



The
Fabulous
Gays

Volume 1
x
Archer

M. Kirin

THE FABULOUS GAYS, VOLUME 1.

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To Kitty, my anchor in the storm.



O

Have you been tired recently?

No, I don't mean *so tired* that you had to skip a day of school, or had to go to the doctor, or anything like that. I'm talking about a different tiredness. Have you ever stopped doing something that was fun to you? *Really fun*? Like, you got up one day and realized that it just wasn't fun anymore? That's the feeling I'm talking about. This exhaustion that afflicts only one portion of your being. Have you felt it? Have you stopped doing something you used to do with glee? Of course you have, and that's okay.

There's no reason to be alarmed. It's all part of the psychic link. *Everything's okay*. You have done this before, often without realizing it. At this moment—yes, right at this very instant—you are hearing my voice. You do not even know my name, and yet you hear what I sound like in your head. You can hear me, the pauses in my voice, and the way, the curious way, in which I enunciate certain *words*. People tell me I have a bit of an accent, though I didn't believe them for a time. How could I? I'd always lived inside my own head, like a little critter in a cage, spinning my wheels silly. At least now I can see outside of my own head and let others see inside of mine. Hence why we're here, inside this place, inside me.

It's not a cage anymore.

The walls are covered with plush drapes as blue as the sky will never be. The floor is covered in a rough carpet. It is well-trodden, though the chessboard pattern remains crisp. The only source of light in here are the LED strips framing the floor like a runway. The lights burn blue, and you can't look at them for long before they begin to hurt your eyes. The ceiling of the room is slanted, higher as you walk deeper. At the very end of the room, there's a wide screen. It's not a computer screen, or a television screen,

but a *movie screen*. On the other end of the room, opposite to the screen in question, there is a little window. Through the glass, you can see the mechanical workings of a chrome contraption. Back at the center of the room, there's a handful of seats: one row of six and another row of seven. Your seat is in the front row, right at the center, right next to mine.

The seat is plush. You feel it envelop your body like a warm blanket. The armrests are at the perfect height, and the material on them is perfectly soft too. It's that softness present in stuffed animals made for babies. You brush the tips of your fingers across the fabric, and its impossible softness reminds you of the past. There was a time when we were allowed to be weak, afraid, and in need of help. There was a time when we were allowed to cry if we were in pain, if we were scared, or if we needed affection. There was a time when plushies were impossibly soft, and we were allowed to ask our imaginary friends for advice. Once we become adults, we're told softness is a weakness and that needing help is wrong. And so, we shut up and suffer in silence, because that's what's expected of us. We learn that the easiest way to live is by not inconveniencing anyone with our stupid feelings.

Of course, this is untrue.

Softness is not weakness.

Needing help is not wrong.

I will show you.

The lights are beginning to dim. There's a paper bucket on your lap filled to the brim with popcorn. The blue light all around the room is reflected on the surface of each, buttery kernel. You know what these taste like without even putting them in your mouth. They're soft and tender, their taste envelops your palette and lingers right at the back of your tongue. So buttery and salty. There's a soft drink in your arm rest. It's a big one. *We might have to share.* I got the flavor you like, and it's real fizzy. Here, put your ear close to the straw. Can't you hear the bubbles rising to the surface? They go *pop, pop, pop.* It's so fizzy and it tastes great. It's perfect for washing down the buttery goodness of the popcorn. Is your mouth watering at the thought of combining both treats? Yes. *Yes,* the calibration is almost complete.

The lights dim. The room grows dark. The projector begins to spin, light pours out through the little window. It's almost time...

What's that?

Oh, you need not worry about me.

I'm a friend.

You already know what I look like and what I sound like, though I guess you want a name. You won't know who I am for a while, but for now, you may call me *PAGES*. And no, this is not my story. I am not the main character; I am not even a member of the supporting cast. In time, I will fill my role, take my seat at the end of the table, but for now, you and I share more than just this psychic link. We are witnesses.

The impossible blue is gone. In this room, there is only darkness and the perfectly geometric rectangle at the far end. The movie screen shines like the midday sun. There will be no trailers today; it looks like we're jumping straight into the good part. Get comfortable. Enjoy your snacks and that fizzy drink.

I'll be here, right beside you. I'm the little bug in your ear telling you what *really* happened. And how all of this began...



1

It was the first Monday, and the first workday, of a brand-new year. There was a chill in the air, and the slightest haze from the many fireworks that ignited the sky over the weekend. This was no city, though our network of small towns was by no means sleepy. There was motion all around. There were people going to work. There were shops opening for the first time all year. And there were lots, and lots, of hungover people making their way back home. There was one very special hungover person walking down Main Street on that morning. This

person was not me. As I told you before, I am not the main character of this story. Though for a long time I was but a mere witness, my journey began on that first morning of that long and fabulous year.

I was supposed to be working, but how could anyone get any serious work done on a Monday? Let alone the *first* Monday of the New Year? There was this infectious energy in the air. This sense that new things were afoot. And even I—someone who dreaded the idea of New Year’s resolutions—still felt this pang at the pit of my stomach. Not even all the cynicism of my short life could keep the foundations of my being from trembling at the thought...

“Maybe this will be the year everything changes.”

Of course, I didn’t believe it. I didn’t believe in change. I thought people couldn’t change. If you were bad, you were stuck being bad. If you were good, you were probably just faking it. I lived in a black and white world; a chessboard full of pawns in a rat race to become queens. I was young, but I felt old, ancient. The pillars of my person felt worn out, like the ruins of some underwater civilization. I had walked myself into a literal and metaphorical corner. I worked a dead-end job at a crumbling accounting office. There were a thousand

things I hated about my cubicle on the second floor, but at least there was one saving grace: *I had a window*. I had this small window made of four panels, like a perfectly symmetrical comic strip. Whenever I got bored at work, or found the thoughts in my head inspiring darker motives, I would part the dirty blinds and...

I would stare at the pink house across the street.

It looked normal enough, save for the paint job. In truth, that home was a relic of a time when Socorro was just a tiny village on the edge of the Californian coast. It had been two hundred years since our town's founding, and time had done what it always did: it changed things. In the course of the last hundred years, homes like that pink one had been built, lived in, sold, bought, passed from generation to generation, renovated, rented, and more. Isn't that odd? Have you ever thought about how those houses, those foundations, have been the stage for countless stories? Before you moved into that room, someone else lived there. Someone else suffered there, in silence. I thought about this all the time. Deep down, at the bottom of my conscious, this was one of the many thoughts solidifying at my feet like a set of concrete shoes. They sunk me deeper into the spiral. I was terrified of the

thought that, someday, someone else will live in my apartment, and those four walls will become someone else's home. Just like that house. That pink house across the street, right across my window. It had once been someone's home, but now it was someone else's. Thinking about it, I felt my lungs running out of air, but nonetheless I kept staring. Even if it hurt, I would look through my window and see what the strange people living there were up to.

The house was number 121 Golondrina Street. It was right off Main, though if you wanted to find it, you wouldn't need a map. You just had to look for the pink house. It had always been pink. Sometimes the pink was lighter, bordering on white. Other times it was warmer in hue, or cooler. No matter the time or the season, that house was always pink. At that moment, it was more on the cool side, carrying a slight bluish hue. The house had a yard that sported more than one wildflower and weed poking up from the blades of grass. There was an old car parked in the driveway, an old machine with hard edges and a convertible hood. The house had a set of steps leading up to a porch wide enough to fit a table and chairs for a full family. Strangely enough, the front door was

always unlocked. This wasn't out of a brazen sense of security, but rather as a means to facilitate the constant movement the house was subject to. Every day there were people walking in and out of that house. Strange people. These people walked in looking troubled but seemed to walk out holding their heads up higher. Sometimes almost as high as the second-floor balcony, from which hung several flags. There was the pride flag, with a bar for each color of the rainbow, as well as a flag depicting a raised fist in many shades of brown and black. The flag I didn't recognize was the one with stripes in four oddly specific colors: yellow, white, purple, and black. I had no idea what this flag could represent, though in time I would.

On the balcony of the second floor of that obnoxious pink house, there was a door that led to an office. Or at least I *thought* it was an office. Most of the time, I would see people talking there, sharing in conversation. Sometimes these people were crying. Sometimes they were laughing. Sometimes it was a mix of the two. The people who left that house always seemed happier than they'd been before they walked in. Sometimes I would spot people talking on the balcony, but with the cold

weather and all, it had been a long while since I'd last seen anyone there.

On that day, I looked out the window of my dead-end job, staring at that pink house. Always full of people. Always full of laughter. Always full of smiling faces. And then I—I felt something stir inside of me. A rumble at the bottom of my ocean that caused a great and fearsome sea-serpent to rise from its slumber. There was something I wanted. Some emotion so crimson and so sharp that to reach out for it felt like sticking my hand into a jar of razor blades. There was something I wanted. Something my soul longed for. And it was there, in that house.

I wasn't the only one who felt this way.

On that day, the first Monday of that crazy year, a young person stood before the first step of that house, the first step of his New Year's resolution. This young person was a student attending the local college. He had a youthful face and, though the morning was cool, his cheeks had a dash of blush on them. This young man's hair had once been a bob, but time made his bangs reach further than intended. He parted his hair at a forty-five-degree angle, causing the majority of his bangs to cover one of his eyes. The young man's hair had once been

bright blue, but time had done its share. Now only the tips of his black head of hair were stained blue. This young man had fair skin. He wore makeup, though not any eyeshadow or lipstick. He was sporting a look on his face so serious that it fully betrayed his youthful appearance. And his outfit. How could anyone look at this young man and take him seriously? It was the middle of winter and he was wearing Converse sneakers, black skinny jeans, and a sweater so oversized and so loose that his hands were lost inside those long sleeves. I knew the instant I looked at him that he was *new*. He had never been inside that pink house, though he'd thought about it for a long time. He must've seen the ad, or someone must've recommended it. Either way, he knew what he wanted to do... but his courage was failing him. He wasn't even at the front door yet; he hadn't even put his foot on the first step. He stood there, staring at the ground, looking like a kid waiting to be called into the principal's office. This young man was waiting for a sign—but that's the thing. The universe doesn't favor giving signs at random. It favors geometry. Everything happens in sets of three. Don't you see it? Haven't you realized it yet? The universe doesn't work in mysterious ways. It works in *triangles*.

And so, as you have no doubt surmised, that young man standing outside of the pink house was also *not* the main character of this story. Though, you'd be wrong to think he was without importance. That young man and I were two points on a sheet of cosmic graph paper, drawing a perfect straight line between the accounting building I was in and the front of that pink house. And what else could've happened on that day—that fateful first Monday of the New Year—if not for the universe to have drawn the right angle?

At that moment, a very special and important person took a left off Main and began to walk down Golondrina Street. This curious individual had fascinated me for as long as I'd looked out my window. They were the reason why so many people walked into that pink house, and I knew—long before I gained the power to *know with certainty*—that they were the reason why everyone who walked out of that home looked so much happier. This person was neither man nor woman. They were something else.

