing anyone but you? What’s the big deal? You’re treating me like a child.”

“You are a child—a child in this world at least.”

I don’t have to put up with this. I snorted in his general direction and shook my head.

“You’re right; you can’t die. But there are things far worse than death,” said Duck, getting serious. “And that last thing you want is to get snatched up by the neverborns before you even admit you’re really dead. This place can be dangerous, especially for people like you.”

“Then why put a sign on the door, announcing to the world that I’m an atheist? And by the way, nothing about this hallucination has changed my mind.”

“It takes a village, Garry,” said Duck, going back to his sarcastic smile. “This hotel, these rooms, Dawn, me, the rest of the A.W.C.—we are only interested in your safety. That’s our job. And we lose too many to the neverborns. So don’t let anybody in here. Nobody! And don’t go out wandering.”

“Fine,” I relented with frustration. “I won’t let anybody in. I won’t go anywhere. None of this is real anyway, so it won’t matter.”

“You’re about to figure out that it’s real,” said Duck, standing up to leave. “Oh so very real.”

“And how are you going to prove it to me?” *I want proof.*

“You’ll prove it to yourself, Garry.” Duck pointed at me, sticking his index finger into my chest. “Don’t leave the room. Don’t let anybody in. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He opened the door, waved goodbye while his back was turned, and was gone.

I was alone.

10

You'll prove it to yourself. Duck's words kept rattling around my hyper-mind as I sat motionless in the hotel room. *But where are the angels, or the demons? Where are the harps and clouds, or where is the fire and suffering? This isn't like anything I've ever heard of the afterlife. But I did fly. And I didn't wake up.*

The internal debate continued for a time. *This must be a delusion. Flying is a classic dream sequence. Everyone knows that.* I finally moved about the room, comforting myself with my old skeptical friend: doubt. I walked into the kitchen, finding the snacks Duck had left behind. I opened a small package and popped something that looked like half a granola bar into my mouth. Like everything else, it felt nearly weightless and hollow. There was a slight taste to it, but it was almost indiscernible—like I was eating popcorn with no salt or butter. *Here's something Duck was wrong about.* Not really hungry, I laid the uneaten food on the counter and continued to explore.

There was a small bathroom that looked like almost every other hotel bathroom I had ever seen. *Interesting. It feels like I've been here for hours, but I definitely don't need to go.* And then I saw myself in the mirror for the first time. *Who is that?* I stared in disbelief at my flawless face. There was no blemish, no untoward wrinkle, no suggestion whatsoever of aging. I looked at least twenty years younger, but somehow better. My eyes were a sharp blue-green hue, and seemed to even emit faint light. Although I hadn't touched my sandy brown hair, it sat perfectly styled atop my head. My hairline was obviously lower, and the bit of flab that used to inhabit my waist was definitely gone. It was me in that mirror, but an upgraded version. *I never realized my subconscious was so vain. I look like a Ken doll.*

I shook my head and left the bathroom, but couldn't help another glance in the mirror before I exited. I sat down on the couch and let my mind wander. *I can't be dead. This can't be real.* And then the mega-brain hit me for the first time. In my desperation to prove to myself that I hadn't been killed by a speeding train, I went back to those last few moments in my car before impact. But the level of detail was astonishing. Not only could I remember the vague tidbits that typically inhabit the mortal mind, but I was able to discern each particular moment. Every wrinkle of the leather steering wheel was visible to my mind's eye; every thought as I approached the guard rails—at a level much deeper than words can express—was apparent to me; every grating sound of the initial impact echoed as if I could hear it in slow motion. I could even pause the scene, as if I had the ability to “look around” my own memories. *This is different. This is new.*

And suddenly it was dark outside my hotel window. After realizing the awesome power of my recollection, I had decided to explore other events in my life, to see if the level of detail was the same. I spent some time at my wedding, the births of my boys, the day I passed the bar, and the publication of my first book. It was like I could live those moments all over again, but with even more clarity than I experienced while actually living them. So I dug deeper. I went back to my teenage years: the first time I rode a motorcycle, night skiing with teenage friends, telephone calls with high school sweethearts. I could remember every word that was said on the ski lift, every crack in my pre-pubescent voice over the phone, every wobble of the dirt bike's handlebar. It was astonishing.

But as the sun had gone down, the mind dives got darker too. I jumped to a shouting match that had essentially ended my marriage. And I agonized about why I had said what I said, why I hadn't had the ability to slow it down and think a little more clearly—an ability I seemed to now possess. That divorce decree I received in the mail loomed large, the black ink on the page

that took my sons away for all but the occasional nights and weekends. But even more horrifying than the words were the thoughts and actions—the lusts for fleeting pleasure that had crowded out reason, and duty, and promises. I went back to those moments of decision, hoping against hope that I could somehow change them, like wishing a tragic character in a movie would make a different choice on second viewing. But I was helpless to intervene. The memories of my broken marriage and various indiscretions were more intense than getting pulverized by a locomotive.

An almost noiseless knock at the door pulled me from the wreckage.

11

“Hello,” I said, stirring from my waking nightmare and heading toward the locked entryway. “Who’s there?” I spoke through the door, remembering Duck’s stern warnings.

“Just a fellow with like-minded beliefs, hoping to help you make some sense of everything.” It was a man’s voice, extremely soft spoken. I looked through the peephole. Sure enough, he had the same fashion model look as everyone else. Although he was only dimly lit by the hallway light—and what appeared to be his own sheen—I could see that he wore a welcoming expression.

“Are you from the Committee?” *But Duck told me not to let anybody in.*

“No, certainly not,” he answered, still maintaining his friendly tone. “We don’t incarcerate people like they’ve done to you. I’m here to help.”

“Help what?” *It does kind of feel like I’ve been incarcerated.*

“Well, first of all, help you get out from under the thumb of the A.W.C. They’re not who you think they are. They’re liars.”

“They told me I’m dead,” I said, still speaking from behind the door.

“And what do you think?” he answered, almost too quickly.

“Well, I know I’m not dead. I’m standing here talking to you, aren’t I?” *The dead don’t talk. The dead don’t do anything. They’re dead.*

This time he paused, as if he were thinking something through. He finally spoke. “You need to trust your instincts. The A.W.C. is trying to control you. I’m here to break you out. Can we talk face to face?”

This guy's a creeper. "Not sure about that. Why are you here in the middle of the night? I don't consider myself paranoid, but it's kind of a life rule not to hang out with strangers in the dark."

"The A.W.C. was with you earlier. And they get violent if someone gets in their way. This was my first chance to try and help."

Uh huh. "We're communicating fine. Just tell me what you want."

"Come with me. I'll get you out of here. And I'll help you get back on the road to recovery."

"What? Are you a doctor?" *No stethoscope. No little black doctor's bag at his side. No white coat. Can't be a doctor.*

"No, but I can get you to one. I can make sure you get some help with your ... sickness."

"What sickness? Who are you?" *He's trying to scam me into something.*

"I'm just like you. The A.W.C. tried to imprison me for my beliefs, or my lack of belief. But I was able to break free. Trust me. They're religious zealots. And they'll say anything to control you."

No doubt religion is a form of mind control. But neither Duck nor Dawn even mentioned religion. And this midnight traveler is sketchy. "Leave me your name and number and I'll contact you if I think I need help."

"That's not going to work," he said, a slight tremble in his voice. He seemed a bit disheveled for the first time. "We have to go now. There's no time to wait. They might even be watching us right now."

I instinctively turned around to see if there were cameras in the corners of the ceilings, but saw nothing but simple crown molding. "What do you think they're going to do to me? What's the threat?"

"Like any cult," he answered, this time with obvious rancor in his voice, "they're going to indoctrinate you. One more minute with those extremists and they could win you over."

I purposely laughed out loud so he could hear. “Look, I’m not gullible. I’m a rational human being. I’ve written books on this. I can spend a minute with anyone without losing my ability to think. Have a good night.” I left the entryway and headed back to the couch. Frankly, I was a bit freaked out.

“You’re making a mistake!” he yelled. “You need to trust me.”

“Like I said,” yelling back, “leave your name and number and if I need help, I’ll contact you.”

He didn’t respond. And there was no indication as to whether he was still standing outside the door or had left. I watched the door intently for a time, but couldn’t discern anything. I glanced at the clock on the wall, which indicated it was almost three in the morning. *What a psycho. Why aren’t I tired at all? Duck said I wouldn’t sleep. My eyes aren’t even heavy.*

I continued my stare at the door, but the mega-mind started wandering back into vivid memories. Just as I was about to submerge, I heard a faint scratching at the door. It sounded like cat claws quietly grinding against metal.

“Are you still there?” I shouted. “Get outta here, freak!”

“You have to come with me!” Now he was in a rage. “You don’t know what you’re doing!”

Tell me about it. I picked up the phone and dialed zero. A new voice answered. “How can I help you, Mr. White?”

“There’s some weirdo outside my door. He won’t leave me alone. Do you have some kind of security that can escort him out of the building?”

“Of course, sir,” replied the man on the other end of the line. “Thank you for alerting us to this intruder. Please ensure that you don’t let him in the room. I’ll send somebody up to collect him right away.”

“Thank you.” I turned my attention back to the door. “Hey, freakjob. Hotel security is sending somebody up here to deal with you.”

But there was no response. It seemed I was alone.

12

“Who is it?” I shouted, emerging from another mind dive to a knock at the door. It was morning. Throughout the night, I had not experienced one moment of drowsiness—not one thought of sleep. I had been too busy exploring memories I never knew I had.

“Your best friend,” responded the voice. “Sir Duck, the Benevolent.”

It better not be the creeper. I walked to the door and looked through the peephole. Sure enough, there was my “mentor.” I quickly opened the door and invited him in without a word.

Duck entered and looked around the hotel room. “Yup. Looks about right. No sign of food or drink, other than that snack wrapper.” He turned and looked at me with a twinkle in his eye. “How about a nice glass of Tang?”

“Uhh... sure,” I replied. *They have Tang here?*

“So, it’s not really Tang, but it’s the best they could come up with here in Dead World. Ingredients aren’t quite the same, but you work with what you got.” Duck walked into the kitchen and started preparing my morning tonic. “So how’d it go last night? Re-live your first t-ball game? Maybe visited Disneyland a couple of times? You get to skip the lines when you’re just remembering. Pretty sweet.”

“No, nothing like that.” *T-ball was miserable. That red-faced coach always yelling at me.* “But I checked out my wedding, and graduations. And then I watched some of the biggest failures in my life. So that was nice. It was pretty much horrible.”

“Yeah, it’s normal,” said Duck, stirring my Tang with a spoon and handing me a cold glass. The liquid was almost orange, but looked watered down. “I told you; try to focus on the good stuff for now. No reason to get bogged down with all the bad, at least not yet.”

I took a sip of the drink. It was basically tasteless, with only the slightest hint of citrus. *This is horrible. He must have skimped on the powder.* “Good advice. But I didn’t do that the whole time. I was actually in the womb when you showed up. That was a trip.”

“Really?” said Duck, raising an eyebrow at me as he sat down on the couch. “Usually takes the newbies a few days to think about that one. Kinda cool, huh? Hearing your parents talk while you’re underneath that warm blanket.” Based on the far off look in his eyes, I could tell he was remembering the same thing as he spoke.

“It was ... shocking,” I said, sitting down on the opposite side of the room. “And the strangest thing was that—once I remembered it—everything about it was familiar.”

“Not strange at all. You lived it before, so of course it was familiar. Your meat brain just forgot about it after you started toddling around. But your real mind never forgets. Never.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

He laughed and shifted in his seat. “Well, it will change your political views in a hurry; that’s for sure.”

What’s that supposed to mean? “There’s something else that happened last night.”

“Oh,” answered Duck, sitting up in his seat. “Do tell.”

“Somebody visited me. I followed your advice. I didn’t let him in. At first he was really friendly. But when he didn’t get his way he started screaming at me.”

“He wanted you to go with him somewhere? Said we had you locked up in a prison?”

“Exactly!” *He must have known this was going to happen. Maybe he sent him?*

“Pretty brazen,” mused Duck, leaning back into the couch. “Coming to the Diamond and knocking on your door like that. They must see you as a prize.”

“Who are ‘they’? What are you talking about?”

“We’ve been over this, Garry. The neverborns. I told you they’d come. But that was aggressive even for them, to try and win you over on the very first night. Must have something to do with your prior status back in the land of the living.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” *Not sure I had much status.*

“I’ve been doing some research on you, and I understand you wrote some fairly popular books on atheism: ‘The Delusion of the Divine,’ ‘Reason in the Modern Age,’ and my favorite title, ‘Confessions of a True Believer.’ You had a few followers in Meat Land, and the neverborns are hoping you will join up and attract some of those same people here. This isn’t complicated.”

“How do you know about my books?” *Of course he would know. This entire hallucination is a projection from me.*

“Unfortunately, my own noble demise occurred long before they were published.” Duck stood up and clapped his hands together. “But I did a bit of study when Dawn assigned me to work with you. Fascinating works, Garry. Total nonsense. But fascinating. You should be proud.”

“Are you going somewhere?” Duck was again heading toward the door.

“We are going somewhere. I need to take you over to the registration office. We need to get your date and time of death all papered up, sign some bureaucratic forms, wait in line for a while. Thrilling stuff.”

“I thought I had to stay here an entire week.” *That’s what Dawn said.*

“We mostly want you to stay here for a week. But the neverborns weren’t telling you the truth. This little hotel suite isn’t a prison. And we’ve got stuff to do. So let’s get going. We don’t want to end up in line behind all the car wreck fatalities.”

“The what?”

“Just a little joke.” Duck led the way out of the hotel room and slammed the door behind me. “Oh, and by the way, decide if you want a different name or not.”

“A different name?”

“Yeah, do you want to continue being Garry White, or do you want a new title? In Meat Land, your parents named you—I presume. Here, you get to name yourself. So give it some thought.”

Name myself. The next thing I knew, Duck had me by the arm and we were flying down the empty elevator shaft.

13

Other than all the gorgeous, glowing people everywhere, the registration center seemed to operate just like any regular bureaucratic office. We entered the building, were immediately handed a number, and sat down to wait our turn.

“There are this many new dead people?” I asked, somewhat shocked by the number of individuals walking in and out of the building. Almost everybody in the waiting area seemed to be sitting next to a mentor.

“Yup,” answered Duck, looking bored as he sat next to me. “Depends on the month, but about 8,000 fleshheads die every day, just in your good ol’ U.S. of A. Obviously, they’re not all here. But there isn’t a registration center for every little Podunk town either.”

Your United States? “So, what country are we in? This isn’t the U.S.?”

“Everything is set up differently here in Dead Land, but I’ll tell you more about that later. You’ll end up asking me five thousand questions and I’d rather you just took in the scene here.” Duck nodded his head and extended his arms, gesturing to the entire room. “Know what I mean?”

Nope. “Fine. I’ll ask you later.”

We sat in silence for a time, and I couldn’t help but eavesdrop on many of the conversations taking place in the room. The predominant theme was one of extreme joy and relief. Many of those in the waiting area seemed to know their mentors well, as if they were having a reunion of sorts. And nearly all were discussing how good they felt.

“Why does everyone else seem to know their mentors?” I finally asked Duck. *And why would I be stuck with complete strangers?*

“Now we’ve come to it,” he said, always with that same sarcastic smile. “And it only took you a couple of minutes. Very nice! Most people are mentored by a family member, a former spouse, even a close friend occasionally—especially if it’s well-known they will be departing the World of the Living soon. Although they don’t look it,” added Duck, shifting his gaze and surveying the room, “most of the people here lived much longer in mortality than you did. And their deaths weren’t surprise endings, like you had with that train.”

“So they have a different welcoming committee?”

Duck shifted in his seat and looked at me intently. “Look, Garry, most people don’t need any welcoming committee. Dear old mom, dad, hubby, or wifey, sometimes even their own kids, take care of them. But some of us—and I say ‘us’ because I was one of them—need a more specialized introduction to Dead World. Plus, when you are living one second and suddenly hit by a train the next, notifying the ‘next of kin’ can get complicated. Not always, but sometimes.”

Sounds like I got a raw deal. “So, my mom died a while back. And instead of seeing her, I get you and Dawn?”

“Yup, and you and she are way better off for it—especially your mom. Atheists can be like wild bulls in the china shop of Dead Land, Garry. Not always, but they often have insane freak-outs that cause too many problems. Most of the people you see here always expected something like this after they died, so they don’t have a freak-out. Is this making any sense?”

“Seems like there are a lot of assumptions built into these committees.”

“Oh yeah, a lot of assumptions built on a lot of experience.”

So where is my mom? And everyone else I knew that died? “And why are they all so relieved?” I asked, not looking toward Duck. I kept my eyes on the ground. I was determined to be upset that I was getting a different experience.

“Until just a few hours ago, most of these people were living with intense pain,” explained Duck. “You never got old, newbie. Neither did I. But by all accounts it totally sucks. You ever wonder why old people walk all bent over and slow?”

“Sure,” I shrugged my shoulders. “They’re old. That’s the deal.”

“Well, it’s not just because they’re old. It’s because of pain. It hurts to stand up straight. It hurts to walk. It hurts to live. And when they die, the release from that pain is almost shocking. It brings a sort of ecstasy. At least for a while.”

A while? “I guess I can understand that.”

“Number 2754,” said a woman’s voice over the intercom system, “proceed to station 12 for processing.”

I stood and headed toward my destination, my mentor following close behind.

14

“Prior name?” said the man on the other side of the glass without feeling or discernible thought. He appeared to be in perfect physical health, but wore an expression of abject boredom.

“Prior name?” I asked, seeking clarification. My confusion seemed to annoy him.

“The name by which you were known in the World of the Living,” he clarified, never taking his eyes from the screen off to his right.

“My name is Garry White, first name with two R’s, last name like the color.”

“Manner of death?” He spoke in perfect monotone.

This guy’s the one who seems dead. “Well, a couple of days ago I was involved in a motor vehicle accident with a train. I’ve been told that it killed me.” I looked toward Duck; he chuckled at my continued resistance to the idea that I was a dead man.

The bureaucrat also smiled, apparently taking some pleasure. “Death by train, eh?” he commented. “That’s unfortunate. Contact information?”

“I’m staying at the Diamond Hotel, for a week I think they told me. From there, I don’t know where I’ll go. I haven’t been able to find my cell phone, but I can give you my mobile number if that helps.”

The bureaucrat snorted. “Your phone number is certainly unnecessary. Make sure you inform the registration office when you leave the Diamond. We’ll need up to date information about your location.”

“Why?” I challenged the man. “What does it matter?” I saw Duck silently laughing from the corner of my eye.

“You’re now a citizen of Newfoundland,” he answered, never raising his voice or actually looking at me. “Even if that’s temporary, we still need to document your information. Nobody lives off the grid in the World of the Dead. It’s illegal.”

“Nobody?” asked Duck, with some meaning in his tone.

“Nobody who came from the World of the Living,” responded the bureaucrat. “Additionally, it’s important to register so that your next of kin are able to locate you—should any of them desire to do so.”

Should they desire. “Okay, so I guess I’ll tell them when I leave.”

The man on the other side of the desk said nothing in response. He punched a few more buttons and presented me with another monotone question. “What would you like to be known by?”

Oh yeah. Duck said I get to name myself. “Atticus,” I said with resolve. Duck pursed his lips and shook his head somewhat approvingly.

“Any last name?” asked the bureaucrat, taking zero interest in my name selection.

I looked at Duck, who shrugged his shoulders. “No. Just Atticus.”

The man finished typing and handed me a small case. “This is your personal communication device. Try not to lose it, as obtaining a replacement will require you to make another trip to the registration office.”

I clearly need to avoid that. I picked up the case and held it in the palm of my hand. It had no discernible weight. “Great. How do I use it?”

“There are instructions inside the packaging, Mr. Atticus. Is there anything else I can do today to help you with your registration needs?” He continued his hollow stare into the monitor before him.

“Well, none that I can think of.” I turned to Duck. “Anything else?”

“Nope,” responded Duck. “You’ve survived your first government interaction.”

The bureaucrat spoke to me one last time. “Enjoy your time in the World of the Dead. We wish you the best.” With that, he placed an “On Break” sign in front of him and pulled down a curtain so we could no longer see him.

“Thanks,” I muttered.

Duck and I left the registration office and started walking back toward the Diamond. “That guy was a real downer,” I commented. “He may be the best proof so far that I’m actually dead.”

“Every man dies,” replied Duck, “not every man truly lives.”

I think I’ve heard that quote before. “So what’s the deal with the ‘personal communication device?’ Is it like a cell phone?”

“Well, I guess. You stick it in your ear and use it to talk to people. It can also provide you with information about where things are, give you directions, stuff like that.”

“So it’s exactly like a cell phone.”

“I died before cell phones could be used for anything more than talking. So I guess it might be like the cell phones you’re used to. I would imagine it’s way better; our tech is pretty sweet here. But how should I know? Stick it in your ear, read the directions, and that’s it.”

Alrighty then. “So what now?”

“Now, Atticus, we go back to your prison so you can do some more mind dives and learn to play with your new ‘cell phone.’”

“My mind dives got a little dark last night. Maybe I shouldn’t do it anymore.”

“Get it out of your system, and stay positive. A little self-deception won’t hurt you—at least not much.”

“Okay, boss,” I laughed. “You got it. But one more question for today: if people in Dead Land can fly, why are there roads and vehicles?”

“Well, dead dude, even though you’ll learn to fly soon enough, you’ve still only got two arms. You still need something to carry your crap around in. Plus, who doesn’t like a good road trip?”

15

“**A**nd how many people live in the World of the Dead?” I sat alone in my room at the Diamond, asking the device I had received question after question.

“The World of the Dead is inhabited by approximately one hundred eight billion people,” answered the soothing, female voice inside my right ear. I had implanted the device with no difficulty whatsoever. And as Duck had said, I was soon unable to discern it was inside my ear. *Sweet tech for sure.*

“That’s a lot of people,” I commented. The voice said nothing in response. Unlike the virtual assistants I had used prior to my run-in with the train, this one never seemed to get confused—so long as I asked a coherent question.

There was a subtle vibration in my ear. I picked up the instructions, which informed me that someone was trying to contact me. I double tapped my ear lobe and heard Dawn’s voice for the first time since our encounter near the lake. “Good morning, Atticus. I’m coming by with a few other members of the committee today. It’s most likely just for introductions, and to give you a minor break from your memory work.”

“Uhhh... great,” I replied, looking around the room and soon realizing there was nothing for me to tidy up. “I’ll look forward to seeing you again.”

“Excellent,” replied Dawn, her voice full of enthusiasm. “Please come to the door and let us in. We’re already here.”

Why even call? “Got it. Okay. On my way.” I went to the door and checked the peephole. Sure enough, there was Dawn in all her magnificence. Standing next to her were two individuals, one on each side. To her right was a tall, strong looking man with dark eyes, a prominent forehead, and

thick black hair. To her left was a much shorter woman with flowing blonde hair, her eyes a light blue. I unlocked the door and swung it open, beckoning them to enter.

“Hello again, Dawn,” I said as she entered with her entourage. The two followed close behind, almost as if they were her bodyguards. *I hope I’m not in trouble for something.*

Dawn looked around the barren hotel room and immediately sat down. Her companions remained standing. “Atticus,” she started, “I’m here to check on your progress, and to introduce you to a couple of additional members of the Committee. This is Nox,” she said pointing to the large man.

“Hey, Garry,” he said, extending a hand and putting on a wide smile, “good to meet you.”

“He goes by Atticus now,” corrected Dawn. “Garry was his mortal name.”

Nox nodded his head in remembrance and tried again. “Hey, Atticus. Good to meet you, man.”

I took his outstretched hand for the customary shake and was surprised by the power in his grip. Everything I had touched since that day by the lake had a certain emptiness to it. This was different. “Good to meet you,” I agreed. *He must be the guy they send to rough up the troublesome atheists.*

“And this,” added Dawn, pointing to the other, “is Sydney, but everyone calls her Syd.”

“Hello,” said Sydney, simply nodding her head in my general direction as she kept her arms folded.

“So what have you been up to, Atticus?” asked Dawn, taking over the conversation.

“Well, just like you said, I’ve been experimenting with my memories. Then Duck came over and took me to the registration office; I gave them

my new name; they gave me the little cell phone earpiece thing; and ever since I've just playing with that and checking out some more memories."

"Wonderful," said Dawn, clasping her hands together. "And have you become resolutely convinced that you are dead?" Nox laughed at her candor.

Do I really believe I'm dead? "Still sorting through that one," I answered, unwilling to commit to anything. "I do wonder if that train put me in a coma, and now I'm in some kind of semi-lucid state that projects my memories into everything, and everyone around me." I looked toward Dawn to check her reaction.

"Ah yes, Atticus, the *Wizard of Oz* plotline," she mused. "Excellent work stringing that theory together."

"Don't worry though, Attic," laughed Nox, "there ain't no flying monkeys here. Only flying humans."

Syd raised an eyebrow. "Flying monkeys?"

Nox continued. "Yeah, in the movie there were these sketch flying monkeys that the evil queen lady sent to snatch up Dorothy and Toto. Always scared me as a kid." Nox looked at Sydney more closely. "You never seen *Wizard of Oz*?"

"I died young, remember?" Sydney tightened her folded arms in annoyance.

"But that's like a kid's show, man," muttered Nox.

"Well, Atticus clearly remembers it," added Dawn, "and it's become his working theory for his current state of existence. I suppose Nox here is your Uncle Henry and I'm your Auntie Em?"

Now she's just piling on. "Like you said, it's just a working theory."

"Don't be offended by me teasing you a bit, Atticus. You spent your whole mortal life trying to keep soul and body together. It's no surprise

you're still holding out hope you're alive. It's natural for many, and even more so for a materialist like you."

"I'm not offended." *Maybe not offended.*

"Well, good. And tell me about your visit with the neverborn. Duck told me you had an encounter that first night. Very strange for a neverborn to venture here. They must see you as a prize, Atticus." Dawn looked me over from head to toe, as if she were proud of me.

"I was just sitting here mind diving, and then there was a knock on the door. The guy was nice at first, but then it got weird. He said you were keeping me in a prison."

"You feel like you're in a prison, Attic?" Nox looked at me intently. "Ain't no bars on these windows, least not that I can see."

"No," I answered truthfully. "I don't really feel like I'm in a prison. But Dawn and Duck have given me some pretty strict rules."

"It won't last long," replied Syd. "And you'll be glad you listened to what Dawn had to say."

But it might be nice to have a few other perspectives. "Yeah, okay," I muttered.

"If you are in a prison," said Dawn, standing up to leave, "then you're going on another field trip. Nox is going to show you around a bit more today. Your sojourn at the Diamond is about over, and we need you to start thinking about what comes next."

"What does come next?" *I suppose I'll still be following orders from her.*

"That's entirely up to you," answered Dawn as she opened the door to leave. She turned and stared at me, a sincere look in her eyes. "But I do have high hopes for you, Atticus. I think you can be a great contributor to the work we're doing here." And she was gone.

"It was good to meet you," said Syd, following Dawn out of the hotel room. "Don't be a stranger."

I turned around and was greeted by Nox's wide smile. His perfectly white, perfectly straight teeth seemed to go on forever.

"You ready to party?" he asked.

16

“**Y**ou like ice cream, bro?” After a short flight, Nox set me down in front of what appeared to be a small shopping plaza. Beautiful people hustled and bustled about everywhere around us, holding what appeared to be shopping bags. I could tell that some were with mentors, but many were on their own.

Who doesn't love ice cream?

“This place has some of the best ice cream in Dead World,” Nox continued

“Yeah, sure. I could go for some.” Although I hadn't realized it before, I felt ridiculously hungry at Nox's mention of food. *I'm starving.*

“You ever try Blue Bell?” asked Nox as he ushered me into the ice cream shop.

“Doesn't sound familiar.”

“Man, before I kicked it, I used to get a half gallon of Blue Bell ice cream out of the freezer every day at lunch. Go take a nap. 45 minutes later, it's all nice and soft, and I'd just pound one of these every day. Nothin' better. Those were the times, man.”

“Wow. I'm jealous.”

“Big man, big appetite,” added Nox, already staring at the menu. After a few seconds, he turned back to me. “Know what you want?”

A perfectly made-up young lady behind the counter stared at me, apparently annoyed that I didn't have a selection in mind. “Peanut butter cup,” I said, not sure it was an option.

“Good choice,” commented Nox. “And I'll have the cookie dough.”

“Will that be everything?” asked the ice cream scooper in monotone. She clearly wasn’t very thrilled about her job.

“That’s it!” answered Nox. He then leaned close to me and whispered. “Maybe if it’s good we’ll get seconds.”

Without a word, a screen displayed numbers that made no sense to me. Nox put his thumb up to the screen and a satisfying sound apparently informed him he had successfully paid.

“I’m sorry, Nox,” I said, embarrassed. “I haven’t been able to find my wallet since I ... since I got here.”

“You ain’t got no wallet,” laughed Nox as he gestured toward a seat. “And even if you did have a wallet, you ain’t got no money. You ain’t got no job. But it’s okay, Attic. You’re a newbie. We all been there.”

We sat down at a small table and, almost immediately, the shop attendant brought us two gigantic ice cream cones. They looked absolutely stunning. *Man, I’m really hungry.*

“I’ll have to pay you back once I get work. But Duck said I wouldn’t be able to be a lawyer here. That’s what I do for a living.” I bit into the ice cream cone. But instead of the sweet, sugary cold sensation I was expecting, it tasted like I was eating Styrofoam with a splash of stale candy on top. *Ughh... nasty.*

“Nah, Mr. ‘Lawyer,’” said Nox, his mouth full of ice cream. “We good. You’ll pay it forward. At least, I hope you will. What you think?”

“It’s ... it’s pretty good.” *He knows I’m lying.*

He belly-laughed long and hard, wiping the side of his mouth with the back of his large, left hand. “You’re a newbie. You’re used to mortal food. Dead food is different. Taste is a lot more ... subtle over here on this side. You’ll get used to it.”

“I think the word might be ‘tasteless.’ I’m sorry; I wish I liked it more.” I took another bite, but it remained dull. My hunger drove me to keep going.

“So you got mowed down by a train, Attic?” asked Nox between a few more bites. “That’s rough, bro.”

“Something like that,” I answered sheepishly. “Didn’t notice the crossing guard. I got distracted by my phone and some ... other stuff.”

“It’s all good, man. We all kick it sometime. Don’t be ashamed.”

But it’s shameful. “How did you die, Nox?”

“Man, it was weird. I was doing fine and then, one night, I just couldn’t breathe and I had some chest pain. And then, next thing I knew, I was chillin’ in Dead Land. That’s the whole thing. Still not sure what went down that night. Maybe I had a heart attack, but I don’t know.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Nox didn’t seem fazed at all, focused on the last few remnants of his cookie dough ice cream.

“It’s all good, bro. Like I said, we all end up in Dead Land.”

“So what’s the deal with today?” I asked, looking at Nox intently. “Dawn said you’re going to show me around. Anything other than ice cream?”

“Today,” replied Nox, pointing his finger at my chest as he swallowed the last piece of cone with a gulp, “we gonna stop all this nonsense about you thinking maybe you ain’t a dead man.”

I raised an interested eyebrow. “And how are you going to do that?”
This ought to be good.

“We’re going to go and check out your dead body, bro.”

“How are you going this fast?” I screamed. Nox had an iron grip on my left arm, and we were traveling through the air at an incredible rate of speed. In all my “flights” since the incident with the train, none had been anything like this. The desert ground of the Earth shot past us below. *I’m surprised the ground isn’t all a blur.*

“We can’t be late, bro,” answered Nox. He was chortling again with that bright, wide smile. “Those other flights you had were baby rides. This one is for grownups.”

This guy’s always laughing at me.

“What?” he continued. “You wanna slow down?”

“No. It’s just a little ... unsettling.”

“You wanna know the truth, Attic? This ain’t even close to full speed. I’m not joking around here.” Nox burst into a new round of belly chuckles.

At least someone is having a good time.

We continued the breakneck pace for another half a minute or so, and then suddenly slowed down. I instantly recognized my old stomping grounds. “That’s Denver,” I said. *It’s nice to actually know something for once.*

“Very good, Attic,” said Nox. “But you ever been to the morgue?”

“Can’t say that I have.”

“Well, bro, it’s in kind of a sketch part of town. But don’t worry. You gonna be safe with me.”

Very comforting.

Nox slowed us down and descended toward the surface. Within a few seconds, my feet were on the ground. The Denver coroner's office stood before us, a large metal door marking its entrance.

"So, couple things, Attic. This is the World of the Living, so it's a bit different bein' dead here than it is bein' dead where you been. The people here—they ain't gonna see you. No matter what you do. And the other thing, nobody's gonna hear you knocking on the door, so you gotta learn to slide through stuff."

"Slide through stuff?"

"You ever do the limbo before you kicked it? It's kind of like that. You don't go through things; you slide under them, or squeeze around them. Like this, bro." Nox turned around and determinedly walked toward the door of the coroner's office. And then he was gone.

Now that's a magic trick.

A second later, his bright, goofy grin and a beckoning hand reappeared on my side of the morgue. "Come on, Attic. Remember, don't just walk at the door. You gotta slide through it."

"I'm not sure what you mean by that," I said, flustered.

"It's kind of a feel thing, you know," answered Nox. "Just give it a shot."

"Yeah, sure." I followed Nox's example and walked straight toward the entryway to the morgue. But instead of going through like Nox had, I bounced off the steel exterior and hit the pavement with my backside. Luckily, my weightless state prevented me from any discernible injury. "What was that?" I yelled in frustration. *Just give it a shot. Uh huh.*

"You didn't slide through, Attic. You just ran into the door. Go a little slower and try it again."

I picked myself up off the ground and cautiously approached the metal barrier a second time. "Great advice. I'll go a little slower." I stretched out my right hand and let my fingers feel the entrance. But Nox was right; I

sensed that there was space between its metallic elements that I could move within. I had soon wiggled my fingers, forearm, and even my right shoulder through the door.

“Nice, bro!” said Nox with enthusiasm.

No thanks to you. I closed my eyes and angled my forehead into the door. Once I could sense that my eyes were inside the structure, I slowly opened them to have a look around. To my astonishment, I could see the elemental makeup of the galvanized steel. *Apparently, my dead eyes are both telescopes and microscopes.* Just like Nox had said, there was open space within which I could maneuver. After some careful contortions and thought, I was standing inside the coroner’s office.

“So how does that work?” I asked Nox, looking over myself in astonishment.

“Just like I said, you slid around the stuff in that door. And when you’re in Living Land, you can pretty much slide through everything. Everything they make he is pretty ... porous I guess.”

“Metal doors never seemed very ‘porous’ in my experience.” *And that train I danced with was pretty solid.*

“You thinkin’ like you’re still alive,” explained Nox. “But you’re dead. You’re made of different stuff now. The real stuff. The stuff that was really you all along, bro. We’re made of something more refined, more pure than the bodies they got in this morgue.”

I smirked and furrowed my brow in dissatisfaction.

Nox rewarded me with another belly laugh. “Don’t worry about it, Attic. You’ll figure it all out. Now let’s go find the stiff.”

18

We walked through a few dimly lit hallways until we could hear voices in one of the rooms.

“Yikes,” said a man’s voice. “This guy sure did a number on himself. What happened to him?”

A female responded. “Says here he was in a collision ... with a train.”

“Train wreck is right,” laughed the first man. “Luckily, it looks like we’ll still be able to verify the identification through dental records.”

Following Nox’s lead, I entered the room. The man and woman were hovering over a dead body, sprawled out on the table. *This is going to be awkward. We’re not supposed to be here.* But as Nox had predicted, they paid us no attention.

“Is that....?” I started.

“Yup,” interrupted Nox, “that’s the stiff we came to see, Attic. That’s you.”

I looked toward the body, but the morticians blocked my view of its face. A yellow card was tied to the big toe with a string. *Those sure look like my ugly feet.*

“Go take a look, bro,” said Nox, gesturing toward the body. “And don’t worry about those people. They won’t notice you one bit. Fact is, there’s dead people around here all the time. And they never notice nothin’.”

I nodded my head in understanding and quietly walked around the morticians in order to get a better view of the dead body. *That’s me. It’s really me.* My face was a wreck. A deep crevice in my forehead revealed the innards of my skull. There were lacerations, bruises, and several facial

features that were not quite where they used to be. But I could tell—that was my dead corpse on the table.

“You okay, bro?” asked Nox with genuine concern. He stood still, close to the door.

“Well, apparently not,” I responded, shifting my gaze from Nox back to the body. “It looks like I’ve had better days.” *Much better days. I look like something out of a horror movie.*

One of the morticians unknowingly interrupted our conversation. It was the woman. “Hey! I think I know this guy. Wasn’t he that hardcore atheist that was always giving lectures? I think he may have written a few books.”

“Not sure,” answered the man as he pried open the mouth on my dead corpse to get a glimpse of my teeth. “You know what they say though, there are no atheists in foxholes.”

“What about on train tracks?” quipped the woman.

“Pretty funny,” said Nox, as if he was asking me for permission to laugh at her joke. “Did you look at the tag, Attic?”