Their name was Hoshi Yoshinaga, they were in their late twenties, and they were very hungover. Hoshi was tall, about six-foot-and-change before the heels. They had light

skin and long black hair perfectly cut to frame their face. Hoshi's bangs were just above temple-height, a feature which served to exemplify their thick, expressive eyebrows. Hoshi was a master at prettying themselves up, and even after a night of celebration, their makeup was on point. Some people—the easily fooled—would've looked at Hoshi and thought they were not wearing any makeup at all. As if. There's no such thing as a 'natural' look, and you would've *never* spotted Hoshi without at least foundation and powder. Looks meant a lot to Hoshi. Though not because they were vain or they wanted to impress anyone. Hoshi had learned, a long time before, that there was no feat they couldn't achieve as long as they felt comfortable in their own body. Even at that moment, hungover and waddling a little as they walked, Hoshi felt comfortable inside their own skin. Their outfit for the previous night, and by extension their outfit for that fateful morning, was a faux fur coat and a wine-colored turtleneck sweater, which had been cropped to show Hoshi's midriff. It might've been the middle of winter, but nobody could talk Hoshi out of wearing a crop-top. Nobody. Hoshi's desire for fashionable comfort—over actual comfort—was complete with their long sheer skirt that revealed not

only the modest pair of shorts they wore underneath, but also displayed their long legs. Sure, Hoshi was freezing, but they looked good, and for them, that was enough.

Hoshi walked down Golondrina Street, their heels *clicking* and *clacking*. That early in the morning, the sound bounced against the houses up and down the street, almost like clapping. There they were, Hoshi, a carefree soul who navigated life without friction, without strife. Nothing seemed to hurt them. Nothing seemed to ail them. And, instead of growing bitter and burning with hatred, Hoshi extended a hand to everyone and everything.

Hoshi walked past the young man, up the steps to the pink house, turned the knob of that unlocked door but did not enter. Hoshi looked over their shoulder and flashed the young man a smile.

“Good morning, good sir. You wouldn’t happen to be waiting for anyone important, would you? Nobody is important enough to warrant standing out here in the cold. Would you like to come on in? Oh, and by the way, Happy New Year!”



2

It is a curious paradox of the human condition that no matter how hard we memorize something, the words always seem to disappear as soon as we try to summon them; be it the answers to a test, the lines of a play we're performing in, or even the words we've been rehearsing while standing out in the cold. All of a sudden, our mind is a blank slate, and we know nothing.

“Um... ah... erm...” The young man struggled to form even a transient sentence to buy his brain a millisecond. He was truly stumped. The young man—

who was going by the name *Archer*—mustered all of his computing power and buffered a complete sentence. “You. Yes, I mean, you.”

“Ah, this is about me?” Hoshi let go of the door knob, turned around to face Archer, and smiled even wider. “Well, I’m a slut for self-validation, so if this is about *me*, then consider my interests piqued, my dear...”

Hoshi meant to finish their sentence with ‘*my dear Archer*’ but they stopped themselves short. This might’ve been their first time meeting, but Hoshi already knew who Archer was. They already knew about the young man’s struggles with his identity, about his feelings for a certain *Lovely Boy*, and pretty much everything else. The human mind was full of twists and turns, sharp corners, and false doors. Every mind was a labyrinth, and Hoshi had the power to see each person’s unique layout. With just one look, Hoshi would know with certainty all of a person’s problems as though looking at the solution to a cereal-box puzzle. Hoshi already knew everything—but that was no reason to forget one’s manners. It was rude not to let someone introduce themselves. This may seem silly to you, but you must understand that Hoshi had a curious way of looking at life, relationships, and healing.

Hoshi knew that conversations—*real conversations*—weren't just about the transfer of factual information from one person to another. Real conversations were about listening, being heard, and coming to a greater understanding. Most people don't know what a real conversation is like. People don't listen. Everyone is just waiting for their turn to speak. Hoshi realized this a long time ago—they felt this emptiness in their soul—and that strife transformed them into the person they were that day. The first step towards real connection was listening, so Hoshi made that their passion.

“Oh dear, we haven't even introduced one another! You'd think I was raised in a barn or something,” Hoshi parted their faux fur coat, revealing a button pinned to their sweater.

The button had the same colors as those of the strange flag hanging from the second-floor balcony: yellow, white, purple, and black. Printed in between the multi-colored bars were the words *'they/them.'* Hoshi didn't always wear their pronouns on their chest. It was something they did at Marsha Hall, the local queer youth center, where Hoshi volunteered at. It also just so happened to be where Hoshi spent the previous night. Guests at Marsha Hall were

encouraged to take a pronoun pin from the jars by the table. Hoshi kept forgetting to return them, so they had a couple dozen they/them pins at home.

Hoshi extended a hand and spoke brightly.

“The name’s Hoshi. My pronouns are they/them and, as you can see, I live in this gay-ass house. What’s your name? And pronouns, please.”

Archer froze. Not because it was cold outside, this was California after all; it was cold but not *that* cold. Even though Archer had practiced introducing himself in front of the mirror, the words escaped him. Such was the paradox of the human mind. In truth, although he went by the name Archer online, and it was the name he wanted to go by from now on, he had never introduced himself by that name. He had also never been asked his pronouns, which happened to be another thorny topic for him. He hadn’t always been a *he*. He hadn’t always been an *Archer*. This was all new to him. Inside of him, inside the privacy of his imagination, he liked the idea of being called a *he*. And he really liked the idea of people calling him *Archer*. But when those ideals were exposed to the reality of introducing himself out loud, he just... struggled. He hadn’t told anyone. He hadn’t even told his

friends. He assumed they knew. How could they not know? Archer wasn't like other people. But, then again, people didn't listen. Everyone was busy living their lives, attending college, going to their part-time gigs, hosting parties; they didn't have time to listen. And even if they did have time, Archer was terrified at the prospect of being turned away, facing judgement, and feeling like an outcast.

Archer wanted to be heard...

But asking for help is hard.

And yet, there was something inviting about Hoshi's eyes. He wanted to say the words he'd practiced in front of the mirror. The words felt right, like the answers on the inside of a cereal box. The answers were there, all you had to do was be brave enough to open up. It'll be worth it.

"I'm he/him! I mean—I am my name. No, ugh. My name is Archer. My pronouns are he/him."

Even if you make a little mess.

"Nice to meet you Archer," Hoshi took the young man's trembling hand and shook it. "What brings you to the outside of my home on this, the first Monday of a new year?"

“You, um... you help people,” Archer nodded to himself, the words began to come to him. He’d messed up, but that was okay; he wanted to be heard. “My friend, Emily, she told me about you. She told me you help people with their problems, kind of like... ah... a therapist?”

Hoshi nodded; they had been described this way in the past, which they welcomed as a compliment. That being said, Hoshi’s gig had sailed as smoothly as it had in thanks only to the transparency seen in the new clothes of some fabled emperor.

“Ah, I see,” Hoshi nodded, then spoke in as clear a voice as they could muster, “I am legally bound to tell you I am *not* a therapist. Or a psychiatrist. I cannot give you a prescription for anything. At least, nothing you couldn’t already get on the shelves of the pharmacy. I’m flattered that your friend described me like that, but I must be clear that I am not a licensed professional. I’m just a person who listens. I’m not even like a cheap alternative to a therapist, and I would know because I’m so *cheap*. You see these heels?” Hoshi gestured to their bright-red heels. “I got these off that second-hand place on Washington Lane, you know the place? It’s right across the street from the

pet shop. These puppies, the heels not the actual puppies at the pet shop, cost me only five bucks after tax. They were such a good deal that I got into a fight over them. You see, my ex wanted them for himself, but he's just so cheap. Not as cheap as me, of course, but he's also a clown. So it all kind of evens out in the end."

It was all too much for Archer to catch up with. He could almost see thoughts spiraling out of him like bubbles in a comic strip. Say what? There was a second-hand store across from that pet shop? Hoshi's ex, presumably a man, also wanted the heels? And he was a clown? Archer was thrown off by this flurry of details and also by the casual nature with which Hoshi talked about all of it. Archer had moved to Socorro County a little over a year before, and he had like, *zero* stories to tell. The most exciting plot lines in Archer's life were his crush on a certain Lovely Boy and his passion for role-playing games. By comparison, Hoshi's life felt like something out of a sitcom.

"Then again, we dated for a long time..." Hoshi squeezed the tip of their nose and let out a squeaky *honk*, as though the horn of an old-timey bicycle. "So, maybe I'm a bit of a clown too."

Archer paused; maybe he was expecting to hear canned laughter, maybe he was awestruck by how strangely welcoming Hoshi was. It was as if Hoshi lived in a parallel world—a funhouse mirror dimension—where every day was an adventure full of fabulous, ridiculous exploits, where every week there was some dramatic plot line involving Hoshi and their friends. But Archer was wrong. Hoshi didn't live in a sitcom. No, Hoshi lived in the real world where everyday people possessed incredible abilities, even if they were not aware of them. The real world was unpredictable, terrifying, full of unspoken dangers—and it was nonetheless beautiful, wonderful, and worth getting up for. If you could see it, if you could open your eyes to the truth that lies within; if only you could see the gayful, gleeful, joyous truth Hoshi had embraced.

Archer had yet to open his eyes. He'd yet to face his fears. But even then, before his journey had even begun, he felt a kind of reverse vertigo. Instead of his body telling him to move away from the edge, every cell in his body, every fragment of his identity, wanted to move closer as though through a bizarre magnetism. Hoshi knew as

much; they'd seen inside of Archer and knew he had the potential. He just needed a chance to break the mold.

“So, how about it, young man?” Hoshi said, walking backwards up the steps of that pink house and turning the doorknob slightly. “Would you like to come in?”

“Um, shouldn't I—ah, I don't have an appointment, and I don't know your rates, and I—I want to make sure I can pay you for your services...” Archer took a step back.

“Oh dear, you make it sound like a *job*,” Hoshi put on a dramatic frown. “You can pay me a little, or nothing, or pay me in doughnuts or coupons. I don't really do this to make money. I do this because... well, it's something I can do to help people. Just to listen, really listen, and give them a chance to say what they really want to say. That's all. Also, I don't do appointments. Dear lord, look at this mess. Does it look like there's room in my purse for a planner? You think I have an itinerary app on my phone? It's first-come, first-serve, and if you don't have anything else on your schedule you can... I don't know, hang out? There's always someone in this house and who knows what might happen if you get to know them; you might even make a friend. That's the gamble in this little game

we call ‘Life.’ Worst-case scenario? You waste your time. Best-case scenario? Everything changes.”

Archer looked down. His feet felt heavy, as though bound in place.

“Is it...” he mumbled to himself. “Is it really that simple?”

“Totes,” Hoshi smiled. “Life is simple; it’s people who are complicated. You can spend your whole life waiting for a sign. Then the sign hits you on the head, you go to the hospital, and while you’re getting bandaged you think to yourself: ‘man, I should’ve turned right.’”

Archer listened—really listened to those words—and committed himself to a moment of arithmetic. Archer placed all his worries on one side of an imaginary scale; he placed all his self-doubt, all his worries about the future, and all his struggles with his identity. He wasn’t sure *what* he was. He didn’t know if he wanted to even stay a *he*, or switch back around, or be something else entirely. It felt as though all these things, all these slates weighing him down, would shatter the scale. And yet, it was the flip side that reigned supreme. The weight of all those worries and fears was nothing compared to the horror of spending the rest of his life wondering what might’ve been. If only he’d

gone into that house and spilled his soul to that strange person...

If only.

Asking for help is hard, daunting, and scary.

But staying quiet? That shit's *deadly*.

"I want to turn right."



3

You'd be forgiven for thinking that Hoshi owned that obnoxiously pink house. They sure walked around like they owned the place, but attitude alone did not entitle one to a deed. No, the pink house was under the name of one such *Cami Dixon-Smith* who was—on the morning of that New Year—fixing coffee and breakfast for Hoshi and Archer. It might seem like an odd thing to do, seeing as how Cami was on the other side of the house and had yet to even hear the door creak open. How did Cami know to pop four slices of bread into the toaster? And why did they

pull a small collection of jam and marmalade jars out of the fridge? That right there, the whistling phantom you hear in the back of your skull, was not the sound of the percolator. No, that was the sound of a train about to leave the station—so you better be quick on your feet or you’ll completely miss the plot. I know you’re new at this, so I’ll excuse you for being slow on the uptake. At least, *this time*. Before I descend into explaining architecture, it is best that we slow down and take a look at the formal owner of the pink house. It is easy to let people become blurs in the background of our stories. We all like to think we’re the main character—we’re not—but it would be a lie to say nobody matters. Everyone does. All characters, background, extra, and tertiary, are important to the wheel of causality. Some are more important than others though, and there was no one more important to Hoshi’s story than Cami Dixon-Smith.

Cami was a couple years older than Hoshi, though you wouldn’t be able to tell. This was because of Cami’s youthful looks and their difference in height. Even while wearing heels, or heeled boots, Cami was a couple inches shorter than their other half; a fact that seemed to amuse Hoshi to no end. Cami had black skin and, whenever they

smiled, the dimples on their cheeks would cause Hoshi to melt. Hoshi found Cami to be gorgeous like the sunset; no matter the weather or the day, there was perfection in that horizon, on that person. Cami's hair was always in flux. They liked to dye it, cut it, perm it, grow it out, shave it, and back again. A couple months prior Cami had huge, perfectly kinky, red hair. A couple months before that, they'd fully shaved their head. And then there was that period when they had a mohawk, then a braid, then a side-cut; of course they had a side-cut, everyone had a side-cut last summer. At that moment though, Cami's hair had returned to a more natural color and state. Cami's dark brown hair had outgrown the summer's side-cut, and though one side was still longer than the other, the volume helped to keep it off their face. Using product also helped. Nobody's hair could look that healthy and shiny without some serious TLC, and Cami was committed to their appearance. Yes, it was the first workday of the year—and *yes*—Cami was working out of the kitchen even though they had a home office. None of this meant Cami was working out of their pajama pants and oversized t-shirts. Absolutely not. All of Cami's tees were custom-fitted to enhance their curves and also to remove

those boxy sleeves. Cami did all the customizing themselves, and it was all thanks to their sewing machine and those two semesters of Home Ec. As for that morning's ensemble, Cami had on a pair of jeans and a fitted t-shirt from a local jazz band. The image across the chest depicted three angels blowing on their trumpets like the world was ending. Cami was also wearing a pair of slippers, the kind with faux fur on the inside, because one of the benefits of working from home was not having to wear real shoes.

Although Cami and Hoshi were different in many ways, they shared in their identity. Neither of them felt like they were a man or a woman. They dressed however they wanted and relished not having to fit into gender roles. They were two people, in a relationship no less, but there were no expectations that one would fill the role of a *woman* and another the role of a *man*. In this absence of roles the two found incredible freedom; they were not restricted by invisible walls or uncomfortable glass slippers. Their home was a little bit of a mess, but life was a little bit of a mess too. Hoshi and Cami both knew that the world wasn't going to end abruptly if laundry didn't get done on time.

Speaking of chores. Let's talk architecture for a moment.

If one were to be a particularly crafty bird, with the ability to see truly, then one would make out the layout of the pink house as easily as if it were drawn on grid paper. At the south-most point of the house was the front door, above which was a long and wide hallway that served as a kind of stem from which the rest of the house bloomed from. On the east side of the first floor, adjacent to the long hallway, were two rooms and one bathroom. One of the rooms served as Cami's home office, though it wasn't like Cami really ever used it. They preferred working at the kitchen table. It reminded them of the good days in a different town, with different people, when things were a lot simpler. The other room in the first floor was a guest room; that is, a room where cardboard boxes stayed as guests. It was a storage room in anything but name. The west side of the house led, through virtue of an archway, right into the area many would've referred to as the *parlor*. For all of us—less civilized folk—it was a long *living room* connected to the dining room, which itself was adjacent to the kitchen as though the pieces of a puzzle. The parlor was just like the rest of the house: beautiful, expensive,

and a bit of a mess. Not the kind of mess with food wrappers or litter literally littering the floor, but rather the mess that told you this was a place people lived in. Particularly in the living room, where a certain man by the name of Jason was currently crashing in. One would think Jason had partied a little too much and had decided to spend the night, just as Hoshi had at the youth center, but that wasn't all true. Jason wasn't just passing by. He was staying in that living room at the moment; though not by virtue of begging or demanding it. Jason's stay, much like everything that happened in that house, was Hoshi's doing. Jason was Hoshi's current project, though neither of them would have described it that way. Jason needed a lot of help and Hoshi had a lot of help to give. There was a lot of room in Hoshi's heart for those in need, almost as much room as there was in that pink house. The path one could draw from the hallway to the living room, to the dining room, to the kitchen, and back to the hallway in that infinite loop, would've looked like a pink ouroboros. And that was before the second floor. The hallway gave way to a set of stairs which led to a couple more rooms, a master bedroom and an equally masterful bathroom. It was that bedroom, the one that led to the

balcony on the second floor, where Hoshi liked to do most of their work. Though, in describing it as such, I make it sound as though Hoshi entertained their guests in more ways than one. This was sometimes true, but that was the exception to an unspoken rule. Really, the goal of taking guests into the master bedroom was to inspire a sense of intimacy, to help people open up and speak truthfully. It was harder to do that, to be willing to open one's mind, when it felt like you were about to be judged. This fact was easily circumvented by hosting these private and delicate conversations in an equally private and delicate place.

But enough with architecture.

Hoshi and Archer were just about to walk through the front door on the other side of the house when Cami took a second to check-in with themselves. The toast was toastin'. The percolator was percolatin'. The jam was on the table and sadly not jammin', though Cami did have some sweet tunes coming out of their laptop. In the moments before Hoshi and Archer met for the first time, Cami had been sipping on their own cup of coffee and finishing their omelet. Cami had impeccable timing, and managed to calmly finish their own breakfast before

preparing Hoshi and Archer's. With all this done, Cami felt like they could breathe again. And when they did, they caught their own reflection on the microwave door.

And they looked good.

Cami shot their reflection a playful wink and sat back down on their chair. Although Cami technically had a home office, they couldn't help but work from the little round table they'd found at the flea market so many moons ago. Cami settled back on their chair, relaxed their shoulders, and returned to answering all those emails and sorting out the schedules for the shows in the upcoming weeks. It was in that moment, when Cami returned to their element, that they looked—and felt—like the person they'd always wanted to be. The breach between the person they'd always been, and this new individual, had become imperceptible. They'd made it. A long and painful journey had come to an end and Cami had emerged on the other side, transformed. The person who sat there, jammin' to those sweet tunes, typing away at their keyboard, was the ultimate version of Cami Dixon-Smith.

And they looked *good*.

Cami hadn't gotten to spend the previous night with Hoshi; they each had their own parties to host and attend to, and that was okay. Being apart from someone who makes you feel loved could be stressful and even anxiety-inducing. This was not the case for Cami, because they'd always been an introvert; and also because they could see Hoshi whenever they wanted. Cami was looking at Hoshi at that very moment. Even though Cami's eyes were set on the laptop screen, all they needed to do was flick a switch inside their mind... and then, they could see whatever they wanted to see. No matter how far away. Even at that moment, Cami could see Hoshi leading Archer into the house. Cami could hear Hoshi telling Archer to take off his shoes and instructing him to leave them at the rack by the door. Cami could see Hoshi and Archer, as though from the point of view of a bird perched above the doorframe. The two of them walked up the hallway, past the archway and the sleeping shirtless man on the sofa, away from the stairs leading up, and—at last—into the kitchen.

How could Cami do this? How could they see what was faraway without even turning their head? To this vital question I propose another. How could Hoshi know

Archer's name, and the source of his worries, before they even shared an introduction? Or, even better, how could I know all of this was happening? How could I know what was being said and thought inside that house and inside those minds when I was physically sitting inside my cubicle, no longer even looking out my window? The answer to these questions is... *fabulous* to say the least, and to say the most would be to spoil a surprise before the toast has even popped out of its toaster, let alone be jammed and marmaladed. There will come a time for me to explain, or rather to regurgitate Hoshi's explanation, but until then you must do the unthinkable and get on this train with me. The only ticket you need is an open mind. If you cannot believe that Hoshi could read Archer's mind, and that Cami could see faraway, and that I could retroactively gaze through the veil of time and space—then you might as well be a slowpoke, stay in your seat, and miss this train because things are about to get a lot weirder. And a lot more fabulous.

So. Repeat after me: *I am not a slowpoke, I'll board this train even if it wrecks me.* Good. Very good. Now you're a thousand times more ready for what's about to happen than poor little Archer ever was.



4

“Good morning, darling!” Hoshi walked under the archway that led into the kitchen, arms extended as though making a grand entrance or priming a hug—or in this case both. Hoshi hugged the sitting Cami from behind, planted one kiss on their forehead, one on their gorgeous dimples, and a couple on their lips. Once Hoshi’s affectionate attack was through, they kissed one more time and spoke as their lips parted. “Happy New Year, darling.”

“Happy New Year.” Cami tried to suppress their smile. Hoshi’s need to be overtly affectionate was something Cami was still coming to terms with. To Cami, such displays seemed like a luxury. They were the kind of thing that you ought to save for the really important moments in life, but they were glad—oh so glad and relieved—that Hoshi didn’t care about any of that. Every day was important in Hoshi’s mind; every day was a chance to remind everyone just how much Hoshi loved them. Cami was pretty high up in that list, a fact that always struck them as a surprise. No matter how long the two of them had lived together, it was hard for Cami to come to terms with the idea that someone loved them. Unconditional love was a strange thing, like some bizarre alchemical component. Cami wasn’t sure they understood it at all, but they sure were glad they had Hoshi in their life.

Hoshi and Cami looked at one another, savoring a second of silence.

“I missed you,” Cami was the first to speak.

“Oh, darling, I missed you too,” Hoshi kissed Cami again. “We didn’t get to spend New Year’s together, but that’s alright. We have twelve months to make up for it.”

“Did you have fun at the youth center?” Cami asked.

“Of course,” Hoshi smiled. “Did you have fun at the venue?”

Before meeting Hoshi, Cami would’ve never have described the previous night as anything other than *work*. Networking. Running a show on the final days of the year. Wrapping up a whole twelve month’s worth of finances and promises. How could any of that be anything but *work*? It turns out, Cami had really come to love what they did for a living. Cami felt like they were finally doing something with their life, making a real difference, and giving other people a chance to make their dreams a reality.

“It was great,” Cami gestured to the laptop on the kitchen table. “I talked with so many bands last night, we got several shows lined up for the next quarter, and I finally got to catch up with so many people. Oh, I realize, I have a lot of gossip too...” Cami held a palm up, as though to physically stop themselves from continuing. “I could talk your ear off, but I can see you’ve brought someone in. Please excuse my manners and the mess. The name’s Cami, pronouns are they/them. Pleasure to meet you.”

Cami got up from the chair and extended a hand to the awkwardly silent Archer.

Archer and Cami had a lot in common. They were introverts of sorts and not at all used to being around—and the subject of—affection. Archer could not help but feel his poor little gay heart rush when he thought of a certain *Lovely Boy*, and how amazing it would be to be treated that way. To be kissed. To be hugged from behind. To feel his warmth as Archer typed away at some boring college assignment. Archer's mind had a knack for going down these imaginary rabbit holes, like some professional Alister in Wonderland. He would sometimes, without realizing it, follow these imaginary scenarios until their ridiculous extremes. He'd sometimes imagine days, months, and even years of waking dreams. It was at that moment, just as Archer was deep into imagining what domestic life would be like with a certain *Lovely Boy*, that Cami went in for the handshake. Poor Archer was not ready for this. He blinked his eyes, as though trying to flick through a series of unflattering selfies in his phone's photo library. He stammered, realized he'd gone down the rabbit hole again, and did the conversational equivalent of trying to act as though he'd meant to trip

and fall on his butt. Absolutely. It was all part of his style, you see. Totes.