I moved to the end of the table and examined the cream yellow index card tied to my big toe. The side I could see was blank. I instinctively stretched out my hand to flip the tag over. While I could feel it, I was utterly powerless to move it.

“You gonna have to try and look from the other side, bro,” said Nox. “Remember, you can’t move stuff here. All you can do is slide through it.”

Yeah, yeah. That’s right. Slide. “Got it,” I muttered. I went around to the other side and used my eagle eyes to read the words. It said: “Identification pending verification: Garry White.”

Maybe I really am a dead man.

19

“So, you convinced yet?” Nox stood in the kitchen of my hotel room, searching the empty cupboards for something to eat. “Bro, you gotta get Duck to take you shopping.”

“I don’t want to be some mooch. Plus, I don’t usually feel that hungry.” I paused for a second, thinking over his question. “And I’m not entirely convinced yet. This could all still be an elaborate hallucination, brought on by significant head trauma. What you showed me in the morgue might just be a projection of my subconscious fears about what might have happened during the train wreck. It’s not really proof.”

“You dumb, man,” laughed Nox, giving up on his search for food. “But whatever. I can’t make you believe it. But the sooner you accept it, the sooner you gonna get settled in and make something of your new life.”

He’s probably right. “That’s good advice. But it’s hard for me to accept. I spent most of adulthood believing there was nothing after death. There was just no proof.”

“You got the proof now, Attic. And lots of it. You didn’t know nothin’ back then; but it’s all good. Now you know more.”

“Did you believe in life after death, when you were still alive?”

“Course I did.” Nox didn’t hesitate.

“So how did you get on the Atheist Welcoming Committee?”

“That’s a good question. When I picked up my first gig, they had me on the Criminal Welcoming Committee, working muscle jobs mostly. But Dawn heard about some of my skills, and asked me to come over. So here I am.”

“The Criminal Welcoming Committee?” *How many blasted welcoming committees are there?*

“Yeah, bro. We got bad people here, just like over there. And there’s a lot of bad people who die—some even in the act of crime. So we scoop ‘em up and try to put them on the right track. The C.W.C. is kinda gritty though. I prefer working security for Dawn. She’s a gem, Attic. A real gem.”

“I bet you have some stories.”

“Ah, no question, Attic. Murder-suicides are the craziest. These fools drop someone, and then kill themselves when the cops come, thinkin’ they gonna escape everything, and then the next thing they know they’re getting chased by the C.W.C. Dead World ain’t no escape from crime. Fact is, it’s easier for us to prove they’re guilty.”

“But what can you do to them? They’re already dead. It’s not like you can give them the death penalty.”

Nox nodded his head in agreement and gave me that wide smile. “Nah, man. But prison is a real thing. We got bars on the windows here, just like over there. We don’t kill ‘em, but we lock ‘em up. And that’s a tough way to start in Dead Land, that’s for sure.”

That’s tough anywhere.

“Well, bro. I gotta dip.” Nox moved toward the door to leave. “Nice to meet you. I’m sure Dawn’s gonna send me over here some other time. You should come work with us on the A.W.C. Help some newbs figure stuff out. Take down some neverborns. We have some good times there, Attic.” He opened the door to leave and looked back. “Need anything before I go?”

“Food that actually tastes like ... something, maybe?”

“You gotta get used to it. Everything’s gonna taste kinda empty for a while. Truth is, it’s never gonna be as good as what you had when you were alive. But you kinda stop thinking about it. But next time, we goin’ out for burgers. It’ll taste better then. See you, bro!”

20

I *gotta get out of here.* My 15 hour-plus mind dive had left me antsy. And all I had really discovered was that learning to walk is a lot like learning to slide through a door—there is a lot of falling.

I awakened from my toddler memory stupor and tapped on my ear lobe. “Where is the closest place to ... get a milkshake at this unholy hour?” *Man, I am hungry.*

“Bertha’s Burger Shack,” said the voice in my ear. “Two blocks north, four blocks west. I’ll guide you there if you would like. Will you be flying, Atticus?”

“I wish. Don’t know how yet.”

“Then I will provide you with walking instructions for the time being.”

“Why, thank you.” I exited the hotel room and headed for the stairs. It was dark, but my lustrous self, coupled with my bionic vision, made for an easy descent. I passed the receptionist—who gave me a knowing nod of the head—and I was out into the night. The skies and streets were strangely busy. *Oh yeah, people don’t sleep here.* The soft glow from the building lights and inhabitants brightened up some low hanging clouds. It seemed like it was raining, but instead of drops it was more like a thick mist.

A few people here and there acknowledged me as I speed-walked toward the shake place, but most weren’t too interested. Except for this one lady. As I passed a dimly lit alley between two buildings, she emerged and was instantly walking at my side.

“How are things going, newbie? Still getting used to it around here?”

“I’m not interested,” I said, speeding up and trying not to look at her. *Maybe if I ignore her she’ll go away.* But it didn’t work.

“Not interested in what?” she asked in a soft voice. I gave her a closer look. She was short, of course skinny, looked to be in her mid-20s like everybody else, and seemed to be wearing 90s grunge clothes. *Maybe that’s in style here.* Her long, blonde curly hair was tucked up into a ponytail. “I’m just bored, and looking for something to do in this place.”

“What do you want from me?” I asked, still walking fast.

“Nothing,” she answered, a smirk on her face. “Just want someone to talk to—someone who isn’t my ‘mentor.’” She emphasized the last word with a negative tone. “What’s your name?”

“I’m ... Atticus.”

“How’d you die?”

Why is this any of her business? “Got hit by a train while I was distracted. And you are?”

She nodded her head with a faint smile. “I’m Katherine, but everyone calls me Kat. Well, everyone in Alive Land did. Heroin overdose.” She lowered her voice and got closer, whispering into my ear. “My mentor is from the Drug Addict Welcoming Committee and is a total drag. I couldn’t sit in that small room anymore. So I decided to venture out. It feels like sneaking out from my parents’ house when I was a kid.”

“I’m sorry to hear about that,” I said, distancing myself from her and turning the corner toward what I thought was Bertha’s Burger Shack. Kat turned and stayed right by my side. “Your passing, I mean.”

“Parts of it have actually been a relief.” Kat surveyed the street as we walked. “This is the first time I’ve really been sober in years. But the withdrawals are horrific. I keep mind diving to when I was using just to try and score a fix. But it doesn’t really work.”

It seems like she’s oversharing. I don’t even know this lady. We arrived at Bertha’s and I slowed my pace to a stop. “So, I was just going to get a milkshake. It was nice ... uh ... talking to you.” *Maybe she’ll take the hint.*

“Mind if I join you?”

Nope. Totally missed the hint. “I guess not,” I said, turning to go inside. *Ah crap. I don’t have any money.* I instinctively searched my clothes for a wallet that didn’t seem to exist. I turned to Kat, who had her eyes fixed on me. “I can’t get anything. I just realized I don’t have any money.”

“Don’t worry about it, Atticus,” she said. “My mentor gave me some ‘credits,’ or whatever it’s called here. Your milkshake is back on the table.”

“This is terrible,” I complained. Kat laughed at me as I slurped the cookies and cream shake through a large straw. “Just like the ice cream here. There’s no taste. It’s like it’s made of tofu.”

“Tofu?” Kat raised an eyebrow.

“You’ve never heard of Tofu?” *I could understand not consuming tofu, but never hearing of it?* “It’s tasteless squares of goo.”

“Sounds gross,” replied Kat. “I mostly ate at McDonald’s before I died.”

“That sounds gross. You obviously died young.”

“Yeah, but that was more about the drug addiction thing.” Kat ordered a Big Bertha Burger, but had only taken a couple of bites. She was strangely ... observant. She never seemed to take her eyes off what I was doing—even when it was mundane.

“I’m just so hungry, and all the food is just so bland.”

“I know what you mean,” agreed Kat, still staring at me intently. She leaned a little closer and lowered her voice. “I’ve heard that there are ways to get something that tastes ... more real.”

More real? “What, like a better restaurant? How can we outmatch Bertha’s here? It was the closest to my hotel, according to the talking ear computer.”

She chuckled. “No, not at a restaurant. As I was out and about, I heard some people talking about having a” She paused, looked around cautiously, and whispered. “... having a near life experience.”

“A near life experience?” *No idea on this one.*

She shooshed me with the universal sign of an index finger in front of her lips. "Not so loud. I heard that they aren't strictly ... legal."

She is definitely trying to sell me something. "And what's your take? You get a piece of the profits if I sign up for this thing? I told you; I'm not interested. Plus, as you now know, I don't have any money. And finally, I'm not totally convinced I'm even dead. I think this is all a hallucination."

"Calm down, Atticus," she replied, her soft demeanor vanishing. "I've never done anything like this. I'm just like you. I just got here. I'm just telling you, if you hate the food, I heard that there is way to get something better. Relax." Kat shook her head and sighed loudly.

"So that's it? You're not going to try and apply some more pressure?" I smirked at her. "You're not that good at sales."

"Let's change the subject," she said, a scowl on her face. She took another bite of her Bertha Burger and grimaced as she chewed the food. "Have you learned to fly yet?"

So many embarrassing questions. "Nope. Haven't even taken a lesson. But I have mastered the art of 'sliding' through doors. So that's exciting. You?"

"Yeah, my D.A.W.C. mentor and some 'flight instructor' taught me how after the first week. It's amazing. But I totally freaked the first time I fell 100 feet and hit the ground. I guess being dead has its perks." She threw her burger down in disgust and pushed her tray toward the center of the table.

"You actually fell 100 feet? You look totally fine." *Perfect actually.*

"Yeah, just bounced off the ground. It was intense. You'll have to tell me how it goes. I think they usually start the instructions after the first week. At least, that's what the D.A.W.C. does. Who assigned your mentor?"

“I’m with the prestigious Atheist Welcoming Committee. I don’t believe in God, or the afterlife. And if this is the afterlife, I don’t believe in milkshakes anymore either. I guess I’m kind of a skeptic.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty clear. But why would atheists need their own welcoming committee?”

Exactly. “Apparently, we cause problems because we never expected an afterlife. Freaking out, creating mayhem; at least, that’s how it’s been explained to me.” I tried to stomach another gulp of tasteless milkshake.

Kat looked out the window of the restaurant as if searching for something. “I don’t see one bit of ‘mayhem’ out there.”

“That’s because the A.W.C. is keeping all us atheists in check. They also told me that they protect people from the ‘neverborns,’ whatever that means.”

Kat gave me a perplexed look. “What’s a ‘neverborn’?”

“All I can gather is that they are bad dudes who are trying to do bad stuff. One of them allegedly came to my hotel room the first night I was here. He was all creepy nice at first, but then had a temper tantrum when I wouldn’t let him in. Kind of strange.”

“That is creepy,” said Kat, leaning in closer. “Do you think they’re real?”

“I don’t know what’s real, Kat. Not one thing.”

“Good morning, Atticus!” Duck stood outside my door at the Diamond. He wore a t-shirt and dark jeans. I ushered him in and he immediately started checking the cupboards.

“Got any ‘snacks’?”

“Not a one. I went out last night for a milkshake, but it tasted like Styrofoam mixed with water.” *Not sure I should tell him about Kat.* “Can I just tell you how much the food here sucks?”

“Oh yeah, it’s the worst,” agreed Duck, walking into my living room and plopping down on the couch. “Especially at first. You’ll get more used to it. But don’t ever mind dive to a really good meal. It’ll take weeks to recover. Same with other physical experiences. You don’t want the Ache to set in, if you can at all help it.”

The Ache? “Good advice. So what’s up today?”

“Today, my dude, we’re checking you out of this dump and teaching you how to fly. Well, starting to teach you how to fly. That is, if you’re so inclined to learn.”

Obviously. “Yes, of course I am. That sounds amazing. But where am I going to live?”

“How should I know?” laughed Duck. “Wherever you want. Maybe a nice cottage out in the country. Or a small apartment in a high-rise. I guess you could even live in an igloo. Whatever sizzles your bacon, Atticus.”

“I have no money!” *And it’s really starting to get old.* “How am I going to afford the rent?”

“The loving despots at the A.W.C. will float you for a solid month or so. But reality is crashing in, Atticus: you’re going to have to get a job.”

“A job? Like what? Serving ice cream or processing newbs?”

“What am I? Your dad? Whatever you want, within the framework of your qualifications and the economic realities of available jobs. Scarcity, Atticus. It’s still a thing here. So, yeah, you might be serving ice cream or pushing paper. Don’t forget agriculture; don’t give up on the dream of farming.” His eyes went out of focus and gazed at nothing in particular. I could tell he was mind diving. And then he was back. “By the way, are you convinced you’re dead yet? I heard Nox took you to see the stiff.”

Here we go again. “Is this really that important? What does my existential crisis have to do with anything?”

Duck stood up and pointed at me, a bit of irony in his eyes. “You, Atticus, need to get a grip on reality. Once you figure out what’s really going on, you’ll be much better suited to this place. And I think Dawn might have a job offer for you, but she’s going to question your qualifications if you keep doubting.”

“I’m just not certain, okay? I’m not trying to be rude. None of this was supposed to exist. None of it.”

“You really are a sophist,” replied Duck as he headed toward the door. “Get your crap and follow me.” He paused. “Oh yeah, you don’t own anything. So just follow me.”

“Hold on. Let me look around.” Of course, I knew there was nothing to collect before I checked out of the hotel. But a sense of nostalgia hit me, and perhaps a memory of what checking out of a hotel used to be like. The walkthrough took no more than 10 seconds. I checked the bathroom, and there was—of course—nothing there. Before I hit the lights, I looked in the mirror again. There was that same Ken doll, staring back at me. I shook my head in disbelief and followed Duck out into the hallway.

“Pay attention,” said the male flying instructor standing before me, “because I’m not going to repeat myself. And don’t forget, I’m in charge here.” A gruff laugh escaped his lips as he spoke. He looked as dashing as everybody else I’d met since the train. His square face was accentuated by a strong chin.

“I won’t forget,” I replied, “especially since I don’t have a clue how to do this.” We stood in a large, flat field of faintly glowing grass. There was a slight breeze in the air, but otherwise the weather was perfect.

“Carter’s the best instructor I know,” said Duck, apparently trying to comfort me. “And I can guarantee you won’t die.”

Carter chuckled at Duck’s reassurance and moved his hands into what appeared to be their teaching position. “It’s not really about learning something new; it’s more about remembering something you’ve forgotten.”

Pretty sure I’ve never flown before, at least not without an airplane. “I’ve been remembering a lot lately, and I don’t recall flying the way people do around here.”

“It’s built in,” continued Carter, gesturing broadly with his hands. He then pointed to his own head. “Although we’re not entirely certain, it appears to be part of the code.”

“The ‘code’?”

“The building blocks, the recipe, the DNA—to use a concept you’re familiar with. So what we’re going to be doing today is more about remembering something you once knew, or activating something that was dormant for—well, how long did you live?”

“Mr. Atticus here was killed by a train at the tender age of 42,” said Duck, answering the question on my behalf.”

“Death by train, huh?” replied Carter, looking at me closely and smiling wide. “Maybe this is going to be harder than I thought.”

Unbelievable. “And how did you die?” *Maybe he’s got something more embarrassing.*

“Heart stopped beating, just like everybody else. But before that I fought cancer for years.”

Now I’m more embarrassed. “Sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be,” replied Carter without missing a beat. “It made me a man.”

“Death by train may not have those same perks,” added Duck, rubbing his chin as if he were contemplating the issue.

Carter continued. “The first thing you need to do to learn how to fly is take control of the third toe on your left foot.”

“My what?”

“Your middle toe. Take a look down and you’ll see two to the left of it, and two to the right. It’s the one right smack dab in the middle that we’re concerned about right now. You can also count to three from the left, or you can count to three from the right, and you’ll end up at the same digit. Are you with me, Atticus?”

“I’m familiar with the fact I have a middle toe. But what do you mean, ‘take control’ of it?”

“Let’s pause for a second here,” replied Carter. “Now that your memory isn’t slowed by that wrinkly old brain, can you ever remember a time you were able to move the middle toe on your left foot—entirely independent from any other toe?”

I thought we were going to be flying. “Can’t say that I remember that, sir.”

“Good, ‘sir.’ I like that. And no, you can’t. The nerves were all in place, presumably, the muscles were there, the tendons, etc., but your fleshy brain

couldn't figure out how to control it. Just like flying. So look down, and take control of that third toe. See if you can move it independently from the others."

Pure insanity. I obeyed the instruction, looking down at my pristine foot and focusing on my middle toe. But, try as I might, I couldn't get the blasted thing to move on its own. "Not working. They all seem to be moving in unison." I tried some more. "I guess I can kind of move the big one and the little one independently, but that's it."

"Focus just a little longer," said Carter. "You'll break through that old physical limitation and then we'll get somewhere. Focus just on the middle toe; nothing else."

"Yeah, Atticus, focus," added Duck.

"Very helpful. Thank you," I said, now laser focused on moving the toe. After dozens of attempts, something happened. It was as if my brain took complete control and—independent of all the others—I was able to wiggle it up and down, left and right. "Yes!" I yelled, cheering myself in the small victory.

"Excellent work," said Carter, resuming his gruff laugh as he spoke. "Now do the same on your right foot. Break through the cobwebs of the physical mind and get that one moving independent from the others."

Although it still took quite a few attempts, I arrived at the same result on the right foot faster than I had on the left. Soon, I was a middle-toe-moving virtuoso. *This has to be one of the weirdest things I've ever done.* "Okay. Got it. What now?"

Duck gave me a sarcastic smirk. "Sure you have enough strength to keep going for today?"

"We always get people off the ground during the first lesson," said Carter, "no matter how long it takes. We just hope we get them back down again." He started gesturing again with his hands, signaling that we were in

another teaching moment. “Now, Atticus, believe it or not the nerves that control flight are right below the middle toes on your feet. The living can’t fly because they are unable to sense and control the region.”

“Plus,” added Duck, “they’d all scatter their innards on the ground learning how to do it.”

“That’s true,” continued Carter. “So your next task is to focus your mind on the area just below your middle toes. And be careful here; once you’ve identified the area some unexpected ... movement can take place. It’s like that middle toe. It takes some time to learn how to use it.”

“How do I focus on an area of my body that isn’t part of my body?”

“It is part of you,” answered Duck. “It’s just that you never knew about until now.”

“Great,” I replied, again looking down at my feet while I tried to concentrate. I used the new pathway between my mind and my middle toe to search for something else.

“That’s it,” he said, breaking my concentration. “Try not to engage in any sudden movements once you find it—if you can help it.”

No sudden movements. What’s going to happen? “Thank you for that.” I continued concentrating for another 30 seconds or so, unsure what I was looking for. And then, I felt it. It was a like a platform lived beneath my feet—an extra space between the ground and me that was somehow within my ability to feel. “I think I got something here!” I said with excitement.

“Great,” replied Carter. “Now be careful not to....” But I didn’t hear him finish. Following a lightning bolt pattern, my body shot into the sky at a breakneck pace.

I was flying.

24

After some involuntary screams of fear, I shouted a few choice words at Carter and Duck, but they were too distant to hear me. *I am going to die!* I was probably 15,000 feet or so in the air before I—somehow—figured out how to disengage the flight mechanism beneath my feet. It was like I had gone from drive to neutral. And with that change, I was immediately falling—falling like I had never fallen before. As the ground raced toward me, I again tried to concentrate on the space below my middle toes. *There it is!* But it didn't have the desired effect. Rather than slowing me down, I started racing toward the ground at an incredible speed.

Suddenly Duck's voice was in my ear. "Try to change positions so your feet are beneath you. And ease into the flying controls with more subtle movements."

"Thanks for that helpful information, mentor!" I replied with biting sarcasm. But it was far too late. My face hit the ground first, and my weightless body followed close behind. I rolled onto my back, looking straight up into the blue sky above. *How am I not dead?* I definitely felt discomfort, but the searing pain I expected wasn't there. Instinctively, I moved my hands over my head and chest to check for injuries. *I can move my hands!* Everything seemed to be working, and there was no blood.

"Nice work, Atticus!" said Carter, suddenly standing over me. He couldn't help another gruff laugh at my expense. "Looks like your head is still attached to your body."

"And it was a cool flight pattern," added Duck. "You shot up there like you were painting a giant 'Z' in the sky."

“That was what I was going for,” I mumbled. *Why am I not hurting more than this?* “Are there any obvious broken bones?”

“Of course not,” answered Carter. “It takes a lot more than that to hurt the dead. Do you even feel any pain?”

I sat up and stared at him. “It’s more like shock I think.”

“Stand up, dude,” said Duck. “We’ve seen way worse crashes than that. You should be fine.”

And, of course, Duck was right. I stood on my feet, looked myself over, and realized I wasn’t hurt in the least. *Incredible. But it still wasn’t any fun.* “Why did I go that fast when I ‘hit the gas,’ so to speak?”

“You’re a luminous being,” explained Carter. “Most of us can almost go the speed of light, if we really want to. But you don’t want to have a crash at that speed.”

“But what would really happen—since none of us can die again?” *That’s what everyone keeps telling me anyway.*

“Intense pain,” replied Duck. “And it would probably last a while, at least during the repair process.”

Repair process? “So I can’t die, but I can experience ‘intense pain.’ Great.”

“Yup,” said Duck, shaking his head in agreement. “Mind-bending pain. So don’t go that fast for a while.”

“How do I prevent it?”

“Be a bit more cautious with the throttle,” replied Carter, going back into teaching mode. “It’s like when you learned to drive a car. Most people slam their foot on the gas pedal, and then slam their foot on the brake pedal.”

“And they jerk the steering wheel,” added Duck. “Believe me. I know. I died in a car crash.”

“You never told me that. You did?”

“Pay attention,” interrupted Carter. “Just try to engage your flying nerves a bit more ... gently. Then you won’t shoot up so fast, and maybe you can get some control before you plummet back down to the ground. Ready?”

“Not in the least,” I said, shooting back into the sky.

“I appreciate you coming, Atticus.” Dawn sat straight in her pod, her legs crossed, exactly as she was right after I made friends with that train. “And I can see you’re flying now. Very good work. You’re a proper dead man these days.”

“Thanks, I think.” *But am I really dead?* After helping me move into my new “flat,” which was almost exactly the same as my room at the Diamond, Duck had informed me that Dawn wanted to meet with me. He sent the directions to my “earphone” and it was a fairly simple job to find her. “But I might have run into a few trees on the way here.”

“Well then, it’s a good thing you’re indestructible. Much easier to travel when you don’t have to worry about keeping soul and body together. And thank goodness we have such better vehicles here; I don’t miss car trouble one bit. I still remember this old Dodge Billy and I had. Every time the sun went under a cloud it wouldn’t start. It was a nightmare.”

“Billy?”

“My husband, of course. You haven’t met him yet. He’s around, kind of a part time member of the Committee. But he likes to go fishing. Always fishing.” She paused and re-focused her attention on me. “Please have a seat, Atticus.”

What is this all about? Does she know about my meetings with Kat?

“You’re probably wondering why I wanted to meet with you. Well, I doubt it’s going to be much of a surprise. I would imagine Duck already gave you the heads up.”

“Now that you remind me, he did mention a while back that you might have a job offer for me.” *You’re going to be flipping burgers, Atticus.* “Anything in the legal profession, by chance?”

Dawn’s never-ending smile widened. “Now that would be a trick. Legal advocacy is a job for the long-deads. You’ll need quite a bit more experience in this world before you can take on a profession like that. But I do have something that I believe will ... interest you greatly.”

“Serving really nasty ice cream?”

“Hardly,” she said, an audible chuckle in her voice. “I want you to come and work for me on the A.W.C. I think you would be a great proficient, if given the chance.”

“And why’s that?”

“I have a feeling about you. Plus, you’re intelligent, well-spoken, someone who can follow a few simple rules. And I think there is some leadership buried in there somewhere. We need someone like you in this fight. Someone with your experience could be a great asset, especially in protecting incoming atheists.”

She gets points for flattery; that’s for sure. “Fight? What fight?”

“The only fight there is, my boy. The fight against the neverborns. We are losing too many to those demons. And it’s time we upped our efforts.”

“Dawn, I don’t even know what that means.”

The smile left her face in a flash. “Oh, you’ll find out soon enough, regardless of whether you decide to work for me.”

Well, it sounds better than working in the registration office. “Okay, great. Why not? I’m in. Will I make enough to cover my rent?”

“Of course, Atticus. You’ll have what you need. There is one prerequisite though, one qualification you need to meet before I’ll allow you to join.”

“Well, you’ve done so much to sell me on the job that now I just can’t live without it.”

“Ironic, that’s exactly what I need to ask you about.” She leaned in closer--her brilliant, glowing, beautiful face just a few inches away. “Do you now believe you’re a dead man?”

Part Two

1

“Just sit here and watch,” said Sydney, tugging at the sleeve of my shirt in an effort to get me to crouch back down. “We’re not intervening today.”

“I thought you said these people are evil. We’re just going to let them take her into a dungeon or something?” Syd and I sat safely tucked away behind a parked box truck. Across the street, flashing neon lights advertised “Therapeutic Services” at the center of what looked like a thrown-together strip mall. A 20s-something woman who appeared to be in the prime of life—no surprise there—had just entered the facility. “What are they going to do to her?”

“If this is a neverborn front, which we believe it is, they will start counseling sessions with her regarding her depression, or anxiety, or longing for her living family—whatever it is that has brought her to them.” Syd watched the front door closely as she spoke. “And soon they’ll offer her what’s called a ‘near life experience’ as a way to address her problems.

“Oh yeah, I’ve heard of those.” *Maybe I shouldn’t have said that.*

Syd was shocked. “You have? How? You’ve only been here a few weeks, and I thought Duck was watching you?”

Great. Here we go. “It was just something I heard on the street one night when I was out for a walk. What is it?”

“Just what it sounds like. The neverborns offer the dead a taste of the physical sensations we had during life. That’s one of the ways they hook people. And once you’re hooked, it’s a hard drug to get away from. And that’s how they enslave people. Well, that’s often how they do it” She trailed off, as if she didn’t want to reveal too much all at once.

“I’m still not sure I get it,” I said. “What kind of physical sensation?”

Syd stopped staring at the storefront and focused on my question. “What do you think of the food here in Newfoundland?”

“It’s horrific.” *Understatement.* “It’s the most tasteless, vacuous drivel I’ve ever encountered. It’s like constantly eating unbuttered, unsalted popcorn.”

“Did you ever have a cheeseburger while you were alive?”

“Are you kidding?”

“How should I know?” replied Syd, shrugging her shoulders. “Maybe you were raised in a vegan compound or something.”

“I had a short phase with vegetarianism, but couldn’t give up bacon. Pigs definitely evolved to be eaten by humans.”

“Or they were created that way.” Syd winked at me as the words left her mouth. “So back to the cheeseburger—we’ll even call it a bacon cheeseburger. You are absolutely never going to get something that tastes that good here. Never! Dead World is made of a different type of matter, a much lighter, purer form of element. So that physical sensation of biting into a juicy, sizzling bacon cheeseburger? You are never going to get it here.”

“But these neverborn dudes can somehow get a cheeseburger?”

“Ha! Hardly. They can get you access to that life experience. They can get you really close to what it was like. But they can’t make a cheeseburger. Nobody here can do that.”

“So what’s the big deal? It’s a cheeseburger. I don’t see how that’s going to ruin that lady’s life—er, death.” *Not unless there’s heart disease here.*

“It’s not just the cheeseburger. There are a lot of other ... potent physical sensations that people can’t get here. And the neverborns offer them all.”

“Oh, so we’re not just talking about food.” *Making more sense.*

“We are definitely not just talking about food. And the neverborns know that, once the craving sets in—the ‘Ache’—they have an advantage. And for a lady like that,” Syd added, pointing across the street, “they’ll tell her that a near life experience will solve her emotional problems. They’ll diagnose her with ‘sensation withdrawal syndrome,’ or whatever they’re calling it at the moment. And then they deliver the near life experience, the unsuspecting patient is hooked, and they just picked up a new slave.”

“So Dead World has slavery. Unbelievable.”

“Not people like you and me, not people who were previously alive. Only the neverborns harvest and maintain slaves.”

“What do they make them do? What’s the point?”

Syd raised an eyebrow and looked at me intently. “We don’t exactly know. These people just ... disappear after a while. Nobody sees them or hears from them again. Some that have escaped talk about working with the neverborns to take others captive. Others describe imprisonment and torture. We think they ... take them somewhere—somewhere we can’t seem to get to.”

“So, what’s the plan, fearless leader?” *Hoping it doesn’t involve torture.*

“We’ll track that lady back to her place when she comes out; keep an eye on her. And tomorrow, you’re going in for a therapy session.”

2

“You can’t mind dive there,” said Duck, slurping what was almost assuredly a tasteless noodle into his mouth as he spoke. “You need to acclimate to the new normal. Otherwise, you’ll get sucked in. And we can’t have that, now can we, Atticus?”

“So trying to remember how good pad thai is while eating this poor substitute is somehow going to get me captured and enslaved by the neverborns tomorrow? Seems like you’re a bit paranoid.”

“Paranoia and experience aren’t the same thing.” Duck scooped up another pile of noodles and put them in his mouth, a satisfied smile forming on his face. “And since everything here is an acquired taste, better to acquire it now.”

But everyone here is definitely paranoid. “So does that mean you’ve had some of the forbidden near life experiences?”

“Not necessarily,” he responded.

I shook my head in disgust. “There are a lot of things you haven’t told me.” *You’d think I could get some transparency from my own mentor.*

“There are a lot of things you haven’t asked,” Duck replied, still focused on his plate of noodles. “I can get you a copy of my memoirs, if you’re so inclined. Riveting stuff.”

“Like your death. You mentioned the other day that you died in a car wreck. I didn’t know that. What happened?”

“Young, stupid, intoxicated. Driving alone late at night. Went around a corner. The road bent further left than I turned the wheel. I ended up in the riverbed below. Died instantly. It’s probably even more embarrassing than getting hit by a train.”

“Not even close,” I said. “And I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago. Not a big deal. I didn’t feel a thing. Luckily, no one else got hurt—at least physically.”

“And you were an atheist, I take it? That’s how you got mixed up with the A.W.C.?” I looked down at my own plate of noodles with dread. I was resolutely not interested in eating the tasteless, curly straws in front of me.

“I was somewhat religiously unaffiliated. My mother’s dormant Mormonism, and my father’s fledgling Methodism, prevented me any baptism at all.” He mused at the memories. “It seems I slipped through the cracks of faith.”

“Lack of affiliation is not the same as atheism. A true atheist makes a deliberate choice.” *Atheism is a rejection of fairy tales.*

“Well, sure. I wasn’t very happy with the Creator at the time of my death. I thought he either didn’t exist or had a sick sense of humor. I had lost quite a few friends in the couple of years before I died. Looking back, we were all just being stupid. But, at the time, I blamed it all on God. So, I guess that’s how I ended up in the loving embrace of the A.W.C. upon my own demise.”

“Being stupid in what kind of way?”

“Well, after my illustrious days frying french fries for a living, I’d get together with my friends, smoke pot, drink way too much beer (I was developing a proper beer belly when I died), and play video games all night. And I’d drive around a lot in various stages of inebriation. So, yeah, kind of a recipe for disaster.” He paused from his meal and gave me a satisfied smile. “Any other questions?”

He was just a kid when he died. “I do actually. But this one is just between the two of us. Do I have your word?”

“You have my word as a scholar,” answered Duck immediately.

“So, in the few weeks I’ve been here, I’ve never noticed any ... how do I say this? ... any attraction to females. I’m kind of freaking out about it.”

“Ha!” he chuckled. “It took you a while to break. Some newbies ask me within the first hour.”

“So this is normal?” *Thank goodness this is normal.*

“You’re not broken, dude.” He went back to slurping noodles in between words. “Although the living often forget, physical attraction is, at its base, a reproductive impulse. And in Dead Land, ain’t none of us reproducing one bit. It doesn’t happen here; it’s not possible. So, that physical attraction you were so used to? Gone.”

Okay, that doesn’t sound normal. “I thought you said I wasn’t broken. Sounds like we’re all broken.”

“Don’t think of it as broken. Think of it as the new normal.”

“But I’ve heard about people being married here. How does that work?”

“You’re a shallow dude, Atticus. People can still experience emotional attraction. You know, companionship. Caring for others. That’s still real.”

“So if I met somebody and really liked her, we could get married?”

“Nah,” answered Duck. I could tell he was losing interest in the conversation. “Nobody gets married here. It might even be against the law. Who knows? The only people who are married here were married when they were alive—like Dawn and Billy.”

“Okay. Not getting that.”

“What, you already in love?” Duck tapped on his ear and his eyes got wide. “Ah crap, we’re going to be late for your next adventure. Let’s fly.”

I followed his lead and stood up from the restaurant table. I hadn’t had a solitary bite of food. “Where are we going?”

“To meet some new dead dude,” replied Duck.

3

“Where am I? And what are you planning to do to me?” shouted the man. He seemed to be in a frenzy.

Dawn remained calm, despite his agitation. “Please sit down, Lawrence,” she said, motioning toward the same pod where she had asked me to sit weeks ago. “There’s no reason to be upset. We’re not planning to do anything to you. We’re just here to have a chat.”

“It doesn’t make sense!” continued the man. “I’ve been in bed for weeks. I’m sick. How did I get here? Where are we?”

Duck and I lay crouched on the ground in the forest—able to see and hear the entire scene, but completely undetected by the newly-arrived dead man. “This dude might pop,” commented Duck as the man continued arguing with Dawn. “He can’t get calmed down.”

Pop? “Like, his head is going to explode or something?” I whispered.

“Nah, nothing that dramatic. Immortal, remember? But he might work himself into a state and start getting violent. Or he could pass out if he can’t get a grip on the situation.” Duck looked over at me with a sarcastic grin. “Know any ninja moves?”

“Not a bit,” I answered. *But I do know how to fly now.* I shifted my attention back to the atheist Dawn was attempting to welcome. He kept threatening her with the police and blabbering about false imprisonment.

“Alright, Lawrence,” said Dawn, in a soft-spoken voice. “I know this may be hard to believe, but you passed away just a few hours ago and I am here to welcome you to the Land of the Dead.”

“What are you talking about?” he answered. His eyes darted back and forth, as if he was looking for an escape route. “I couldn’t have died; I was doing just fine.”

“You were on hospice for six weeks, Lawrence,” smiled Dawn. “That strong heart of yours did all it could, but it very much stopped beating a short while back—which is why I now have the pleasure of getting to know you. Would you please sit down?”

“Dude’s in total denial,” said Duck, giving me a jab in the ribs. “Most of the hospice types don’t end up here. They tend to make peace with the idea of kicking the bucket.”

“I don’t have to take this!” screamed the man. “You’re a liar!” He stood up and ran from the pods. About 10 yards from where Dawn sat, he tripped over his weightless legs and crashed hard into the soft turf.

“Lawrence here wasn’t much of a track star,” said Duck. He tapped on his right ear. “Want us to go and get him, Dawn?”

Dawn looked over to our position and re-crossed her legs. “I think we let Lawrence stumble around for a while—maybe a couple of hours. Then I’ll have Nox bring him back in for a second attempt. I think this poor soul needs to get his bearings straight. Fortunately, he didn’t pop. I was getting a little worried there.”

“Roger that,” said Duck. “I’ll take Atticus over to the Diamond for a check-in. Anyone in particular you want us to go and see?”

“Definitely,” responded Dawn. “The N.N.A. is trying to wrap its tentacles around Eliza. Go and pay her a visit and make sure she’s doing okay.”

“You got it, boss. We’re on it.”

“The N.N.A.?” I asked, following Duck’s lead as he stood up and prepared to fly.

“The New, New Atheists,” he replied.

“Are they slavers, like the neverborns?”

“Nah,” laughed Duck. “They’re just idiots.” He shot up into the sky without another word.

4

“**T**hey’re not all bad,” explained Duck as we walked through the corridors of The Diamond Hotel. “Dawn just doesn’t like their meddling. And, she thinks they might be a front for the neverborns. But I’m not so sure.”

“You’re allowed to have your own opinion?” *I thought everyone just did whatever Dawn says.*

“Once in a while.” Duck stopped walking and turned to face me. “But she is usually right.”

We continued down the hallway until Duck found the proper room. “Okay, this lady is Eliza. She was some kind of evolutionary biologist who died from a stroke a few days ago. She’s been interesting. She didn’t freak out like that last dude we saw, and she hasn’t been telling herself it’s all a dream or some crap like that—sound familiar by the way? She’s convinced there is a biological answer for everything she’s experiencing. As you know, we just offer advice, but she hasn’t listened to us one bit about steering clear of people for a while. She reached out to the New, New Atheists because she’s looking for answers. Any questions?”

“Probably only 10 or so.” *This should be interesting. Maybe she’s on to something.*

“Great, save them for later.” Duck rhythmically tapped on the door and it immediately swung open.

“Hello again, Duck,” said the woman. She had a radiant glow, with fiery red hair flowing down her shoulders. She looked at me curiously, her light blue eyes scanning me for recognition. “And you brought a friend it looks like?”