“Um... ah, happy New Year!” Archer shook Cami’s hand a lot harder than was necessary. “My name’s Archer, he/him. Sorry to intrude, er, um, I can come back another day, it’s really no big deal. If this is an inconvenience—”

The toaster popped four perfectly toasted slices of bread. The surprise was enough to make Archer flinch, throwing him out of his apologetic state. Cami, who possessed the fabulous ability to see things at a distance, knew for a fact that Archer had tried several times in the last month to seek Hoshi’s services. Every time Archer tried to knock on the door, he would talk himself out of it and turn around. On the morning of that first Monday of the New Year, Archer had come the furthest yet: just before the steps that led to the house. Whatever was troubling Archer, Cami wanted—almost as much, if not more than Hoshi—to help the young man find a solution. If anything so that he didn’t waste so much time walking up and down Golondrina Street.

“No inconvenience,” Cami closed their laptop and tucked it under one arm. “I was just about to move to the office. I have some papers I need to print, sign, scan, and

email to some chump across the country. As you can see, it's all very boring stuff, and last time I checked, it's bad manners to make your guests fall asleep on your kitchen floor," Cami gestured to the toaster and the jars on the table, "or let them go hungry. There's also coffee in the pot, the mugs are in that top cabinet over there. Make yourself at home."

Archer had spent all of December hyping himself up for the day he would knock on the door of that pink house and finally seek the help of the strange person who lived there. Archer had prepared himself mentally, rehearsed what he would say, and gone down hundreds of rabbit holes trying to envision what could happen inside that house, what could go wrong, and what Archer could do to mitigate any possible friction. Surely you've done this too. Have you ever been so nervous about an upcoming gathering, social event, or school presentation, that you mentally imagined what could possibly happen? Isn't it hilarious how, once this cataclysmic event finally arrives, nothing ever seems to go as you expected? Archer had never, not once in all the rabbit holes he'd fallen into, thought he would be invited to have coffee and toast. The house was nothing like he'd expected. It was strange, but

it was also everything he wanted to have one day. Archer wanted a place to call his own. A partner who took care of him, loved him, and made him feel safe. He wanted a den where he could retreat from the world and where he could invite others who sought refuge. Archer was not yet ready to externalize these words—it would take a while for him to see the writing on the wall—but Hoshi and Cami... they looked like the kind of adults Archer wanted to be someday.

“Thank y-you!” Archer said, meaning a lot more than those two words could contain.

Archer then proceeded to walk around the kitchen table. He fidgeted with the mug cabinet with the care you’d find in a museum curator handling priceless artifacts. There was quite a bizarre mug collection on display; a different narrator would likely go on for page after page describing each unique item in the gallery Cami and Hoshi had amassed together. But—*let’s be real here*—that ain’t me. I would rather take focus away from Archer’s quest to find a suitable mug and instead turn to look at the two sneaky gays who were whispering to each other back and forth.

“How bad is it?” Cami asked, their voice almost inaudible.

“So, Archer likes this boy in his class, and he likes him back. So yay. Except Archer is not sure if this boy likes him because of who he is, or because of what the other boy perceives of him and...” Hoshi paused. “Why are you shaking your head?”

“I didn’t ask about *that*,” Cami said. “Is he dangerous?”

“He’s a kid. He’s no harm to anyone or himself. Specially himself.”

“Okay...” Cami let out a sigh of relief. “How powerful is he?”

“I don’t know.”

“Haven’t you looked inside—” Cami cut themselves short.

Archer had finally decided on a mug; it was bright yellow, shaped like a honey pot, and had a hand-painted drawing of a bee on the outside. Archer had taken the percolator, gone to pour himself a cup of Joe, when he suddenly turned to look at the other two. If there was ever a bad time to be whispering, it was when the subject of the conversation was looking right at your face. Cami did a quick calculation in their head, playing their very own

game of Family Feud. If one hundred people in Archer's position were surveyed as to what would make them stop from pouring themselves a cup of Joe, what would be the most common explanation? There were quite a few popular options. Was the cup dirty? Was the coffee not ready? Was there something wrong with the coffee? Cami put away their mental calculator. They knew what the number one answer had to be.

"Cream and sugar?" Cami asked.

"Sorry, I'm weak..." Archer gave an apologetic smile.

"Sugar is right there behind you," Cami gestured to a curious porcelain container shaped like a fat cat wearing a bowler's hat. Removing said hat would reveal a reservoir of brown sugar. "We also have a bunch of sugar alternatives in that drawer over there. As for the cream, it's on the fridge door. Again, we have a lot of alternatives."

"Because I'm picky!" Hoshi shouted excitedly.

"Thanks..." Archer walked over to the fridge, realized Hoshi and Cami were both looking at him, and the young man could not do anything but ask the obvious. "Um, is everything okay?"

"We're gossiping," Hoshi rushed to explain. They leaned forward, partially covering their mouth as though

sharing in a secret, and spoke just above a whisper. “My boss has a crush on me. It’s bad. Like, really, really bad. And she thinks nobody knows. It’s cute, in a sad kind of way.”

“Your... um, *boss* has a crush on you?” Archer asked, putting emphasis on the wrong word. In his phrasing, it seemed as though he was more shocked that Hoshi had a regular job, with regular human hours, than the idea that their boss had a crush on them.

“Yeah, her name is Lee, she runs Coupe de Jubilee, on Main. It’s a coffee shop, I work the register there sometimes when I feel like it. And whenever I don’t feel like working, I just quit. But it’s okay, Lee will always put me back on the schedule if I ask nicely enough.”

“Oh, I see. That, um, that must be really uncomfortable.”

“Not at all,” Hoshi smiled. “You never know how many people have a crush on you, and because most people are too scared to act on them, you’ll likely never find out. And that’s okay. Honestly, Lee is a sweetheart, and I wouldn’t mind going on a date with her. Or two. But she thinks that Cami here would murder her.”

“And let me tell you,” Cami nodded. “I do *not* have the energy to explain to Lee, of all people Lee, that our relationship doesn’t work like that. I don’t own Hoshi, Hoshi doesn’t own me. If Lee cared at all to maybe get to know us, then maybe she’d realize this.”

“But she won’t act on it,” Hoshi smiled. “The very foundations of her person would have to quake, shatter even, for her to take the crush she has on me and turn it into anything other than a comforting fantasy.”

Those last few words were a little *too real* for Archer. He tried, as best as he could, not to think about the crush he had on a certain Lovely Boy. Instead, he went on to dress his coffee and take two of the four slices of toast, while Hoshi and Cami finished pretending to be sharing in some tasty gossip.

“So, about this kid...” Cami narrowed their eyes. “How worried should I be?”

“Darling, I’ve got no idea,” Hoshi shrugged their shoulders. “It’s not like I can see a level above his head, like: ‘whoops honey I brought home a Level 99 college student sorry about that.’ You know?”

“Well, is he manifesting?”

“Oh, he’s manifesting alright. I’m convinced it’s part of the reason why he’s got such a hard time making choices or acting on his crush.”

“It’s nothing dangerous then?”

“The house is safe. I promise,” Hoshi crossed their heart.

All of a sudden, a third voice—not at all whispering—sounded from behind the two of them. This new voice was deep, masculine, and very hungover. Standing under the archway stood a tall man, muscle-clad, wearing nothing but a pair of loose pajama pants.

“Hoshi... did you bring home another stray?”



5

Like the mechanism of an antique clock *clinging* and *clanging* to indicate the time of day, everyone in the kitchen turned around in unison to look at the masterwork of a man standing under the archway. This was not Adonis, but rather *Jason*.

Jason Hagerty was in his late twenties, built like a cologne model, and was—in fact—not wearing a shirt. He didn't even have socks or slippers. The only garment on his person was that baggy pair of pajama pants, which only served to exemplify his chiseled abdomen, chest,

arms, and... that handsome face. *Heavens*. That man was a work of art, akin to the marble statues of old. He looked like an impossible ideal and yet, he was flesh and bone. No artist had carved him out of stone, nor painted him across a canvas. He was a real man. You may think that I'm showing my bias, but I ask you this: who could look at this man and not be enamored with his bare chest? We are in agreement, so I digress. This prolonged description of Jason serves a dual purpose. I need you to know that Jason was a beautiful man because *that was a fact*, but I also need you to see him first for how attractive he was because these were the thoughts that swirled around the mind of a poor little gay. Archer was staring so hard, and blushing so bad, that he didn't realize he was spreading a naked knife across a slice of toast. Poor Archer, so young and so gay, was lost in the mirage that was Jason. How could such a man exist? Jason's square jaw. Jason's long, shoulder-length, chestnut hair. Jason's bright blue eyes. Jason's Californian surfer tan. How was this possible? How did the forces-that-be conspire to create such a perfect man? Well, that was its own story. Someday in the future Archer would learn of how that man came to be, but even if there'd been a block of exposition telling him

all of that, he wouldn't have had the eyes to read it. Archer was dumbstruck. Actually *dumbstruck*. Jason's looks had punched Archer right in his little gay heart, and our poor young man was seeing stars, and Jason's chest, mostly Jason's bare chest.

It was then, as Archer was still absent-mindedly spreading nothing on his toast, that he noticed something on Jason's chest. There were *scars*. Jason had two scars on his chest. These two lines, drawn under his pecs like crescent moons, were a tone lighter than his surfer tan. They were so light, Archer barely even noticed them, but now that he did—Archer's feelings changed. His outright thirst for this man suffered a metamorphosis akin to that of a caterpillar emerging from its cocoon. Archer's feelings for Jason swelled, expanded, spread out their wings and cast upon the world prismatic light from each glass-like wing. Now Archer was thirsty for this man *and* also deeply inspired by him.

At last realizing how badly he'd been staring this whole time, and how he'd butchered his slice of toast, our blushing Archer looked away. He nearly tipped over his cup of coffee in the process, but he didn't seem to notice. He was too busy trying to act normal while in his head,

he was battling a very serious and very important conundrum.

“*Can you...*” Archer thought to himself. “*Can you stan a random person you just met? Is that even allowed?*”

Now, you may think that Archer’s little display went unnoticed, just the same way we like to think our dumb crushes go unnoticed by those around us. But you and I—and you, and you, and specially *you*—know that this is not true. We *all* know when someone’s got a crush on someone else. The energy in the room changes, and that’s when we as a people tune our innate psychic frequencies to the same station. I’m sorry to break it to you, but *everyone* knows about your crush. Just like how everyone at the coffee shop knew Lee had a crush on Hoshi, a dumb and hopeless crush. Everyone can tell when you like someone. You can’t fool them. Everyone’s got innate psychic properties. There’s literally nothing you can do about it. Just like there was nothing Archer could do. Hoshi, Cami, and the hungover Jason, could all tell that Archer was looking a little frazzled all of a sudden. Only one of those three could read minds, but let me tell you, you didn’t need Hoshi’s *Facet* to know what was going on.

“Is your new stray okay?” Jason asked, playing dumb.

“That’s Archer, by the way, he/him pronouns,” Hoshi shot Jason a smile. “Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year,” Jason smiled back. “How was the youth center?”

“Fun as always,” Hoshi nodded, then softly punched Jason on the side of his muscled arm. “What about you, big guy? Did you even party? What did we buy all that booze for if you’re not going to get drunk every once in a while?”

Jason shuddered at the mere thought of alcohol, and that was all Hoshi needed to see. It was a good thing that Jason let himself go the previous night. It’d been a long time since he’d put down his guard without Hoshi, and he truly deserved a night away from all his worries. In a way, the piercing headache was worth it.