"This is Atticus," said Duck. "He's our newest member of the Committee. We're just doing a few training exercises today."

"In other words, you're taking him around to see the troublemakers." Eliza gestured to the small sitting area in her hotel room. "Well come on in, boys. I'm expecting some other guests any minute, but the more the merrier."

"Thanks," I said, following Duck's lead into the room. As I walked past Eliza, she did a double take.

"I know you," she said with some excitement. "You're Garry White. I've read a few of your books—even attended a lecture once."

"Wow, Atticus," smiled Duck. "Your first fan." He directed his attention back toward Eliza. "He goes by Atticus now. Some kind of insecurity about his old name. Really kind of strange."

"You go by 'Duck,'" I shot back.

"There's a great story behind that," he replied.

I'm sure there is. "In any event, it's great to meet you, Eliza. Duck told me we have some common interests. How have you been doing these past few days?"

"Well," she said, sitting down on the couch. "It's been a lot to take in, but I think I'm wrapping my mind around it. It has become apparent to me that the natural selection model runs far deeper than anything we ever anticipated."

Finally! Somebody talking in a language I can understand. "Fascinating," I commented, unable to restrain my excitement. "What have you learned?"

"That there must be a duality of some sort, a symbiotic relationship between this form," she gestured to herself, "and the physical form we inhabited during natural life."

Duck looked at her with his typical sarcastic grin, but didn't say a word in response.

Eliza continued. "Our current form must have evolved first, along with consciousness, through the regular process of random mutation acting within the genome. That evolution must have then continued to a more physical form, obviously for purposes of survival."

"I hadn't considered that at all," I said. *This really could just be another natural process.* "Is there a DNA equivalent where the mutations take place?"

"That I don't know," answered Eliza. "The N.N.A. said they would provide more information during our upcoming meeting—which is set to start any minute."

"You know, I'm no scientist," said Duck, tucking a strand of his brown hair behind his ear, "I was actually a fry guy before my untimely death. But doesn't the natural selection process require both reproduction and death?"

"Well, as we know it, that's correct," answered Eliza. "That's how the selection process works."

"And you realize, of course," continued Duck, "that nobody reproduces here. It's actually not possible. And that nobody dies here?"

"I did not know the extent of that," said Eliza, her cheekbones glowing a bit brighter than they had before.

Duck smiled a bit wider. "So there is no selection process, either through survival of the fittest, or through reproductive advantages. In other words, the fry guys and the biologists—despite the clear differences in their intellectual capabilities—both survive. And neither of them has any chance for offspring."

This isn't Duck's first rodeo on this subject. "But wait a second," I interjected. "What if Eliza's describing a process that happened in the distant

past? Perhaps the forms we now inhabit have reached a state of ... stasis, a perfection of sorts.”

A knock echoed from the doorway.

“Perhaps,” replied Duck. “Let’s ask our N.N.A. friends. It sounds like they’re here.”

5

“Good afternoon,” said a short man at the door. He was surrounded by another man to his left, and a woman to his right. They entered Eliza’s room without hesitation and seated themselves. “You have guests today, Eliza,” continued the man.

“Yes, these two are from the Welcoming Committee that has been helping me get situated,” replied Eliza. “And although he now goes by Atticus, this man was known as Garry White before he passed. He was one of the great debaters on the subject of atheism.”

The female member of the group quickly checked some paperwork she removed from a folder. “Yes, I see that on my list here. We’ve been hoping to arrange a meeting with you, Atticus. How fortunate you are here today.”

“How very fortunate,” said Duck in mock agreement. “Is that a list of would-be converts you have there?”

“The N.N.A. doesn’t convert,” said the short man, an obvious edge in his tone. “The N.N.A. works to overcome delusion and re-enthroned science as man’s guiding principle.”

“Lofty goals,” replied Duck, leaning back in his chair. “Do you have a pamphlet or something that I can review? I’m eager to overcome my delusions.”

The woman tucked her paperwork back in its folder and sighed loudly. “The A.W.C. and all its supposed goodness. It really is a shame that religious zealots control so much of what goes on in Newfoundland, and every other welcoming city.”

Zealots? “I’ve been curious about that as well,” I said, trying to calm the room somewhat. “Frankly, I haven’t heard much about any worldview—religious or otherwise. Is organized religion a force in Dead Land?”

“Not a force,” responded the woman. “The force. Reason has all but been abandoned here.”

“I haven’t seen any churches,” I said, thinking it over in my mind.

“You have,” said Duck, “you just didn’t notice them.”

“Really?” *They must be hiding then. It’s not obvious.*

“Really,” continued Duck. “We have every brand of religion or secular worldview you could ever hope for. There are, like, billions upon billions of people here after all. We got Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, Buddhists, Hindus, Baptists, Anglicans, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Jehovah’s Witnesses. Dude, we have Mormons here. They all live in the same place, but they even send out their missionaries. And, of course, we have other groups. All sorts of atheists. The New, New Atheists—who we have here—the Clergy Project, Humanists International, and my personal favorite, the Canadian Atheists. And then we have some weird groups, like the Church of Satan, the Sophists Magnifique, and the Sith—yeah, they want to be Sith like in Star Wars. And last of all, we have the neverborns and their slaves. So, indeed, quite a palette to choose from.”

“He’s telling you the truth,” said the short man. “And it’s so sad. Objective reality is, again, cast aside in favor of some fanciful deity.”

Duck leaned forward in his chair. “Well, let’s talk about your deity. Tell me what objective proof you have that natural selection acting upon random mutation has evolved the life forms on this planet.”

The woman snorted in response. “Darwin proved that irrefutable fact during the 19th century; you can’t be serious.”

She’s deflecting. “I think he’s asking about the life forms in this world, Dead World.”

“Atticus here is a top-notch thinker,” replied Duck. “And he’s right. I am asking about random mutation in the lifeforms here. Because, although I’m just a fry guy, I do know that there is no known case of cellular mutation in Dead World. Cells here don’t regenerate, don’t die, aren’t born. They just exist, forever. So, help me understand.”

Eliza’s eyes became wide. She turned to the representatives of the N.N.A. “Is this true?”

After an awkward pause, the short man cleared his throat and provided a response. “The science indicates that cells do not regenerate in Dead Land. However, there are other research avenues we are following that could potentially explain the evolutionary process.”

“Oh, do tell!” said Duck.

6

“It was kind of sad,” I said, absentmindedly stirring the milkshake in front of me, as if that would somehow make it taste better. “They really didn’t have any evidence at all to back up their claims. So, if they really are a front for the neverborns, I guess they lost a few points during the discussion.”

Kat smirked as I finished telling her about the N.N.A. “I don’t get why those boring people would be a front for anything, especially a supposedly evil organization seeking to enslave the dead.” She took a bite into her Bertha burger.

If only these things tasted as good as they look. “Yeah, I’m not convinced either. Everybody is looking for meaning in life, right?”

“And in death,” she quipped.

“So tell me, how is it going with your Welcoming Committee? And when can you graduate?”

“Oh, the D.A.W.C. is lovely. I don’t think anyone graduates for at least a few months. Us junkies have a way of, you know, falling back into bad habits. My mentor is nice enough—some lady whose heart literally exploded from a crack bender. I really think she means well; I just get tired of all the supervision. You want the rest of these fries?”

“You mean those plastic straws with pretend salt on them? Nah, I’m good.”

“Tomorrow we’re going on a ‘nature flight,’ whatever that means. I guess I’m supposed to find fulfillment from all the shiny trees and stuff.”

“Actually sounds nice. I’ll be pretending to get therapy from what is—supposedly—a separate neverborn front. I’m interested in meeting one of these neverborns. Can they really be as bad as the A.W.C. is telling me?”

“I don’t know. Slavery doesn’t sound very good. But I don’t understand how therapy leads to slavery.”

“Through those ‘near life experiences’ you were telling me about the night I met you. That’s how they get you. At least, that’s what I’ve been told.”

Kat smirked again, finishing up her burger and talking with her mouth full. “So the New, New Atheists are a front for the neverborns. The therapists are a front for the neverborns. And the people who offer near life experiences are a front for the neverborns. Is Bertha’s Burgers a front, too? The A.W.C. is obviously paranoid.”

Well, when you put it like that. “Maybe you’re right,” I admitted.

“I’m going to find out,” she said, a bit of daring in her eyes.

“Find out what?”

“Whether a ‘near life experience’ is really the pathway to an eternity of misery. I’m hoping it’s just the pathway to better tasting french fries.”

“I’m not sure you should do that, Kat. What if the A.W.C. is right? Why would they make all this stuff up?”

“Give me some credit,” laughed Kat. “I’ve been clean since the day I died. My powers of resistance are out of this world.”

“If they are who we think they are, they’re going to ask you how you feel a lot,” said Syd as we made our way toward the mental health clinic. It was storming outside, but storms in Dead Land are a bit different—well, at least most of them are. Rather than large drops of water, the clouds overhead seem to generate a mist. “They will immediately direct you to the physical sensations you can no longer experience.”

There seems to be a lot of those. “But doesn’t that make sense? What else do people have to be depressed about here?”

“Pretty much all the same stuff people could get depressed about in the Land of the Living. The part of you that thinks is still with you, remember?”

“Yeah, okay. Got it.” I tried to imagine what my therapy session would be like, but was having a hard time getting a picture of it in my head.

“So after they get you focused on what you’re missing, they will offer the near life experience. That’s how we’ll know if they are neverborns.” Syd wiped the moisture from her forehead as we rounded a corner. I could see the clinic up ahead.

“And if they make the offer? I just start tackling people and screaming? I don’t even have a weapon.” *And it wouldn’t kill them anyway.*

Syd didn’t crack a smile. “No, nothing like that. This is just information gathering. Set the near life experience appointment for some other day and then get out of there.”

“What if they want to do it immediately?”

“That’s not usually how it works.” Syd slowed her pace as we approached the entrance. “It’s usually at a separate time.”

Usually. “Well, okay. And you’ll just be out here hiding I guess?”

“You got it,” she answered. Syd motioned to her ear and extended her index finger. “Just tap and call if anything gets too weird in there.”

Yeah, since nothing about this whole thing is too weird. “Great. I’ll try not to get captured or something.”

8

“**A**nd how have you felt since you entered the Land of the Dead, Atticus?” A squat, boring-looking man sat across from me in an overstuffed recliner. He of course had a full head of thick, dark hair and appeared in perfect health, but something about his tone made me think of him as a bald, middle-aged accountant.

“Confused. Very confused about everything.” *I’m not sure that’s what I was supposed to say.* “And ... hollow, like everything is fake. Nothing I eat has any taste. It seems like I can’t smell anything. There’s no substance to anything here. It all just feels ... empty. Maybe this is all a dream after all?” *That was it. That’s the script.*

“Do you feel like you have acclimated during your time here?”

“Well, I don’t freak out as much as I used to, if that’s what you mean. It’s probably been a while since you experienced it, but being a newbie here is quite a trip.”

“I’ve been dead for almost 700 years,” he explained, putting down his pen and looking at me a little closer. “So it has definitely been a while. However, I still remember my passing perfectly. But back then, we often welcomed our demise. The days of the black death were a horrible time to be alive.”

“Wow, 700 years. I’ve never met anybody that old.” *The black death? This guy must have some stories.*

“And that’s no surprise,” he replied, picking his pen back up and jotting down a note, “there aren’t many long deads in Newfoundland. We tend to organize our societies based on the general era of death and geographic location of life. But, of course, duty calls. But let’s get back to you, Atticus.

Have any of these feelings of emptiness lessened since you've been here? Or do you find that the sensation is increasing?"

Here we go. "It only seems to be getting worse. Nothing feels real; it's all just fake. I find that most of my time is spent searching memories for life experiences."

"We call it 'the Ache.'" My interviewer looked at me intently, his eyes absolutely fixed. It seemed as if he either had a great interest in me, or a great contempt. "And if it isn't checked, it will only get worse."

"What will happen to me?"

"You will eventually lose your sense of reality," he answered, sitting back in his plush chair. "You'll escape so often into your memories that you will lose the ability to discern past events from the present. But there is hope. We have developed certain treatments that can get you on the right track."

So far, just what Syd said it would be. "That's wonderful news. Do I take a pill or something? I'm hoping it's not electric shock therapy."

"No, certainly nothing like that. We find that a little dose of those physical experiences can actually give you the boost you need to pull through."

Wow. This guy moves quick. "Really? I didn't know that was possible. I figured that, since I was dead, there was no way to have something like that back in my life."

"Well, it's a heavily-regulated regimen, typically only administered by the long dead—those of us who have significant experience in this sort of treatment. But keeping your sanity, Atticus, certainly comes first." My alleged therapist pulled out a form and began checking boxes. I wasn't able to see what he was doing, but it appeared I was cleared for the next level.

"I certainly agree with that." *Don't botch it. Don't botch it!* "So is it some kind of virtual reality experience? I've noticed the technology here is first rate."

The man snorted with laughter and tore a piece of paper from what appeared to be a prescription pad. "It's a reality, but nothing of the virtual sort." He handed me a rectangular piece of paper with a date, time, and what appeared to be an address neatly outlined in perfect handwriting. "This will be the location of your next session. It's not in Newfoundland, so you'll need to make arrangements to travel there. You are flying at this point, I assume?"

"Yeah, I've been working on it," I mumbled as I looked over the instructions on the paper. "Late at night in downtown Denver?" *This seems like a weird place for a therapy session.*

"Yes," said the man as he slipped some papers into a folder and stood up to leave. "We find that we have the most success at those times. Look for a circular tent right outside this facility. That's where my colleagues will be to administer the therapy."

"Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate all your help."

He turned as he exited the door and gave me a knowing smile. "We'll take care of you, Atticus. That's what we're here for."

9

“**M**an, goin’ back to Denver, eh? You nervous, bro?” Nox looked at me with wide eyes as he sat in my condo in Newfoundland. “I can come with if you want. I’m up for it. But I’ll probably just start droppin’ people.”

“I like your enthusiasm, but I’m not sure that’s what Dawn and Syd want me to do. I think they want me to play along.” *And not become a slave in the process.*

“Yeah, they don’t just want the frosting, man. They want the whole cupcake.”

“I think I know what you mean.” I finished scooping some ice cream into a couple of bowls and handed one to Nox. “So Carter’s going to be there for this flying in space thing today?”

“For sure, bro. He loves taking newbs up there. It’s a trip for him.”

“How far have people traveled out there?”

“Who knows? I’m sure there’s some long deads who have gone out past the solar system and stuff like that, but I don’t think anyone has ever made it to the next thing.”

“What do you mean by ‘the next thing?’”

“You know, like the next star, different planets and stuff. Don’t get me wrong, it’s kinda cool out there. But it’s uncomfortable. It’s like bein’ in the ocean after a while. You just gotta get back to the shore, you know what I mean?”

“I guess I’ll find out.” I took a bite from my own bowl of ice cream and grimaced. *Hopefully that evil therapist gets me something that tastes better than this.*

“Yeah, I went to Mars pretty soon after I died. It was cool. But it’s more about the idea of it than actually being there, you know? Cause, once you’re there, it’s just a bunch of ugly rocks. Nobody lives there or nothin’ like that. And there’s no aliens.”

“Yeah, I guess it does sound kind of boring. Maybe I’ll cancel the trip.”
This doesn’t actually sound boring at all. It sounds amazing.

“Nah, man. You gonna love it.” Nox finished his last bite of weightless ice cream and put down the bowl. “So about tomorrow, you sure you’re good? Any questions or anything?”

“Well, I don’t know. Syd kind of prepped me for what to expect. I feel kind of weird about it, but I’ll go along as best I can.”

“It’s like I told you, Attic, you just slide in. But you gotta remember what’s really goin’ down; that’s the main thing. And don’t worry ‘bout nothin’. Dawn will take care of you, bro.” Nox stood up and slapped me on the back. “Let’s go have some fun, man.”

10

“Don’t forget,” said Carter with his signature gruff laugh, “I’m the one in charge up there. The good news is you can’t die. But we don’t want you getting disoriented and ending up out in the asteroid belt. As much as I like flying, I don’t want to have to go out there and search for you.”

The asteroid belt? How would I get there? “Got it. Don’t get lost.”

“And watch your breathing. You’re still going to have the urge to breathe, but you don’t need to. Take a couple of deep breaths here and you’ll be fine.”

“You gonna feel like you’re drowning, Attic. But you ain’t gonna drown.” Nox looked at Carter for approval, but received nothing in response.

“I’m still a little confused about that. Why am I breathing here if I don’t need to? Seems kind of ... inefficient.”

“Well, it’s good to breathe. You just don’t really need to, that often.” Carter laughed again.

“Okay, that’s making zero sense to me.” *Do I need to or not?*

“It’ll make more sense once we get up there. Are you ready, Atticus?” Carter gave me a serious look, almost as if he was testing my resolve.

“I’m ready. What do I do?”

“Follow me.”

As the words left Carter’s mouth, he steadied his feet beneath him, bent down slightly, and then shot up into the sky at such an incredible speed that I couldn’t tell where he had gone.

“Time to go, Attic!” said Nox, and he was gone.

I don't think I'm going to be able to keep up. I found the spot beneath my middle toe, engaged my flight mechanism, and mentally pushed the pedal down as far as it could go. I, too, shot up into the sky—flying faster than I ever had before. For a few seconds, the air was still filling my lungs. But as the blue sky gave way to black space, I found myself gasping for breath.

“You good, Attic. Don’t worry about breathing right now. Just fly.” Nox was suddenly by my side, and must have sensed that I was about to turn back and head for more oxygen.

“How are you speaking without air?” I sputtered out, coughing while I tried to suck in the last traces of breathable air in the upper atmosphere.

“I don’t know, bro,” he answered casually. “You just get used to it. You might have to look it up if you want the right answer. Follow me!” He turned his head and shot out into the darkness.

I'm really going to die, all over again. I shut the thought out of my mind, closed my eyes hard, and pushed toward the void. I felt something that could be called coldness, but it wasn’t biting or otherwise uncomfortable. It was just different. After a couple of seconds, I opened my eyes and found myself surrounded by a blanket of black. Other than the stars, which sparkled brighter than I had ever seen before, there was nothing in my field of view.

“Excellent work, Atticus,” said Carter, flying in a Superman pose to my side and then standing upright—as if there were ground beneath his feet. “You made it to the first stop on our little adventure here. Turn around and get a look at that.” Carter took me by the shoulders, and manually turned my body toward the Earth far below.

“It’s” *I can't speak. I'm suffocating.* Had I been able to muster more than an incoherent syllable, I would have told him it was incredible. There, perched beneath my feet, was the Earth in all its splendor. But it was different than I remembered from pictures. Like the humans, animals, and vegetation in Dead World, the planet was luminescent, as if it was a living

thing. *That is absolutely majestic.* I turned to Carter and tried to unlock my vocal cords, but all I could muster was a coughed “good!”

He smiled and patted me on the back, like he was rewarding a child for some good deed. “Breathe it in, Atticus. Not the air, of course, since there isn’t any—but the scene here. Take your time and enjoy it.”

I think he used the word ‘breathe’ on purpose. I nodded in agreement and continued to survey the planet below. I decided that, later, I would focus on the memory of what I saw, and try to snuff out the sensation of drowning.

“I think he likes it, Carter,” said Nox, wearing a goofy grin.

“Well, let’s see how he likes the next part.” Carter turned himself around and faced the moon. “Follow me. We’ll take you up to the site of the Apollo landings.”

“E xcuse me,” I said with a bit of hesitation, clearing my throat even though it absolutely never needed clearing, “am I in the right place?” I had just entered what appeared to be a dark red yurt. Just beyond the tent structure was a physical building with a sign that read, “Wanda’s Party Lounge.”

“That depends,” said a short man wearing a polo shirt. He looked over a list and then sized me up. “I’m assuming you’re not Shelby, but if you’re Atticus or Bruce then you’re in the right place.”

“I’m Atticus. My therapist asked me to meet here for some kind of mental health exercise.” There were three other dead people in the structure, all of them busy checking documents or communicating through their ear devices. *Recruiting slaves must require a ton of paperwork.*

“I’m Hugo,” said the same man, extending his hand for the usual greeting. “I’ll be your guide during tonight’s session.” We shook hands for an awkward second and he looked back at his papers. “Atticus; living in Newfoundland; you’ve been in Dead Land for a few weeks now; having some problems with the Ache. Is that correct?”

“That’s me.”

“Excellent, excellent. How’d you die, Atticus?”

Always that same question. “I was pulverized by a train during a moment of inattention.” I had started answering that question with a bit more sarcasm since joining the A.W.C. *Why is it anyone’s business how I died?*

“That’s a tough way to go,” replied Hugo with a distracted grin. He looked toward the entrance to the yurt as more people entered. Two of the other workers—both of them female—approached the newcomers and

started the same orientation. “Good, we have everyone here now,” said Hugo, turning his attention back toward me. “What have you been up to since moving to Newfoundland?”

Stick to the script. “Well, I had a 10-day mentoring period through the Sudden or Accidental Demise Welcoming Committee, and since then I’ve just been trying to get my feet under me. I’ve really been struggling with distracted living. The memories are just so palpable, and I find myself....” I trailed off and stared toward the floor, just like Syd had instructed.

“You’re spending all your time in memory, or most of it?” Hugo looked toward his documents and scribbled something.

“That’s right. That’s right.” I put my hand up to my face and rubbed my forehead. “It’s like I don’t know what’s real and what’s not.”

“I understand, Atticus. We’re going to help you with that tonight.” Hugo stood and beckoned me to follow him. We went to a dimly lit section of the yurt, on the opposite side from where I had entered. “Have you had any training or experience moving through physical objects?”

“Yes, a little. One of the members of the Committee had to take me to the morgue—actually not far from here—and show me my own corpse in order to convince me I was really dead. So I’ve been through a few walls. But not much more than that.”

“That’s good. Much better than what we normally get during a first session. Follow me and we’ll check your progress.” Hugo led me through an exit and stopped at a brick wall outside of Wanda’s Party Lounge. “This masonry is about two-feet thick or so. Just head on through there and come back. Let’s see how you do.”

I’ve flown to the moon, so I think I can handle a little brick wall. “No problem.” My mega brain searched its memory banks and I instantly remembered Nox’s instructions about sliding through physical objects. I casually walked up to the wall and slid through with little trouble.

Inside the lounge, I was greeted with a dark, smoke-filled room. Rotating lights pierced through the haze at intervals, revealing what appeared to be a dozen or so living people in various states of inebriation. *Why would they have us meet here?* I shook my head and slid back through the brick wall, nodding to Hugo on the other side.

“Excellent work,” he remarked, again making notes on his documentation. “I expect you’ll be done with your session before the other candidates ... patients ... even begin.”

“Great,” I said with manufactured excitement. “I’m eager to see what you can do to help me.” *And a little freaked out about what you might do to me.*

Hugo again motioned me to follow and we headed back into the yurt. From there, he pulled out a document that appeared to be a script of some sort and began reading to me. There were a lot of risks explained, various consents I was agreeing to, and otherwise boring jargon. But then something caught my ear. “The physical participants in your session will not be harmed or maimed in any way, and it is highly doubtful they will have awareness or memory of the experience whatsoever.”

“The ‘physical participants?’” I asked, cocking my head and giving Hugo a questioning look. “What is that supposed to mean?” *Not in the script.*

“This form of ... therapy requires a physical participant, a living man or woman. Otherwise, we can’t provide you with the life experience you require in order to satisfy the Ache.” Hugo laughed nervously and stared back at one of his various documents. “But rest assured, the experience is nothing to them. Through centuries of research and careful documentation, we have demonstrated that these experiences are rarely, if ever, sensed by the physical participants.”

“I don’t understand,” I continued, still unsure of his meaning. “How can they participate if they can’t even see us? Last time I was around living people, they had no clue I was even in the room. Can we somehow show ourselves to them?”

“Not without the right clearances and so forth,” answered Hugo, still avoiding my gaze. “But that’s not the point. Your therapy session will center around the physical senses of the living participants. You will see what they see, feel what they feel, hear what they hear.”

It does sound like some kind of virtual reality. “Great. How?”

Without a word in response, Hugo handed me a document and what appeared to be a ballpoint pen—much fancier than any pen I had ever used. The document was written in an archaic-looking font, with so much flare that it was difficult to read.

“What is this?” I asked, my eyes squinted as if that would somehow help me comprehend the words on its various pages.

“Just your written consent form. In summary, it says that you agree to the procedure and have been thoroughly informed of all the benefits and risks, etc. and so forth.” Hugo stared at me intently, his anxious look replaced by an almost menacing, intentional gaze.

I shuffled through the papers for another second or two, pretending to read the contents. However, the type was so small, and the font so ornate, that it was hard for me to decipher anything. *I guess I’m going to have to sign this thing no matter what, regardless of what it says.* I took the pen in my right hand and placed it above what appeared to be the signature line. *I don’t even know how to sign my updated name.* With little more thought, I scrawled out a dramatically large ‘A’ and attached the rest of my dead man name in cursive. Immediately, Hugo snatched the paper from my grasp and rolled it up tightly. After placing a red ribbon on each end of the document, he stamped the middle with what appeared to be a wax seal of some kind.

He then crouched down, tucked the document away in an elaborate trunk, and stood back up to face me.

“Very well then,” he said. “Let us proceed.”

12

“**T**his physical participant will be perfect for our purposes this evening.” Hugo pointed toward a man slumped over at the bar inside Wanda’s Party Lounge. He appeared conscious, but only awake enough to take small sips of his drink once every couple of minutes. “Let’s observe him for a time while I instruct you regarding the manner by which you will obtain the near life experience.”

Observe him do what? And he finally called it a ‘near life experience.’
“Okay, I’m all ears.”

Hugo shot me a confused look, and then continued. “Atticus, you need to understand that the physical form is simply a vehicle for a more ... sensational ... manifestation. Did you ever ride inside a horse and buggy or a steam engine during your days in mortality? Maybe even a motorized vehicle of some sort?”

“Well,” I answered, trying to suppress a laugh, “I can’t say that I did much horse and buggy travel, but I’ve been on a train. And I’ve definitely been in a car. In fact, as I indicated, my tragic death involved both a train and a car.”

“Excellent, excellent,” said Hugo, some excitement in his eyes. The living man next to us took another uncoordinated drink from his cocktail. “And while you occupied that automobile, did you ever have occasion to steer, depress the gas pedal, brake, and things of that nature?”

“Of course.” *But apparently not well enough, or I wouldn’t be here with this imbecile.* “That’s kind of the whole deal, you know.”

“Perfect. Now think of this man’s physical body as you would that motorized vehicle. There is a control center of sorts inside the brain. Your

objective this evening will be to engage those controls, which will in turn allow you to experience those physical sensations and thereby alleviate the Ache.”

“Wait ... what?” *Is he saying what I think he’s saying?*

“In the same manner by which you traversed through the brick wall, if you move into this man’s body you will find a set of controls whereby you can, well, operate him—similar to how you would operate a motor vehicle.” Hugo tried to act natural as he explained the process.

This is possession, and I’m the demon. Syd and Duck never said anything about this. “Well, this just seems really strange to me,” I muttered, trying to stall for time. “There’s really a steering wheel inside his brain? I don’t remember anything like that from when I was still kicking.”

“Kicking what?” asked Hugo.

This guy obviously hasn’t been alive for a while, if ever. “I mean when I was still in the Land of the Living. I don’t ever remember this set of controls.”

“Oh, I see,” chuckled Hugo. He quickly tapped his ear, as if he were hoping I wouldn’t notice, and continued. “The moment of initial engagement with the control center is imperceptible, because of course the central system develops while this more permanent part of you,” he touched me on the shoulder while he spoke, “helps direct its growth. Go to your earliest memories and you’ll get some sense of what I’m saying.”

I’m going to have to check on that later. “Uh ... okay.”

Hugo resumed his explanation. “And of course you have no memory whatsoever of the control center after initial engagement because you were always inextricably connected to the system. The combination of the two was nearly imperceptible—at least, that was my experience. And upon the destruction of your physical system this permanent part of you was

immediately ejected. And then I assume you stumbled upon a member of your Welcoming Committee, no doubt.”

“Why would I have been ejected?”

“Think back to a time during your life when your buggy—vehicle—became inoperable for some reason. You likely exited the contraption and looked for alternative modes of travel?”

“Yeah, I guess. I’ve had a few flat tires in my day. Once had the engine catch on fire.”

Hugo clapped his hands together, apparently ecstatic that I was picking up on the metaphor. “When the physical becomes inoperable, you exit the system. We call that death, Atticus.”

The groggy man at the bar was no longer drinking. His head was upright, but it appeared he was sound asleep. I couldn’t perceive that he smelled bad, but he sure looked like the kind of guy that would stink. I turned my attention back to the “therapist” who was allegedly trying to enslave me. “Just one more question: once I ... get in there, how do I prevent myself from becoming ‘inextricably connected’ to his body? Seems like that wouldn’t be quite fair to him.”

Hugo tried to give me a reassuring smile while nodding his head. “Of course that is an important element in all this. Be assured of two points. First, this man will never perceive that he had a guest this evening. That is why the living participants are ... often ... in a state similar to his.”

“You mean wasted?”

“I mean a state of near unconsciousness or a total lack of control, through whatever means. And second,” Hugo rubbed his hands together as he delivered this part of his presentation, “this experience will do him no harm whatsoever. He will be left as if this had never occurred.”

“How do you know that? It’s not like you can ask him.” *Don’t get out of line. You’ll blow the whole thing.*

“I know that because I have over 2,000 years of experience in this sort of thing.” Hugo tapped his ear again quickly and began packing up his various documents into some kind of travel bag. “So let’s get to it, Atticus. Let’s help you overcome the Ache.”

13

“Like I said, it’s just like going through a wall.”
I could tell Hugo was getting frustrated by my hesitation, but I was really just trying to buy time. *Am I really going to do this?* “Yeah, but a wall is just studs and sheetrock. This is a living thing. It just feels completely different to me.”

“It’s no different. They are two manifestations of physical objects—mere clumps of matter, originally aligned through random processes. Nothing more.”

He must have some intel on me. He’s speaking my language now. “What’s it going to look like in there? How will I know where I am?”

“You’ll encounter brain matter, of course, as you search for the control center. But I expect you will very much know the place when you see it.” Hugo again tapped his ear. He seemed to be getting more impatient by the second.

“And what do I do when I get in there?”

“You experience, Atticus. You feel. You live once again. You satisfy the Ache.”

No more stalling. “Alright, here we go.” I took one last look at Hugo, noticed a devilish grin on his face, and worked to slide toward the disheveled man at the bar. I immediately encountered cellular matter, taking my eagle eyes to microscope view as I focused on what I assumed were this man’s neurons. I could have spent hours there, just looking around. The cellular structures were more complex than anything I had ever imagined, as if each one was a spherical, bustling city. *You’re going to have to look into this more later.*

Somewhat disoriented, I refocused my attention on the parameters of “the patient’s” entire body. I realized I was too far forward, and worked to align our various appendages. And that’s when I caught a glimpse of what Hugo had prepared me for—the control center. But it wasn’t at all what I expected. Rather than a command chair, video monitors, and a console with various controls, there was the subtlest of openings. *Maybe I’ve watched too much Star Trek.* And although the man at the bar was oblivious to it, I perceived I was staring directly at his soul.

I don’t belong here. Is this really worth whatever the A.W.C. is trying to accomplish? Despite my significant hesitations, I pressed forward—working to slide into the already-inhabited control center. To my surprise, I was able to maneuver into the space. Although, I perceived the area was stretched well-beyond its typical confines. It was like trying to fit two fingers into a solitary space in a glove.

Like Hugo had said, the man’s real self didn’t seem to notice I was there. As I worked to get situated, he made a few half-hearted attempts to eject me, but I easily maintained my position. *This guy’s totally wasted, body and soul.*

I fought off a few more pushes and shoves as I worked to take control. *What am I doing wrong here?* But now I was getting closer. It was more of a feeling than anything else, like finding the perfect recliner. I withstood one more attack from the regular occupant of the control center and nestled into the spot. And then it was like somebody flicked a light switch. My mind exploded with sensation.

14

It was like I felt everything at once, from the crown of the man's head to the bottom of his feet. I thought I even noticed the flight controls down below his middle toe, but quickly abandoned any attempt there. *Maybe the dead can make the living ... levitate?* Focusing his eyes, I looked intently at the hands in front of me. I was able to stretch them out and draw them into fists without much effort. I spent a moment contemplating how I was controlling them, but I couldn't figure it out. It just seemed ... natural.

After a few more seconds enjoying the ecstasy of physical sensation, I noticed something was wrong. *My head ... well, his head is spinning like a top.* I instinctively placed the man's fingers on the temples of either side of his head, as if I could somehow manually stop the circus ride. But it was no use; we were in pure vertigo. *I guess that's the trade-off when your "living participant" is intoxicated.* I shook his head slightly and that seemed to help some, at least for a moment.

Seeing a shot glass at the bar, I reached his hand forward and grasped it as best I could. Although there was a slight tremor at his fingertips, I just managed to get the glass up to his lips for a drink.

Without warning, my ears screamed as the bartender spoke. "Not sure you should have any more, pal. You said you had to drive home after this."

A responsible bartender. How quaint. Probably got sued in a dram shop case recently. I did my best to respond, but could only muster a grunt from deep within the man's chest. *Oh, great. I can't speak.* Helpless to say anything to the bartender, I pointed toward a menu under the glass top of the bar with a wobbly finger.

The bartender laughed in response. “Agreed, maybe a bacon cheeser will help sober you up. I’ll get it going.” The physical participant’s mouth watered as I thought about the prospect of a burger. *Incredible. Even my thought processes invoke a response.*

I sat in silence for a time, simply enjoying the ability to feel something, anything. I had a few half-hearted nudges from the man’s true self, but I was in complete control. It was as if his physical intoxication had also numbed his soul—like they were both inebriated. *Another topic for later.*

Eventually, the bartender plopped the blessed food down before me. The side of fries beamed with a golden glow. The bacon, sitting atop the charbroiled hamburger patty, sizzled with absolute precision. Even the toasted bun, slightly smashed but still retaining its original shape, was like a vision. Through some effort, I was able to get the man’s mouth to grunt an audible “thank you.”

“No problem,” laughed the bartender. “I’ll bring you some ice water to wash it down, and maybe help you wake up a bit. Don’t choke on that.”

The powerful smell wafting from the food filled my ... his ... nostrils and, as far as I could tell, put a visible smile on the man’s face. I picked up the burger with two hands, doing my best to raise it toward the participant’s mouth without dropping anything. And then I took a bite—and everything about the strangeness of the experience was gone. No more A.W.C. No more Hugo. No more neverborns. No more anything. It was just me and the pure ecstasy of sensation. *This is the greatest moment of my life, or I guess, the greatest moment of my death.* I chewed the food with a ravenous passion, waiting to swallow so I could experience every morsel, every feeling flooding through what were now my senses. Everything else was meaningless; nothing else mattered. This was the heaven I had been waiting for.

“**B**ut what happened?” I said, disoriented. “One second I was there and the next I was here with you again.” After a few more bites of the burger, I was about to dig into some french fries. But I had been suddenly dispossessed of the experience altogether.

“The physical participant decided you were no longer welcome,” answered Hugo, checking a few boxes on an archaic-looking form. “And that’s quite alright, for I believe we achieved our purpose here today. How do you feel?”

I would feel better if I’d been able to eat those fries. “I feel okay. I wish it could have lasted a bit longer. Is there any way to do another round?” I looked over at the participant, who was absentmindedly scratching the back of his head while I spoke.

“I don’t believe that will be possible with this host. While his body remains inebriated, you have very much awoken the inner part. It was his true self that ejected you from the control center. It’s normal. Many hosts will allow others to control the space for a time, but the host always has more power than the guest, of course. They are far more integrated into the system.”

“Well, okay. I guess that makes sense.” I looked over at the burger and fries in front of the man, helpless to partake. *Talk about ache; I’d almost do anything for that food right now.*

Hugo handed me what appeared to be a parchment. “Here is some information about your next session. I will likely be your guide that evening, but I can’t guarantee that’s the case.”

“Sounds like we’re done for this evening?” *He’s not even going to ask me how I feel? Bad form.*

“That’s correct. You need time to process the experience and determine whether it was beneficial in your struggle with the Ache. I suspect you will determine that it has been helpful, at which point we will work on satisfying other urges which are unattainable in your current state. Are you able to make the appointment?”

I looked down at the paper. The writing was again presented with an ancient appearance, but I couldn’t help but notice that it was far easier to read than the contract I had signed. *Fine print is a thing even in the World of the Dead.* The appointment outlined a different location in Denver—definitely one of the seedier parts of town if I was reading it right. “Yeah, I don’t think it will be a problem.”

Hugo stuck out his hand in a perfunctory manner, an invitation for a goodbye shake. “It was a pleasure meeting with you this evening, Atticus. I look forward to seeing you at our next session.”

He’s trying to get rid of me, and in a hurry. I looked around the dark bar for the other “patients,” but could see no sign of them or their alleged therapists. “Well, okay then. Thanks for everything.”

“Demonic possession, Dawn! That’s what I’m talking about. And I was the demon!” I sat across from her in the A.W.C. building in Newfoundland. The space was nothing fancy, but it was better than the bureaucratic offices in the World of the Living. There were a few family-style portraits on the walls, which I assumed were her relatives. Based on their lack of glow, it appeared they were still living—at least at the time the photos were taken. Dawn watched me silently, that knowing grin—which she seemed to always have on her face—projecting my way.

I repeated my frustration. “I would have liked to know that going in.”

“‘Possession’ would be the correct word,” she replied, looking down at a stack of papers on her desk as she spoke. “But not ‘demonic possession.’ You are not a demon. You’re a member of the A.W.C., and this was an important part of your training, and an important part of our investigatory work. When and where is your next appointment?”

She’s not going to let me be outraged. I pulled the parchment out of a pants pocket and tossed it to her without a word.

“They are elevating you quickly,” she responded, reading over the note. “I believe this is a house of ill-repute. Or perhaps it is a clandestine lab of some sort.”

“Well, I’m not participating in that kind of nonsense.” *I would like to find another cheeseburger though. And I would kill for a real milkshake.*

“Nor would we ask you to, Atticus. But this fits the pattern. You see, the neverborns usually start with something more innocent, like food or drink. But they escalate you quickly. Many of those they seek to enslave are

more willing to engage in other behaviors that are much more invasive, such as drug use and sexual acts. The neverborns, of course, care nothing for the ‘physical participants,’ as they typically call them. And soon, their adherents join them in that perspective.”

“Who are they, Dawn? Who are the neverborns?” *Am I ever going to get a straight answer to this question?*

“It’s time you knew more about that. Come with me.”

“**W**e’re almost there,” answered Dawn. After leaving her office, we had wound our way through the A.W.C. building with a series of twists, turns, and descents. Eventually, we reached a large door in what seemed to be the basement with the title “Detention Facility” written across it in boxy letters. Rather than knocking, Dawn tapped her ear in the usual fashion.

After what was only a few seconds, a man unlocked the barricade and welcomed us inside. He was shorter than Dawn, dark slicked-back hair sitting atop his head and a fierce intensity in his subtly glowing eyes. “I wondered if you were going to visit today,” said the man. To my great shock, Dawn leaned down and kissed him as she walked through the corridor. “And now I’m glad you did,” he added, winking at me as I followed Dawn into the Facility.

Okay. What is going on here?

Dawn laughed and turned to face me. “Atticus, meet my husband, Billy. Billy, meet Atticus, the newest member of the Committee.”

“That’s right. You two are ... married,” I stammered out.

“People don’t get married in Dead Land,” answered Billy. “But Dawn and I hitched our wagons together when we were still kicking. So she puts up with me.”

“How long have you been married?”

“Well, she up and left me for this place about 15 years early, but all told we’ve been married 95 years.”

“Wow, congratulations. That’s quite an achievement.”

“I’m the only reason he has a job,” added Dawn. “He’d just spend all his time fishing if it weren’t for me.”

“I don’t get it,” I said, “how can you fish if there’s no more death in Dead Land?”

“Well,” answered Billy with some excitement, “you can still hook those buggers and reel ‘em in. You just can’t fry ‘em up afterwards. And Dawn doesn’t believe me, but I swear fish are smarter here than they were back in Living Land.”

“And the fishing holes are very well-stocked,” quipped Dawn, “so it’s not much of a challenge for a professional like my Billy here.” She tapped her ear and then opened her eyes wide. “We need to get moving, gentlemen. I don’t have time to dawdle today. We’ll all go fishing together soon enough.”

“But never often enough,” added Billy, resuming his walk through the narrow hallways of the Detention Facility. “Follow me for your tour, Atticus.”

“**T**he one we’re going to have you talk to is probably the most loose-lipped demon I’ve ever met. Sometimes it’s hard to get him to shut up.” Billy spoke as he guided us through the prisoner portion of the detention facility. Small square windows sat at eye level in each door, but so far I hadn’t seen anybody looking our way as we walked along the corridor. “So we keep him around here for intel. Maybe he thinks our little makeshift hell down here is better than the long-term facility in Old York. Who knows?”

“Where does he come from?” I asked Billy, hoping he might give me some more information. *He seems to be more of a straight talker than the others.*

“Same place they all do, I guess.”

“Ah, I see.” *So no luck there.*

“Ask him yourself, Atticus,” said Dawn. “This is his cell. But I doubt you’ll get a straight answer out of him. They’re tough nuts to crack.” She motioned to a nondescript cell door with the exact same square window. Unlike the others, there was a pair of eyes staring out at us.

“Any special instructions?” I asked, somewhat hesitant. “You know, stay to the right? Don’t drink the Kool-Aid? Anything like that?”

“Just give him a good whack if he gets out of line,” answered Billy, opening the cell with what appeared to be a large brass key.

“A pleasure to see you as well, William. As per usual, I trust you’ve brought me another of your pupils for his first lessons in demonology?” The man was calm as he stood awkwardly still near the door of his empty cell. He appeared to have absolutely nothing by which to pass the time. The

cramped prison contained bare walls, low ceiling, and cold floor. The detainee wore a dark, tight-fitting shirt and pants of the same color. Of course, he appeared to be in his mid-20s and in perfect health, like every other male in Dead World.

“So what is your name, dead man? And how did you pass from that World of the Living to this state of existence?”

I looked over to Dawn for some guidance about how to proceed, in response to which she lifted her eyebrows and nodded toward the detainee. I took that as a sign to proceed. “I’m Atticus. I was killed by a train.”

“How splendid, Atticus.” For some reason, he greatly exaggerated the pronunciation of my name, as if it were a joke to him. “And what did you come here to discover from me?”

I guess I’ll just go for it and ask Dawn for forgiveness later if I have to. “I’ve been told you’re a ‘neverborn,’ and I guess I want to know more about who you are and where you come from.”

“Such trifles,” laughed the prisoner. “Hardly worth my time, even though it is infinite. But I’ll spar with you for a moment. My name is Molgon, as both Dawn and William here will attest. And where I come from, that’s more ... involved.” Molgon suddenly started speaking in a language I didn’t understand, as if he were reasoning with himself. Whatever this internal conversation was about, it seemed to amuse him. “Forgive the pause in my response,” he continued, “I at times have to consult those above me in the ranks. One must follow orders.”

“You were talking to somebody else?” I asked. *Dude’s a psycho.*

“Well, of course I was. Didn’t you hear the conversation?”

“Guess I wasn’t sure what was going on there.” I turned my attention from Molgon and looked to both Dawn and Billy. They seemed content to let me run the conversation alone. So I went on. “So, Molgon, are you a neverborn and, if so, where do you come from?”

“I like this one,” he said, shifting his gaze to Dawn. His speech was slow, but deliberate and elegant. “Very direct. A hopeless skeptic though.” He looked back at me and chewed on the questions for a moment. “The name ‘neverborn,’ it’s somewhat of an insult, you see. And I don’t blame you. You’re just parroting what you’ve heard others say. But I will reveal that I took a different path than you did—one which did not involve the calamities of the flesh. But isn’t it fascinating? Our two paths have converged at this very moment. We have arrived at the same destination.”

I don’t think he actually told me anything. “So what was your path?”

“I will answer that question if you are willing—or able—to answer one of my longstanding queries: you, Mr. Atticus,” he again emphasized my name in mockery, “what was your path to the womb of your fleshy mother? How was it that you—the real you—arrived there?”

I had been to that place during mind dives several times. It was like a sudden beginning of consciousness, an immediate ability to think and feel. “I don’t know that path,” I answered. “My memories don’t extend beyond that place.”

“Well,” smirked Molgon, “if you cannot—or will not—reveal to me how you charted that course, then I refuse to reveal my very different path to our convergence here today.”

“But you are a neverborn, as insulting as that designation may be?”

“It is true, Atticus, that I did not experience physical birth in the same way you, Dawn, and even William here did. But I am not the lesser for it.”

Seems like maybe he has a complex. “But you can’t tell me where you came from?”

“Of course I can. The more salient point is whether I am willing to tell you. And unless you provide more details about your own origins, you shall leave here disappointed.”

“How many neverborns are there here in Dead World?”

“Why do you want to know?” he scoffed. “Plan on locking up every one of us, Atticus? You will need to expand this facility considerably.”

“Just curiosity.” *And I’d like to know what I’m up against.*

“30 some odd billion and a smattering of others, Atticus.” Molgon paused, and must have seen the look of surprise on my face. “Yes, young one, there are quite a few of us. Dawn and Billy here have their work cut out for them.”

“But, Molgon,” said Dawn, winking as she spoke, “you don’t all cause problems. There are a few of you out there who have been properly reformed.”

“A ruse, at best,” smirked Molgon, “but go on patting yourself on the back if it makes you feel better.”

“Okay, fine,” I said, trying to get us back on track, “you took a different path. There are a whole bunch of you. Why are you trying to hurt the rest of us?”

“Now you are being offensive, Atticus. As well as naïve. Dawn tells you that we are evil, so you simply believe it. She tells you near life experiences are improper, and you just accept that with no critical thought. By the way, many of your people arrange and participate in near life experiences as well—I’m sure Dawn didn’t tell you about that. We assist your kind in communicating with your loved ones, and Dawn again cries foul. You need to reassess your newfound sense of morality, Atticus. It is the A.W.C. and these other bureaucrats who punish and hurt.” He looked around his empty jail. “And imprison.”

“I’m told you make slaves of men.”

Molgon laughed long and hard. “And who is the one locked in a box at the present?” He said, a wild look forming in his eyes.

“So you think I’m the one that’s been duped?” *Maybe he’s right. What do I really know about the A.W.C.?*

“Yes, Mr. White,” said Molgon. “Or shall I call you Garry? You have very much been led astray. And you didn’t even finish those marvelous french fries.”

19

“Sure you don’t want a snack?” Duck smirked at me as he looked through my kitchen cabinets for something to eat. “Maybe it’ll make you feel better, dude. You seem a bit high strung today.”

“Maybe it’s because my mentor never told me I would be engaging in physical possession and sparring with demons during my time on the A.W.C.” *Details I would have liked to know before I signed up for this.*

“Oh, calm down. You ate a cheeseburger and had a conversation. I think you’ll survive.”

“I just think you should have told me what this was all about.”

“But you wouldn’t have done any of it. Dawn needed to test you; make sure you could have a near lifer and not lose your soul to the nevers.”

“And how does she know I won’t?”

“If you were that weak it would have shown by now. You’d be tripping over those glowing legs trying to get back to your pseudo therapist. Here’s another reason: we needed an insider. And now we have one, at least for a while. Once one of us blows cover it’s hard to go underground again. They have a pretty good system for spotting us. I don’t know how; it seems like they’re always passing old parchments around. But they must have some cool tech we don’t know about.”

“Molgon knew my living name, Duck. I think my cover is blown.”

Duck bit down on something crunchy and took a seat. “But does Molgon know your therapist? What was his name? Hugo? That’s a probably not.”

I hope he’s right. “Are there really 30 billion of these people, or was Molgon just trying to get me to freak out?”

“Well, I haven’t counted them,” answered Duck, wiping a few crumbs off his shirt, “but, yeah, Dead World is literally crawling with neverborns. Most of them seem to keep to themselves, living underground in caves and crevices, but a lot of them cause trouble too. I guess that’s not very surprising.”

“How do I know you’re not a neverborn?” *Anyone could be a neverborn.*

“You don’t know I’m not a neverborn, but I can guarantee my knowledge of Super Nintendo video games and 90s grunge bands greatly surpasses that of your average demon.”

Seems like scant proof. “So much to worry about. I thought being dead would be more ... restful.”

“Not for schlubs like us,” laughed Duck. He stood up and slapped me on the back. “We’re going on a little field trip today. Pack some snacks and anything else you need for the few seconds it’s going to take us to fly to Fort Collins.”

“Why are we going there?”

“Don’t worry, no neverborn interrogations or awkward cheeseburgers. Dawn thought you might need a little pick-me-up since you’ve now engaged in demonic possession. They always ask me to help with the charity work.”

“So they can’t see me, right?” Without a word of explanation, Duck had flown straight to my ex-wife’s home and beckoned me to follow him inside. For the first time since my hasty death, I saw my boys. It looked like a typical Saturday morning for them—video games and bowls of cereal occupied their full attention.

“That’s right. Even though you are their dad, the same physical rules apply. It’s not like the movies.”

They look older to me. “I’ve thought about coming to see them before, but I didn’t know whether that was against any Dead Land laws.”

“Nah. Harassing them would be. Popping in for a visit? Not at all.” Duck moved toward my older boy and watched him navigate the controls on his game. He was playing a first-person shooter, his fingers jumping around the knobs and buttons with expertise. “Video games have come a long way since I kicked the bucket. I think Duck Hunt was the only shooting game I ever played.”

“The name seems kind of ironic now,” I said, laughing at my own joke. It was a strange sensation, being in the same room as my living sons when they had no ability to see or hear me. “Do you know how they’ve been doing?” *Why would Duck know how they’re doing?*

“They’re doing fabulous,” answered Duck, now observing my young boy’s cereal selection. “After you got hit by that train, they got a fat life insurance check. My research tells me they got a few toys to ease the pain of your tragic passing. But most of the money was socked away in a college fund. Good on you for taking care of them.”

“How did you figure all that out?”

"I'm your mentor, Atticus. It's my job to keep tabs on you. Frankly, I've been surprised you haven't asked about them before. You're a bit atypical there, my man."

"I just didn't want to mess it up, you know? I didn't want them feeling like they were being haunted or something like that, if that's even a thing. I'm sure their mom is taking good care of them. She probably thinks the best thing that ever happened to them was me getting hit by that train."

"Nah, dude. She took it hard. And haunting is a thing—another tactic of the neverborns to draw people to their side. Pretty intense stuff, but pretty rare. At least, rare in this part of the world."

"Unbelievable."

"Are you going to say anything to them?" asked Duck. "It's up to you, of course. I can go in the other room and hang out with your ex if that will make it easier for you. But I don't want to be creepy."

"Talk to them? We've been talking this whole time. They can't hear us."

"Well, they won't be able to audibly hear you. But they may be able to ... feel what you're trying to communicate."

"They might be able to 'feel.' What does that even mean?" *I swear there is some new thing I find out about being dead every day.*

"Didn't you ever feel like someone who had died was with you during mortality? You know, like you could sense their presence?"

"I just always chalked stuff like that up to, you know, memories, déjà vu, random tricks of the brain."

"You were such an atheist back then." Duck smirked in my general direction and then headed for the kitchen. "I'm going to go check out the rest of the house. Do whatever you want."

Thanks for the help. I sat silent for a minute or two, just watching the boys. They laughed at their game in unison, fought over whose turn it was

a couple of times, and other than having aged some, seemed every bit how I remembered them. *Do they remember me? Do they ever talk about me?*

I finally mustered up the courage to speak. “Hey guys. This is your dad. I know you can’t hear me. Well, I don’t think you can. But I want you to know that I’m doing just fine. Dying isn’t anything like I thought it would be. I’m still very much alive, and I’ve been thinking about you a lot. I’m sure your mom is taking good care of you. She’s a smart lady, so do what she says. I’ll come back and visit, now that I know I can.” As far as I could tell, there was no discernible change in their behavior.

So much for them being able to ‘feel’ what I said. I walked into the kitchen and saw Duck there, staring out the sliding glass window into the back yard. “I always wanted a trampoline,” he said without looking at me. “You know, when I was a kid. It seemed like all my friends had one, but we never did.”

“Well, you can fly now,” I replied, not very interested in the topic. “So no big deal.”

“But I couldn’t fly back then, and I’m talking about how it was back then.” He looked out the glass door for a little longer, and then turned to face me again. “So, are you all set? Said what you needed to say?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think they could ‘feel’ what I said. They didn’t even flinch.”

At that moment, my older boy walked into the kitchen area and scratched his head, like he was deep in thought. “Hey, Mom,” he said. “What do you think Dad is doing right now?”

“I just don’t think it’s a big deal.” Kat rolled her eyes in my general direction as we walked down a busy street in the heart of Newfoundland. “And why be so afraid of everything all the time? You should live a little, even if you are dead.”

She thinks I’m a wimp. “I just don’t like the ‘invasion’ that happens with a near life experience. Why should I have a right to be in someone else’s body? It’s even worse than breaking into someone’s house or stealing their money.”

“You had a couple of bites of a cheeseburger. It’s not like you threw the guy off a cliff or something. I can’t wait to give it a try.” Kat picked up her pace as she beamed with excitement.

“So, how are you going to go about getting one? Mine came through a therapist.”

“You’re too tied up with the A.W.C.,” laughed Kat. “If you opened your eyes a little bit, you’d see that there are N.L.E.s being offered everywhere. You just have to pay a bit of money, but not too much.”

Dawn was right. It sounds like a seedy business. “You sure that’s the best thing to spend your money on?”

“Don’t worry, Father. I’ll be able to cover my rent.”

“I’m not trying to be your dad. I’m just worried about you.”

Kat skipped out in front of me and dramatically turned around, as if she were a performing ballerina. “If you’re so worried, Dad, you should just come with me. You know, keep an eye on me; make sure I don’t miss curfew.”

Maybe she's right. And then I can report back to the others about what I see. "When is your session?"

She laughed at me again. "There is no 'when.' There is no 'session.' There is only a place and a chance to live again, if only for a few heavenly minutes. Or earthly minutes, to be more precise."

"Okay, so there's no appointment. But when are you planning to go?"

"Meet me at that pizza joint on Sixth Street. You know, the place with the crust you said tastes like rubber pellets. I'll be there tomorrow night, quarter to midnight. That should give us plenty of time to get there."

"And where are we going from there? What's the destination?"

Kat came close and grabbed the collar of my shirt before responding. "You need a little bit of adventure in your life, Atticus. So you'll just have to wait and find out."

“Nox, please give us your report,” said Dawn. We sat solemnly around a conference room table buried within the depths of the A.W.C. Dawn was crouched over a mess of paperwork as she conducted the meeting.

“Just like you said it would be, boss,” answered Nox. “They scattered like roaches in the light, but we nabbed a few along the way. I even dropped a few of ‘em.” He looked at me with a wide smile as he finished.

“Excellent work,” Dawn replied. “And have you interrogated any of the prisoners at this point?”

“That’s next. Right after we done here.”

“Wonderful, please take Syd with you for the interviews. She seems to be able to wiggle more useful information out of them.”

Syd nodded her head in agreement. “Happy to help.”

“Thank you,” said Dawn. She shuffled a few more documents and turned to my mentor. “Duck, can you provide reports on Lawrence and ... Eliza please.”

“Eliza is doing fine,” he answered, leaning back in his chair with his hands behind his head. “She’s sworn off the New, New Atheists and seems to be settling in for some work with one of the labs in town. She’s been a bit down about not getting the answers she wanted, but I think she’s going to be fine.”

“If only facts were a bit more considerate of our wants,” smiled Dawn. “And Lawrence?”

“That dude’s been more of a trip,” said Duck, shaking his head as he spoke. “He was convinced he was in a coma for weeks, and now he’s

graduated to believing he's mentally insane. I might actually agree with him on the latter theory."

"Have you had him participate in any of the usual modalities to convince him?"

She must mean taking him to see his dead corpse. I remember those days.

Duck shook his head and laughed. "I can't get him to do anything. He believes I'm some kind of phantom."

"So do I," I quipped, but nobody cracked a smile.

"Well, keep working the problem," said Dawn with finality. She turned her head and looked at me with her signature, knowing smile. "We've cracked tough nuts in the past."

Figured that was coming.

"And finally, Atticus, tell us about your continuing efforts as an undercover near lifer." Dawn's faintly glowing eyes seemed to pierce me as she asked the question.

Does she know about Kat? "Well, I had my first 'session,' if that's the right word, a few days back. And I'm scheduled for round two at a "house of ill repute"—Dawn's words, not mine—this Saturday night. So I guess I'll show up and, what, start tasing people?"

"Oh, we're not going to ask you to participate in that debauchery," said Dawn, again looking down at some paperwork. "We'll send most of the team out to back you up on this one, as well as a few police officers to round up the neverborns."

"Won't that blow my cover, so to speak?" *I feel like I'm in a buddy cop movie right now.*

"Well, not necessarily," continued Dawn. "Maybe we'll have you arrested as well to maintain the illusion."

"I'll try not to drop you, bro," laughed Nox.

“But I will tase you, if I can get my hands on something like that,” added Duck.

“I’ll put you next to that demon Molgon in the jail,” said Billy, joining in the fun. “He really seemed to like you.”

“Alright, that’s enough,” interrupted Dawn with finality. “It will go swimmingly, Atticus. We’ll make sure of it.”

“**K**at, is that you?” It was already midnight at the pizza joint, and thus far I had seen no sign of her. The pedestrian I had just hailed gave me a strange look and kept on walking. *Guess that’s not Kat. And I guess I’m getting ditched tonight. Seems just like mortality.*

I waited for a few more minutes, and was about to abandon the entire affair, when I heard Kat’s familiar voice. “Hey Atticus, sorry to keep you waiting. Frankly, I’m a bit surprised to see you here tonight.”

“I’m a bit surprised by it, too,” I mumbled in response. Something seemed off. *She’s never late.* “Where were you?”

“Lost track of time. I was mind-diving a bit to get geared up for the experience, and the next thing I knew it was past midnight. You ready to fly? Hopefully they’re still there.”

“I’m ready. Mind telling me where we’re going?”

“I do mind,” she said, a twinkle in her eye. “You’re just going to have to follow me and find out. Let’s go!”

“If you say so.”

“I do say so!” yelled Kat as she blasted up into the sky. I followed her, doing my best to track her through the night. *We’re definitely heading north.* The ground below was only sparsely populated here and there. There wasn’t much life of any kind—either from the living or dead.

“It seems like we’re going nowhere,” I said, catching up to Kat with a middle toe adjustment. “Are you taking me out here to kill me?”

“That would be a good plan, if you weren’t already dead.” She tapped her ear, signaling she was seeking some kind of information about our destination. “It’s right up here; next to that small lake.”

“There’s nobody there,” I answered, almost in protest. “Don’t you need living participants around to have an N.L.E.?”

“I only need one.” Kat flashed me a raised eyebrow and then descended to the surface.

I landed without incident and looked around. Other than Kat and the seemingly lifeless body of water in front of us, there was nothing there. *Seems a bit strange.* “You sure we’re in the right spot?”

“Not a bit,” she replied, flicking her hair and walking away from the lake. “But let’s find out.”

The bright moon, and my own subtle luminescence, lit the way as we traversed across a jagged landscape. Kat was looking for something in the rocks and crevices, but she didn't seem to want my help.

"Maybe your living participant is hanging out under a stone?" I asked with sarcasm, but Kat didn't respond. *This is really strange.* After a few more minutes of watching her fumble around, I had lost all patience. "Kat, what are we doing? There's nothing out here but sagebrush and rocks."

"No spoilers," she said with a sly grin. "And stop distracting me. I need to concentrate." She tapped her ear a few more times while she continued to inspect the ground beneath her.

Maybe she's hoping to inhabit the body of a lizard.

"Here it is," she said with excitement.

"Here what is?" I could see nothing other than rocks and shadows.

"Let's go and find out." She leaned back into a crablike sitting position and deliberately crawled into the midst of a shadow between two large boulders. The glow of her perfect face was suddenly gone.

"Kat! What are you doing?" I went to her last known position and peered into the darkness. There, I could see her twisting and contorting her way through a tight fissure.

"This is the way!" she yelled back. "Hurry up!"

Why not just slide through all these rocks? I went through the mental stretching to work myself through the boulders instead of between them. But as I reached out my hand, I was met with a thud instead of a path.

I could hear Kat laughing below. “This isn’t some man-made building. This is pure earth. You can’t just slide through it.”

“Well, now I know!” I said, somewhat frustrated as I yelled down below. She was almost out of sight. “Wait up a second; I’m on my way.” I bent down low and tried to mimic Kat’s crab walk as best I could. But instead of a controlled descent, I slipped and bounced my way down the cracks. Of course, it didn’t hurt at all, but it had been so long since I experienced pain from contact that the discomfort registered in my mind the same way. I landed near Kat’s position in a heap. *Impressive, Atticus.*

“At least you got here,” said Kat, giving me a reassuring pat on the back. She quickly removed her hand and pointed down what appeared to be a rock-hewn corridor. “This must be it. Let’s go!”

“Oh yes, it’s obvious,” I muttered, chasing her into the darkness.

25

“See anything up there?” Kat was still leading us through a jagged tunnel. We seemed to be descending, but it wasn’t altogether clear.

Before she could answer, I heard a faint voice from up ahead. “Katherine, I believe you have located us. Just a little further.”

“Ha!” said Katherine, turning around and giving me a jab with her elbow. “I told you we were going the right way.”

How could we possibly have a near life experience down here? “Yup,” I muttered, wary of the situation, “you were right.”

After another 50 yards or so, the underground shaft opened into a large clearing. The rounded rock walls were smooth, adorned with various portraits of men and women wearing ancient looking smocks. Faint candlelight sat atop pedestals spread out in four corners.

“Katherine,” said the same voice, “we are delighted you could join us this evening. And it appears you brought a companion?” A well-groomed man approached us from a crowd and offered his hand to Kat. She took it enthusiastically and looked toward me.

“This is Atticus,” she said. “He wanted to tag along.”

“Atticus, welcome,” said the man. He spoke deliberately, as if he were trying too hard to make every word sound just right. “We look forward to entertaining you.”

Entertaining me? “Thank you. Nice to be here.”

“Aurelia,” he said, beckoning to a woman from the crowd. “Please provide our guests here with some refreshment. They have traveled a long distance to be with us tonight.”

The woman obeyed without a word, handing us what appeared to be two goblets. *I feel like I'm in the middle of some kind of medieval reenactment.* I mumbled a “thank you” and took a sip from the pristine chalice. But instead of the same old watered-down liquid I was used to, this concoction actually had ... flavor. An excitement filled my eyes as I hurriedly downed the rest of the drink. *Maybe we're already in the near life experience somehow?*

“Be careful there, friend,” laughed the man before me. “We wouldn’t want you to choke.”

The beverage still tingled in the back of my throat, and I could actually feel it descend into my midsection. It was the first time since my N.L.E. that I felt like I had actually tasted something. My suspicions returned immediately.

“Who are you?” I said to the man with a challenging tone. “And why do I feel like I’m at a renaissance fair?”

“I am Cassius,” he replied, “and I will be your host this evening. Those of us gathered with you tonight do not come from your ... age, and are therefore fashioned a bit differently. I hope you can forgive some of our stylistic choices; it’s what we know, Atticus.”

“How does this drink have actual flavor?” *Maybe a bit demanding in these questions.*

Kat didn’t use words, but she shot me a look as if to say I was being rude.

Cassius chuckled softly and nodded his head in my direction. “We have worked for a long time to perfect the fare offered to our guests.”

Cassius turned his attention from me and addressed Kat. “Are you ready for the experience we discussed a few days ago?”

“Oh yeah,” she answered with enthusiasm. “I can’t wait to actually feel something again.”

“Marvelous, please follow me.”

I'm not buying this. "Cassius, sir," I said in the politest tone I could muster, "where are the living participants? Everyone here appears to be dead. And I'm really doubting that any living person could have navigated through that labyrinth of rocks back there."

"Never fear, Atticus, we have scores of participants who will accommodate your every desire this evening."

"Scores? Where are they?"

"You will need to travel with us a bit further to have the full experience."

Nope. Something is wrong here. I raised my voice. "That's not going to happen. Come on, Kat. Let's go."

"Atticus," she replied with a shrug in her shoulders and upturned hands, "what are you talking about? We just got here."

"And we're just leaving here." I turned to exit, but found the tunnel entrance blocked by four people. Each of them stared at me intently with arms crossed.

Unbelievable. Dawn's going to kill me. I looked back to Cassius. "Imprisonment then? Nice."

"The only prison you occupy is the one inside your mind," said Cassius. "And your participation with the Atheist Welcoming Committee is only worsening the matter."

"Who are you guys?" *Must be neverborns. Ah, I'm so dumb.*

"Mr. White, Mr. Garry White. To answer that question is one of the principal reasons we've invited Katherine and you to join us this evening. Follow me and we'll explain everything."

With that, a few more members of Cassius' brute squad took their positions on either side of Kat and me.

"Now we will leave this place. Prepare your minds to be enlightened." Cassius started a slow walk. His goons ensured that we followed close behind. Kat said nothing. I was a prisoner.

Part Three

1

The march through the underbelly of the Earth seemed deliberately unhurried. Our captors said nothing along the pathway. Our direction was impossible to decipher. I could only perceive that we continued a slow, steady descent further underground.

Not only is Dawn going to kill me, Duck is never going to let me live this down. But what if I can't get out of here? At least I would never have to face them again.

"Where are you taking us?" I finally said, unable to endure the silence any longer.

Cassius turned to me and again spoke with precision. "Mr. White, we are taking you to our home. That quaint clearing in the rocks above is just a meeting place—a gate of sorts."

"When will we get there?" ventured Kat. I could detect what seemed to be a slight tremor in her voice. "It won't be long until my mentor with the D.A.W.C. starts asking questions."

But how could they find her? How could anyone find us down here?

"As if the Drug Addict Welcoming Committee isn't used to its newest members absconding into the night," answered Cassius without hesitation.

“But don’t fret; we are almost there. The aggressions waged by your people forced us into hiding centuries ago. Please forgive the length of the journey, but it is required for our safety.”

“What do you plan to do to us?” I asked, feeling a bit emboldened when I remembered I could no longer die.

“We don’t plan to ‘do’ anything to you,” answered Cassius as he made a sharp turn to the left. “We only plan to educate you for a time, in the hopes that we can put a stop to this pointless discrimination.”

Sounds like thought control.

“But the anticipation can end,” added Cassius. “We have arrived.”

As he finished speaking, we came upon an ornate, stone door which appeared to have several locking mechanisms on its left side. There was some kind of writing in an arch across the top, but I wasn’t able to read what it said. One of the members of the brute squad worked the locks for a time, after which the door swung open without a sound.

Cassius beckoned us to follow as he led the way inside. “Come, my new friends, and welcome to the ancient city of Luxor.”

There’s an eye opener. Beyond the door were what appeared to be hundreds of marble pillars of a dark green hue, perfectly aligned in both distance and height. The ceiling, which must have been 100 feet high, and walls appeared to consist of the same substance, giving the impression that the pillars had been hewn from raw, elemental earth. Although there were few lights, I could discern numerous doors and entryways along the walls lining the great hall before us.

“It’s incredible,” said Kat, almost in a whisper. “Like something out of a movie.”

“No mistake there,” I replied. As the words left my mouth, I heard the stone entrance shut resolutely behind us. Cassius resumed his speech.

“Be at peace, my friends. Luxor, although it has endured these many centuries, has all the modern amenities and comforts. Aurelia will nourish you momentarily, at which point I will be back to discuss our mutual plans.”

When did they become mutual? “Seems like we don’t have much choice in the matter. Frankly, I’d prefer not to be locked up in this place.”

“And we’d prefer not to be hunted by the Atheist Welcoming Committee and the various other groups designed to oppress our people, Mr. White. So it appears we are at an impasse.”

2

“**W**hat do you think they’re going to do to us?” I asked Kat. Aurelia, who hadn’t spoken a word, had apparently left for a time to obtain our “nourishment.” *Probably going to poison us by degrees.*

“I don’t know,” she answered, looking around as she spoke. After Cassius’ speech about being oppressed by the A.W.C., Aurelia had taken us to a stone table along one of the marble walls of the cavern. At that moment we seemed to be entirely alone. “They’re acting like they’re either going to throw us in a prison or torture us.”

“Maybe both.”

“Well, it’s your fault,” added Kat, a bit of flare in her voice. “I never should have brought you. They only seem upset because you’re a part of the A.W.C.”

“I agree that it certainly doesn’t seem to be helping. But why do you think they wouldn’t have done the same thing if you had come alone?” *I never would have seen her again.*

“Because that stupid committee you’re part of literally hunts and imprisons them.”

“Well, they’re enslaving people.” *At least, that’s what I’ve been told.*

“Yeah, whatever. Let’s just see what we can do to get out of here.”

So these jerks, almost assuredly neverborns, have captured me. And now Kat’s turned against me. Awesome. “At least it’s really pretty here. I wonder how many cities there are like this.”

“There are thousands,” said a voice from behind. I quickly turned my head and saw Cassius there, along with a tall woman who was outfitted in

the same medieval garb. The red hair atop her head was braided in complex patterns. “Many are similar to Luxor, hewn from elemental earth. Some lie in the deep places and dark currents of the oceans. Others reside in the cold ice at the poles. We are everywhere and seemingly nowhere, Mr. White.”

Sounds like a good description for insects. “It’s impressive. I’ll give you that.” I re-examined our surroundings, this time engaging the magnification in my eyes. Every corner of the great hall seemed to be adorned with flowing artwork and unreadable lettering.

“Thank you. I can discern your sincerity on that point.” Cassius turned to his red-headed companion and extended his arm in her general direction. “This is Juno. She will dine with us this evening, if that is acceptable.”

As if we have a choice. “Well, since you’ve got us locked away here and all....” Kat shot me another annoyed look, telling me to shut up with the glint in her eyes.

“Excellent,” replied Cassius as he openly ignored my contempt. “Aurelia will be along momentarily.”

3

“I would just like to know how the food has so much ... flavor.” I took another bite of whatever it was in front of me—it appeared to be a buttery pasta of some kind. It certainly didn’t match mortal food, but to decipher any taste sensation at all was amazing.

Juno smiled as I raved about the meal. “We’ve had quite a bit more time to perfect the art of cuisine than your people. After all, you were placed in a city full of the newly dead.”

Your people. “Then why didn’t you come and get me?” I realized after asking my question that I was speaking with my mouth full. *I wonder if that’s considered rude here?*

“Excuse me?” said Juno, still being polite.

Kat gave me another warning glance but I continued nonetheless. “Why do you allow cities like Newfoundland to manage the recently dead? Why didn’t you come and grab me right when I died? Why wait until tonight to bring your brute squad and lock us in here? Do I need to be clearer on these questions?” *Pretty high on the tension scale there.*

“Mr. White,” said Cassius, an awkward laugh escaping his lips, “we’re content to let your people manage their own affairs—if that is their desire. We have offered our services many times throughout the ages, but are typically rejected due to unfounded prejudice.”

“And why have you suddenly become so interested in Kat and me?”

Juno put down her eating utensil and stared at me hard. “We aren’t actually that interested in you, Mr. White. Katherine, however, appears to be someone who is focused on breaking the shackles of both Newfoundland

and the status quo. It is because of her—certainly not you—that we dine together this evening.”

I laughed out loud and looked to Kat for her reaction. “Is that true, Kat? You want to do some shackle-breaking tonight?” *She actually might, knowing her.*

Kat took another bite of food and stared down at her plate. “I’m up for anything, especially if it feels this real.”

Is submission her strategy for getting out of here? “Well, wonderful. So what’s on the docket? You guys take us to your leader at this point? Maybe medieval torture of some kind? Lessons on servitude?”

“Nothing of the sort,” replied Cassius with a renewed smile. “After we finish here, Juno will give you a tour of our home. She should be able to answer all of your questions.”

“Unlikely. I typically have a lot of questions.”

4

“Tell me about your life path, Mr. White,” said Juno, as we left the stone-tabled seating area. This was, apparently, supposed to be a one-on-one tour. Kat was escorted away by Cassius.

Hopefully I see her again at some point.

“Oh, you know, the typical middle-class upbringing: went to college; became a lawyer; got married and had some kids; got divorced and rarely saw my kids; got way into atheism and tried to convert people to the cause; unceremoniously pulverized by a train during a moment of inattention; came to Dead Land; and just recently enjoyed a nice meal with some people that kidnapped me.” *If there’s a torture chamber here, you’re going to find it.*

“Portions of that sound rather typical, at least for the area of the world where you lived. But you were definitely a thought leader, based on our research. And I assume you have no memory of any events before your mortal conception?”

She completely ignored the sarcastic dig at the end there. “No, I already told one of your buddies—Molgon was his name—that I can’t remember anything like that. He seemed to know that I wouldn’t be able to, just like you. Where are you taking me, by the way?” We had exited the great hall through a perfectly curved passageway and were walking through a dimly lit corridor. Faint, flickering lights, which were too sparsely spread out along the walls, illuminated detailed artwork along the corridor. It almost seemed like a storyboard of some sort, but much more complex. The light was too dim, and we were walking too fast, for me to make any sense of the depictions. I thought I saw something slithering on the ground in the darkness ahead, but I couldn’t be sure. *Was that a snake?*

Juno kept her back turned to me as we continued along the pathway. “I thought we’d start with the Luxor Museum and Library, followed by the city center and personal living quarters. Will that work for you, Mr. White?”

“Sure, yeah. Whatever.”

“Excellent. I am not familiar with Molgon, but it sounds like he is a member of the Host?”

“No idea.” *The Host?*

“Well, it’s no surprise he inquired as to your distant memory in some fashion. It is the only way we can discern the lifers. And since they are often—not always—aggressive toward the Host, it is a common topic of discussion when meeting someone new. I hope you can forgive his and my prying.”