“Jason, there’s coffee in the pot,” Cami turned around, readying to make their leave. “Feel free to steal Hoshi’s toast, just make sure to leave the loaf by the toaster. You can never tell when Hoshi is going to bring home more strays.”

“Thank you, Boss,” Jason shot Cami a smile.

“Don’t mention it,” Cami said as they started walking down the hallway. “I’ll be in the office if anyone needs me. And Hoshi, I’ll leave you to you-know-what.”

“You got it, *Boss*,” Hoshi gave a melodramatic military salute, then turned around to look at the inside of the kitchen.

Jason had in fact stolen Hoshi’s toast, and was already spreading some jam across the golden-brown surface. Seeing that the man hadn’t taken anything to drink, Hoshi poured him a tall glass of water—he was hungover after all—and settled it next to him. In finding that Archer was still embarrassed and blushing, and that Jason was enjoying this game like a cat toying with a piece of string, Hoshi decided it was best just to get the conversation started.

“So, introductions,” Hoshi began. “Jason, you already know who Archer is, he’s come over today to talk with me about something that’s troubling him. Archer, this here is Jason, pronouns he/him. Jason is staying with us at the moment. He’s a friend I’ve been helping for a little bit.”

“Nice to, um, meet you, Jason,” Archer said, learning the hard way how awkward it can be to say those words without actually making eye contact.

“Nice to meet you too, kiddo.”

Hoshi, having taken the exchange as a chance to grab a cup of coffee, continued the conversation as they poured a lot of cream, and even more sugar-free sweetener, into their mug.

“Alright, alright. Work, work, work. So, *Archer*, how much do you know about what I do?”

“Um... my friend Emily, she said she came to see you once, and that, like, you helped her figure out the solution to this problem she had. She didn't go into detail, and you said you are not a therapist, so I'm... honestly I'm not sure what it is you do...”

“Hosh, you still giving people that spiel?” Jason asked through a mouthful of toast.

“I have to,” Hoshi said. “I can't go around telling people I'm a psychiatrist.”

“Because you'll get in trouble?” Jason narrowed his eyes.

“With whom?” Hoshi laughed. “The doctor police? No, I just want my clients to know that I'm not going to fix their *depression*. Sitting in my chair and telling me about your problems isn't going to fix the chemical imbalance in your brain.” Hoshi sat on the kitchen counter so they

could look at Archer and Jason sitting at the table. “So, Archer, I take it that’s not what you’re here for, right?”

“No, no, I don’t think so,” Archer shook his head.

“Okie dokie,” Hoshi checked off another item off their imaginary list. “So, would it be okay if we began our session now? Do you mind if Jason sits with us? He’s got this tough exterior but he’s a sweetheart—or, let me rephrase that, he used to be feral, but now he’s a cuddle monster. He’ll purr if you scratch him behind the ear. It’s true.”

Archer turned to look at Jason. The bare-chested man brandished his knife, the tip of which was stained with bright red strawberry jam, and slowly shook his head. That was the quietest hiss a cat had ever mustered.

Now, you’d think Hoshi was making a mistake, asking Archer to pour his heart in front of *two* complete strangers, but that right there was the trick. Hoshi had done this many times in the past; they’d made a career out of helping people open up, and they knew the power of being a complete stranger. It was easier to say the truth, those fiery words that burn inside, when the other person was a stranger. It was easier when they didn’t know the full story. When they were impartial. When they were

someone you would never see again. All of this anonymity granted one the space, the comfort, to step outside of our mental comfort-zones. It was in this irony of life that the safest place to share our deepest fears also happened to be the least safe, but that's the human brain for you. It's an M.C. Escher painting up in there and, honestly, I wouldn't have it any other way.

“I... um, I think it's okay,” Archer nodded. “I wouldn't mind another point of view, honestly.”

Before Hoshi could say anything else, Jason barged in with the subtlety of a jackhammer.

“So. What's your deal? Are you trans? Is that it?”

Poor Archer heard that while he was in the middle of sipping his coffee. He was too polite to just spit-take on someone else's kitchen table, and specially while right across from the handsome Jason. So instead, Archer unleashed his secret technique. Archer was easy to scare, and even more easy to flinch, so over his short nineteen years, he'd developed a complex maneuverer where—as soon as he realized he was about to spit-take—he would cover his mouth with one hand and pinch his nostrils with the thumb and index fingers of the same hand, effectively forcing all the liquids to remain on the inside

of his mouth while the shock passed. It was goofy-looking, but damn if it wasn't effective.

"Good save," Hoshi nodded, legitimately surprised.

"T-thank you..." Archer added.

"Telling from your reaction, you *are* trans." Jason took a bite off his toast. "It's not a big deal, technically speaking everyone in this house is on the trans spectrum. You don't have to be ashamed or anything."

"I'm not—I mean, I..." Archer looked down. "I don't even know *what* I am."

"That's a valid option too. You don't *have* to be anything," Jason pointed his knife in the direction of Hoshi. "Exhibit A. I'd also give you Exhibit B, but they're currently working in the home office."

"I know, I know," Archer scratched at his temple, "but it's just, I don't know, I'm afraid of committing to any one thing. It's just that, I—I don't know. It's kind of sad."

"What is?" Hoshi asked.

"I..." Archer took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. The young man looked tired, as though he'd spent many sleepless nights inside his head, fruitlessly spinning his wheels. "My name is not actually Archer. That's just, kind of my online handle, but it's also a name I really like. I

would like people to call me that. It feels right, but people don't call me Archer. My friends don't call me that, not even *he* calls me that. He calls me—”

Hoshi hopped down from the counter and softly, carefully, placed their palm on Archer's shoulder. The young man fell silent. He thought about the word he'd been about to say out loud, the name he'd been given nineteen years prior, and for the first time, he felt like he was looking at things objectively. Maybe it was because of Hoshi's calm demeanor; nothing ever seemed to trouble Hoshi, no rock or quake could seem to disturb the surface of their mind. Maybe it was the warmth of Hoshi's hand; it felt welcoming, like the warmth of one's home. Maybe it was the feeling of weightlessness inside Archer. Merely thinking about that word—that awful, cruel, word—was enough to quicken his step. The slates at the bottom of his mind remained in place, intact, unbroken, but they were shifting. An earthquake was coming. Hoshi just needed to keep him steady.

“You don't have to tell us your other name,” Hoshi whispered softly. “You can be our Archer forever, or for as long as you want to be Archer.”

“Names come and go,” Jason said. “Some of them wither and die.”

“And that’s okay,” Hoshi added.

Archer thought it over. He inspected his own feelings as though the contents of an old purse. He’d tried so many times to come to terms with the hand he’d been dealt. He tried running away from it. He tried pretending it never happened. Archer took his new name for a spin on the internet and found a great sense of joy in knowing that some of his online acquaintances knew him only as *Archer*. To those people, there was no one else. Archer wished that he lived in such ignorance, but even on the internet, he could not escape from the name he’d been given. Every time he commissioned art from a friend, or received a package in the mail, the name on the receipt wasn’t *Archer*. And with this single thread, the whole sweater of Archer’s identity came loose. Archer wasn’t even sure what he wanted to be. He wasn’t even sure if he was a *he* at all, and the journey to find out seemed so treacherous. How could he get there, how could he find the answer, if he hadn’t even started?

Archer was young and, though youth often made fools of people, there was a hidden voice inside of this young

man. This whisper was bright, merciless, magnificent—so much that it bled through the slate at the bottom of his mind—telling him that unless he began his journey, he would never know for certain.

It was simple.

If you want to change, you must change.

If you want to be different, you must start.

But starting was hard. Because, in Archer's mind, he could not start his reincarnation—his metamorphosis out of the cocoon—without first exhuming the corpse of his past self: the identity thrust upon him. The person he was told he had to be by his family, his friends, and the whole of society. Archer was currently lost inside a labyrinth of someone else's making, but he was not trapped in there, he could find a way out. He knew he could escape. He just had to start.

Beginnings are different for everyone. Some are born demigods, some pull swords from chunks of stone, others catch stars from the sky; most of us just get up in the morning and go to school. Everyone's journey begins at different places. The exhuming of a dead name—a dead self—is not necessary for growth. Justice does not always require digging up corpses and finding the cause of death.

Every case is different. Some are treacherous and hard, but that did not make them any less worthy. Archer was a special case; he felt the need to place his scalpel to the flesh of that rotten self.

“Everyone... everyone calls me *Matilda*.”



6

Archer was born, approximately nineteen years prior, under the name of *Matilda Cisneros*. Archer's mother, who moved to the United States when she was a teenager, took pride in all the reading she'd done in order to master English as a second language. Among the piles upon piles of book she'd read, there was none she liked more than Roald Dahl's 'Matilda.' She wasn't as big a fan of the 1996 movie adaptation, but when wasn't that the case? Now, some parents name their children after relatives, some pick cool-sounding names out of a book, and others let

love decide. Love is a curious substance though, and the best of intentions are just that: *intentions*. You can mean well and do things with a good heart but that doesn't guarantee a damn thing. Archer's mother meant to pass on her love for a fictional character onto her child... but this had the opposite effect. Archer's birth name felt like a ill-fitted pair of shoes, and this had nothing to do with the fictional character the name came from. A name's just a name—*of course*—but a name's also like a hotel key to a room you didn't ask for. This can be specially daunting for someone who's young, because at the earliest stages of development, a name's all you got. So, like most people, Archer tried living in the room labeled *Matilda*, and like most people, he managed. He dressed like someone named Matilda would. He behaved like someone named Matilda should. He did things a Matilda would do. He made friends with people who looked like a Matilda and stayed away from people who didn't. And all of this could've been perfectly serviceable. Many people are born with a hotel key in their little baby hands, and they never even think of living anywhere else. They inhabit that space, fit into the role asked of them, and live fulfilling lives. *There is nothing wrong with this*. In fact, some might

even argue the luckiest people in the world are those who've never had to think about the hotel room they inhabit every day. If the shoe fits, Cinderella, then all power to you. All luck to you as well. Remember that not everyone catches the good side of the coin flip. Some people are given the wrong key. Some people don't even want a hotel room to begin with. And so, many people struggle with the pair of shoes given to them at birth. If they don't fit, if they're too big, or too small, or too tight on the sides, or you can't stand shoelaces, then you're likely to spend most of your life struggling with this. You spend your life feeling like there's something wrong with you; feeling like you don't belong; feeling like you're in the wrong place and the wrong time.

Archer found himself facing this hurdle from a young age. He didn't like wearing dresses. He didn't like playing with dolls. He didn't like playing with action figures *either*. Archer loved drawing the monsters, heroes, and fantastical worlds he saw in his imagination. Things that were and things that might someday be. Archer didn't like gossip, or sleepovers, or even liked talking about boys. And so, every time he'd be reminded of his name's origin, the fictional Matilda, he'd look down at this feet and

suddenly feel very out of place. And out of time. Was he supposed to look like that girl? Was that what his mother wanted? Did he even *want* to look like that? Why couldn't he just choose for himself? These questions percolated on the back of his mind, pushing into one another, picking up speed, and forming a current powerful enough to cause a whirlpool inside of him.