“No, go ahead. Pry away.” We continued down the tunnel, but I thought I could see a clearing opening up in the darkness ahead. “But I have a question for you: when I talked to Molgon, I asked him where he was from. But he wouldn’t tell me. Are you willing to tell me?”

“The idea of ‘from’ is a concept particular to the lifers,” answered Juno. She turned to me and stopped, her eyes emitting light in my direction. “The two of us took a different path, Mr. White. But we are all ‘from’ the same place; we have always existed. And we will always exist. There is no ‘from.’”

Not possible. “So you have always just been Juno, escorting miscreants around Luxor and drawing pictures in tunnels?”

“No, no. It’s not like that,” she answered, resuming our walk through the corridor. “There is progress and growth—both in form and knowledge. The great divergence took place between our people not too long ago. Well, not too long ago in the grand history of it all.”

“More clarity, please.” *Maybe she’s actually going to tell me something that’s useful.*

“You see, Mr. White, the lifers decided some thousands of years ago to attempt a more ... physical form of being. You and your kind believed you could achieve a higher state of existence through biological technology, through a synthetic form. And it was then that your great experiment began. The trade-offs were substantial and, as you can now see, the entire venture has been an absolute failure. The Host—those of us who knew better than to jump so quickly to a new state of being—have been hunted and abused ever since. And as we are in the minority, we have had to adapt. We have not always lived in caves, Mr. White.”

“You’re going to have to provide some more clarity there. What ‘biological technology’ are you talking about?”

“Your physical body—the one that was hit by a train and is likely now buried in mounds of elemental earth somewhere—was and is nothing more than a manufactured product, a thing designed to be inhabited by what you really are. It was a vehicle of sorts. And when you so brazenly decided to inhabit one, you gave up the most crucial part of your existence: your memories. The life form, as the Host understands it, didn’t allow the experiment to operate in any other way. And here you are now, unable to discern who you really are, where you’ve actually been, the path that has been leading you to this point forever. What a tragic mistake, Mr. White.”

She’s lying to me. Why would I have ever made such a bargain? “That doesn’t make any sense to me,” I muttered in confusion. We had reached the end of the tunnel and another cavernous room carved out of the rocks stood before us. This grand hall featured numerous shelves of what appeared to be books, with dozens of statues and portraits displayed along its rounded walls.

“Then we are at a point of agreement, Mr. White,” replied Juno. She walked into the tremendous cave and extended her arms. “Welcome to the Luxor Museum and Library.”

5

“Here you will find texts, both modern and ancient, which have been created and collected by the Host for millions of years,” said Juno, her gaze spanning the length of the cavern. “I understand you were something of an author during your detour in the flesh?”

They must have a file on me somewhere. “Yeah, I wrote a few books back then. Nothing artistic. They were more informative. Well, at least I thought they were informative at the time....”

“You might even have some literary work here, Mr. White. It is not uncommon for a lifer to have published before mortality—especially those with a propensity to write. Many of the great ones who were once among the Host have tales in these storied halls.”

“Well, awesome. But how would I find out? Is there like a Dewey Decimal System or something similar?”

“We would need to know your name,” explained Juno. She looked at me intently, raising her eyebrow as if to ask the question.

“Garry White,” I answered with a shrug and shake of the head. “You already know that.”

“Your real name.”

“Oh, got it. Atticus. That’s my name now.”

“No, Mr. White.” She laughed at me gently. “Your real name, the name that enshrines your true identity—not the one heaped upon you by ignorant nothings in the flesh. You’re speaking of trifles.”

“Not sure I’m following.” *But it sure sounds like I’m being insulted.*

She again chuckled softly. “The name by which you were known before the experiment, before you lost your memories. That is your true identity, Mr. White.”

“Oh, I see what you’re saying. So if this story you’re telling me is true, I used to be called something different. I get it. So what was my name back then?” *How many names can I have?*

“That’s just it. That is the great tragedy of your decision. That identity has been completely lost to the Host. When you danced with that crippled technology, it altered your true self. And you are now unrecognizable to the Host, and yourself—unregistered from history as it were.”

“So there’s no way to figure it out?”

“None so far as the Host is aware. Mortality altered your appearance and erased your past.” Juno looked around the library and approached a shelf lined with books. “I’ve spent millennia reading every book and scroll housed in Luxor. And I remember every word.”

So what does she do for entertainment now? “Wow. So what do you recommend?”

“You would first need to learn the language of the Host,” smiled Juno. “But that isn’t much of a task, now that your true mind is uninhibited by the flesh.”

“Yup, that’s a good point.”

“But I’m happy to point you to some of our finest works. I would begin with history, Mr. White, since you have forgotten who you really are.”

“Yeah, you keep telling me that.”

“I’m here to help you. To rehabilitate you.”

Yeah, I’ll bet.

“Let’s continue forward,” she added. “I would like to show you the city center and where you’ll be staying. Follow me.”

6

A *wesome. Another pictured tunnel.* Juno led the way in silence as we traveled through a new passageway carved in the rock. The artwork seemed to make more sense during this part of the journey. I couldn't decipher the storyline—mostly due to the perpetual lack of light—but there was a definite message.

“What are you going to do with me after you’ve finished showing me all this stuff?”

Juno answered without turning around. “We’re not going to ‘do’ anything with you. You’ll be free to go, as soon as you’ve had a chance to see what the Host is really like.” She stopped and turned her head in my direction. “We’re hoping you’ll persuade some of your A.W.C. friends to let us live in peace.”

“And how long is going to take me to figure out what you’re really like?”

“As long as it takes. But don’t worry; we’ll let you leave, Mr. White.”

She’s lying. They’re never going to free me. “If you want to be left alone, why do you meddle in our affairs? Why do you harass the dead? Why take people against their will, like you’ve done to me here?”

A fire seemed to light in Juno’s eyes. “Because your prejudice won’t allow you to see! You are blind!” She forced a gentle expression back on her face and lowered her voice. “You were taught, I presume, from your very first moments after mortality to avoid ‘the neverborns.’ Even the very name is bigoted, and it sullies my mouth like a disease. But am I right? Is that what they told you? Speak truthfully.”

“They did. I was told you’re dangerous. And now that I’ve been imprisoned, I firmly believe it.”

“We will broaden your understanding.” Juno resumed walking. Up ahead, a large group of people were coming from the opposite direction. It appeared there was a complex intersection of sorts, with passageways leading in numerous directions. As we drew closer to the convergence of tunnels, I detected at least 12 separate paths. It was like a pinwheel carved out of the hard rock.

This could be my chance to escape. The oncoming group was full of conversation and laughter. There must have been 10 neverborns walking toward us. *They are definitely going to torture me if this doesn't work.* By total coincidence, our marches met precisely in the middle of the crossway. Without a word, I darted straight toward a neverborn in the middle of the pack, sending him and a few others behind crashing toward the ground in an unexpected collision.

A few of them screamed out in some language I didn't understand, as others sought to assist their fallen comrades. *Time to go. Now!* I quickly located the trigger beneath my middle toe, levitated up off the ground, and shot into the closest tunnel at a flight speed that was much too fast. *I'm going to regret this!*

I bounced off the walls of the tunnel as it gradually descended over the course of what seemed like many miles. Fortunately, pain wasn't part of the trip. *Are they following me? This glowing body isn't helping. I wish I could turn off the light somehow.* After another few seconds of flight, two additional passageways opened up—one on the right and another on the left. I banked toward the left passage, flew a couple hundred yards or so beyond its entrance, turned around, and tried to burrow myself into the ground. *The elemental earth here isn't letting me slide inside an inch.*

I looked up toward the main tunnel and saw a flash of light scream past the intersection. *At least one of them followed me this way, but they missed the turn.* I pointed my head in the opposite direction and again engaged my flight controls. Like the first tunnel, this one gradually descended downward for what seemed like many miles. It eventually became nothing more than a hole, heading directly toward the center of the earth. After a time, I could sense that the cool, cave-like temperature of Luxor was replaced by a surging heat. *Luckily, the weather doesn't affect me much these days.*

And then the free-fall descent suddenly stopped, and I again encountered perfectly flat stone ground. I gracefully landed and looked up, holding my gaze for a long time. There was no sign of anyone following me down the passageway. *How am I ever going to get out of here?* Hoping against hope, I tested the perfectly smooth rock walls to determine whether they were permeable. *Nope. Pure earth down here, too.*

Well, time to look around. Unlike Luxor proper, there were no lights in the passageway. It was only the luminescence coming from my body that

allowed me to discern anything at all. *It's hot in here.* I certainly wasn't sweating, but this was the most discomfort I had experienced from heat since my days in mortality. I unbuttoned my shirt and allowed the light from my torso to shine greater light into the tunnel. Although I was better able to see, there was no relief from the slight discomfort brought about by the high temperature. *So much for two birds with one stone.*

With a little more light, I determined this tunnel was more like a hallway, containing dozens of perfectly spaced doorways on each side. *Maybe people live down here? But in total darkness?* After a brief hesitation, I decided to go forward. As I approached the first doorway on my right, I noticed numerous square openings, large enough for a hand to poke through, but nothing else. The holes revealed granite doors which were at least six inches thick. They were aligned in a curious geographical pattern, which allowed me to peer inside the entirety of the room beyond. *It's a prison cell.* Beyond the gate, there was nothing but bare rock and darkness. I put my hand through one of the lower openings and peered through another, but the space was completely empty. *Not surprising no one wants to live in there.*

I turned to the left and similarly looked in the opposite cell, but it was exactly the same: empty. *Maybe these are all empty.* I quickly progressed down the hall to the next set of doors and looked through the holes on my left. But this time in place of the darkness I saw light in the shape of a woman. She stood in the absolute center of the square holding chamber, facing the door with eyes open and a blank expression.

"Hello," I stammered, unsure of what to say. "It's ... nice to meet you. How have you been?" *Could you have come up with something less absurd?* The woman had no discernible reaction to my awkward introduction. She continued standing there, motionless, staring off into the distance. "Can you hear me?" I asked, again trying to engage her. But she remained still. *Okay, this is officially creeping me out.*

“**W**ho the deuce is out there?” It was a man’s voice from a few cells further up the dark hallway. “Are you speaking English? Pretty sure I’m hearing English.”

I took one last look at the expressionless woman and ran toward the voice. *Maybe I can get some answers.* I’m certain I passed more people along the way, but I wasn’t eager to look in any more rooms. I chased the darkness until I thought I was close to where I had heard the voice. “Who said that?” I ventured.

“I said that, and you were speaking English.” I swung around and looked through one of the square openings in the prison door. There, sitting in the back left corner, was a lanky, dark-haired man wearing a sarcastic grin. “What are you doing down here?”

“Why wouldn’t I be speaking English? What’s so strange about that?”

The man stood up from the corner and approached the other side of the opening. “Neverborns don’t speak English, dude. At least, not this far underground. So, I’ll ask again, what are you doing down here?”

“I went out with a friend who was hoping to have a near life experience. She was led to some crack in the ground and the next thing I knew we were surrounded by Neverborns and trapped in Luxor. Some lady was giving me a “tour” and I took off as soon as I had the chance.” *Yeah, that’s about the sum and substance of it.*

“Well, you sly dog. Bravo.” The man looked at me through the hole; he was either studying me intently or was about to laugh at me. “How’d you die?”

“Got hit by a train. But what does that matter right now?”

"Oh, it always matters," he said, letting out a laugh. "That's a good one. Gotta watch out for those trains. They come outta nowhere!"

"And how did you die then?" *Didn't I just say it doesn't matter?*

"It was one of the great tragedies of this era," he said, wearing a smirk and turning his back to me. "There I was, poolside with my soulmate. She was one for the ages. The best girl in the universe. That's no exaggeration. And wouldn't you know it? Meteorite falls from the sky and puts a shaft of light where my brain used to live. Dead instantly. What are the odds? It totally sucked."

"I've never even heard of someone dying from a meteorite." *This guy's a liar.*

"Wrongo, buddy. You've heard of one person dying from a meteorite, and he's standing right in front of you." He slumped back into his corner and looked toward the door. "So, I'm assuming you don't have a key to my cell here?"

"Uhhh ... sorry. I don't. I had no idea what I would find down here."

"It's hell," said the man. "And you found exactly what you would have expected: people suffering."

"I saw a lady back there," I stammered, still reeling from the thought of her, "it seemed like she was ... frozen or something."

"Prolonged mind dive. Most people in here escape to their memories. And most of them don't make it out again. She's been like that for months. Never heard her make a sound."

"You really think this is hell?"

"What else would it be? Unborn demons locked me away in a hot, dark pit and I can't get out. Sure seems like hell to me."

"How long have you been down here?" *And am I going to end up in here?*

“Two years, three months, one week, four days, seventeen hours, two minutes, and nine seconds. And yes, I’ve been counting.” He spread his arms out across the smooth rock and patted it gently. “Yup, this little square is my home. Lovely, ain’t it?”

“How’d you get in here?”

“My Welcoming Committee hooked me up with a job in law enforcement. Next thing I know I’m putting the hurt on Neverborns. And I was good at it. And they apparently didn’t like me getting in their business, so they captured me and started the torture, imprisonment, etc.”

Sounds horrific. “And that was over two years ago?”

“Nah, that was over four years ago. They originally tried to ‘re-educate me’ at a demon lair down in West Texas, but I guess I wasn’t a very good student. So then they threw me in here as a lost cause and, yeah, I don’t get out much these days.”

“Re-educate?”

“Yeah, they’ll try to turn you into a proper demon if they can. They even assigned me a ‘tutor’ to guide me in the ways of the Host—their name, not mine. But I guess I pushed back a little too hard. In hindsight, it wasn’t the best plan. But these dudes are total jerks, and they do some horrible crap. Hard to stomach.”

Just as the man finished speaking, I heard a guttural scream a few cells down the hall. It sounded like someone was being stabbed to death. “What was that?” I yelled.

“It’s normal,” said the man as he chuckled softly. “Sometimes the prisoners down here will leave their mind dives momentarily and scream, yell, wail. I’m not entirely sure why they do it, but it seems to happen a lot. It’s kind of a drag.”

Maybe this really is hell. “So this ‘tutor’ of yours, what did he do to you?”

“Oh, good ol’ Groffmite. Groffmite the Deceiver is his preferred name, I believe. Or maybe I just started calling him that. He played it real cool at first—showed me around their underground lair, taught me the language, had me reading their books. All that stuff. And then he was trying to convince me that attacking mortals was a good thing. He said it was the ‘only way they could truly express their authentic selves’ or some nonsense. That’s where we went off the rails a bit and I stopped playing the good son. So I spent some time in prison at Ugruk—that’s the place in West Texas—and then I got shipped up here for especially bad behavior I guess.”

“How can I get you out of here?” *And if I try, am I just going to end up in the same place?*

“They have pretty elaborate locking mechanisms on these doors. And there are probably hundreds of thousands of demons who live in this place. You’re not going to be able to out-muscle them. How persuasive are you? Maybe you could just talk them into letting me go.” He flashed a half-hearted grin at me.

“And you’re sure there’s no way to escape?” *It’s obvious there’s no way to escape.*

“Pure, unadulterated, elemental earth down here, my friend. Can’t slide an inch through this stuff. Believe me, every poor sap down here has tried.”

“Who was your welcoming committee? Or who were you working for? Don’t they have some responsibility in trying to help you?” *And will the A.W.C. be coming for me?*

“I came in through the Accidental Death Welcoming Committee. And when they got to know me better and I had stopped crying about losing my girl, they shipped me off to the N.C.U.”

“N.C.U.?”

“Neverborn Crime Unit. It’s by far the largest division of the policing force in Dead Land. In fact, I don’t think there would be any crime at all if we could eradicate the Neverborns.” Another scream from a neighboring cell vibrated through the hall.

“What do they do to people?”

“What don’t they do? I’ve seen it all, dude. And I was only in law enforcement for a couple of years. As far as I can gather, they run a well-oiled war machine. And they are in constant battle with us lifers—both living and dead.”

“What kind of battles? And for what purpose?”

“They go after the living, harassing them through mind control—what they call ‘instruction.’ They control individuals, corporations, and world governments at every level of society, from people on the streets in rags to the princes and presidents of the Earth. The breadth of it all is astonishing; they are in the details of almost every facet of life in the living world. And they do the same thing to the dead here. Near life experiences are just a small piece, man. The battle is fought by people like me, people like you.”

“But I don’t get it. Why? Why go to all the trouble?” *Don’t they have anything better to do?*

“Come on, dude. It’s about power. They want to take over, but we outnumber them.” The man slid his legs out from underneath him and stretched out on the ground, putting his intertwined hands beneath his head. “Plus, they totally hate us. And I’m not using that word lightly. Complete and total hatred. It’s almost inspiring how committed they are to making every one of us miserable.”

“So what do I do? How can I help?”

“You need to get out of here. As soon as you can.” He suddenly sat up, as if he had just hatched a plan. “What’s your welcoming committee?”

“A.W.C.”

“Ah, a proper atheist. Excellent. I bet you had your eyebrows up quite a bit the day you died.”

Understatement of the day. “No question about that.”

“I might have been welcomed by that committee if I had died earlier in life. But I had quite a few experiences before I keeled over that taught me coincidence isn’t real. Our paths aren’t guided by cosmic dice, my friend.”

“Yeah, thanks for that. I’m figuring it out.”

“Don’t get testy, dude. I’m not judging. Anyway, were you issued an earpiece before this girl brought you to Luxor?”

“Yes,” I said, a glimmer of hope in my response. I tapped on my right ear. “It’s in there now.”

“Good. You’re going to need it to translate.”

Translate?

He must have noticed the confused look on my face. “Demons don’t speak English unless they’re ‘instructing’ someone who speaks the language. They’ve got their own lovely way of talking. It sounds like snakes singing Christmas music. It’s horrible.”

“Well, okay. But how is that going to help me?”

“Because you are going to act like you’re a neverborn. And that’s how you’re going to get out of here.”

“I barely know how to act around regular dead people. I don’t think I’m going to be able to pull it off.” *There’s no way I’m going to be able to pull it off.*

“Well, you’re going to have to figure it out, or else you’ll end up slaving for them or sitting in here.” As he finished speaking, another panicked scream echoed through the chamber.

10

“Don’t worry; we can do this.” The man stood up and started pacing in his cell, an excited look in his eyes. After a few moments of silence, he turned and faced me again. “You are Groffmite the Deceiver!”

What is he talking about? “But my name is Atticus.”

“You’re pretty dense; you know that?” He resumed pacing while he continued, lifting up his right index finger as if he were giving a lecture. “I don’t care if your name is Bobo the Space Clown, from now on you’re Groffmite the Deceiver. You just got transferred up to Luxor from Ugruk to assist in the instruction effort. You aren’t much of a talker, but you’re great at listening and obeying orders. That’s one of the best parts and worst parts of this whole war: nobody can tell who is working for whom. We all look exactly the same. Well, not exactly the same; but there’s no way to distinguish a lifer from a neverborn—at least not by appearances.”

“How am I going to pull that off? I can’t pose as a neverborn; I don’t know anything about them.”

“I told you!” he said, raising his voice. “You aren’t going to talk much. You’re going to steal some demon clothes. You’re going to get in line and do what they tell you to do. And eventually they’ll take you out of this hellhole. And in the right moment, you’ll get up to the surface and escape undetected.”

“I don’t know about this.”

“You got a better idea, newbie?” He paused for effect. “Didn’t think so.”

I certainly don’t have a better idea. “But what if.... What if they make me do something....”

“Evil? They almost assuredly will ask you to do something evil, and you’re going to have to go along with it. Otherwise, you’re going to end up in here losing your mind as they slowly cook you—just like me.”

“And what about you?”

“What about me?” he smirked. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll figure something out. I’ve been through some crap, and I can get through this.”

“I’ll come back for you.”

“No, you won’t. You’ll get captured and then they’ll be two idiots behind this rock gate instead of one.”

It doesn’t seem like I have another option here. “I guess you’re right. So what do I do now?”

“The key is going to be that super-computer shoved in your ear,” said the prisoner. “It has a translation mode, and whoever programed the thing was smart enough to include neverborn languages.”

“There’s more than one?”

“Yeah, sure. Why wouldn’t there be? Is that surprising?”

It is surprising. As the thought ran through my mind, another inmate screamed in the distance. “No,” I muttered. “I guess not.”

“The earpiece should be able to translate in real time. The problem is that it’s not going to be able to translate what you need to say on the fly. And that’s why Groffmite the Deceiver is going to be a quiet soul in these hellish halls.”

“Well, that’s all fine and good. But I can’t just be a mute when I’m dealing with these people.” *Although that does sound a lot simpler....*

“You’re going to need a crash course in the language of Luxor. Find a shady spot—not here, someone should be along shortly to check on us, and you don’t want to be around for that—sit down, and learn as many of the essential words as you can. Ask for training in common phrases as well.”

“I can’t learn a language in a couple of hours.”

“Stop thinking like a bag of meat,” laughed the man. He was still speaking excitedly, but had calmed somewhat. “Your unclouded brain is capable of infinite memory and instantaneous recall. You’ll be fine; just make sure you cover the obvious stuff.”

“Yeah, sure. Like ‘where’s the bathroom?’”

“Well, not that. Finding the bathroom is going to be the least of your worries.”

“Great.”

“You’ll want to know basic greetings, directional words, numbers. You know, the stuff they taught you in Spanish 1 back in the day.”

I smirked. “I was never good at foreign languages.”

“Again, you’re thinking like a bag of meat.”

“Yeah, I seem to have a real problem with that.” *And now I need to learn to think like a demon.*

“Now listen up: if you get out, don’t come back for me.” The man looked at me gravely while he spoke. “No matter what, do not come back here. I’ll come up with something.”

“I might have to come back anyway, for my friend Kat. So I’ll bust you out if you’re still here.”

“Oh yeah, your friend.” He emphasized the last word with sarcasm. “Dude, I can almost guarantee she’s a neverborn.”

“What are you talking about? She’s a newbie, just like me. Got to Newfoundland right when I did.”

He narrowed his eyes and looked at me hard. “How did you meet her?”

“I just went out one night for a milkshake, and she came up to me on the street. She’d been a drug addict back in the living world. She’s never been anything but kind to me.”

“But she brought you here, dude. And I’m assuming she led you here, every step of the way. Found a path through the cracked earth and guided you to the entrance of Luxor? Right?”

“Yes, but she was looking for a near life experience. I had one, and she wanted the same. I actually think this is all my fault. I must have oversold it.” *How am I going to find Kat?*

“She might be a newbie dead, but based on what you’ve told me she sounds like a neverborn. They’re always going after atheists. I’m not trying to be rude, but you people are usually pretty dense when you first get here. Easy pickings. That’s why atheist welcoming committees come with built in neverborn security—to give you extra protection. Don’t come back for her, bro. And if you do, don’t come alone.”

A loud, grating gong sounded, echoing through the hallway and reverberating around the various cells. “What was that? Is someone here?”

“That’s just a little treat for us prisoners. It sounds on the hour, and is designed to be just annoying enough to wake us from mind dives. You know, so we can get our focus back on the suffering. But it does mean you need to leave. They’ll be along in the next 10 to 15 minutes to poke and prod us.”

“I’m not sure I can....” I started, but then the realization hit me. “I don’t even know your name.”

“You never asked,” said the man, again flashing me his sarcastic smirk. “And now you need to leave. Find a dark hole, work on the language, steal some clothes, blend in for a few days, get out on an expedition, and don’t look back. And maybe you’ll escape all this, Atticus. I mean, Groffmite.”

I looked left and right, but saw nothing in the dark passageway. “You sure they’ll be here soon?” *Not ready for this.*

“Like clockwork, dude. The neverborns run a tight ship. You better get out of here.”

Guess I don’t have a choice. “Thanks for your help,” I said, my voice revealing worry. “If I can make it out of here, I’ll do my best to help you.”

“Get out of here. And don’t try to help me.” He walked back to the corner of his cell and slumped into its dark corner.

I turned to leave, checking to make sure I still had a clear path.

“The name’s Tom.”

THE ATHEIST WELCOMING COMMITTEE

“Your living name? Or your dead world name?”

“Both.”

12

Flying through a cave and trying to avoid neverborns is a bit stressful. But, then again, I guess I'd done it before. *I need to find a place to work on that demon language before anyone spots me.*

I scurried up the same way I had come down and, thankfully, saw nobody. When I reached the main channel, I went left in the hopes that I could hide in another shady spot off the beaten path. *If I see anybody, I'll get thrown in there with Tom.* I flew as fast as I could without bouncing my head off the rock ceiling. *I'd probably be better at flying through here if I wasn't such a newb.*

And suddenly there was someone in front of me. I slammed down on the space under my middle toe and tried to land as gracefully as possible. But I still stumbled when my feet touched the uneven ground. *That's it. I'm done here.*

But the glow emitting from the man on the opposite section of the tunnel never altered. He kept a steady stride and didn't so much as acknowledge my existence. *Maybe he had a rough week.* It was almost as if he were mind-diving while he was walking. Regardless of the reason, he passed by as if he had no idea I was there. *That was a close one.*

As soon as he was out of sight, I picked my feet up off the ground and again engaged my flight controls. After what seemed to be about the length of a football field, pathways started emerging on both sides of the tunnel. Fearing that I would see someone else, I ducked into the first opening on the right. The corridor was empty of demons and somehow more dimly lit than the main passage. *Language training and clothes. That's what Tom said I needed. Language training and clothes.*

The trail ascended rather sharply, and after another few hundred feet contained ancient-appearing doorways on both sides. I tried the latches on the first few along the path, but all were barred shut. *Is breaking and entering a thing in neverborn cities?* Fearing I might arouse some disgruntled tenant, I stopped checking the locks and continued up the trail. But at the end of the row, one of the entryways was slightly cracked open. *Do I dare go in there?*

I thought it over in my enhanced mind for what seemed like a minute, but was probably only a second or two. *Don't forget; at least they can't kill you.* I pushed open the rock-hewn doorway and plunged inside, scanning the darkness quickly for any sign of light. But there was nothing. I quickly shut and barred the door behind me. I had found my shady spot.

I opened up my shirt to emit as much light as possible. It was clear to me within a matter of seconds that this was indeed some kind of apartment. *Whoever lived here must really be at the bottom of the ladder.* There were some crooked shelves hewn from the rock, adorned with what appeared to be some old food items scattered about. A separate section of the dwelling had nothing more than a hole in the ground. *Don't want to know where that goes.*

A final room had a table with scattered, rolled papers on its surface, a couple of crooked chairs, and some kind of cabinet along a dank wall. *I hope that's what I think it is.* I opened its middle drawer and peered inside. *Yes!* There, haphazardly strewn about, were tattered robes, coats, and pants. The remaining drawers revealed socks, scarves, and some other adornments I didn't quite understand.

Better change while you still can. I hurriedly shed the button-up shirt and khakis the A.W.C. had given me when I first arrived in Dead Land. *Nothing seems to really get dirty here. I guess it's the lack of filth and body odor.* Rummaging through the various drawers, I was able to cobble together an

outfit that at least appeared plausible. After a few minutes of “shopping,” I wore a long sleeved, light gray robe that opened up at my waist and extended down past my knees. The matching pants and hood were lined with cracked gold and red patterns. As a final piece, I tied a red sash at my waist. *I must look like I’m on my way to a renaissance festival. But this isn’t too different from how Cassius was dressed.*

13

I sat down at the table and unrolled a few of the documents. The style of parchment and the ornateness of the writing reminded me of the contract Hugo had presented me just prior to my near life experience. Unfortunately, the Latin-like letters spread out on the page seemed to be complete gibberish. *Can't speak the language; can't even read the language.* But then an idea sparked in my mega-mind. *I'll ask the ear computer to describe the alphabet used by neverborns in Luxor, and then I'll work on putting meaning to the words.*

I thought it over for a few seconds, wanting to get the prompt just right. "Tell me about the alphabet used by the neverborns in Luxor, including the shapes and sounds of the letters and their arrangement into words and sentences." There was a slight pause, causing me to wonder if Tom had been wrong about the computer's capabilities with Luxor languages. *I might be in real trouble here.* But as soon as the thought entered my mind, I heard a response.

"The Luxorian writing system has remained unchanged for thousands of years...." And on and on went the voice for quite a while. By the time it was over, I knew the names and sounds of each letter shape, the rules for word construction, and the manner by which they were scrawled on the written page. *Now we're getting somewhere.*

With my newfound knowledge, I decided to try and decipher one of the parchments. I hissed out the first sentence in the sing-song pronunciation just like the ear computer had taught me. "What did I just say?" I asked. *Probably came out like gibberish.*

The voice instantly filled my right ear. “A Guide for the Instruction of Mortals.” *I must have done something right.* I looked back down at the frayed document and committed each of the words and their pronunciation to my flawless memory. *7 words in, probably 200,000 to go.*

I continued the work of cobbling together the meaning of the parchment. “The mortal mind is one that is highly subject to persuasions of all kinds. But through long experience it has been determined that simple, subtle suggestion is typically the most effective form of instruction.” *Okay, this is starting to make more sense.* “Offer your pupils soft whisperings of information and education. Sudden shouting is only rarely to be employed to stave off catastrophe of the deepest ill.” The words and their meanings were coming faster. *Immortality has its perks, I guess.*

As the thought finished its journey through my mind, I heard a rustling outside my new living quarters. I threw down the parchment and tried to cover the few exposed areas of skin emitting light. After a few moments of silence, I heard voices.

The shrill conversation outside my new living quarters was indiscernible. But luckily the ear computer was again there to assist. “Translate the conversation out in the passageway into English,” I whispered. *Can it even detect what is being said? Not sure this computer has superhuman hearing like I do.*

“Another week with the same lowlifes. I don’t know how much longer I can take it. I need a rotation.” It was a man speaking. At least, that was how the earpiece piped the words into my ear. He sounded discontent.

Another man, with a higher pitch to his voice, responded. “Stop complaining. We all have our assignments. This is the Great Work.” He seemed to emphasize those last words, as if it were a title of some kind.

“Let’s go and get it over with,” responded the first voice.

The translation is working well. Just as the thought rattled around my mind, I heard a loud bang on the door to my new living quarters.

“Time to go!” screamed one of the men from the corridor.

I must have done a poor job hiding the light. And I had. I detected a few beams around the door frame and sighed with disappointment. I tried to re-adjust my medieval costume, but it was no use. Another crash sounded at the entryway.

“I said get out here! Everyone has to do their part.”

The jig is very much up. Even though my lungs didn’t need the air, I took a deep breath and made my way toward the door. At the last second, I tapped my ear and asked the computer a few questions. “How do I say, ‘my name is Groffmite?’ How do I say, ‘I’m from Ugruk?’ After answering my

questions stay in translation mode and tell me how to pronounce standard responses to any questions they might ask.”

The computer piped the answers into my ear in quick succession, revealing the sing-songy hissing sounds I was to relay back to my new companions.

Here we go. I gripped the door handle, did my best to put a casual look on my face, and stepped out into the hallway.

I was met by a lanky man with sharp edges on his face. He furrowed his eyebrows at me and stepped back half a foot.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

I brought the computer’s prior answers to the tip of my tongue and tried to keep my cool. “My name is Groffmite. I’m from Ugruk.” *And that’s it. End of story. Nothing more to see here.*

The other man, stalky but more pleasant in appearance, laughed at my response. “Transferred here from Ugruk? You must have really impressed your superiors for that kind of promotion.”

No question; therefore, no help from the computer. I stared back at him in silence, nodding my head in the affirmative. *Do neverborns nod their heads like this?* I stopped immediately and stood still.

The skinny one turned to leave and beckoned me to follow. “I’m Gorgon. This is Samus. Everyone in this section has been working instruction lately. We’ll take you to the assignment station. Maybe you’ll venture out with us today.”

I was tempted to say “thanks,” but then realized I had no idea how to utter the word. *And do neverborns say “thanks?” This is insane.*

We continued down the passageway, with Gorgon pounding and screaming at every door we passed. *He must be some kind of drill sergeant. Either that or he wants everyone to be miserable just like he is.* New neverborns appeared and joined our march toward the heart of Luxor. The

doors eventually ended, and we were walking in the main tunnel—heading back to where I had given Juno the slip. *What if she's still around here? I'll see Tom again, I guess.*

A few of the demons gave me strange looks, but none of them said anything. I tried to reciprocate their facial expressions, completely unsure whether that was helping my cause. We passed through the main intersection and headed left. *Never been this way before.*

The artwork along the passageways was much more elaborate in this section, like it had taken years to complete. Diverting my attention from my new friends seemed to make sense, so I studied the walls as best I could. Despite the low, flickering light, I could discern depictions of a man speaking to a tremendous crowd of people. The subjects held both arms high, as if cheering or worshipping him. The next section showed the same man, now with a tall woman at his side, walking through throngs of people. A gate stood before them, with a rising moon shining upon silver clouds beyond its border. *This guy must be a big deal.*

We continued our march through the tunnel, but the light became so dim that I had trouble discerning any additional images. There were some rumblings in the group as we approached another intersection, but the voices were apparently insufficient to trigger translation. *Maybe they're just moaning or something?*

Gorgon's distinct hiss cut through the clamor. "Wait here for your assignments. We have at least one newbie, but we'll try to keep you with the same subjects. Unless any of you feel like a transfer is needed?"

The way Gorgon said that last bit translated like a question, but there was a sharp edge to the computer's intonation. Nobody in the group responded. *Maybe neverborns needing transfers isn't a good thing?*

We stood in silence while Gorgon and Samus handed out rolled parchments to the various neverborns in line. As the parchments were

unrolled and studied, there was a little chatter. But none of it made its way to my ears through translation. *Pretty sullen group.*

My eagle eyes quickly adapted to the low light conditions, which allowed me to take another peek at the artwork adorning the walls. There was the same man, this time atop a shimmering white horse. The woman, close by his side, was similarly mounted. Behind them stood a vast army, decked out with swords, spears, and other medieval-looking armaments. *This dude seems to dominate the conversation, whoever he is.*

“Groffmite,” said Gorgon as he handed me a parchment. “You will venture out with Samus and me today. There have been some changes to the instruction methodology as of late, so we’ll try to get you updated along the way.”

He turned and faced the others. “Go now, bold combatants of the Host. And be on your guard. The enemy is everywhere.”

“**W**hen was the last time you instructed a living participant?” asked Samus as we departed the assignment area. True to my instructions, the ear computer provided an answer. And much to my relief, it also provided a lightning quick translation so I knew what I was saying.

“It’s been a little while,” I hissed, the words coming out of my mouth slow as I tried to perfectly match the diction from the computer. The language seemed to have musical notes, but everything was in a minor key. *I was never much of a singer, that’s for sure. Let’s hope they buy it.*

Samus laughed as he looked me over. “You must have been buried deep in prison duty for quite some time. You have a peculiar accent. Don’t they give you any breaks in Ugruk?”

The response came fast this time—a one-syllable screech of sorts. “Yes,” I uttered in response. *‘Yes?’ That’s all I get? No other words? This is a nightmare.*

“He’s definitely out of the habit of conversation,” said Gorgon as we rounded a corner in the dark tunnel system. He continued. “The focus has changed over the last few decades, Groffmite—at least on this front. We instruct the forgetful mortals to emphasize their intrinsic individuality, to focus on the self at all costs. The wants of the one trump all else. That’s what they need to believe in this modern age.”

There was no question, so again I am limited to silence. I should have come up with a better plan.

“I often miss the old ways,” added Samus. “Harassment and intimidation were an effective means.”

“But short lived,” commented Gorgon. I continued to walk in silence as they spoke, the ground below slowly starting to ascend to cooler climate. “To be sure, a bit of terror can be a lot of fun. But the new directives allow for longer term advancements in the war. And that’s all that matters.”

“Yes, yes,” sneered Samus. “The ‘war.’ We must not forget the war effort.”

Gorgon stopped our march toward the surface and shoved an index finger in Samus’s face. “No more talk like that. We have work to do.”

“Yes, sir,” answered Samus, the annoyed look remaining on his face.

Gorgon wasn’t satisfied. “Never forget their great betrayal. Never forget what they did to us—what they’re still doing to us.”

What did “they” do?

This last argument seemed to stir Samus from his despair. “I will never forget,” he said with fierce intensity.

Gorgon turned his index finger toward me. “And what about you, Groffmite? Will you forget the atrocities of the past? The great displacement?”

Oh no. Here we go again. The computer provided the sing-song hiss response. “I cannot forget.”

“Excellent,” replied Gorgon, resuming our march toward the surface. “Now let’s get to work.”

16

The spat between Gorgon and Samus had, thankfully, cooled the conversation. We walked in silence a while, eventually finding our way back to the opening where Kat and I had been unceremoniously kidnapped.

What am I going to do about Kat? Am I really just going to leave her here? I tossed the question around in my mega mind as we started the climb up through the cracks and crevices. *I have to leave her here for now. But I will come back for her. I will come back.*

“Almost to the surface,” said Gorgon as we continued making our way through the narrow rocks.

“Where are we headed this time?” asked Samus. “I didn’t pay attention to the manifest.”

“Around Salt Lake City,” answered Gorgon. “One of the suburbs to the north. I’ve been instructing a group there.”

“Please don’t tell me it’s depression and anxiety work,” muttered Samus as we exited the crevice and stepped out into the evening air. “There’s only so many times I can tell those meatbags to worry about what the other meatbags think of them.”

“I thought you liked scaring them,” replied Gorgon, looking up toward the sun-setting sky to get his bearings. “Maybe you just like to complain about the Great Work.”

Should I just engage the middle toe now? Take off as fast as I can? But they can probably fly faster than me, or smarter than me.

“Maybe I am complaining,” answered Samus. “But not about the Great Work. Only D&A work, vanity work, domestic work. It just gets tedious.”

“We’ve all been there, Samus,” said Gorgon. “But you’re in for a treat tonight. Something spectacular.” Gorgon shifted his attention to me. “Just follow my lead. If I’m right on this one, it’s going to be an event.” Gorgon rocketed upward as he finished talking.

I hesitated a bit, causing Samus to smile. “I know how you feel,” he said. “I’d rather be doing something else too. But we better follow him. Maybe we can break away and have some real fun tonight. I’ll take the rear.”

No question. No reply. I gave Samus a slight nod of the head, found the spot beneath my middle toe, and shot up into the air following Gorgon’s path. *Guess I’ll have to find an escape route later.*

Although he had a huge head start, my eagle eyes could see Gorgon off in the distance. Samus was right behind me. *I hope neverborns don’t have some special way of flying that I haven’t learned about.* But it didn’t appear that way. The Superman pose must be a universally accepted method of traveling through the air. I tried to increase my speed some, and soon enough was more closely tracking Gorgon’s flight. *Why the slow speed? He must like to fly casual.*

We flew in silence, shooting over mountain peaks and wide-open plains. Soon we were above the sprawling suburbs of the living, thousands of lights dancing below us. Gorgon decelerated and matched my position.

“Right down there,” he said, pointing. “And watch out for hunters on the descent.”

Again, no question. Again, no response.

Samus broke through the awkwardness of my blank stare. “Don’t want to end up in one of their prisons. It might be worse than guarding one of our own! Right, Groffmite?”

We touched down on the surface in what appeared to be a regular, middle-class neighborhood. The lack of mature trees indicated it was a relatively new development. The two-story homes adorned with brown stucco, aluminum siding, and small yards seemed to go on for miles. *This looks just like where I lived when I was still married.*

“So, it’s domestic work then,” sneered Samus as he surveyed our surroundings.

“I told you,” replied Gorgon, “it’s going to be something spectacular.” He looked from left to right, as if checking to ensure nobody else was around, and then proceeded toward the fake wood front door of one of the cookie cutter houses.

“Yeah,” said Samus so only I could hear, “maybe we can get some newlyweds to fight over what they watch on television.”

I have no idea what’s going on here. I again nodded, still unsure that was an acceptable social cue among neverborns.

Leading the way, Gorgon slid through the front door as if walking in the falling snow. I hesitated, causing Samus to go around me and do the same. *I’m not going to be able to get through that so easily. I’m going to blow my cover here.*

Suddenly it hit me. *Now’s the time to escape!*

Just as the thought raced across my mind, Samus’s head appeared through the door. “Are you coming or what? We’ve got really important work to do in here.” He laughed sarcastically.

I gulped hard, as if I were still a mortal, and moved toward the door. Remembering my first failure at the morgue with Nox, I concentrated as best I could on not running into any of the core elements inside the door. *Okay, really going too slow here.*

As I slid through to the other side, I could see Samus there waiting. “Groffmite, you really were down in that prison for a while. When’s the last time you were among the meatbags?”

The ear computer immediately hissed a response, followed by the translation. “I do not spend time with meatbags.” *That’s ridiculous.*

But I decided to go with it, with a half-smile added to try and portray a joke.

Samus laughed and turned his attention back to Gorgon. *I must be in the clear.*

“So what’s the plan, Gorgon? Are we going to instigate a spat over the family finances?”

“This way,” answered Gorgon, leading us down a dim staircase. “It’s going to be much better than that, assuming everything aligns properly.”

We walked down the stairs, Gorgon’s cautious steps setting a pattern for Samus and me. *It’s like he’s afraid someone is going to attack us or something.* In the basement we found an unoccupied dark room containing faux leather couches and a large television. Empty soda cans were strewn about the ground in disarray. At the end of a short hallway was a closed door. Dim light escaped through a gap close to the floor.

“There she is,” said Gorgon. He turned to face us and lowered his voice even further. “There might be supporters in there, so be ready for anything.”

Samus nodded his head to signal understanding. *Neverborns do nod their heads to say yes! But what’s a “supporter”?*

Gorgon slid through the bedroom door and Samus followed him closely. I again tensed up and did my best to casually get through the

passageway. Other than a slight hang-up with my left elbow, I made it through without delay. But Gorgon and Samus weren't the least bit interested in me. They were staring at two girls, probably in their early 20s, sitting on the carpeted floor of the bedroom.

Samus turned to me and sneered again. "So it's a slumber party?"

“Silence,” hissed Gorgon. “We don’t want to distract them.”
 The young ladies were deep in some intense conversation.
 Gorgon moved closer, causing Samus and me to do the same.

“I don’t know,” said one of them. She had long, straight blonde hair and what appeared to be a homemade heart tattoo scratched into the underside of her forearm. “But what are you worried about?”

Gorgon turned to Samus. “You run script on this one. I’ll try to seal it with the subject.”

“Got it, boss,” answered Samus with understanding. He quickly knelt down next to the blonde girl and spoke deliberately into her ear in perfect English. “Well, it’s up to you,” whispered Samus. “I’m not going to force you.”

The blonde parroted Samus’s words to the other, with no discernible variation. *Wow. How can she possibly hear him?*

The other girl—stout with light brown hair and wide eyes—responded. “That just seems a little ... much. I’ve been having fun, and I’m not sure I want to go there.”

Gorgon shot Samus a look, to which Samus nodded in response. He again whispered into the blonde’s ear. “You know, I went to a lot of trouble to get this. But whatever. I’ll party without you later.”

The blonde again repeated Samus’s suggested script word for word. The stout girl sat in silence for a time, mulling over the blonde’s proposal.

Gorgon watched her intently, as if he were biding his time until the perfect moment. After a few seconds, he crouched low by her side and spoke in a deliberate voice. “Let yourself go, and open your mind.” At the first hint

of Gorgon's voice, she clenched her jaw and looked in the opposite direction, almost as if some part of her were ... resisting him.

One of them is a slave; the other is a fighter. Samus shot Gorgon a condescending grin, as if he were communicating that Gorgon was out of his league.

"It just seems a little...." started the stout girl. She hesitated for a few nano seconds as she made eye contact with the blonde. "....much."

"Yeah," added Samus, piling on. "Maybe you can't handle her."

In response, Gorgon made some strange sound with his mouth—almost as if he were hissing at Samus. He then got a wild look in his eye and crouched down next to the stout girl again. "You are an absolute coward. A scared, faint of heart, craven little invertebrate." Gorgon wasn't only speaking to her. He was screaming at a fever pitch. "And if you allow fear to dominate your decisions, you don't deserve the BEST THINGS YOUR PITIFUL LIFE HAS TO OFFER."

It was the loudest thing I'd heard since that train ripped through my fleshy ear drum. The volume of it was an agony. Even Samus, who was presumably used to this sort of thing, recoiled from Gorgon's speech. I looked to the brown-haired girl, confident she would do the same. But to my surprise, she sat motionless—as if she hadn't heard a thing. Although I couldn't hear what she was thinking, Gorgon's ranting had definitely had an effect. Subtle changes in her facial expression showed that she was thinking over the proposition with renewed interest.

Did these jerks talk to me like that before? How many of these guys are out here doing this kind of thing?

After a few seconds of silence, Samus again instructed his parrot what to say. "Don't be afraid. You can do this." His words were repeated by the blonde, the tone and volume a near perfect match to his demonstration.

Do I try to stop this? I'll end up with Tom in that gulag for sure if I do.

But it was too late. Fear had been replaced by resolve. “Alright, fine,” she relented. “What’s the worst that could happen?” The stout girl stood up with a sigh and beckoned to her blonde friend. “But not in here. I don’t want my parents to find out.”

Gorgon and Samus closely followed them out of the bedroom and up the shadowed staircase. Samus noticed I was lingering behind and beckoned with a finger for me to follow. “There might be others where they’re going,” he said in a projected whisper. “Then you can join in the fun.”

I reluctantly followed them up the stairs, saying nothing in response. Both the living and the neverborns had stopped and now stood around a square dining room table. “Let’s test your connection with that one,” said Samus. Without any consent from Gorgon, he again spoke into the blonde’s ear. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

The blonde turned to her friend and repeated the words.

Gorgon sent Samus a confident smirk. He put his mouth right next to the brunette’s ear and spoke softly. “I’m positive. What could go wrong?”

The stout girl turned to the blonde and repeated Gorgon’s suggestion verbatim, with no variance in tone.

“We got a listener!” shouted Samus in excitement.

19

The girls and their demons made their way out the front door, walking toward an old used car in the driveway. I slunk behind, hoping beyond hope that Gorgon and Samus would just forget about me.

“Groffmite,” barked Gorgon. “Keep up! The subjects are about to leave.”

I’m sure I used to be a “subject.” Now I can fly. But if I fly away after they get in that car, the steel roof won’t do a thing to keep them from coming after me. I obeyed Samus’s command and jammed my way into the middle seat in the back of the small vehicle. *Maybe I’m a “listener” too?*

We were immediately traveling somewhere at a steady 10 miles per hour above the speed limit. *Weird to be in a car again. This is the first time since I got close and personal with that train.* My mind wandered back to the accident, but Samus was quick to pull me to the present.

“Hey Groffmite, you in there?” Samus laughed at me from the seat to my right. He turned his attention to Gorgon. “This one’s really been down in the dungeons for way too long. They need to update their policies in Ugruk.”

“I’ll make sure to file a formal complaint,” replied Gorgon with disdain.

“Do you want to give it a try?” said Samus, ignoring Gorgon’s disinterest and gesturing toward the blonde in the driver’s seat. “We’ve got a brand-new listener here. There’s no telling what you could get her to do.”

I absolutely do not want to “give it a try.” The translator whispered the Luxor word for “yes” into my ear, but I was familiar enough with simple phrases at this point to singsong hiss out a “no.”

“Come on, Groffmite,” protested Samus. “How are you going to be effective in the ‘war effort?’” He looked over to Gorgon with a grin, but Gorgon ignored him.

The translator spoke the answer to his question in my ear: “I will be diligent in my service.” *It’s not perfect, but why not?*

I hissed out the response with a bit of trepidation. *This conversation needs to end soon or I’m going to join Tom down in that hell prison.*

Samus snorted again and shook his head in disbelief. “I think you’re hopeless, Groffmite. You have to learn how to have fun with the meatbags. It’s the only entertainment we get around here. Seriously, tell her to do something. Anything.”

Of course, no help from the translator. I sat in silence, looking back and forth between Samus and the young girl. Scouring my perfect memory, I strung together a few words in an effort to escape the situation. “Don’t want.” It was all I could muster. *Not good enough!*

“Quiet!” barked Gorgon. “Don’t distract the listeners. We could make some real progress tonight if we play this right. And I don’t want Groffmite here jeopardizing the work.”

I nodded my head in Gorgon’s general direction and Samus seemed to do the same. We continued our drive into the night, our mortal companions oblivious to our presence.

The girls pulled up to a small, 1970s era house. The driveway and street were full of busted old vehicles. *It looks like a parents-out-of-town party.*

“Oooohhh,” smiled Samus, rubbing his hands together in excitement. “This is going to be more fun than I thought. Look at all the meatbags here!”

“Yeah,” added Gorgon, “but we’re going to have to share. It was a concerted effort to put this together.”

Share? As the thought fired through my deadman mind, I saw a few other non-mortals following young 20-somethings into the house. *Ah, he means there are other neverborns here.*

“I don’t like sharing,” replied Samus.

We exited the vehicle and followed the girls inside. The dimly lit house presented thumping bass pop music, hundreds of red plastic cups, and dozens of young people in various states of inebriation. At almost a one-to-one ratio, each mortal was paired with a neverborn.

“There’s no room to play here at all,” grumbled Samus as we surveyed the scene.

“Just stay on task and stick with our listeners,” answered Gorgon as he followed the girls into a smoke-filled kitchen. Gorgon eyed the surroundings and re-focused on Samus and me. “And don’t worry. There is plenty of enjoyment to be had here.”

“You got it, boss,” replied Samus. As he started following the blonde toward a basement staircase, Samus paid me one additional bit of attention. “Groffmite, go find a subject and see if you can get anywhere. Hard to mess something up in here.”

Although the translator was no help at all, I could muster at least some response from memory. “Yes.”

I then watched Samus descend to the floor below. *This might be my time to get out of here.* I surveyed the main level again, but there was Gorgon, still close and glancing over at me often. *Maybe he suspects I’m not a neverborn.* I immediately hatched a plan, deciding to shadow someone who appeared to be heading outside. At that point, I could make an escape.

I spotted a red-faced, curly-haired party goer who seemed to be making his way toward the back yard patio. He strutted and nodded at various young women as he slowly moved through the crowd. Luckily, he didn’t seem to have a neverborn whispering in his ear. *How many sips can someone take from one red cup?*

I moved into position right behind him, listening to his awkward laugh as he tried to interact with the opposite sex. We eventually found ourselves at a sliding glass door when a giggling young woman suddenly stopped our procession.

“Hey Rhett! Good to see you. How’s it going?” Similar to my “subject,” she had no neverborn hanging at her ear.

“Oh, hey. Doing great. What’s up?”

He clearly doesn’t remember her name.

“Same old. Same old. Just working every day and trying not to stay sober at night.” Her giggle elevated to an ear-piercing cackle as she laughed at her own joke.

“Awesome,” said my would-be savior. “Working is good and stuff.”

Good and stuff?

“Did you get that job you told me about?”

A look of total confusion passed by the man’s red face. Not only could he not remember who this woman was, he had no idea how she knew anything about him.

“Well, actually,” he stammered, too many thoughts filling his mind to eke out a coherent response, “I sort of decided I’m not working right now.” He sheepishly grinned after making the admission regarding his lack of employment.

“Right on!” said the female, the cackle returning. “Take a break from it all for a while. Figure out what you want to do. Find out who you really are. Be authentic. I love it.”

Unemployment is authentic? I looked over toward Gorgon and, sure enough, he met my gaze almost instantly. *He knows something is up. I need to hurry here.*

“Where are you living these days?” asked the giggler. She somehow seemed to be more interested in the red-faced partygoer.

“Well, still living with my parents, you know,” he started to stammer again. “But it’s kinda nice. Got the whole basement to myself.”

Unbelievable.

“I love it!” she screamed, the cackle reaching new heights. “Living rent free!”

Alright. This ends now. I moved closer to the young man’s ear and whispered intently. “Go outside.” But he didn’t budge. He and the girl continued to blah blah, and he seemed to pay me no heed. I looked back toward Gorgon and, fortunately, he seemed to be engaged with his “listener.”

“Yeah, I mean, it would be sweet to catch up,” said the young man.

I’m not a very good tempter, apparently. Remembering Gorgon’s strategy back in the basement, I put my mouth as close to his ear as possible and screamed. “GO OUTSIDE, RIGHT NOW!” And much to my shock (and horror), he complied.

“I gotta get some fresh air,” he mumbled while beginning to exit the house. “Care to join me?”

The giggler seemed ecstatic, beaming as they negotiated a sliding glass door and made their way to the back patio.

Maybe I'm really going to get out of here.

As we crossed the threshold leading outside, I heard a shout from inside the house. *Someone must have passed out.* I turned back around and surveyed the living participants. But nothing had changed. They were still chatting, laughing, and obviously sipping from their red plastic cups.

Strange. I then looked toward Gorgon. Three dead men had him surrounded, one of which had his head locked between a bulging bicep and a locked wrist. “Get out of here!” screamed Gorgon to any demon that could hear. “Get out! It’s the N.C.U.!”

N.C.U.? N.C.U. That’s the Neverborn Crime Unit Tom told me about. They can save me! But how will they know I’m not a neverborn? I instinctively ducked for cover, letting my weightless body slam down onto the wooden patio. I crawled up toward the house and—deciding it was too risky to rise up and look through a window—simply moved through the exterior of the house until my eyes were inside the room. *This is like a bar scene out of an old western.* It was hysteria inside, with neverborns hissing, cussing, punching, and flying at their would-be captors.

“You’re ruining the fun!” yelled Samus as he flew up the stairs and tackled a brawny woman. He sent her sprawling out of my line of vision. But the neverborns were far outnumbered, and appeared to be no match for the much larger members of the N.C.U.

I saw Gorgon place a well-aimed neck punch at the hulking man who held him in a headlock. His apprehender stumbled back, releasing his grip and freeing Gorgon. Wasting no time, Gorgon lifted off the ground,

spun around multiple times to avoid the hands reaching toward him, and shot through the window right above me. His attackers followed close behind.

I should have been escaping instead of watching. The scuffle was now very much on the back porch. Gorgon attempted to jet toward the sky, but the N.C.U. militia grabbed his kicking legs and forced him back to the ground. As two members of the brute squad wrestled him to submission, the third turned around and spied me crouching on the ground behind him. *Uh oh.*

"I'm not a...." I started to protest. But at the very moment I was about to reveal my true identity, Samus came headfirst at the man who had spied out my hiding spot. They tumbled to the dark grass and commenced a wrestling match.

Time to go. Now! I backed away from the brawl, hoping that no one would notice my departure. As I was about to turn the corner toward the back of the house, I heard another shout.

"You there!" said the voice from behind. "You're coming with me." He grabbed my arm, twisted it to an unnaturally high position on my back, and whispered into my ear. "Playtime is over, neverborn."

A stout woman with curly dark hair approached, giving her companion a congratulatory pat on the back.

"There's a legion of them here tonight, JP."

"Yeah," responded the round-faced man. He wore an unusually wide smile, which narrowed his eyes to the point they nearly looked closed. "I guess we need to attend more beer parties." He turned his attention to me. "This is what you do for fun? Messing with a bunch of kids?"

"I can explain everything," I replied in a hushed tone so Gorgon and Samus wouldn't hear. "But I am so glad to see you."

JP's smile was instantly replaced with a raised eyebrow. "I'm doubting that."

Yeah. They're going to torture me.

“**Y**ou really think I’m going to buy this?” JP’s round face was positioned across the room from me. I was in some kind of detention center, similar to the one Dawn and Billy had shown me when I first started working for the Atheist Welcoming Committee.

“Then why were you delivering ‘the message’ to a bunch of young mortals? Doesn’t make sense.”

Oh, I absolutely agree with that statement. “I told you. I went to Luxor with this woman named Kat. She didn’t know it was a neverborn city. She thought she was getting a near life experience. The neverborns surrounded us and locked us in. I was able to get out, but only by pretending to be one of their own. And I was just about to takeoff from that kid kegger when you grabbed me from behind.”

“People don’t just escape from Luxor,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief, “especially not a newbie dead. No way.”

“Oh yeah, Tom. Tom! There was this guy I met down in the Luxor lockup. He was the one who told me how to break out. He said he worked on your committee, the Neverborn Crime Unit, until he was caught. *I got to get him out of there somehow. He saved me.*

“Tom,” repeated JP. He touched his ear and whispered something I couldn’t hear. And then he directed his attention back toward me. “But you at least admit you were breaking the law, trying to take part in a near life experience.”

“Well, I had no interest in it. Kat did, and I thought I would go along to make sure she was okay.”

“Aiding and abetting then,” said JP, distracted by some paperwork in front of him.

“Well, I’m not a lawyer in the World of the Dead, but I think my defense to that charge would be that we didn’t actually participate in the near life experience. So I don’t think I aided or abetted anything.” *This guy’s determined to get me on something.*

“That might be true, Atticus. But it doesn’t change the fact that you were actively engaged in the harassment of mortals—a serious offense in our system of justice. There were neverborns involved in active possession there! Do you want me to share some video of what they had those poor kids doing?” JP was serious now. “That kind of possession and messaging can drive people to do horrible things, to others and themselves.”

“Are you able to contact the A.W.C. in Newfoundland?” *Maybe Duck can save me from this most recent insanity.* “They can corroborate everything I’m telling you.” JP looked up from his papers and glared at me. “Well, almost everything.”

JP touched his ear again and apparently received some burst of information from his minicomputer. “Is Dawn still running the A.W.C.?”

Still running? “Absolutely. And she can verify I’m not a neverborn. She was the first one I met when I came here.”

“I would normally disagree,” replied JP, his eyes squinting at me, “but Dawn is one of our brightest and best. I doubt you could bamboozle her.”

I doubt it, too. “Okay, great. Can I talk to her?”

JP smirked while closing the file of papers spread out before him. “We’ll call her together.”

23

“**Y**ou got yourself into a real pickle, didn’t you, Atticus?” Dawn’s brilliant face smirked condescendingly at me from across the desk.

She must think I’m a complete moron.

“But your escape proves real resolve, and a quick-wittedness I frankly didn’t expect. You’re both dim and bright all at the same time. Marvelous.”

Yeah, I guess I deserve all that.

“So you do know this man?” asked JP, still glaring at me as if I were a serial killer.

“Oh, I absolutely know him. This is Garry White, a once committed atheist who was mowed down by a train just a short time ago. He is an up and comer in the A.W.C., if he still wants to be a part of my committee anyway.”

JP’s excitement noticeably faded. “Well, he’s an incredibly lucky man to have escaped the neverborns. And probably one of the stupidest newbie deads I’ve ever met.”

Hey, pal. I’m right here. But I guess I deserve that, too.

“It is a mistake that has been made before.” Dawn again looked at me intently. “Although, I’m sure it has been a great learning experience for Atticus.”

“Yeah, I learned a few things.” *Quite a few things Dawn never told me.* “For example, that demons go out on night raids to tempt the living. That hell is real. That the neverborns seek control of every aspect of human life.” I looked back and forth between Dawn and JP, shaking my head in disgust. “Might have been nice to know.”

“Oh, Atticus,” replied Dawn, flicking her wrist away from her face as if my complaints were a common insect, “we couldn’t possibly tell you everything you would like to know. Who has the time for such things? And, think about it, would you have believed me had I revealed that information during our first meeting in the meadow?”

“What else are you hiding from me?” *Tone probably a bit sharp on that one.*

“‘Hiding’ information is quite a bit different than strategically ‘revealing’ it. And don’t trifle with me, Atticus. I was welcoming atheists into the World of the Dead long before you were publishing drivel about cosmic chance.”

I guess she’s not wrong.

“I’m surprised she’s going to let you stay on the committee,” added JP, a fake laugh escaping his curved lips. “I’d have you working street cleanup somewhere if I were her.”

Dude loves to pile on.

“I expect he’s got some cleanup to do,” replied Dawn. “But of a different sort.”

“**Y**ou want some snacks?” laughed Duck, rummaging through a few cupboards at AWC headquarters in Newfoundland. “You’re probably hungry after all your misadventures with the neverborns.”

“I’m not, surprisingly,” I answered, in no mood for Duck’s jokes. “And after eating the demon food in Luxor, I don’t think I ever want another one of these ‘snacks’ again.”

“Really? That bad, eh?”

Does he really not know?

“No, it wasn’t bad at all. In fact, it was amazing. Best food I’ve had since mortality.”

Duck raised an eyebrow and nodded affirmatively. “Well then, maybe you shouldn’t have been so eager to escape—if the fare was really that sumptuous. Perhaps you should go back, my young mentee.”

I do need to go back. I need to get Kat out of there somehow!

“I’ve actually been thinking about that.”

“Don’t let your stomach do the thinking for you,” replied Duck, pretending to scold me like a child, “especially since you’re an immortal now.”

“I’m serious. I just left Kat there, and I need to get her out somehow.”

Duck rubbed his clenched jaw, as if deep in thought. “That’s a really dumb idea, dude.”

As if I don’t know that.

“But she’s probably down there, somewhere in that hellish prison.”

Duck ripped open a package of fake crackers and started munching. “She’s probably lived there for five thousand years, man. She’s obviously one of them.”

“And why is that so obvious?”

Duck crossed the small breakroom, plopped down on the couch, and put his feet on a centerpiece table. “Well, let’s consider the evidence. Your story is that you meet her on some random street at night; she befriends you; she almost immediately invites you to participate in illegal activity; she leads you to a neverborn lair; you are captured there and held against your will.... I could go on, Atticus. Nine times out of ten she’s a neverborn. Odds actually might be worse.”

Maybe he’s right. But what if he’s wrong? “And what about that remote possibility, Duck? What about the possibility that she’s stuck down there getting tortured in hell?” *Maybe shouldn’t have raised my voice.*

“No, I get it, Atticus. It’s a pickle for sure.” He took another loud bite at his cracker snack. “But you don’t want to be lured back in there, especially if you already escaped her trap. Don’t fall for it twice, my man.”

“There has to be a way to find out whether she’s a neverborn or a new dead. There just has to be.”

“It’s a tricky business,” replied Duck, now stretching out his arms to cradle the back of his head. “You know, since we all look exactly the same and all that.”

I’m going to need proof. “But what about records? What about talking to people from her welcoming committee?”

“Records can be faked. People can be duped.” Duck was serious now. He stood up and wagged his index finger at me. “You are dealing with the most sophisticated villainy ever encountered. We don’t fight against flesh and blood; these aren’t petty thieves. These neverborns have genuine power. They infiltrate this world from the lowest valley to the highest

mountaintop. They are the principal force of darkness in this world, and in the World of the Living.”

Now I'm getting lectured.

Duck continued. “And if you aren’t careful, they will have you—body and soul.”

“So you won’t help me if I go to break her out?” *Seems obvious.*

Duck slumped back down on the couch and resumed his casual attitude. He shook his head in disbelief and whistled through pursed lips. “Well, I guess I didn’t quite say that.”

“**M**an, you dumb,” laughed Nox. He led me down one of the numerous hallways of the Diamond Hotel.
Everyone here seems to think that lately.

“I just don’t know if I can let it go, Nox. What if she’s trapped down there? And what about Tom, the guy that helped me out? I know he’s still in that dungeon. How can I just forget about them?”

“You ain’t gotta forget about them. But you gotta use your noggin. They don’t want you going down there and getting caught. Come on, man. This is easy.”

Nox paused our march down the narrow corridor and put a shushing finger up to his lips. After a moment, I could hear faint crying from one of the rooms to our right.

Must be a rough mind dive going on in there.

Nox looked at me intently and raised an eyebrow. “You see, Attic? These in here? They’re babies. They know nothing. They cry. They make a fuss. They need someone looking after them. These are the ones you should be worried about right now. This is your job.” He then raised his voice and spoke toward the door. “Hey, it’s Bix Nox. Need anything in there?”

The sobbing quickly shifted to quiet. And then the faint, trembling voice of a man responded. “I think I’ll be okay.”

“You got this!” yelled Nox as he continued our march. Then he whispered to me, just loud enough so that my mega ears could barely detect his words. “Dude can’t stop cryin’ ‘cause he ain’t seen his mom. She ain’t even dead yet, man. I told you, they’re just babies, Attic.”

My mom is dead too. Where is she?

“But Nox,” I continued, swiping away the thought, “I’ve done the research and Kat checks out. The D.A.W.C. welcomed her to Newfoundland just days before I got there. She exhibited all the classic addiction behaviors. There was nothing strange about her. They have no reason to believe she’s a neverborn.”

“Except she took you to a prison, bro. It don’t happen a lot, but the nevers can get bold. And they got skill we don’t have. They been around a minute. Maybe she ain’t what the D.A.W.C. thought.”

“Alright, fine. But even if you’re right, Tom is still down there. And we both know he’s not a neverborn.”

“Yeah, he’s legit,” replied Nox, still lumbering down the hall at a slow pace. “But you think he wants you coming in there again, after he got you out? Man, you don’t know nothing. Probably the best thing he ever done here was getting you out. You going to untangle all that? Not cool, man.”

But I can’t just leave them there. I’d feel guilty for the rest of my ... existence? No way!

“My mind is made up,” I stammered, a bit afraid of how Nox would react.

“Good,” said Nox, not bothering to turn around as he replied. “You’re starting to wise up, Attic.”

“No, Nox. I’ve decided that I’m going to go back there and try to bust them out. And there is no talking me out of it.”

Nox turned, shaking his head and smiling at the same time. “Man, you dumb.”

Part Four

1

“Atticus, you must know of the grave danger involved in operations like this.” Dawn stared at me from across her desk in the A.W.C. headquarters, a paradoxical look of kind disdain on her face. “Not only to you, but to others on the Atheist Welcoming Committee.”

“I know. Everyone on the committee has been peppering me with warnings. But I can’t just leave Kat and Tom there.” *Even though I’ll likely be joining them there.* “And Duck, Nox, Syd—they don’t need to come with me.”

“They are demanding to come with you, and it will not be possible for me to talk them out of it.” She sighed and continued. “Believe me; I’ve tried. Even threatened them with New New Atheist rehabilitation duty. It was all for naught.”

The New New Atheists. Those people are as dumb as rocks.

“So what can I do about it? Other than sneak out to Luxor in the dead of night when they aren’t looking?”

"That isn't going to work. Sydney is an expert surveillance technician. She'll be following you around like a cape. And she is very eager about this mission."

"Well, then I don't know what I can do to prevent them from coming."

"Agreed. It appears we are very much at an impasse. So you must now set your focus on ensuring that you and every other member of my team make it back from Luxor unscathed."

She's going along with this?

"Well, how can I do that? We'll be four against millions."

"You certainly won't be arriving in Luxor in open combat, Atticus. "No...." she then paused, as if she were working something over in her mind, "that wouldn't do at all." She stood from her seat, her back straight and her chin high. There was new resolve in her demeanor. She looked at me intently. "You will carry on your identity as Groffmite the Deceiver, and perhaps even seek out those very miscreants that led you on the evening of your escape."

"Are you sure about that? I think at least one of them was on to me."

"Then your re-arrival will prove to them that you are in very fact a neverborn. For why would you ever return? Only a fool would do so." She sharpened her mouth into a smile. "Only an absolute fool."

She's marvelous. But the constant insults.... "They will have heard that I escaped. I will match the descriptions provided by Cassius and Juno. But who knows? Maybe they put Juno in a prison for losing track of me."

"You are starting to understand," said Dawn, nodding approvingly. "And you make fair points. Perhaps we will need a different plan of attack."

"What do you suggest?" *I wonder if she's ever busted into a Neverborn city. I'm guessing she has.*

“My suggestion is that you sort that all out, Atticus. After all, this is very much your operation.” She paused and looked at me intently. “But do share it with me once you’ve sharpened it up. I might have a few modifications.”

2

“**N**ah, man,” laughed Nox between bites from his enormous ice cream cone. “We just go in there and I start dropping people. That’s better than some ‘plan’ or whatever you callin’ it.”

It might actually work with this guy on our side. “But Dawn doesn’t think you’re going to blend in very well.”

“Yeah. She right. So I start dropping people as soon as we see someone. Like I said.” His perfectly white teeth outshined the fake vanilla ice cream he was so eagerly consuming.

“I’m just not sure it’s going to work. And with all the language training I’ve been doing, I think I can handle it.”

“So I’m supposed to be like Chewbacca or something? All chained up when you get to Luxor and then we just make our way down to the prison?”

Well, it worked in Star Wars. “Exactly, but you won’t really be chained up and then if ... when we run into trouble, you can start doing your thing.”

Nox shoved what appeared to be half the cone into his mouth and responded. “Not sure I can wait to start doin’ my thing. Every one of those guys deserves a fist to the mouth, not just some of them.”

“For sure. I was shocked at what I saw that night.”

“You don’t know the half of it, Attic,” replied Nox, gingerly patting the corners of his mouth with a napkin. “These nevers don’t ever stop. They got something against everyone over there in the land of the living. And they hate us even more. It’s like they think they can take over or something. Tryna get slaves and weird crap like that.”

“When I was down there, the lady giving me ‘the tour’ was trying to tell me that everyone who had lived and died had given up their memories and true identity for some kind of experience with technology. It was weird.”

“That’s how they talk about the body,” replied Nox, standing up from his seat and wiping a few cone crumbs from his shirt. “They think, or at least they sayin’, that we all made some big mistake by bein’ born and all that.”

Well, everyone who was born did die, after all. “I have no memories before being born, but this lady in Luxor was talking like she’s lived for.... Well, I don’t know—a really long time.”

Nox laughed as we exited the ice cream shop. “And you don’t think you’ve done the same, Attic?”

“If I have, I certainly don’t remember it.”

“Let me ask you something, Attic. When you was alive, over there in the body, could you remember being born?”

Well, I certainly can now. “Of course not. Not one bit. Just like everybody else.”

“But, even back then, you knew you had been born, right? Maybe there was pictures and stuff with you drooling all over everyone when you was a baby?”

“Well, yeah. So what?”

“So, Attic, just because you don’t remember somethin’ doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. Man, I thought you was smarter than that. Weren’t you some kind of smart guy before? Writing books and everything?”

“I think you just told me that you agree with the lady in Luxor, Nox.”
In fact, I know he did.

He paused his lumbering walk down the busy sidewalk of Newfoundland and faced me. “They don’t always lie, Attic. Fact is, they usually mix a little bit of lie with a lot of truth.”

“So do you remember anything before you were born?”

“Nah, man,” replied Nox. He turned around and resumed walking toward A.W.C. headquarters. “Least, not yet.”

3

“**H**ow goes the demon tongue training, Sir Atticus?” Duck snickered at me from the other side of a conference room table. We were buried in the deep recesses of the A.W.C., joined by Dawn, Billy, Nox, and Syd. Operation Insanity was set to begin the very next morning. *Truly, this is insane. What if I get caught? Or worse, one of them?*

“His education in that slithering nonsense should be complete, or this mission is on hold until further notice.” Dawn wasn’t smiling, definitely a rarity for her.

“I’ve got it down,” I assured them. “I can hiss with the best of them. I’ve even practiced on a few neverborn inmates to make sure.”

“You know they can talk to each other, right?” said Billy, his ears pricking up. “You might have blown this whole thing.”

“Don’t worry,” I responded. “All we talked about was Neverborn involvement in the great world wars. Nothing about Luxor; nothing about Kat, Tom, or me. Frankly, they seemed relieved to have someone to talk to.”

“That’s all they do is talk, man,” added Nox. “That’s the only weapon they got.”

“That’s the only weapon anyone has,” replied Syd.

“Nah,” said Nox, a twinkle in his eye. “I got more.”

“What did they tell you about World War II?” asked Duck, genuinely curious. “They must have had an entire army at Hitler’s ear.”

“That’s what I figured,” I replied, “but they actually told me he was barely touched. After his initial training that is.”

“Dude must have been a real jerk,” sneered Duck.

“Why don’t you go and meet him?” I asked. *He must be around this place somewhere.*

“He was almost assuredly arrested immediately upon his arrival,” said Dawn with curtness. “Where he is now, I don’t know. But the concept of celebrity is just as real in the World of the Dead as it is in the World of the Living. It is highly unlikely you could broker a meeting with that wicked man if you wanted to. And yet this is all wholly irrelevant to the reason I asked you all here today. Atticus, you have complete confidence in your command of the Luxorian dialect?”

“I’ve got it,” I responded with as much resolve as I could convey. *I hope.*

“Excellent,” responded Dawn. “Your ability to speak with the Neverborns will be paramount to the expedition.”

I’d seriously rather that nobody said a word to me. But that’s probably a pipe dream.

“And Duck,” continued Dawn, “you are satisfied with your role in the venture?”

“‘Satisfied’ might be a stretch,” he replied. “But I’ll make do with my paltry part.”

“Very good,” answered Dawn. “Don’t be the hero. Just do your bit and get out of there as fast as you can. Nox, are you prepared?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “I just gotta hold off on the punches until the right time. No problem.”

“Sydney, I recognize you have experience with Luxor based on prior assignments, but are you absolutely confident?” Dawn looked at a clock on the wall, as if she were in a hurry to get somewhere else.

What could be more important than this right now?

“I’ve been down to that wasteland before,” answered Syd with confidence. “I can guide Atticus to where he needs to be. No problem whatsoever.”

“Then we are all set,” replied Dawn.

I have to say something. One last try. “I want everyone to know how grateful I am for your willingness to help out on this. But I have to say this again: you don’t need to come with me. I have serious concerns that one of you, maybe all of you, are going to end up trapped down there. And I really can’t have that on my conscience for eternity. If you know what I mean.”

“But who knows?” said Duck in response to my plea. “Maybe they’d let us eat that sumptuous fare and read their infinite library of pre-mortality books. Might be exciting. A little bit of R&R never hurt anybody.”

“Yeah,” added Syd, “couldn’t be worse than trying to convince an atheist he’s really dead. They can be really thick, Atticus.”

“But he makes a good point,” said Billy, suddenly becoming serious. “You are all risking a lot on this. And we can’t offer you any guarantees. You have to be sure about it.”

“I’m sure,” replied Duck.