Archer's teen years were hard but—*thank the heavens*—they were through. Archer struggled with his identity, but at least he had venues to explore. One of the few boons of being a teenager was the socially acceptable idea of having a *phase*. Archer exploited this social construct. He fully took into the role of a tomboy, committing to it with the determination of someone signing up for a ten-year doctorate. Of course, Archer's parents noticed the shift in their child, but like a lot of parents, they ignored it. They thought it was just a *phase*. It was easier to let it go than to do anything about it, and for that socially acceptable laziness in parenting, Archer was forever grateful. He took this space to experiment. He hung out with boys to see what they were like. He partook in role-playing games with his friends, the kind with dice and dungeons drawn on graph paper. In these games he

often took the role of a character who was male, or a fantastical race that was devoid of gender altogether. He used these spaces as a chance to experiment, to see what it would be like to be a man, or to be something without gender. Between the safety of dungeons filled with monsters and in the margins where he drew his characters, Archer created for himself a new room to live in. Once he was out of high school, and out on his own, he thought he'd try to move into this other place...

But it wasn't easy.

Archer's friends didn't understand what he was going through. Things were said that shouldn't have, lines were drawn in the sand, and Archer started to believe that—no matter whom he told—he would always face the same awful reaction. The human brain is specially wired to avoid scary situations, and as instructed to him by the survival instinct thousands of years in the making, Archer stopped telling people about his struggles with his identity. He kept quiet. He kept his head low. All the feelings were still there; he was just suffering all on his own, all in silence. Like most people.

And then... Archer met *him*; a young man in one of his classes. His name was Matthew, but Archer nicknamed

him *‘Lovely Boy’* because that’s what he was. Matthew was just so lovely, so sweet, so warm, so kind, and so endlessly cute. As soon as Archer met him, he felt that bizarre Hollywood effect where time appeared to slow down. Archer really liked Matthew. Archer wanted to hold him, to bury his head in his chest, and to kiss his lips. Archer had never, not once in all of his life, felt the sickening longing of wanting to be with another person. Suddenly, the one class that previously felt like a chore became Archer’s favorite. Suddenly, the person who previously kept to himself started being more outgoing. Archer started answering questions, going up to the board, all because he wanted—more than anything in his life—for Matthew to pay attention to him. Archer wanted Matthew to notice that he existed. And he did. Matthew noticed Archer. He started sitting next to him. He started talking to him. And then, as if love wasn’t already cruel enough, Matthew said something very sad. It wasn’t mean, or rude, or even problematic. Matthew didn’t say anything wrong. In a way, he said the perfect thing to confirm that Archer’s crush was being reciprocated. Except, without realizing it, Matthew had stepped into a minefield of emotions. One

day before class, Matthew approached Archer and spoke with as bright a smile as the sun itself could muster.

“Matilda? I would like to file a formal apology to you.”

“Really?” Archer raised an eyebrow. “Why’s that?”

“I... I have been lying to you.”

Matthew feigned sadness then. In his mind, it was all part of his little apology but poor Archer—so gay and so in love—found his heart racing. Matthew saw the change in Archer’s expression and immediately tried to correct course.

“N-no, it’s nothing bad, I just, I never told you... but I’ve actually never seen the movie *Matilda*. You told me your mom named you after the character in it, and I thought I’d maybe learn more about you if I watched it.” Matthew noticed Archer’s expression worsening, though not for the reason he thought. And so, like anyone in that situation, he overcorrected hard. “I really, *really* liked the movie! It’s so cute, and funny, and like, really cool? Like, if someone had told me the movie was about a little girl with *psychic powers*, I would’ve been watching this movie on repeat every day at daycare. I just—I, I just wanted to say that I think your name is really cool. You’re so lucky to have a cool name like Matilda.”

Matthew meant well. He had the best of intentions. But intentions are just *that*. Intentions. Shoes. Hotel room keys. Sheets of graph paper. Colored pencils. Dice rolls. Coin flips. DVDs rented from the college library. A random movie from the 90's which lingered in a lot of people's minds. In the background mostly. Archer was not as lucky. That one film—and his mother's choice nineteen years before—lingered at the center of his thoughts, like a torch casting light onto every aspect of his life. Sure, a name's a name but what if the shoe doesn't fit? And what if you're not Cinderella? And if the room you've been living in your whole life feels wrong? And what if you were just getting ready to try again, to try and be someone other than *Matilda*?

What then? The options were simple.

You can pick love over comfort, and suffer in silence.

You can pick comfort over love, and suffer in loneliness.

Or...

You can do the hard thing, the scary thing, and reach out.

You can see about that strange person who helped your friend. You can get their address. You can walk out

of the dorm building. You can hop on the bus. You can get off at the stop right by that doughnut shop. You can walk down Golondrina Street in search of a pink house with a pride flag hanging from the second-floor balcony. You can stand there, at the steps of that house, telling yourself over and over that it's better to try something, anything—even *if it hurts*—than to remain where you are.

It might take a couple tries; it might require someone to give you a little bump in your rump, but in the end, you go through with your plan. You spill your past, your soul, your problems—and you realize something funny and sad. Your problems haven't changed. You haven't suffered some magical metamorphosis, but that's not to say something magical hasn't happened inside of you. Sometimes just talking about your problems, letting the words fall out of your lips, is enough to make the world feel better. The walls of your cocoon thin. There's a transformation coming. It could happen at any moment. And that's okay.

You've let the words out.

The hardest part is through.

Nothing can hurt you now.



7

Hoshi sat on the kitchen counter, trying as hard as they could not to smile. Hoshi listened to Archer's story, to his pain, to his fears, and they felt as proud as a parent could be. Archer had opened up with ease, and he'd followed Hoshi's trail naturally. Hoshi usually had to do a lot of work to help people see the way out of their own labyrinths, but this time had been different. Hoshi was barely even doing anything. All they did was listen, offer a slight psychic signal here and there, and now—Archer

was at the precipice of breaking his *Fabula Rasa*. It was all very exciting.

Though, I ought to rewind for a hot moment. I recently described to you Archer's internal conflict as well as flashes of his memories and a glimpse of the potential within him. I told you a little more than what Hoshi could see using their innate ability to read people's minds, but I also gave you details Hoshi could not fully grasp. Thus in one way, you know more than Hoshi and yet less than they did, because you have no context. You already know that Hoshi was able to read minds. They knew Archer's name—the name he wanted to be known by, as well as his pronouns, his current identity, all of this—with just one look. This is a fabulous ability, but I urge you not to think of it as a *superpower*. As a connoisseur of comic books, I say the following with all the seriousness I can muster: Hoshi and their friends possessed incredible abilities, some more unbelievable than others. But even so, none of them were superheroes. Superheroes are impossible fantasies. Hoshi and friends were *real* people; with jobs, bills, dreams, goals, passions, and lots, and lots, of student debt.

In time, you'll understand how Hoshi unlocked their power. Hoshi will explain it themselves, but for the time being, I must give you context for what Hoshi had just done—or at least, had tried to do. A couple years prior, upon shattering their Fabula Rasa, Hoshi glanced into the endless sea inside of them, and realized the power of the many selves, the many persons they could inhabit, the many Facets of their being. In talking about his fears, his worries, and his troubles, Archer was beginning to unlock something deeper inside of him.

This may be hard to understand, maybe even impossible depending on the burdens weighing on your shoulders, but there exists something fabulous hidden at the bottom of the self. This is the stuff of legends. This object at the bottom of everything is a false door of sorts, though to many this obstacle takes the form of a slab of stone. This object is the embodiment of all our fears, worries, and all the lies about ourselves that we believe to be true. This object is the final barrier between the person we've been told we are—or the person we've been told we *must* be—and the persons we can be. The unlimited potential of the human mind, and all of its boons, await on the other side of that slate. If one were to crush the

Fabula Rasa, then the mythical, the incredible—and *the fabulous*—would become conjoined into the very fabric of our being, and by extension, the fabric of reality itself. Suddenly, there would be no limitations between the person you are and the many persons you can be. With practice, dedication, and an open heart, you could even inhabit multiple persons, multiple Facets, and partake in all of their gifts.

But who could manage that? Who could shatter the mold at the bottom of the mind, when feelings often felt like thorns on our side, and the world seemed full of dangers and monsters? Most people never even realized the weight in their soul is *real*. Most people drag this slate behind them like a ball and chain. And yet, against all odds, there are some who manage to break the Fabula Rasa without even realizing it. Some people glance at a beautiful sunset, witness a harrowing event, or manage a selfless deed, and—next thing they know—they stumble ass-backwards into the answer to that mythical question. Their slate breaks. Their true self seeps through the cracks. The impossibility of self bleeds out, like beads of mercury. This substance is as powerful as it is dangerous, and yet no

less mesmerizing than humanity's first time seeing a solar eclipse.

Hoshi had mastered the mercurial power of the self, as had Cami, Jason, and many of their friends. As previously mentioned, Hoshi possessed the ability to read people's minds as though looking at the puzzle solutions on the inside of a cereal box. There was a bit more to it than that, of course. Hoshi themselves would've never explained their powers in that regard; after all, they did have a certain fascination with mazes. They tended to see everything as a kind of mental labyrinth, but the principle remains the same. Now, you would expect a group of young people with supernatural abilities to end up fighting crime, or something stupid like that, but I must remind you again that superheroes are not real people. *Peter Parker* didn't have friends, or a job, or responsibilities. He barely even had relationships. It's kinda hard to bond with people when you keep letting them fall off the Brooklyn Bridge. Peter Parker didn't have dreams, goals, or passions. The very act of putting on a mask, hiding your identity, was contradictory to shattering the *Fabula Rasa*. One who did not embrace the self could not unlock the many selves that could be, the many Facets, mirrors, and

hues of the gemstone deep inside of us. If Peter Parker were a real person, and not some juvenile comic book character, would he choose to spend his limited days on this world swinging from building to building leaving catastrophe in his wake? I don't think so. Then again, Peter is not the worst. I implore you, *please*, do not get me started on Bruce Wayne. I—I know, I *know*. I'll stop now. Sorry. I'm just a bit of a comic book nerd. Always was. Always will be. I didn't bring them to work, because I would've died of shame if anyone caught me reading one in the lunchroom. But I had lots of them on my smartphone. It was easier to read them that way, specially when you had your back to the wall. That way there was no one to bother you. No one to judge you. It was just you, your cup of instant noodles, and the panels. And that gorgeous art by Alex Ross. Now, *that* was heaven. But. Enough about me.

Hoshi would've never described themselves as a superhero. For starters, they sure as hell didn't feel like one. Superheroes were not *real* people; they were silly fantasies. Seriously, are you telling me Peter Parker could somehow afford to live in a New York apartment off his photography gig? You're telling me this kid went to

university in New York *Freaking* City, and he isn't swimming in crippling debt? Now that's a fantasy right there. Hoshi was a real person, living in the real world. And, yes, I recognize that Hoshi—much like Peter Parker—had questionable jobs that brought home irregular amounts of money, but were they jumping out of a window every night looking for trouble? All for what? To punch goons in the face? To sell more merchandise? What is the goal of a superhero? To make the world a better place? You don't need tights to do that. Hoshi was navigating through life with a single goal in mind, a goal which had, not so long ago unlocked the power to see what lay inside people's minds. Hoshi wanted to help people. That was why they'd started volunteering at the youth center, why they'd put on ads on the college campus, why they'd opened the doors of their home to stranger after stranger. It was the reason why they were sitting on that kitchen counter, using their powers to help a young man out of the maze he'd locked himself into. Or at least that's what Hoshi would've been doing were Archer not so damn good. Seriously. Hoshi was smiling so wide, and was so proud, they could've hugged and

kissed that young man so hard one of them would've fainted. Not sure which one.