“Me too,” said Syd.

“And I’m all in,” added Nox. “They got nothin’ on us.”

“Then it’s all settled,” said Dawn, clapping her hands as she hastily stood from the conference room table. She began her exit from the room, but stopped and looked me square in the face. “Go and save Katherine. And free Tom if you can.” She then flashed me that signature smile. “I can promise you one thing: succeed or fail, it will definitely be a learning experience. And that’s what this is all really about, isn’t it Atticus?”

4

“**Y**ou sure you know where you’re going, Attic? Only thing they got out here are shrubs and rocks.” Nox stood next to me as I stooped low to the ground. The sun was about to crest over distant mountains. I could detect a slight shimmer from the nearby lake. The water seemed dead.

This is about the only thing I am sure about. There are times having a perfect memory is particularly useful. Finding an obscure crack in the surface of the Earth hundreds of miles from home is one of those times.

“Yeah, doubting they’re going to have a sign that says ‘Welcome to Demon Land’ out here.” Duck kicked at a few weeds, his luminescent foot flowing harmlessly through the plant life.

“He’s got it,” said Syd, her eyes fixed on me. “This is the entrance as I remember it.”

I spotted the fateful fissure and pointed. “Yup. Here it is.” I turned to face Nox and Syd. “Okay, are you two ready for this?”

“Ain’t nothing,” answered Nox, a sly grin on his face. “I been looking forward to this for a while now.”

“I’m good, too,” replied Syd.

The three of us started the descent through the cracked earth. Before my eyes went below the surface, they connected with Duck. “If everything goes well,” I said, “I won’t see you again for a while.”

“You have no idea how much I used to hear that during mortality,” quipped Duck. “But good luck. I’ll see you soon. Maybe I’ll even have some snacks handy.”

Here we go. I carefully worked my way down the elemental earth, following Syd's crab walk lead. When we got to somewhat level ground, we regrouped. "The last time I was here, there was a pack of neverborns in a clearing up ahead. They were the ones that escorted us to the front gate. So I think we should take our positions now. You sure about these handcuff things, Syd?"

"That's definitely what they use," she answered. "Believe me, I've been stuck in a pair before. There's no way out of them. It's pure matter."

"Not if you don't lock 'em tight, Syd," said Nox, sticking his bulging arms out to receive them.

I placed the dark, curved metal over Nox's tremendous wrists and worked to keep them in place without locking them, the faint luminescence from his skin lighting the project. *I bet he could tear out of these things regardless.* "Okay, you should be all set."

"Alright. Let's do it," laughed Nox.

This guy doesn't seem nervous at all.

We took our pre-arranged places—Syd and I on either side of Nox—and began our descent into the jagged depths of the Earth. In short order we came to the clearing, but other than portraits of neverborns from times past, nobody was there to greet us. The dim light from four candlesticks flickered as we entered the opening.

"You hear that?" asked Nox, his wide grin fading somewhat.

"Hear what?" I replied.

"I heard it," answered Syd. "And I'm pretty sure it was slithering."

"Slithering, as in snakes?" *I thought I saw a snake last time.*

"Yeah, Attic," replied Nox, his voice low. "Nasty snakes. They use 'em for spies and sending messages. Once in a while for attack, but not much these days."

"It's a good bet they know we're here," whispered Syd, peering into the dark crevices of the clearing. "Keep your eyes on the ground and your communication quiet."

Nox and I nodded in agreement and the three of us continued on. Just as before, the tunnel took us through numerous winding turns as we descended further below the surface. None of us spoke a word.

We eventually arrived at Luxor's elaborate stone entrance. But rather than barred shut—as it was the last time I had been to visit—the thick door stood wide open.

"Maybe the snakes gave them the message about us coming?" asked Nox with a shrug of his shoulder.

"No, there's something going on," replied Syd. She pointed to a large sign perched atop an elaborate pedestal. Its written words contained that ornate style I had come to recognize as neverbornian. "What does it say, Atticus?"

Let's hope the message isn't lost in translation. I activated my hypermind and studied the characters carefully. "Welcome to Luxor," I read aloud, "the Master speaks today. Join us in the assembly chamber."

"The Master?" smirked Nox. "How'd they know I'd be up in here today?"

"It must be one of their great leaders," said Syd, her eyes wide. "This was not a part of the plan."

"Do we abort?" I asked, unsure how a "great leader" would alter things.

"Why stop?" replied Nox. "There's been less security than we expected. I say we just waltz in."

That makes sense to me. "Syd?"

"He's right. Stick to the ruse and lead us straight to the prison block."

The three of us entered Luxor without another word.

5

“I heard it again,” I whispered, looking frantically to the left and right. We walked quietly and cautiously through the grand main hall of Luxor.

“Yeah, me too, Attic,” replied Nox, still not the least bit worried. “But it seems like snakes are the only ones who haven’t left to see ‘the Master.’ So I think we good.”

“Until they report that there are three members of the Host who aren’t where they’re supposed to be.” Syd wasn’t quite so calm.

“Just keep going,” said Nox. “Nobody here yet.”

I think unseen snakes are actually worse than seen snakes. “Agreed. This is the way I went before. Follow me.” Still holding Nox like a common prisoner, I led the little company through the dim tunnels and into the Luxorian Museum and library.

“Whoa,” said Nox. “That’s a lot of books.”

“The demon who brought me here said she’d read them all.”

“Nah, man,” replied Nox. “That would take like a million years.”

“She said she’d been reading them for ‘millennia,’ so thousands of years at least. She also said that she, and I, have existed forever. That was weird.”

“Why is that so strange?” asked Syd, looking intently at a row of perfectly organized scrolls. “Why do you think there was a beginning?”

“Because my memories go back to a beginning—the very moment of conception. But not before.” *Seems fairly obvious.*

“And have you learned nothing about the false precept of only believing what you can see? Seems like you’d know better than that by now.” Syd

flicked through a few of the scrolls, as if she were looking for something specific.

“She right, Attic. There’s stuff out there you don’t know nothing about.” Nox looked at me like a parent scolding a child. “You think you got it all down now that you been dead a couple minutes?”

So what are they hiding from me? “Well, I wouldn’t say....”

Before the words could leave my mouth, two silver green snakes entered the room at a quick slither. They stopped just short of our position in the library, turning back toward the dark tunnel from which they came and sending out synchronized hisses. The three of us instinctively reformed our positions, with Nox as prisoner centered in the middle.

Glowing snakes. What’ll they think of next?

The serpents lifted up their angled heads and surrounded us with their thick bodies. I could feel Nox’s forearm muscles tense as he formed a fist. And then two men—neverborns I presumed—emerged from the same tunnel.

“What are you three doing in here?” one of them barked. “The Master is about to speak!”

6

“We are escorting this prisoner to the detention block,” I answered, pronouncing the words in the best Luxorian dialect I could muster.

“And as you can see,” added Syd, with a perfect rendering of the language, “this former mortal is extremely dangerous. We didn’t feel it would be appropriate to attend the gathering.”

Nox remained quiet, but looked down at the Neverborns with a menacing stare, clenching his jaw as if he were about to pounce.

He might blow this whole thing with his fists right now.

“He’s a behemoth, to be sure,” remarked the other Neverborn, eyeing Nox from head to toe. “But that’s no matter. We will assist you if he becomes troublesome. And who knows? Maybe the Master can ... persuade him. Let’s go! No time to waste!”

I looked at Syd, who gave me a “what else can we do?” shake of the head. I next glanced up at Nox; his intense stare was fixed on the two demons. *I think we’re going to a rally.*

“Alright. Lead the way.” I almost added “kind sirs” at the end of my capitulation, but thought the better of it. *Do demons speak niceties to one another? Probably not.*

We left Luxor’s Museum and Library, following our Neverborn guides through another dark tunnel. As was true of the other passageways I had traveled at this level of the city, pictographs lined the walls—telling what seemed to be an endless story of war and conquest.

At least they aren’t a talkative pair. As soon as the thought danced through my hyper mind, one of them spoke.

“What are your names? And what were you doing out on patrol when you knew the Master was coming for a visit?”

Here we go. “I am Groffmite, most recently of Ugruk. I transferred here to assist in the instruction effort, and was soon thereafter captured in a raid. My companion here, Syndictive, helped me escape. And we brought one of the atheist welcoming committee thugs with us for good measure.” I put an elbow in Nox’s side as I pronounced the word “thugs,” just for show.

“So you’re the guy who was held up,” said one of the Neverborns. He stopped to look me over as he continued. “I heard Gorgon and Samus talking about that during a shift change.” He turned back around and continued leading us through the tunnel. “We’ll have some fun with your friend here. Just a bit of sport.”

“Maybe he’ll think twice next time,” added the other.

“Not likely,” said Nox, his jaw clenched and nostrils flaring.

Keep your cool, big fella.

Syd intervened and changed the subject. “What can you tell us about the Master’s visit? What an unexpected treat to be in his presence.” Syd played the part well, almost beaming with excitement as she asked about “the Master.”

“Not sure,” came the answer. “He’s probably going to introduce some new strategy in the war effort. Seems like they’re always changing things these days. But who knows, maybe it’s just a ‘ra ra.’”

The demon on the right turned to face us as he continued down the tunnel. “Let’s hope it’s not a whipping.” He laughed with an anxious cackle as he turned back around.

“Let’s hope,” I replied, sheepishly.

We continued on in welcome silence for a time, weaving and winding our way through the corridor. The story art was reaching some type of climax, depicting hordes of men and women in open combat amidst fires

and storms. That same man I had seen before was painted tall among the smaller group of combatants, a fist raised in defiant confidence. *I wonder if he is 'the Master'?*

“Good. I don’t think we missed anything,” said one of the neverborns, still with that nervous chirp in his voice. The snakes had rejoined us, hissing and gesturing with their foul heads as we turned a final corner. Flickering shadows danced on the last section of tunnel as we emerged into an enormous amphitheater.

There must be millions of demons here. The boisterous crowds seemed to go on and on forever, filling a fire-lit underground cave that spanned miles in all directions. They faced a rock-hewn stage that, as of yet, was empty.

“We made it in time,” said our second guide. “Let’s take them over to the ‘prisoner’ section.”

“Doesn’t seem fair,” said the first. “They’re going to have the best view of the Master.”

The snakes led the way, followed closely by our neverborn escorts. Syd seemed unfazed—even a little excited maybe, but Nox looked like he was about to erupt in rage. *You can’t punch every one of them, big guy.*

We were led along the smooth chiseled wall of the underground cavern for a few minutes, the crowd becoming rowdier as we traveled. The chaos eventually sharpened into a high-pitched chant. But despite my extensive studies in the Luxorian language, I couldn’t understand what they were saying. Amidst the cacophonous chorus, I ventured to ask my tiny computer for the translation. It piped the answer into my ear instantaneously: “He who ascends!” Over, and over, and over again. “HE WHO ASCENDS!” The neverborn chanters seemed to grow more ravenous with each repetition of the refrain.

This is nuts. Our demons eventually cut into the raucous crowd toward the rock-hewn stage, leading us through rabid fans of “the Master.” Nearly every one of them formed a snarling expression as they saw Nox, our supposedly caged prisoner. Despite my fears, Nox kept his clenched fists in position—still pretending they were cuffed.

How can we possibly stage a rescue operation here? We came upon a large opening in the crowd, formed by a circular pile of dark rocks about three feet high. There was a small entrance at the front, which brought us within reaching distance of the stage as our neverborn guides took us into the enclosure.

Without a doubt, it was a sad sight. Dozens of bound prisoners stood at attention, quietly watching the stage as the chorus of “He Who Ascends!” intensified. A few inmates were clearly trapped in mind dives. I did a double take as I saw the same blank expression woman from the hell cages below Luxor. She stood at the perfect middle of the circle, staring off into nothing. Everything about her was precisely as it had been before.

If she’s here, Tom can’t be far off. I hurriedly pulled Nox, and therefore Syd, along with me as I surveyed the various prisoners, desperate for some sign of my bound hero.

“What are you doing?” whispered Syd, annoyed with my reckless behavior.

She has a point. Gotta keep up the ruse. Without answering, I slowed my pace and acted as if we were trying to find a good spot for our large prisoner. Nox remained silent, but I could tell he was working out an escape plan behind his clenched teeth.

And that’s when I saw Kat.

8

D*on't blow this, Atticus!* My internal pep talk must have had the desired effect. I casually kept searching for a good spot to view 'the Master,' which was—of course—right next to Kat. She didn't notice me, keeping her gaze affixed on the still empty stage. She didn't appear restrained in any way. In fact, none of the prisoners were. The chanting around us was total frenzy at this point. Dozens of snakes slithered through the crowd, lifting their fanged heads and hissing in perfect unison.

After facing Nox toward the stage, I looked meaningfully at Syd—gesturing with my eyes toward Kat. She immediately got the message, nodding with understanding that we had found one of my missing friends. I did my best to get Kat's attention, but my only tool was a meaningful stare. I figured it would be too dangerous to try anything more overt.

Kat must not be a neverborn! She's here with the prisoners! They had all been wrong. As the thought crossed my mind, the final "HE WHO ASCENDS!" blasted through the arena and faded into echoes along the stone walls. It was replaced with an unnatural silence, a disconcerting lack of sound given the sheer number of us gathered in the assembly hall.

And then I saw the Master. He stood silent at center stage, his arms outstretched as a greeting for his adoring fans. He wore a shimmering vestment of dark greens, with jeweled patterns woven throughout. His feet were covered with leather-like brown boots. His face was clean shaven. Like everyone else in the World of the Dead, he appeared young and vibrant, a luminescence shining from his face and exposed hands. *This guy seems to glow more than the others, maybe just a bit.*

He surveyed the vast audience, almost as if he were looking at each individual in the crowd, for some time. His eyes met mine, and it seemed he squinted with recognition at the sight of me. *Does this guy know me?*

After what seemed like minutes of absolute silence, he positioned himself at center stage and finally spoke. “My friends and colleagues,” he began, “it is an honor and privilege to be among you once again. It has been far too long. Far too long.”

He paused, again surveying the endless congregation. I looked toward Kat and, to my surprise, she was staring at me intently. I gave her a half smile and a raise of my right eyebrow, but she turned back to face the Master without any show of emotion. *Did she not recognize me? Of course she recognized me.*

“Despite the passage of time, my beloveds,” continued the Master, “I still remember nearly every one of you. Nearly.” His gaze was again directed to the collection of prisoners as he repeated the word. “And it brings me great pleasure to see that you remain engaged in the Great Work—that greatest of all causes that has united us these innumerable millennia.”

Innumerable?

“Yet, in my mind’s eye, the scenes still unfold before me at a near constant pace. At times I have reviewed those memories and wondered, could it have been any different? Could a more peaceful outcome have been achieved?” The Master paused as the crowd began to rumble. “Absolutely not. It had to be!”

Like choristers leading a choir, the snakes reared their heads and the Master’s rabid fans again repeated the refrain: “HE WHO ASCENDS!”

9

“Now, let us review those pivotal moments from eons ago,” said the Master, rubbing his hands together as he spoke.
No question he’s given this speech a few times.

“The trouble started with the great experiment—that great experiment proposed by the one who should have loved us most. ‘Progress,’ you’ll recall, was the alleged pretext. A never-ending progress.” The Master smirked as the words left his curved lips. “But in outlining such a diabolical scheme, such an inherently unfair ‘plan,’ he revealed his inherent biases, his inherent discrimination!” The crowd roared anew, the echoes amplifying off the elemental rock. “Yet you will remember, my loyal friends,” continued the Master, feeding off the crowd, “that I concocted a different approach—one based on true love for all, one based on mutual respect and equality; a plan that would not arbitrarily select a ‘noble’ few and abandon the majority. No, our way was the path of all, not the narrow trail of some alleged ‘great ones.’ And for daring to question such bigotry, they started a war!”

“He who ascends!” began the chant again. “HE WHO ASCENDS!”

“They started a war!” repeated the Master, raising his voice for the first time. “And that war rages on!”

This speech rages on. The crowd had worked itself into a new frenzy, so I took the opportunity to move closer to Kat. I could tell she saw me from the corner of her eye, but she refocused her attention on the Master almost immediately. Nox and Syd stood silent, listening to the diatribe with rapt attention.

“And you’ll remember the relentless hunting—the violent expulsion from our home. They gathered us, one by one. They caged us. They treated

us like vermin!” Shouts from the masses again echoed through the chamber. “And they abandoned us here!” More frenzied fandom followed. “Abandoned to this cold rock, this pathetic excuse for a habitation. Nothing more than a shadow of where we used to live, what we used to enjoy! The privileges we earned through the countless millennia were stolen.” The Master spoke at a fever pitch, barking at breakneck pace as he spoke to his adoring fans.

“But the greatest irony of them all,” continued the Master, straightening his clothes as he calmed his voice, “is that their foolish experiment led them here. Right back to us. The very place where we had been buried alive. And so the great war continues. And we are winning. WE will ascend, as I told you from the beginning!”

“HE WHO ASCENDS!” roared the crowd in response.

10

The Master stopped speaking for a time. *Maybe he's done. I better figure out how to get Kat out of here quick.* But I saw no easy options. There were neverborn captors stationed around the stone circle, watching their prisoners intently. Both Nox and Syd continued to keep their eyes fixed on the speaker, who appeared to be basking in the shouts, screams, and hisses of his adoring subjects. *Where is Tom?* But he was nowhere to be found. I took momentary comfort in the thought that he couldn't be killed. But it was quickly crowded out by a counterargument. *Eternal torture definitely sounds worse than death.*

"So keep up your worthy efforts, my dear friends," continued the Master. He was now completely relaxed, the vitriol replaced with an affectionate charisma. "Let us now speak of the world of the flesh." The adoring fans were more subdued now, as if they were settling in for an unwanted lecture. *Perhaps they're scared?*

"Your efforts among the flesh are paying vast dividends in the war effort. The new strategies have firmly taken hold, and I thank you for your willingness to engage in a more subdued and ... calculated engagement." The excitement from the crowd had been completely erased. They now stood quiet and still, as if they had been betrayed by this new "strategy" in some way.

"The times have changed, my comrades. Those old tactics—as enjoyable as it was watching them suffer through the possessions, abuses, and plagues—are to be used sparingly in the modern war effort, if at all." The Master stood a little straighter and slightly raised his voice. "It is because of your diligent efforts that we have reached these heights. It signals the final

chapter in the war!” The audience remained subdued, despite the Master’s attempts to rouse them.

“And never underestimate the succulent suffering that comes of an overarching skepticism and a healthy dose of materialism. Rather than a few moments of exquisite agony, which I agree can bring great satisfaction, it is the silent agony and slow despair of decades that will bring true victory. When those who have undergone the great experiment are convinced that their lives are meaningless, that there is nothing beyond the gaze of their own blind eyes, that they are the pinnacle of all creation, YOU my subjects, have won true and lasting suffering.”

This guy’s a sadist. I again caught Kat staring in my direction but, as before, she immediately turned away as soon as I met her gaze. Nox continued staring at the Master, but the amount of clench in his jaw had me concerned that his fists would soon start flying. Syd remained entirely engaged in the speaker’s words.

“So keep teaching them the new religion—the religion of nothing. Tell them they are the pinnacle, and that there is nothing higher.” The Master burst into laughter at the notion, and the crowd was soon to join him. He allowed them their fun, resuming his speech only after the revelry quieted. “Imagine the absurdity of it, my dear and loyal subjects. They genuinely believe those complex machines they inhabit, so carefully designed and manufactured for their use by the enemy, sprang into existence by pure, blind chance. It is of course a manifestation of our great power; the fools will believe anything. The fact that both the natural world and scientific laboratory are entirely devoid of any evidence of such ‘abiogenesis’—as we ironically named the ridiculous notion—is of no moment to them. And this after we told them not to believe anything without ‘evidence!’ I swear to you, we could lead them to drink from boiling pools of acid if we so chose. But the hopeless, pitiless, indifferent ‘nothing’ is a perfection. Nothing is a

harsh god, you see. She requires nothing; but offers nothing in return. Nothing! I salute you on a job well done!" The mob was again on his side, cheering his commendation.

And now he's laughing at me. There was no evidence of life arising by chance, but we all just assumed it had to be, despite the impossible odds. I suddenly realized that, back in my living days, I had fallen into a trap—a trap set by this man and his neverborn servants.

"For those who cling to their beliefs in the Divine, keep whispering to them that they have simply been raised in cults. Use your own voices, and the voices of those who serve you, to instruct them that a belief in anything beyond their own mortal flesh is a myth. Laugh at them and point the finger, and convince them their convictions are nothing more than delusional fables and foolish traditions."

And now I was the one staring at the Master with rapt attention.

11

“Sterility, of course,” continued the Master, “voluntary sterility, remains a primary objective. And for those who use the creative power, have them do so animalistically, without discipline, commitment, or natural alignment. After all, we were the ones who taught them they are mere animals. Let them continue to travel the path of that obvious absurdity. Misuse is the key; the manner of misuse matters not. If offspring results from a union, use it to your advantage through the typical programs of termination, abuse, neglect, or—perhaps most useful of all—total parental abandonment.”

What is he on about now? Sterility?

“It has always mystified me,” added the Master, a whimsical look on his perfect face, “that he dared to share that power with them—the creative force. Now, as I have promised you, we will soon accomplish our own designs to that end, perhaps through different channels, but that primal power we will achieve nonetheless.”

Kat was staring at me again, but I was so fixed on the Master’s talking points that I nearly missed it. I met her gaze and, this time, she looked at me with intent, slightly raising her eyebrows as if to ask me what the plan was. *The plan was not to be front and center before a mob of angry neverborns.* I returned her expression, trying to convey that I was working the problem. She seemed to snort, looking back to the Master with a slight shake in her head. I checked Syd and Nox, but their attention remained fixed on the man at center stage.

“Now, if you encounter a fully functioning ‘family’—like the one the enemy taught them to organize after his own pattern—first curse your

predecessors for a job poorly done.” The crowd reacted with waves of what seemed like forced laughs. After a short pause to soak it in, the Master continued. “But soon thereafter, begin the regular program of domestic work.” The audience withdrew to total silence, with only the slither of snakes to be heard.

Wow. Buzzkill.

“I know it is distasteful, my friends. But domestic work is an absolute necessity if we are to continue our stronghold in the World of the Living.” It remained quiet among the Master’s adherents, but he pressed forward. “Dumb them down with inane ‘entertainment’, which casually depicts the most spectacular wickedness we can inflict upon them. And bind them up in contention over even the most mundane. Continue teaching them that their pitiful forms of currency are all that really matter in their short lives—that it can provide anything their world has to offer. With their attention properly fixed on trivial economics, debasing entertainment, and petty arguments, you can successfully undo what the enemy has done.”

The Master looked at his silent audience carefully, as if he were parsing out the perfect words for his next point. He smiled faintly and continued. “And as their lives descend into pain and misery—a result of your good and faithful efforts—have them seek comfort in an increasingly potent array of cocktails and chemical combinations. Your comrades in the biological department have done an excellent job studying and experimenting on their fleshy forms, and I am happy to report that our efforts to numb them from reality have never been more successful. As they temporarily escape from the wrath you’ve inflicted upon them, their agony will only grow. This cycle of highs and lows, of ecstasy and exquisite suffering, will dumb them down into our continued service.”

The crowd was responding again, apparently preferring “cocktails” to “domestic work.” *This is exactly what Tom was telling me.*

“Over the years, my friends,” continued the Master, “we’ve had incredible success at leading along these forgetful souls. Of course, that was the gambit of their great experiment: to remember nothing of who they really are, of who all of us really are. And, generationally speaking, they are unable to remember the many strategies we’ve inflicted upon them. But I tell you, my faithful servants, our recent advances in the ongoing war effort are the most impressive. Of course we relish in some of our stunning achievements from the past: convincing them to literally worship the craftsmanship of their own hands. Once they stumbled upon a knowledge of the planets, we had them bowing down before them almost instantly. But what they adore and venerate at present is a feat I never dared dream of: they worship themselves. They live only to serve what they see through a looking glass.”

Seems about right, I guess. I looked toward Kat, and she met my glance. I raised my right eyebrow to signify that I was still working the problem.

“So,” continued the Master, “as a conclusion to my remarks regarding your messaging, allow me to summarize: guide them carefully out into the nothing. Aim for voluntary sterility where you can, taking away that most powerful of forces granted to them. Perform domestic work where required. Keep them numb with a steady dose of chemical cocktails. And, finally, direct their worship inward, to the helpless and hopeless self. And with this specially contrived set of messages, we will prevail!”

“He who ascends!” shouted the crowd in response.

12

H*e seems to be finishing, and I have no idea how to get these people out of here.*

The Master resumed, a sparkle in his eye as he shifted topics. “Now, my friends, I desire to remind you of the great purpose for which we fight this war—this war which is about to come to a glorious end!” The crowd sent screams of approval in response.

“Never forget his hatred toward each of us. His discrimination. The withholding of his alleged ‘eternal love.’ It was a lie then, and it has proven to be a lie in every moment since!” The Master was really in his element now. With just a few words, he had worked the crowd back into a frenzy.

“I could not stand for his lack of tolerance in those days long past, and I continue my defiance now! He turned his back on us, expelling us from our home. And, soon, each one of us will break down the barriers, retake our home world, and ascend to the throne of power. It is our right, and it is our destiny!”

The Master’s subjects again erupted into chaos. He had them hanging on every word. “And when you are struggling down in the trenches of domestic work, and other undesirable tasks, remember that those hateful creatures will serve you—will serve us—in the end, adding the strength necessary for our glorious victory. So take heart, my loyal followers. It is clear that those who are with us now greatly outnumber those who are with them. This is due to your diligent and unwavering efforts. Our triumph is inevitable!”

This guy is frothing at the mouth. Nox had stopped staring at the Master. Instead, he was looking from side to side, his fists clenched, his eyes wild. I

instinctively moved to his side and put my hand on his wide shoulder, trying to calm him. He shook me off like I was a bothersome gnat. “You can’t take ‘em all, big fella,” I whispered, but he said nothing in response. A few other neverborns looked our way, but apparently assumed I was trying to discipline my prisoner.

“You, my loyal subjects,” resumed the Master, “will experience an authentic, infinite existence in the flesh—as I have long promised. But our execution of this great plan will not require the augmentation of the mind, nor the forgetting of identity painstakingly forged throughout the eons. No, my friends, you and I will achieve singularity with the physical form in a truly perfect union—one that cannot be severed through the ages of time. We are on the cusp! We are at the door! We will prevail!” The snakes throughout the arena reared their foul heads and hissed in unison, leading the audience in shouts of praise and adoration.

Sounds like a bunch of noise. How long has he been feeding the neverborns this same story? As the thought flashed through my mind, the Master suddenly turned his gaze back toward the collection of prisoners before him. Although I couldn’t be sure, it seemed as though he was staring directly at me—a penetrating, analytical stare filled with venom.

“Now, a parting word to my new friends gathered here front and center: as you can see, our resolve has never been stronger, and our advancements in the war are indisputable.” The Master scanned the prisoners for a moment, and then again met my eyes in a dreadful gaze. “Some of you, certainly ignorant of your previous labors on our behalf, served us well during your time as mortals. Indeed, many of you were instrumental—incrementally of course—in our Great Work.” The crowd roared with approval, almost as if they were rooting for us—for me. “So I ask you at this critical juncture: will you not join with us again in this great effort? You will have a place among us, a place of splendor and glory—a place of power.”

The nerve of this guy. I feel violated.

“We will, of course, give you time to make an informed decision,” added the Master, still staring at me intently, “but the offer will not remain open indefinitely.” He finally removed his eyes and turned his attention to Nox. “Please don’t be offended if we take security measures while you weigh the decision. But you will be treated fairly during the interim.”

Seems unlikely.

The Master finally removed his attention and focused on the congregation as a whole. “To all I say, continue your valiant efforts in the fight for our sacred rights! And diligently continue that fight on both fronts: in the realm of the flesh among the forgetful, and here in the remembered reality. Because soon—very soon—my friends, we, all of us, you and I, every person in this storied hall, will ascend and take the throne. We will ascend and take the throne!”

“He who ascends!” shouted the crowd in response.

“We will ascend and take the throne of power!”

“HE WHO ASCENDS!”

“WE WILL ASCEND!”

13

And then it was over. The Master bowed in prim fashion and disappeared from the stage with a few elegant strides. I scanned the enclave of captors and captive quickly. Sure enough, the neverborns immediately collapsed upon their respective prisoners and began escorting them toward the exit. Syd hissed in my general direction to get my attention, immediately walking to Nox's side as if to guide him along with the others. *Seems like the only available option.* I followed her lead and arrived on the right side of Nox's bulging bicep. One of the neverborns sent us a shooing motion and we took our place in a line of predators and prey. And then we were off, marching through the dark halls of Luxor to a destination unknown.

The nerve of that guy, thanking us like that. The Master's speech rang through my mega-mind with perfect clarity as we clamored through the tunnels. My fits of agitated recollection were occasionally interrupted by a shouting prison guard or a whimpering inmate's plea. But on we went. I noticed the floor beginning to descend as we traveled, the temperature subtly rising. I tried to get Nox's attention by staring sideways at him, but—like me—he seemed to still be fuming from the speech. Despite the lengthy diversion at the amphitheater, I was feeling some confidence. *We were delayed, but everything is still going according to plan.*

"Keep your wits about you," said a neverborn. One of the captives had started moaning as we again descended. The heat continued to intensify, reminding me of the climate in Tom's prison cell.

"You have no right to keep me here!" replied the captive, sharpening the previous murmur into a coherent sentence.

“We have every right,” responded the captor.

It became quiet again as we continued our march downward. *Maybe they’ll lead us right back to Tom. How many dungeons could they have in this place?* Nox and Syd said nothing, keeping their heads low as we moved deeper into elemental Earth. I occasionally looked over my shoulder, making sure Kat was still following. At her side was a neverborn female who seemed entirely unamused about working guard duty.

Great. Some late arrivals. More neverborns to deal with. Three cloaked figures quietly joined the procession from behind, their luminescent faces entirely hidden by hoods. I slowed my pace somewhat to put a bit of distance between us and those ahead, nudging Nox in the side once they were out of earshot.

“You good, big guy?” I asked with a whisper. He still wore a scowl on his typically friendly face.

“Yeah, we good,” he hissed back. “But I gotta start dropping people soon.”

“No kidding,” I said. “I think we’re almost to the Luxorian dungeons, based on the heat down here. It feels about like it did before.”

“Quiet, you two,” interjected Syd. “They’ll hear you.”

We both nodded in agreement, the ground continuing to descend beneath our feet.

14

T*his looks familiar.* After a few more minutes of marching, the long row of prison cells appeared in front of us. Looking up, I saw the tunnel I had traveled during my last adventure, ascending upward into the darkness. *Okay, so I know at least two ways out of here.*

The line stopped abruptly, followed by the clanking of heavy keys on metal. From our place near the back of the procession, I could hear the swinging of gates and the closure of prison cells. *Probably best to act now. The more prisoners outside of cells, the more preoccupied the neverborns.* Obeying the thought, I nudged Nox's side and looked up to confirm his understanding that it was time to begin. But before he could react, I heard one of my many names.

"Groffmite of Ugruk!" came a shout from ahead. As the sound waves echoed off the jagged rocks of the prison house, the guards in front of us stepped aside, creating an open channel between our position and the front of the line. There were two demons standing at the lead, staring at me intently. My perfect eyes instantly recognized them despite the low light. *It's Gorgon and Samus! Perfect.*

They began moving toward me in unison. "That's right," said Samus, "Groffmite the Deceiver. I didn't expect to ever see you again. You were bagged in that night raid. Truly a pity."

"Unfortunate to say the least," added Gorgon, continuing toward me. "But I take great pleasure in seeing you again, Groffmite." Gorgon's added emphasis on my fake name was disconcerting.

“That was a tough night, for sure,” said Samus. They were now just a few feet in front of me, their pace casual. “Strange though—don’t you think, Gorgon?—that the event was broken up as soon as Groffmite here arrived.”

“I agree,” came my response in perfect Luxorian. “But I seem to recall that it was Gorgon who directed us to the party that night. I was just along for the ride.” *Guarantee that’s not going to help me.*

“Your speech betrays you, Groffmite—if that is your real name,” replied Gorgon. “‘Along for the ride’ is a colloquialism singular to mortals.”

Yep. Definitely not helping me. “A figure of speech I picked up during the tedium of domestic work. Forgive me.”

“Enough with the nonsense,” barked Samus, his eyes flashing rage. “Tell us who you really are.”

“His name in the flesh was Garry White. He was an attorney by trade, and an atheist of the first order in later years. His fleshy brain was mangled beyond recognition when he was hit by a train during a moment of inattention. He was then welcomed to the real world by the A.W.C., at which point he changed his name to Atticus and began an unjustified campaign of aggression toward the Host. He has infiltrated our beloved realm in order to kidnap one of our newest friends, Katherine.”

I turned toward the familiar voice. To my left I saw Syd, her face twisted into venomous accusation. She held a rolled parchment in her hand. She continued, pointing her fierce expression at me.

“Atticus of Newfoundland, under the binding legal contract you signed on the night of your near life experience, you are property of the Host!” She unrolled the parchment, which came spilling out toward my feet. “Surrender immediately and you will receive a modicum of mercy.”

15

T*alk about fine print.* “What are you talking about, Syd? I thought you were one of us.” I was still trying to process the now-obvious fact that Syd was a neverborn. *But Dawn was the one who introduced her to me.*

“I was going to leave that hateful welcoming committee soon anyway,” she answered. “I had gathered the intel we needed. But taking you with me—to fulfill your contract—was just too good to resist. So I decided to come home a bit early.”

“Don’t mean nothin’,” said Nox, the first words he had uttered since the Master’s rally. Without hesitation, he cast his pretend shackles to the side and sent his gigantic left fist straight toward Gorgon’s face. The neverborn was sent sprawling, wobbling with disorientation at the surprise blow. Nox approached for the finish, swinging his right fist up and connecting with the demon’s chin. Gorgon collapsed to the ground in a heap.

Samus screamed in rage and ran toward Gorgon’s attacker, but Nox was too quick. A left hook connected with Samus’s face and similarly sent him to the ground in an instant. Nox slowly turned to confront Syd, his body heaving with anger.

“How could you, Syd? We had our times with the A.W.C. Now this?” Nox turned his attention to the line of neverborns spanning the corridor. “You know she hunted y’all, right? You know she put y’all in A.W.C. prisons? You gonna stand for this?”

There is no way they’ll turn on one of their own. From the corner of my eye, I saw Syd dig for something in her pants pocket. Nox saw it too, darting toward her with incredible speed. The contract dropped from her grip

during the struggle, replaced by a small cylinder. *What is that thing?* I instinctively reached toward her to assist Nox in the struggle, but the device in her hand started throbbing with energy. She thrust it into Nox's chest, instantly creating a whole-body gyration and sending him to the ground.

Must be some kind of demon weapon! I engaged the middle toe on my right foot, shooting up toward the cavernous roof. "Prisoners of Luxor!" I yelled at peak volume, "Fight off your attackers and follow me!"

I mustered as much speed as I knew how to summon and flew headfirst into the neverborn captors at the front of the line. I was able to knock a few to the ground, but they were almost instantly back on their feet and brandishing the same weapon Syd had used to dispatch Nox. I was somehow able to dodge the charged tips of their pulsating devices, but more were approaching from what seemed like every angle. And then I heard a shout from behind.

"I'm gonna dunk on every one of you fools!" yelled Nox. He was back on his feet, wrestling and punching and otherwise fighting what seemed like dozens of demons. Unlike my battle cry, his act of violent defiance seemed to ignite the other prisoners to action. Although shackled at the wrists, they began throwing themselves at the various prison guards.

But the distraction left me vulnerable. *Now that's not one bit enjoyable.* My body twisted and contorted at the tip of a demon device. I could still hear the fray, but darkness clouded my vision. Flat on my back, I could feel Luxor's brute squad twisting my arms from underneath my body. *They're trying to get my hands into those bonds!* Now the twisting was voluntary. I knew I'd definitely end up in one of those dungeon cells if I didn't have the use of my arms. But the neverborns just kept kicking, pushing, and pulling.

"Nox!" I screamed. "Help!"

16

I kept up the fight, but my attackers only seemed to multiply, while my awareness of what was happening lessened with each blow. I seemed to be bound in a thicket of darkness and immense pressure. I felt the cold, elemental metal of what I presumed to be handcuffs slipping over my left arm. *About out of tricks here.*

“Get off him!” yelled Nox with rage. And then the demons started to clear like flies at the swat of a hand. The metal of the cuffs was gone, and I felt an orientation to my surroundings return.

This guy’s handy in a fight; that’s for sure. I jumped to my feet and surveyed the scene. The neverborns seemed to have multiplied, and were now coming at Nox from every angle. He frantically tried to beat them off, his guttural scream echoing through the dungeon, but they continued to advance. *My turn to help!*

I ran full speed at a few attackers who were harassing Nox from behind, knocking them to the ground with inertia alone. But my maneuver didn’t do much good. They instantly recovered and turned their aggression toward me—each taking an arm and unnaturally extending it behind my back. I stood helpless, unable to assist as Nox tried to fight off more and more demons.

“Nox! Get out of there!” I yelled as the neverborns dog-piled him, sending him to the bottom of what had to have been a dozen prison guards. But my obvious advice was no help; Nox could not match the strength of so many. I stood there bound, helpless.

“As I was saying,” said Syd, approaching me through a crowd of demons. “You now belong to the Host, as attested by your own hand on a

contract that remains in full force. And, let's be honest, Atticus, you've been assisting with the Great Work for some time now, even before your fleshy brain was ground up on that train track."

"Not intentionally," I shot back. More neverborns were approaching behind Syd. "I thought I was telling people the truth. All I cared about was the truth. There was no evidence!"

"Evidence?" laughed Syd. She was now right in front of me. "And just what 'evidence' did you have that puny, weak, grotesque beings such as mortal men and women were the highest form of life in the wide expanse of the universe? And what 'evidence' did you have that mere chance was the architect of the immeasurable complexity and beauty surrounding you every day of your breathing life? That's right, zero. Yet you taught it as religious truth—for money and a kingdom. The fact is, Atticus, you told them precisely what we told you to say. You were just too blind and too deaf and too stupid to know it. And thus you contributed greatly to our important work against the Enemy."

"I didn't know what I was saying. I didn't know what I know now." *They spoke and I simply repeated—just like that girl Gorgon and Samus were harassing.*

"But what do you really know now, Atticus?" Syd got even closer, her malicious eyes mere inches from mine. "You've simply become a listener all over again. Now you parrot the lies of the A.W.C., and all others who persecute the Host. You are quite the puppet."

Maybe she's right? But these dudes definitely seem evil. "Your tactics lead me to believe that you and the Host, as you call them, are in the wrong."

Syd laughed. "'Tactics,' you mean like raiding the unsuspecting and putting them in cages? Last I checked the A.W.C. is a masterclass on that front. Do you know how many innocents we cast away while I was undercover there? It was sickening."

“Then why torture the living? Why possess their bodies? Why lead them down dark paths? That is horrific behavior.” I twisted and contorted, trying to free my arms from the neverborn thugs on either side, but it was no use. “I’m starting to believe that the Host was responsible for every poor decision in my own life.”

“Don’t oversell it,” said Gorgon, smirking as he approached Syd’s side. “We only suggest. You always make the final determination, Groffmite.”

“As for the living,” added Syd, “they are the sworn enemies of the Host. They persecuted us; they discriminated against us; they expelled us from our homes and sent us here. The war still rages, even if their experiment won’t allow them to remember it. But we are forgiving; all who want to join the Host, even if they were once among the living, are welcome.”

Doesn’t sound like a great offer.

“If you are not interested in joining us,” added Samus, who had also made his way toward the front of the line of demons, “we are happy to have you sit in this dungeon to think about it for a while—maybe a few hundred years.”

Offer sounding better.

“Doesn’t sound like there’s much freedom in that choice, Syd.”

“Hey, um, I have a question.” One of the cloaked people who had joined the procession late had his hand raised. He and the other two hooded figures stood toward the back of the demonic spectators. He spoke in perfect Luxorian.

“What is it?” snapped Gorgon, apparently annoyed by the interruption.

“Sorry, sir. I’m just wondering where I could get some ... snacks.” The man stood silent, not making a move. He then added. “I’m very hungry.”

“Snacks?” asked Samus, incredulous.

“Yeah,” continued the man with a bit more boldness. “Snacks. Something crunchy. Maybe something sugary. Help tide me over until the next meal, you know.”

“We have no such refreshment here,” answered Gorgon.

“Well this place sucks!” yelled the man. He unveiled his hood and stood boldly before dozens of neverborns. “I heard you had some good fare here. But that must have been a lie!”

Syd shook her head in his general direction. “This is your big rescue, Duck? When there is no chance of saving anybody? Great plan.”

He was supposed to come if we were taking too long. It’s definitely been too long. But how can he help us now? He’s just going to get himself captured.

“Oh, Syd. You’re doing the traitor thing? So lame. But I do have a plan. And I’m not alone.”

As the words left his mouth, the two on either side of him threw back their hoods. There stood Dawn and Billy, a fierce glow in their angry eyes.

Oh no. Dawn is here? She’ll be captured too.

“Release our friends and you will be treated fairly,” said Dawn. Her gaze met mine, and she flashed me her signature, confident smile.

“There are four of you,” answered Syd. “Are you just going to lecture us until we submit?”

“Sydney,” answered Dawn, speaking like a mother to a child, “I was so disappointed when you confirmed my suspicions here today. I again ask you to release our friends and let us leave in peace.”

“Or what?” said Gorgon, intervening.

“Or after I leave this pit of despair,” answered Dawn, “I will send an army here to break down the doors and round up every one of you.”

“And you better have snacks the next time we come,” added Duck. But none of the neverborns were laughing.

“Retrieve them,” said Gorgon to the neverborn horde.

At Gorgon’s word, the neverborns immediately collapsed on Dawn, Billy, and Duck. At the same moment, my captors dragged me to the ground and again worked to restrain me with some kind of elemental substance.

This is not going well. They were right to tell me not to come. And now they’ll be trapped here with me!

I fought hard against the demons, but more of them rushed toward me and joined the attack. They flipped me over, grinding my face on the ground and pummeling the back of my head. In addition to the repeated blows, I could feel electroshocks from the neverborn weapons. The hits and spasms kept coming, sending me into a near-unconscious state. I eventually gave up the fight, lying limp through the barrage. The constant attacks registered as pain, but a knowledge of my immortality somehow lessened the intensity.

I can’t believe I talked them into this.

Just as the thought fired across my mind, I heard a muffled shout from behind. Although I couldn’t be sure, it sounded as if Dawn was again warning the neverborns. I used my last bit of energy to turn on my side and

look toward the commotion. Through the beating arms and legs of my attackers, I saw dozens of demons surrounding my A.W.C. friends. There, in the midst of them, Dawn and Billy stood in terrible majesty. There was another shout from Dawn, followed by Billy's strong, commanding voice. His words echoed through the chamber like thunder. But I couldn't make out what was happening, nor understand the context.

As soon as Billy finished roaring like a lion, I saw a blinding white light, brighter than anything I had ever experienced—living or dead. It seemed to emanate from my friends, casting out the darkness and filling the entirety of the Luxorian dungeons with brilliant glory. For a brief moment, I thought that every soul and object would be consumed in lustrous fire.

The pummeling of my attackers instantly stopped and, like snakes, they seemed to slither away at intense speed. I saw Nox stand, engulfed in the light still bursting forth from Dawn and Billy. He was calm, unruffled, and dignified. There was no sign of Syd, Gorgon, or Samus. They had fled without hesitation. Kat stood alone, looking at me with intensity.

She's safe. She's safe.

My mind slipped into oblivion, and for a time I remembered no more.

“Well, at least your face is starting to look normal again,” laughed Duck. He flew alongside me at an incredible speed. “I wondered if you were going to get your nose back.”

“Can that happen?” I asked, genuinely unsure. “I mean, scarring and stuff like that?”

“Of course not,” answered Duck. “Immortality has its perks.”

Yeah, I’m starting to figure that out. “For sure. But it also has its drawbacks.”

“No kidding. The food is garbage. The Ache is real. But you get your face back after a dozen neverborns smear it into the ground.”

“I’m still not sure I understand what happened in Luxor. It’s all a daze.” We flew casually, thousands of feet above the surface. I felt a rush of freedom as the wind blew through my perfect head of hair.

“I told you, dude,” replied Duck, still sneering at me, “we carried you out of there at warp speed after the nevers split. You don’t weigh much, you know.” He rotated so that his back was toward the ground, cradled his head with his hands, and stared into the sky as we continued flying. “How’s Kat doing with everything? She was down in that demon hole for a while.”

“I don’t know. I’m supposed to meet her for milkshakes later. She’s been pretty quiet ever since she came back.”

“I’m still shocked she’s not a neverborn. I guess I’m not always right ... yet.”

But Syd was a neverborn, and she was hiding out under our noses.

Duck rotated back so that his stomach was facing the ground, but he still kept his hands behind his head. “Wonder what we’ll get today at the pods,” he mused out loud. “Hopefully this lady doesn’t pop.”

“I still don’t understand how we got out of there, Duck,” I said, ignoring his attempt to change the subject to our incoming atheist. “You keep skipping the key information.”

“I told you. We picked you up and carried you out. Not complicated.”

He’s purposely being difficult. “No, Duck. I’m talking about the blinding white light that suddenly shot out from your general vicinity. And I’m talking about why the neverborns took off when they outnumbered us 20 to 1.”

“Oh,” answered Duck, snickering. “Well then be more specific next time.”

He still didn’t answer, stretching out his arms and slowly flapping them like a bird.

Still being difficult. “So, are you going to tell me?”

“I think you’ll need to discuss that with Dawn. I had nothing to do with it. I was just along for the ride.” He pointed his finger forward and again changed the subject. “The pods are just up ahead. Let’s set down in the usual spot.”

He’s really not going to tell me. Fine. I’ll ask Dawn.

We landed behind thick foliage, but the pods were still empty.

“Guess we’re early,” said Duck, lying down in the thick, glowing grass. We sat in silence for a time, but there was no sign of Dawn or a recently deceased atheist. Duck suddenly sat up. “You know, you’re pretty stupid, Atticus.”

“That realization has been coming for a while now, but I appreciate you putting a fine point on it.”

“You’re all worried about how you escaped Luxor, but you’re not thinking about how you’re going to escape next time.”

“Next time? I don’t intend for there to be a next time.”

“Eternity lasts a minute, Atticus. Of course there will be a next time. And you signed a contract, apparently pledging your everlasting soul to the Host.” Duck shook his head in exaggerated disgust. “I can’t believe a trained lawyer wouldn’t read every word of a contract. A blight on the profession, if you ask me.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot about that. You really think it’s going to matter? I obviously didn’t sign up to be their slave intentionally.”

Duck snorted. “You think they care about fairness, or intent? Nice one, dude.”

“So, what am I supposed to do? It’s signed. Syd has the original copy. So that’s that. I’ll just have to do my best not to get captured again.”

“Or, you could just tear up the contract and never think about it again.”

“Good plan, except Syd has it, remember?”

“Sure about that?” Duck shifted on the ground, jamming his right hand into the front pocket of his faded jeans. Out came an old parchment, all folded and bent. He threw it at me and repositioned himself on the grass.

I hurriedly grabbed the document and unfolded it. Sure enough, it was the contract I had signed on the night of my near life experience.

“Nice work, Duck!” I said, reviewing the signature to ensure it was the original. “How did you get this?”

“Syd must have dropped it during the Battle of Luxor back there. I snatched it off the ground and absconded with it.”

“Awesome. Thanks!”

“As usual, it is my great pleasure to assist you,” answered Duck, his eyes closed as he basked in the sunlight of the meadow. “I am, after all, your faithful mentor. So shred it, and let’s be done with this nonsense.”

No argument here. I tore the parchment with ease, taking special care to destroy the signature line beyond all recognition.

“But I do have one lingering question,” I said, once the job was complete.

“What’s that?”

“Do you think the neverborns made a copy?”

Duck answered without opening his eyes. “Maybe.”

“**Y**eah, no worries.” Duck tapped his right ear as he spoke. “I’ll send him over.” He stood up from his comfortable spot in the meadow and stretched his arms toward the sky. “Dawn says our newbie dead was re-assigned to a different welcoming committee. She must have been convinced right there at the end; it happens sometimes. But Dawn still wants to talk to you.”

Great. She’s probably going to tell me what an idiot I am. “Am I going to get fired from the A.W.C.?”

“Probably.”

I made the short walk to the pods and there was Dawn, waiting for me just like she was on the day of my mortal death. She still wore that caring smile from our first encounter.

“Atticus. What a pleasure to see you again. Please sit down.”

“Good to see you, Dawn,” I said with some awkwardness. *I can never tell what she’s really thinking. She just always seems so pleasant.*

“You appear to be recovering well from your injuries, at least on the outside. But how’s your mental state?”

“You know me, always a bit unsure of something. Always a bit skeptical of what’s happening around me. I’ll get over it.”

“Don’t I know it,” she laughed. “You’re a natural skeptic. But that’s just fine. It keeps you on your toes, which will serve you well in this job.” She shifted in her seat, leaning forward and lowering her voice. “On that topic, I’ve discovered something fascinating about you, Atticus.”

“Oh, have you now?” I shook my head, waiting for some kind of barbed observation.

“Although you are wary of any sort of absolute truth, once you find it—or think you have found it—you will defend it at all costs.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“It is a compliment, my dear friend. Just make sure you are defending the actual truth as you move forward. No more myths and fables from that cult of nothing you were raised up to back in your mortal days.”

Myths and fables. Sounds about right. “I’m reformed. I promise.”

“Good, my boy. Now let’s get to the business of the day. I summoned you here to share some news.”

“So, you are firing me?”

“Of course not. I’ve never been more pleased with you. You’re everything I hoped you would be. No, Atticus, the change is organizational. Billy and I are leaving the A.W.C. It’s been a marvelous run, but we have been called elsewhere.”

Called? “Where are you going? And what about the A.W.C.?”

“The A.W.C. will be just fine. We’ll need a few new recruits of course, to keep it fully staffed, but that shouldn’t be a problem. Atheists are waking up to reality every day in the World of the Dead. It’s a marvel. And you are part of it!”

“But you’re the boss. Who’s going to be in charge?”

“Oh, Duck will be taking my place, of course. I thought that was obvious.”

This welcoming committee is about to get a lot more sarcastic. “Yeah, I guess he is the obvious choice.”

“I knew we had a leak, and long suspected it was Syd. But I had to be absolutely sure. And now that we’ve got that buttoned up, it’s time to depart. Billy and I will be going to a ... different section within the World of the Dead.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means just what I said, Atticus. You’ve been here long enough to know that this world has many inhabitants. And birds of a feather flock together, as the old saying goes. So off we go, to assist as best we can in a new place. We will miss all of you dearly.”

“You’re being extremely vague,” I said, raising an eyebrow. “What are you hiding from me?”

“There’s that wariness I love so much,” she clapped her hands silently and rocked back in her pod. “I’ll say it this way: there are many fronts in our struggle against the Host. Billy and I have been asked to oversee a separate mission. That’s all I can reveal at the present. Someday I will share more.”

That’s all I’m getting on this one. So be it.

“Will Duck still be my mentor, when he takes over, I mean?”

“What silliness. Of course not. He’s taking my place, Atticus. And you’re taking his. We need you mentoring atheists going forward. There is much work to be done, and you—of all people—are perfectly suited to it.”

“Well, if that’s the case, I have some questions.” *Man, do I have a lot of questions.*

“I suspected as much,” answered Dawn, still wearing her reassuring smile. “You always seem to have a lot of questions. It’s one of the things I like about you. But let’s get to it. I have to clean out my office, you know.”

“If you’re really expecting me to be a mentor, I feel like I need to know a lot more about our enemy. During the operation in Luxor, we heard a man the neverborns called ‘the Master’ give a speech. It was like some kind of wartime rally. Who is that guy?”

Dawn looked at me intently, her typical joviality instantly gone. “Nox told me about that. Quite a shocking development. He is exactly who they said he is. He is the master of the neverborns. He was the great instigator of this conflict, which has raged on for untold millennia.”

“He spent a lot of time talking about how the war started, saying that his enemy had discriminated against his people, expelled them from their home, and so on.”

Dawn nodded with understanding. “The common talking points of the neverborns, Atticus. The reality of it is that this Master sought ultimate power—all power—at the expense of everyone else. It was his notion that, rather than allowing us our freedom, he would take it all for himself. He secretly cared nothing for his people; he only sought the throne. He gained quite a following, promising power and progression through servitude, but of course he could never deliver. He, along with his rabid followers, were eventually rooted out. That was the first phase of the war. So we remain the

object of his scorn to this day. He blames us for all the neverborns' pretended woes. And that is why they attack the living, and the dead."

"He spoke of us, those of us who have lived, as undergoing some great 'experiment.' He called it foolish, since we allegedly 'lost' our memories in the process. I heard the same thing from a woman in Luxor during my first visit. What are they talking about?" *I certainly can't remember anything from before the womb.*

Dawn's smile returned as she leaned back in her pod. "They speak of our decision to undergo mortality—our decision to take on the flesh."

"Our decision?"

"Of course, our decision—you and me, and everyone else who has lived, and breathed, and died. You see, the neverborns—by their instigation of a war—rejected the opportunity to experience the physical. But the majority of us willfully chose to partake."

"And lose our memories?"

"For a time, yes."

This makes no sense. "Why would anyone choose to lose their identity?"

"To find a much greater identity, Atticus. And to enjoy a much higher plane of existence." She paused and looked at me as a parent looks at a child. "The physical brings humanity to the ultimate state of being. And for that opportunity, we were willing to forego our infinite recollection, at least temporarily."

"I'm sorry. I'm not getting it."

"Think of it this way," she continued slowly, "you have no doubt experienced the hollowness of this state of being, correct? Some refer to it as 'the Ache.'"

"Of course. The food is terrible. They can't even get milkshakes right."

“Well, don’t just think with your old stomach, Atticus. There are numerous sensations, opportunities, and powers you had in the flesh which are no longer available to you.”

Definitely. That’s why near life experiences are offered by the neverborns.
 “True. But that’s all gone. I left the physical back on that train track. So what was the point of it all?”

“That’s my boy!” said Dawn, raising her voice. She had a look of excitement in her perfect eyes. “You are coming to the crux of the situation: what the neverborns fail to mention in their diatribes is that those of us who have lived have only completed one phase of our advancement. There is another yet to come.”

Another?

“Yes, another,” said Dawn, as if she had read my mind. “You will one day reunite with the flesh and your memories—all of them. And this second phase of physical existence will greatly differ from the first: you will never again be subject to death, or illness, or pain. All the perfections and abilities you experience in this world will also be available in the physical dimension. Imagine your best day in mortality and multiply it a thousand-fold.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Now that’s a question we don’t have time for, but one I’m definitely willing to answer at a later date.”

Convenient. “Well, what proof do you have of it? What evidence? How can I tell if you’re right?”

“For now, you’re just going to have to believe me, Atticus.”

“That’s not very satisfying, Dawn.”

“And yet, entirely necessary at this juncture.”

She’s really in that big of a hurry? Or does she mean something else? “Well, do you have time for one more question?”

“Very much,” she answered, sitting up in her chair and straightening her clothes. “I think I know what you’re going to ask me.”

“That moment in Luxor—when you and Billy shined that light and the neverborns scattered—how did you do that?”

“Exactly. That’s the right question, Atticus. And I’m happy to provide some information on that front. What you saw was the manifestation of a power that the neverborns do not possess—one they can never possess. Of course, they have their little trinkets and cages, their counterfeits and addictions, and they certainly have the very potent strategy of persuasion through lies and half-truths. But what you heard and saw represents a power altogether unavailable to them.”

“What is it?” *Not something you buy at the store, I would imagine.*

“Something deeper, more fundamental. Something their master has sought since the outbreak of the war, but will never attain.”

“Does that mean that you and Billy are the ‘enemy’ he spoke of during his speech to the neverborns?”

“Oh, not by a longshot,” laughed Dawn. “Don’t be so quick to promote us to that exalted state. We just do our best to serve well, Atticus. That is all.”

“When you say you serve, are you talking about....” *I’ve been avoiding this question since I died, which is ironic, since I’m a member of the Atheist*

Welcoming Committee. “Are you talking about God? Is there a God, Dawn?”

Dawn seemed to beam at me in response, the light of her face brilliant in the meadow. “I wondered when you were going to get around to asking me that critical question. I’m glad we are finally at this moment. Before I answer, I’d like to know what you think, Atticus. But I promise I will answer this most important question.”

Of course she’s going to keep me in suspense. After thinking the question over, I answered. “I spent more than half my mortal life convinced there was no such thing as God. I packaged up all the misery and pain I had experienced—much of it due to my own selfish decisions—and used it as proof that I was right. And I trained others to believe in an eternal void, the same as I did. But now it seems clear there is something more, something greater.”

“And of course you’re right, my friend. Divinity is real. And you and I—and every soul alive, dead, or neverborn—are creations of the Creator.”

“How can I know for certain? Can I see with my own eyes?”

“Oh, Atticus. Always the skeptic. But you already have seen Him. Recall your first moments after departing the flesh. Do you recall the light, the warmth? You were experiencing His presence for the first time in an age. You may have chosen not to believe in Him, Atticus. But He never stopped believing in you. It was He that sent you to the Atheist Welcoming Committee. It was He that determined you best belonged with us.”

“Don’t be mad at me, Atticus. I’m just going to give it to you straight.” Kat sat across from me at Bertha’s Burger Shack, a plate of almost entirely uneaten fries before her. “I’m going back to Luxor.”

Is she insane? “What are you talking about? Don’t you remember that whole locking you in a prison thing?”

“And look,” she continued, completely ignoring my protest, “I super appreciate everything you did to go there and try to help me. I really didn’t want your help though, and you had no way of knowing that. The truth is, that’s where I belong.”

How can this possibly be happening? “But Kat, you know what they’re like. You heard their Master’s speech. You know what they do to the living. I’ve seen it with my own eyes. They torture people. They probably did it to you before you died. I’m convinced they did it to me.”

Kat pushed her food away in disgust. “I did hear the Master, and he invited us—all of us—to join them. And frankly, I believe him and everybody else I met there when they say they’re being treated like second-class citizens. They’ve been forced underground; they’re outnumbered; and all they want is to live free. Why is that such a bad thing?”

“Kat, I’ve seen what they do with my own eyes. It’s diabolical.”

“Well, they’ve told me what your A.W.C. does, and a bunch of other committees and agencies and blah blah blah. They are being hunted. They just want to be left alone.”

“What about all the people they’re victimizing? Don’t you care about them?” *How is this even a conversation?*

"I'm seeing it on both sides, Atticus. And frankly, I think they have a lot more to offer someone like me."

"Someone like you? What does that mean?"

"I can't handle this crap," she explained in exasperation, gesturing toward the fries. "It's just not real. It's all fake, hollow, empty. I need something more real. And I'm not just talking about food. It's everything! I need to feel in order to live. And they can offer it. Nobody here can. You think I'm worried about being in a prison in Luxor? Not even close. I'm already in a bondage of the mind here. So I'm leaving."

"What did they do to you down there, Kat?" *She must have done some near-life experiences. And now she can't live without it. Only explanation.*

"It's not what they did to me. It's what they showed me. Your life, Atticus—everyone's lives in this place—they're just empty and bare. And all your work, all your status with the A.W.C. or whatever, it means nothing to me." Her voice was raised. Many of the newly-dead at Bertha's were looking in our direction with concern.

"Hey, calm down. Just breathe. Think about what you're saying. Think about what you're about to do here."

"That's just it. I can't breathe in this place. There's nothing to breathe. It's all a void. All of it!" She stood up from her chair and looked at me one last time. "You can't understand my mind, Atticus. You can try, with all your education and experience. But you'll just never understand." She turned to leave and took a few steps. Without turning to face me again, she said: "I really do appreciate what you did for me." With that she was gone.

And I haven't seen her since.

“That’s tough, Attic,” said Nox, trying to console me somewhere in the bowels of the A.W.C. “But that’s how it goes, man. They got they tricks, and the nevers know how to use ‘em. Who knows, maybe she’ll snap out of it someday. All you got is hope now.”

Hope. “Not much, I’m afraid.”

“You thinkin’ like you still alive, Attic. But you gotta think like the dead. Things go on a long time up in here. Ain’t no end to any of it. That’s a long time to figure things out. Maybe she’ll come around, especially when she sees some of the stuff me and you have seen. You never know.”

I’ve definitely seen some stuff—certainly more than I ever expected. “How am I supposed to mentor newbie deads, when I can’t even convince a friend that neverborns are evil? That’s one of the big three rules for dead atheists. I’m apparently not very persuasive, not anymore anyway.”

“Everybody gotta choice, Attic. You can’t do nothin’ about that one. All you can do is try to tell ‘em what you know. The rest is up to them.”

“Yeah, I guess. But I just don’t get it. And Tom! He must still be down there somewhere. I never had a chance to save him!” *This operation was a total failure.*

“Nah, man. He good. There wasn’t nobody in any of them cells. Not a soul. I looked in every one of ‘em. He musta got out on his own.”

I hope he’s right. But how can I prove it? “Maybe, or maybe he’s being tortured down there as we speak.”

“You gotta chill, man. From what you said, this Tommy guy seemed like a smart dude. They woulda propped him up in front of their master, if he’d still been there. Guaranteed.” Nox stood up from his seat and beckoned me

to follow. “But enough of this. Right now, me and the newest A.W.C. mentor, Attic the Manic, we goin’ to get a few scoops of ice cream. ‘Cause that’s how we gonna celebrate today.” I nodded my head in silent agreement and followed Nox. We flew up the empty elevator shaft corridor and were out on the street in no time.

“You and me, man, we gonna have our times with these nevers. It’s gonna be a party. You just watch, bro.”

I wish I had his confidence. We walked in silence for a time, taking in the hustle and bustle of Newfoundland. Nox then broke the silence.

“You ever dunked anything, Attic—when you was alive I mean?”

“Dunked? As in, ‘dunked’ a basketball?” *I don’t think he understands that I wasn’t always the strapping Ken doll I am now.*

“Yeah, man. You ever dunked?” Nox walked with additional swagger as he asked me the question.

“No, Nox. I’ve never dunked anything. I was too short; I couldn’t jump high enough; and my hands weren’t big enough to palm a basketball.”

“Ah, man,” laughed Nox, patting me on the back as we walked down the street. “That’s rough, Attic. That’s rough. You know what, sometimes you just gotta dunk in this world. And I’m gonna teach you how to dunk.”

“You’re going to teach me?” *I haven’t seen a basketball hoop since the train wreck.*

“Yeah, man. I’m gonna teach you how to dunk on those neverborn fools. We gonna be dunkin’ on them every day. ‘Cause sometimes, you just gotta dunk.”

“Welcome to the World of the Dead. I’m Atticus.” *There’s a first time for everything. Let’s see how this goes.* My newbie dead stared at me silently, as if he couldn’t understand a word I had just said. “What’s your name?” I asked, trying to break the awkward silence.

“Me?”

Who else would I be talking to? Duck had already left the meadow of the pods, so it was just the two of us. “Yeah, what’s your name?”

“I’m Carl.”

“Nice to meet you, Carl. And welcome to the World of the Dead. You understand that you’re very much dead, right?” *The moment of truth.*

He didn’t respond. He just stared at me as if I was some kind of apparition. No answer was forthcoming, so I tried again.

“Carl, do you understand that you’re dead?”

He continued to stare at me in silence for a time, but after a subtle shake of the head finally responded. “That’s what the other man—his name was ‘Duck’ I think?—that’s what he told me. Difficult to understand, frankly.”

“Tell me about it,” I said, revealing a smile. “I had a hard time believing it when I first arrived here. That’s for sure.”

“So, you’re dead too?”

“Very much so. My brain matter was strung across a train track a while back. Wasn’t a bit of fun, but I didn’t have very much pain.” *Let’s see if I can get him to come with me a little further.* “How did you die, Carl?”

“I always wanted to believe in an afterlife,” answered Carl absentmindedly.

Not quite what I asked him.

“But I just never had any evidence to support it. I always preferred the hard truth over any kind of comforting fantasy. I just assumed the thought of any sort of continuance was just a survival instinct, brought on by the fearful mind of man.”

Yeah, I’ve been there. “And are you comfortable now?”

He continued to ignore my questions, speaking in soliloquy. “I was just looking for hard scientific truths, you see. I wanted data, not anecdotes.” And then his demeanor changed in an instant. He became wild-eyed. He grabbed me by the shoulders and started to scream. “What have I done?”

Okay. This is getting weird.

“What have I done?” he repeated. He released me from his grip, placing his glowing hands over his face. “I told them it was all a fantasy. My wife. My friends. My colleagues. Everyone! They trusted me as a scientist. I told them it was all a lie!” His screams filled the meadow, echoing off the trees and reverberating over the lake.

This dude’s going to pop. Better do something quick. “Hey,” I said with sternness. “Knock it off and pull yourself together!” He continued to wail, rolling on the ground and ugly-crying in a pathetic scene. “Carl!” I yelled again, mustering as much force as I knew how. “Stop acting like a child and start taking it like a man.” He blubbered and snuffled for another minute or so, but seemed to regain control of his senses. “Now I asked you before,” I began, still stern, but speaking at a lower volume, “how you died, but you never answered me. I’d like an answer now, Carl. How did you die?”

He wiped his eyes and looked up at me, an almost childlike expression on his face. “I had cancer. And I fought it like mad for years. In the end, I contracted pneumonia and, apparently, died. I faced it all with as much courage as I could muster, never seeking any kind of refuge in illusions.” His

eyes began again to water as he concluded. “And then I told my wife goodbye, confident I would never see her again. And now I’m here.”

“Welcome to the World of the Dead, Carl,” I said, replacing my boldness with as much tenderness as I could muster. I reached out my hand and lifted him off the ground. “I’m your mentor. I’m going to help you get situated for the next while.”

“It’s a cute story,” said Duck with his typical barbed sarcasm. “I’m sure I would have teared up if I had been there, too.”

“Don’t you have a heart?” I asked, shaking my head at him. “He felt insane remorse for what had happened before he died. It was genuine.”

“Yes, that’s what I said. Very touching.” He smirked as he looked through various paper piles spread out on his new desk in the A.W.C. “But just don’t let him get gobbled up by the neverborns. They’re going to be after that dude. He was some big science guy in the world of the idiots. So they are going to want him on their side. Make no mistake. They love celebrities almost as much as their fellow demons in those pits of hell they occupy.”

“Yes, bossman. I got Nox working surveillance over there. He’s already had to drop a few of the more eager members of the Host. But I’m really doubting he’s going to fall for any of their nonsense. He seems to have almost instantly reformed. He’s a smart dude.”

Duck stopped his paper shuffling and looked at me intently. “If only everyone could come around so quickly, Atticus.”

Yeah, point taken.

“How long did it take you to ‘come around,’ as you put it, oh Duck the Great?”

He threw down the pile of papers and looked toward the ceiling wistfully. “It’s a story for the ages, Atticus. There I was, a newbie dead, thoroughly convinced of the nothingness of the universe. Dawn just kept smiling at me and telling me—in her nice way of course—how stupid I was for not believing her. Frankly, I just told myself I was still wasted. But that

stopped making sense after three or four days. And then I converted. It's pretty compelling stuff. Maybe I should write a novel about it."

"Not a bad idea," I laughed. "'How I Figured Out I was an Idiot,' by Duck. It's got a certain ring to it, that's for sure."

"Catchy pen name alone would make it a bestseller."

Catchy name is right. "By the way, you never did tell me how you got that name. You said there was some great story to it."

"Did I? That's funny." He went back to his paper shuffling, clearly not interested in continuing the conversation.

He's going to make me beg. "Come on. Tell me the story. If we're going to be working together for who knows how long, I think I have a right to know."

He laughed to himself and again gave me his attention. "When I was a kid, I learned how to do the Donald Duck voice. You know, the duck from the old Disney cartoons? I would just constantly talk like him to my parents, at school, with my friends, all the time. I thought it was especially funny to wax profane in the Donald Duck voice. And then everyone started calling me Duck, and it stuck. When I died, I figured Duck was a way more interesting name than Tyler. But I've kind of stopped doing the voice thing. Guess I grew out of it. Maybe I should start it up again." He leaned back in his chair as he finished the story, placing his hands behind his head.

"That's it?" I asked with surprise. "That's the big story of your name?"

"Yeah, basically."

Epilogue

“Hey, boys,” I said, entering the living room my two sons seemed to inhabit nonstop on the weekends. “You’re both looking great.” They never faltered from their screens: one stared at the television, while the other was fixed on a handheld. *I’m not even sure they could hear me if I was still alive.*

We sat in silence for a while. Their mother came and went, tidying and vacuuming and giving them ignored commands from time to time. The scene was entirely mundane, but it was captivating as always. *If only I’d been a bit more attentive, maybe we wouldn’t be in this situation right now. Maybe we’d all be together.* ‘The Ache,’ at least as I understood it, was never greater for me than these Saturday visits to my family.

And then a dead woman slid into the room without a sound. She wore a plaid dress with a muted red sheen. Not acknowledging me in the least, she walked toward my boys and whispered softly to them. Although I was getting used to it at this point, I was struck by her radiance. *Who is this lady? No way she’s a neverborn.* She reminded me of Dawn.

I continued to watch her over the next few minutes as she communicated—one-way of course—with the boys. Her face was somewhat shielded by her dark brown hair, which swooped down over her shoulders in a perfect curl. Eventually, she finished talking with the boys and looked at me directly. I instantly knew who she was.

“Mom?” *Can that be her? She looks so ... young. And healthy.* “Mom, is that you?”

“Good morning, Garry. It’s good to finally see you again.” She carefully approached me, and then gave me a warm embrace.

“Mom, where have you been? I didn’t know how to find you.”

“I’ve been here, and there, and in other places. You know how it goes. I visit your family all the time. Once I learned of your passing, I figured I would see you soon enough. And here you are.”

“But why didn’t you come earlier? Why didn’t you come when I died?”

She smiled at me softly. “Well, I actually didn’t know you had died for a time. In some cases, the next of kin are notified immediately—sometimes even before the passing. In your case, it appears the decision was made to get you a bit ... acclimated before I saw you. But that doesn’t matter. We’re together now. And you look wonderful, Garry. How are you?”

“I’m doing great. The Atheist Welcoming Committee has taken good care of me. They actually made me a mentor for the newly dead, but I’m not sure I’m ready for it. I’ve still got so many questions, and so much to learn.”

She sent me a knowing smile. “Oh, Garry. You always had so many questions. Don’t worry; you’ll get everything figured out. No one’s perfect, son—at least not here. But we keep getting better. Just keep getting better.”

*Death shall not destroy my comfort
 Christ shall guide me through the gloom
 Down, He'll send some Heav'nly convoy
 To escort my spirit home*

*Oh, hallelujah! How I love my Savior!
 Oh, hallelujah! That I do
 Oh, hallelujah! How I love my Savior!
 Mourners, you may love Him too*

*Jordan's stream shall not o'erflow me
 While my Savior's by my side
 Canaan, Canaan lies before me!
 Soon I'll cross the swelling tide*

*Oh, hallelujah! How I love my Savior!
 Oh, hallelujah! That I do
 Oh, hallelujah! How I love my Savior!
 Mourners, you may love Him too*

*See the happy spirits waiting
 On the banks beyond the stream!
 Sweet responses still repeating
 "Jesus! Jesus!" Is their theme*

*Oh, hallelujah! How I love my Savior!
 Oh, hallelujah! That I do
 Hallelujah! How I love my Savior!
 Mourners, you may love Him too*

THE ATHEIST WELCOMING COMMITTEE

Oh, hallelujah! How I love my Savior!

Oh, hallelujah! That I do

Oh, hallelujah! How I love my Savior!

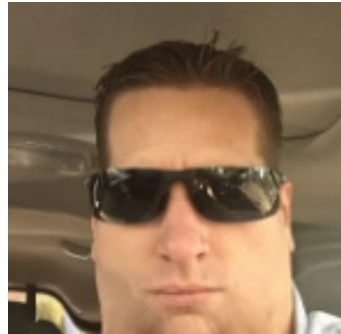
Mourners, you may love Him too

End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mort Gloss

Raised in the picturesque comforts of southern Idaho, Mort Gloss developed an enduring fascination for intergalactic warfare, evolving concepts of socially acceptable body image, chance vs. design hypotheses concerning the origin of the universe, atheists in the afterlife, has-been heavy metal bands, and fast food tacos.



When not writing about idiot superheroes, Mort works as a regulatory attorney. He loves his wife, his kids, and store-bought cookies. Contact him at mort.gloss@gmail.com.

BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

Antihooliganism

Balloon has always been a morbidly obese moron. But recently, something about his feeble brain has changed. Every time he guesses, he's right. Victory, the girl he's been crushing on for over ten years, needs his abilities to save her dying father. Desperate for her affection, Balloon agrees to help. There's only one catch: the cure is over 29 million light years away, perched on a pedestal at the center of the Sombrero Galaxy.

Transforming his single-wide trailer into a white trash spaceship, Balloon races to save Victory's father. Along the way, he encounters an alien regime bent on his annihilation, and a few new friends who feed him tacos.

Cosmic Dice

Balloon may have a ball of power, but he's lost his beloved dream girl to intergalactic bandits. And it's going to take more than guesses and a souped-up single-wide trailer to get her back. Enlisting the help of a few alien scoundrels, Balloon and his pals travel through space and time to rescue Victory, eat tacos, and solve the ultimate mysteries of the cosmos.

Certain Death

Two civilizations are on the verge of total extinction. One of the greatest classic rockers of all time is dead. And Victory stole the ball of power and

gave it to some jerk. Balloon has a lot on his simple mind. To overcome the ultimate evils of the universe, he and his pals will fight bandits, slurp tacos from a tube, play lord protector, and come face to face with certain death.