Now, on a less bright topic, you no doubt are beginning to wonder the morality of reading people's minds, even if the goal were to help them. Hoshi will explain this in time, giving you the long of it, but for now, I will ease your worries and give you the short of it. At this point in time, Hoshi's ability to read minds—the Facet of their self known as *MAZE*—allowed them to see what people were thinking, what troubled them, and a portion of their past. They saw this as plainly as if they'd lived those memories themselves. Hoshi used this ability to guide people during their conversations, steering them in a way so that they'd organically find the answer to their own problems. Think of it as the way items are laid out in a supermarket. The endcaps and signs leading you from section to section, inspiring you to purchase the stuff on the top-shelf first, and so on. If Hoshi wanted Archer to fully realize that Lovely Boy had feelings for him, and solidify this fact in this mind, then Hoshi just had to rearrange the thoughts at the corners of the maze. Hoshi was guiding the young man, placing signs here and there. Sometimes the signs were psychic ones, such as causing a

memory to emerge from the background of Archer's mind. Sometimes it was as simple as Hoshi stating the obvious.

“Archer, you realize he watched the movie just to impress you, right?”

There was an art to Hoshi's way of helping people, but they had not gotten as good as they were without making a lot of mistakes. It required a lot of empathy and patience, and love for your fellow human beings, to let them figure things out on their own. Sure, Hoshi could've just taken one look at Archer and given him the answer, but do you even realize how terrible that would be? Hoshi had learned this the hard, hard way. The sad truth is that people don't really want answers, at least not in the same way that one might take aspirin to cure a headache. *Heartache* didn't work like that. Feelings didn't work like that either. Sometimes it took a lot of time, weeks, maybe months, for Hoshi to start guiding the conversation. In the course of living, the human mind accumulated fears, worries, and lots of negative emotions, like the lint compartment of a dryer. Those things just clogged up a person's ability to make their way out of the maze. Things got even worse depending on a person's mental health; if

you've got a dryer that generates even more lint than average, then it's going to make breaking the Fabula Rasa even harder. Hoshi's ability was supernatural, but it wasn't magic. Hoshi couldn't fix a person's depression more than they could fix Cami's car. Seriously. Hoshi wouldn't even know where to start fixing a car's engine, let alone something as serious as PTSD. Things like depression, anxiety, and other chemical imbalances of the brain, were all better treated by a professional.

It was no wonder that Hoshi was beaming. Most people they helped took weeks, sometimes years, to make as much progress as Archer had in one single conversation. Even prodigies like Jason, who was regaining his abilities after losing them the year prior, was being put to shame.

Inside Hoshi's mind, the world was Broadway lights and fanfare. Archer was doing so good. He was almost *there*. He could not tell yet, because he was not looking inside of him, but the answer to the question—the key to the door—was right in his grasp. Hoshi just needed to guide him a little more and steer him towards a certain, wonderful, emotion.



8

“You know, I get a lot of people who come here because they need love advice...” Hoshi took a sip of their coffee. “But, I don’t think you’re having love problems. If anything, you have love *perks*. This guy you have a crush on, sorry I forget his name, what did you call him again?”

“Oh, um, his name is Matthew,” Archer’s eyes brightened. “But I like to call him *Lovely Boy* because, well, he is. He’s the loveliest person I’ve ever met.”

“I can tell,” Hoshi smiled. “All the while you were telling us about him, it was like the sun was peeking through the rain clouds. You must really, really like him.”

“I do.” Archer held his cup in both hands, feeling the warmth radiating through the porcelain.

“And I have this itty-bitty feeling that he likes you too,” Hoshi said.

“Are you sure?” Archer asked. “I just, I don’t know. He’s just so nice. Maybe he’s nice to everyone.”

Archer’s reaction was not unexpected. This wasn’t the first time he’d second-guessed what he felt. In truth, a lot of people spend their whole lives second-guessing their instincts. Hoshi’s innate ability allowed them to see into Archer’s mind and witness as the young man began walking backwards out of his mental labyrinth. This too was normal. Hoshi was used to spending entire sessions guiding people away from second-guessing their instincts. It was all part of helping people realize that there was a voice inside of them worth listening to, worth trusting, but this task was never easy. That was why Hoshi had trained their patience and empathy, for they knew that as long as they kept helping—even if just a little—the other person would eventually make the right choice.

Unfortunately, Jason didn't have that kind of patience.

The older man, who'd finished his toast and his coffee, had listened to Archer's story about his birth name, about the young man he had a crush on, all the while being as patient as one could be. But Jason couldn't see into Archer's mind like Hoshi could; Jason couldn't see all the progress Archer had made in just that one conversation. Deep down, the older man wanted to help—he surely meant no malice—it was just that his patience was beginning to run out.

“He likes you,” Jason said. “You think he went out of his way to watch some old movie just out of curiosity? Come on, he wanted to get to know you better. He wanted to have something in common, some shared ground where the two of you could meet. It's no different than if he'd started listening to the bands you like or started playing the video games you enjoy.”

“When you say it like that...” Archer sighed. “It sounds so simple.”

“Love is simple,” Jason added, “people are complicated.”

Hoshi had been about to stop Jason, fearing that he would say the wrong thing, but he didn't. Once again,

Hoshi felt that sensation of pride blossoming inside their chest. Jason too had come a long way.

“I never thought about it like that,” Archer said after a long pause. “It’s just—I don’t know.”

Except Hoshi *knew*. Hoshi could see into Archer’s mind, see him trying to navigate the corridors inside of him. Hoshi had been laying signs as carefully as they could, but they couldn’t just change a person’s mind. They couldn’t make Archer think the right thoughts. Not like Hoshi would’ve wanted to do that in the first place. Forcing people to change was a horrifying idea. If people didn’t change out of their own volition, even with a little guiding, then what was the point? Did it even count as helping when what you did went against the very fabric of a person’s being? These were the kinds of questions that Hoshi combated when they first began helping people. In the end, they realized that it was best for people to take things slow—healing took a long time anyway—rather than being pushy and trying to make people change overnight. Thankfully, this wasn’t really the case with Archer. The young man was beginning to see the light. Hoshi knew just where to take him, just where to guide him, so that he could take the invisible key in his hand

and open the door into the deepest part of his being. He was so close. Hoshi knew that the young man would've arrived there on his own some day. All Hoshi needed to do was give the young man a little push.

“Archie, I’m gonna be real with you,” Hoshi said, knowing the harshness of their words would snatch Archer’s attention from his own thoughts. “This *Lovely Boy* you keep talking about? He likes you. I can tell he likes you a lot. That’s a fact. So, the real question here—at least in my mind—is whether *you* want him to like you or not.”

Archer looked up at Hoshi, his eyes darting about the place. Hoshi’s words struck him like a bucket of cold water, and the young man was rushing to form a coherent sentence.

“I—I like him, I do, I would like to get to know him better, it’s just...”

Hoshi felt their heartbeat quicken. They could see into Archer’s mind, into that labyrinth of moonstone and starry black skies, as the young man moved closer and closer to the exit. Without realizing, he was chasing a beam of light, a way out of the corner he’d walked himself into. The words were about to escape his lips, the start of

the end, the very first step up a flight that would carry him out of that imaginary dungeon.

“I just...” Archer looked down. “I don’t even know if I like myself.”

There was an explosion of light—piercingly blue and both boiling and frigid. This light, this burst of energy, could only be seen and felt by those who’d opened themselves to their inner truths. Hoshi and Jason, both on the journey to inhabit all their possibilities, all their Facets, saw a change in that young man. The spectrum of light visible only to those who’d shattered the Fabula Rasa, with its impossible blues and indigos, seemed to coalesce around the young Archer. He didn’t even realize it, but he was closer now. He was almost out of the labyrinth. The distance between the key he held, and the keyhole at the top of the stairs, was better measured in inches.

“Maybe this is TMI but,” Archer continued. “You know, I’m trying to figure out who I am, what I am, and I don’t even wear a binder or anything. It hasn’t been a problem, mostly because I’m as flat as an ironing board, but I don’t know if he sees me like I see myself.”

Archer was so close.

He just needed a little more.

“What do you mean by that?” Hoshi asked, playing dumb.

“I... I’ve never...” Archer’s voice trailed off. Suddenly a thought struck him, and he rushed to pat at the corners of his eyes, where tears were beginning to form. “You know, like, outside, when you invited me in? That was the first time anyone has ever asked for my pronouns, at least, that casually. I told you what everybody calls me, and what they assume I am, regardless of what I look like. It’s just. Every time you say ‘Archer’ it feels right. I can’t describe it.”

“Do you like going by he/him?” Hoshi asked.

“I think I do,” Archer nodded, “but I’m not sure if I want to commit to just one.”

“That’s a valid option,” Jason added.

“I know, but I don’t want to, I’d hate if he—it’s just, it’s weird to explain.”

“Give it a try,” Hoshi smiled.

Archer took a deep breath, unaware of the bright blue light enveloping him.

“It’s just... I can feel like, like things can only go one of a few ways.”

Archer looked down, his eyes burning like torches. Without realizing it, Archer accessed a portion of a power locked deep inside him. A power that allowed him to see things that could be, things that might be. In a different time, and a different place, Archer might've grown up to be an oracle or a prophet—but this was not the age of superstition. In the era of smartphones, high-speed internet, and streaming services, there was no room for wondering what the future would be like. And even less room for those of us fortunate enough to see what was coming around the corner.

“I can see... I can see Matthew liking me because he sees me as a girl, and I see myself conforming to his wants. I know I'd still be happy with him, but... I'd secretly hate myself. I just—I don't think I could go back to dressing femme. What if he thought this was all a phase? What if one day I were to meet his parents and he'd expect me to dress like—like a normal girl? Would I put on a wedding dress for him? I—I see...”

“What do you mean, you *see*?” Hoshi asked, smiling.

“I can see it, in my mind,” Archer replied without looking up, “I can see these... these waking nightmares playing out like stuff happening on a movie screen. If

Matthew expects me to one day become his wife—*holy fuck*, just saying that, just thinking about it, about him getting on one knee and popping the question. It breaks my heart. Because. Because I couldn't say no. Of course not. I love him. I want to be with him. I can see all the good things we'd have. I can see all the things we'd make. I can see..."

The light around Archer's eyes began to flicker, like a candle fighting off a vile wind.

"What do you see?" Hoshi asked.

"It's dumb," Archer shook his head.

"Dear Archie," Hoshi said, "you're talking to the biggest dumbass in the room right now. Seriously, I once saw a crop top with the words 'stupid slut' written across the chest, and I thought 'oh hell yeah, that is totally my brand.' If what you're thinking is so dumb, then go right ahead. Make my day."

Hoshi could see into Archer's mind, could watch the young man's mental arithmetic as he tried to decide whether to say the horrible words inside his chest or to swallow them like poison. It was at this point where an average person might've decided to cut their losses, might've given up the chase, and decided to come back to

fight another day. But Archer was not an average person. He had spent the last two weeks, ever since the semester had wrapped up, thinking about his Lovely Boy. Thinking about sending him a private message. Thinking about asking him out for Christmas. For New Year's. He'd missed two chances already. He'd been mulling over those words, feeling them inside his mouth, and rather than swallow the same rotten meal, he decided he would speak. He decided he would air those damn words.

"I can see being with him. Being happy with him. It's stupid, but I see the two of us having a child. I know, it's weird, but I—I feel like I can almost see it. I can see myself putting on a happy face as we tell our families we're expecting. Putting on a happy face as we're setting up the nursery. I can see myself painting the room pink, rolling the paint brush to finish one part of the wall before... I'm running to the bathroom. I'm crying. Because. Because it's happening again. I'm doing the same to this child that my mom did to me. And I—I hate myself for it. I hate that I never told him."

"Never told him what?" Hoshi asked, their voice quiet.

"That maybe we could paint the room green? Or maybe yellow? Yellow is so bright and happy. It makes

you think of sunflowers and rubber duckies. Why wouldn't you rather paint it yellow? Why should we... why should we paint the damn nursery pink?"

Archer gasped, rushing to cover his eyes and mouth. He was crying. He was trying to hide it, trying to rush to the bathroom of his mind so that no one could see him, and how bad he was struggling.

"I'm so sorry," Archer said in between sobs. "It's not even—it's not real. Jesus Christ, I'm so sorry you had to see that. I just. Sometimes I get lost in my mind, and I get stuck in these waking nightmares, and I—I lose track of time. I'm sorry I'm crying. It's not even real."

"Hey now, it's okay." Hoshi got down from the kitchen counter and began softly rubbing Archer's back. "Even if what you are seeing is imaginary, that doesn't mean the feelings you're experiencing aren't real. But now, come here," Hoshi wrapped their arms around Archer, as though keeping him from falling apart. "You said you could see things going in one of two ways, what was the other scenario? Is it also a waking nightmare?"

"K-kind of," Archer said, rubbing at his eyes. "It's not as involved, but it still, it hurts too."

"What do you see?"

“I see him... it’s hard to explain. It’s also kind of embarrassing.”

“Go ahead, he won’t know you told us.”

“I...” Archer’s eyes began to glow again. “I can see him liking me for what I look like right now.”

“Because you’re male-presenting at the moment?”

“Yeah.”

“And, this feels weird because...” Hoshi waited a second, as though thinking it over, even though they already knew what they were going to say. “Because Matthew might be trying to explore his sexuality, and you being male-presenting but AFAB is a safe way for him to experiment? You think that’s it?”

“No, not really,” Archer shook his head. “I can see him really liking me for being male-presenting. I can hear him, if I just—if I think about his voice, I can hear him calling me his *boyfriend*. I can see him saying these things, and meaning them, and being incredibly happy with me as his... man.”

Archer was so close.

The key and the lock were millimeters apart.

“Archer,” Hoshi whispered, “that doesn’t sound too bad. Why are you crying?”

“It’s just... I know it’s stupid...”

“It isn’t,” Jason’s voice echoed inside the room like thunder. “It’s not stupid. It could never be. Keep talking.”

“It’s just... I don’t even know what I am. Maybe I am a *he*, but maybe not. Maybe I’m a *they* or something else entirely. I don’t want to commit to anything, but I feel like I have to, for him. Because what if I change my mind? What if I want to be something else, and he doesn’t love me anymore?”

The light pouring out of Archer’s eyes painted the room in impossible shades of blue. The tears in his eyes caught the rays of light as though the panels of a prism, casting through his fingers a full spectrum of icy hues. He was almost ready. He just needed one more little sign.

“Archer, you don’t have to commit to anything,” Hoshi took a deep breath, basking in the wonderful light all around them. They thought over the words they’d say and spoke them one at a time in the perfect order. “Your identity is not some slab of stone. It is soft, flexible, malleable. Archer you can be whomever you want to be. Even this name you have is transient. Someday you might find another one that fits you even better. And you know what? This is all okay. This is all working as intended.”

The words struck Archer like droplets of rain. One by one, they pooled at the bottom of his chin. He was crying on the outside—but within, the feeling that resonated inside his walls was one of calm. The words came, went, and what remained inside of that young man was silence. It was the piercing emptiness that occurred just before lightning or before the next stroke of a typewriter. The young man savored the silence, the feeling of clarity. *Yes*, the words made sense. *Yes*, they were so simple—and yet, when put in the right order the mechanism functioned as intended. The key turned in its compartment, and the gears and pistons, and metallic machinations all reacted in perfect unison.

Then came a sound of rushing water, of swirling motion, as though falling, as though flying through the sky. Archer felt something inside him shatter—a quiet, pathetic sound—like that of a glass wall that could've never, should've never, been able to imprison him. This barrier defeated, the young man whose name at that time was Archer—and whose first virtue would be the ability to see the future—opened his eyes, blue light crowning his brow, and saw that he was in another world. A world that existed only for him, inside the depths of his ocean.



9

Archer opened his eyes and found that he was somewhere else. He had no way to know this place was inside of him, or that he'd created it over the course of his life, or even the amazing psychic potential contained therein. Archer had no way to know, because humanity had yet to understand this phenomena. In time we would. In time things would change. The power of the human mind to inhabit its Facets will one day be understood, and the barrier containing these abilities will have its crowning moment, but it would be a long time before

that fateful day. Some of us won't make it. As you can imagine, the room Archer found himself in was shrouded in mystery and confusion. This room—the antechamber containing the *Fabula Rasa*—was shaped differently depending on your life's experiences, struggles, achievements, and victories. To some, this place looked like a familiar room. It could look like a bedroom that reminded us of when we were young and carefree. It could look like the inside of a car where we shared our first kiss or cried when some stupid boy broke our heart. It could even look like the four walls we currently called 'home.' There was no one way for this antechamber to look, for it was as varied as people could be, or as the patterns on the wings of a butterfly. There were similarities of course, but if you looked close enough, you'd see that every single one was unique. Archer's antechamber was not a familiar place, and it looked like nothing in the waking world.

Archer stood on a floating island, the floor beneath his feet was stone-like, smooth and cold to the touch. The island Archer was standing on stretched for about twenty feet in all directions, and though the stone of the floor was immaculate, the edges were jagged and crude, as though

drawn by a child's hand. As to *what* exactly the island was floating on, Archer was not sure. He could not bring himself to walk closer to the edge and find out. If he had, he would've seen the emptiness of space. Just as the planets hung in the void, so did that island, that fragment of some shattered world, hung in the middle of nothing. All around the island, Archer could see little silver stars and a patchwork of hazy nebulae that stained the darkness with blue hues. There was no sun in the distance, casting light upon that floating island, but there didn't need to be. The realm of the mind, from which dreams spilled into our conscious, did not need to abide by the rules of the real world. It was this inconsistency that gave us our power. Reality was not as stern as we were led to believe and, if you knew how, it could easily bend to your will. This principle wasn't rooted in magic, praying, or wishful thinking. Most of the work is actually *confidence*. All you needed to start playing with the building blocks of reality was to trust in your instincts. If you've ever wondered how was it that confident people seemed to always get their way around the world—well, now you know. Confidence, courage, and a brazen disregard for the norm will get you far. Just as they'd gotten Archer that day. The room he

found himself in was a real place. It was tangible. He could feel the stone at this feet. He could feel a chill on his chin, his cheeks, and the tips of his fingers. This wasn't some hallucination or trance. This place was *real*; it existed somewhere in the depths of Archer's mind, as did the sheet of slate at one end of the island.

Even though there was a galaxy of blues and indigos all around him, Archer seemed to only have eyes for the object right in front of him. There, twenty feet or so away, stood something that looked like a huge stone slab. What was it hiding? Archer wanted to find out. He *needed* to find out. There was nothing guiding him anymore. Hoshi and Jason could not have been further away. In this moment, Archer was on his own, truly alone in a world of his own making, and the fire in his chest was fueled by the most human of emotions: curiosity.

Archer walked up to the sheet of slate. It was curved at the top, making it look like a gravestone or a set of double doors, though there was no epitaph and no door handles. Inscribed along the surface of this sheet of rock was the image of a butterfly—or was it a moth? The wings of this insect had a curious pattern on it resembling a human face. The eyes were narrowed in delight, the lips were curved

upwards. This face, this would-be-butterfly, or would-be-moth, reminded Archer of the auditorium in his old high school. Above the double doors that led into that place of art and song hung two masks intertwined with a blue ribbon. One mask was frowning, its eyes holding back tears, while the other was laughing with glee. These masks represented the two original genres of Greek plays: tragedy and comedy. If that sheet of slate—the thing we know now to be the *Fabula Rasa*—had existed in the real world, which is so obsessed with symmetry, then wouldn't each of the wings have been a different expression? Shouldn't one wing have been frowning, holding back tears, while the other laughed in rapture? Maybe this is the way things should've been but, inside the wonderland of Archer's mind, there were no rules; no fractals, no need for mathematical consistency. Just because life was known to be a tragedy *and* a comedy didn't mean that the gates to our full potential needed to reflect that. In fact, any who managed to reach the antechamber would've gazed upon that slate and felt the wonderful need to laugh. There it was, the punchline to the joke we called *living*.

The *Fabula Rasa*.

As soon as we're born, we're told *what* to be; we're given containers to fill, rooms to live in, shoes to wear, and masks to put over our faces. There is no escaping it. Everyone is given a role to play in the theater of life, and for the most part, we play ball. We do as told. We behave first as children, then students, then young members of society, then many other roles are thrust upon us, some with the subtlety of daggers. For millennia, our species believed that the true essence of the self—many called this the soul—navigated through these roles as an actor would, all the while maintaining its unique truthfulness. Sadly, this assumption is wrong. The true essence of the self—the frictionless substance we are all born with—lies at the bottom of all the roles we've played, all the mistakes we've done, all the times we've faltered, all the lies we've told about the world and about ourselves. These lies, mere thoughts, have a way of becoming solid, almost like bricks, and sinking to the bottom of our mind. We believe something about us that isn't true, but because we're told that many times over our lifetime, we believe it. We convert this fantasy into reality, and it sinks to the bottom of our being, creating a sheet of hardened falsehoods. This is the truth of the Fabula Rasa. It is the amalgamation of

all the lies you've been made to believe. Lies about who you are. Lies about what you can be. Lies about what you could do. Lies about what you could achieve. All of these falsehoods solidify at the bottom of your mind, forming a physical barrier between who you are now and all the impossible Facets you can inhabit. If one could change the reality of the self—and destroy the Fabula Rasa—then one would be able to alter reality just as easily.

Archer reached out with one hand...

He touched the surface of the Fabula Rasa and witnessed as the silence of that world was shattered with apocalyptic thunder. A voice Archer knew and recognized as his own burst across that galaxy in his mind.

“YOU DON’T DESERVE TO BE LOVED.”

Archer felt his heart skip a beat.

“YOU’RE NOT WORTH LOVING.”

Archer wrinkled the fabric of his sweatshirt.

“HE DOESN’T CARE ABOUT YOU.”

Archer ground his teeth.

He knew those words. He'd heard them in the background of his life. They'd come to him whenever he least expected; at the middle of a sleepless night; at the precipice of a social event; at the thought of not fitting in;

at the realization that in order to find out if Matthew really did care about him, Archer would have to ask him out. The only way Archer could accept that young man's affection was if he—Archer himself—took the next step.

Suddenly, the world around Archer shifted.

The island seemed to stretch. The double doors Archer had been touching were now far away, higher up. There was now a long staircase, each step hovering unconnected, as though hanging by invisible strings. This staircase was longer than any Archer had seen before. It must've been hundreds of steps, and yet just as daunting as the handful he'd overcome to enter Hoshi's house.

Archer put one foot on the closest step. Although the step was but a pane of some dark stone hanging in the air, it did not fall under his weight. Archer looked up, at those hundreds of steps and began climbing. One by one. He wanted to know. His curiosity could not be satiated or deterred.

“YOU WILL ALWAYS BE ALONE.”

Archer shook his head and kept climbing.

“YOU HAVE NEVER BEEN LOVED.”

Archer began taking the steps two at a time.

“YOU’LL NEVER FEEL COMFORTABLE IN YOUR OWN SKIN.”

Three at a time.

“YOU WILL FOREVER BE AN OUTCAST.”

Archer ran up the steps, even as they seemed to multiply under his feet. Archer kept running, kept climbing steps a dozen at a time, leaping and bounding higher and faster than his body should’ve been able to. He climbed up the steps, crushing them under his feet, under his desire to know what lay on the other side of that door. And it was here, in this moment of stress and bliss, that Archer began to *think*. His thoughts bled into the world around him, as though a droplet of dye staining a glass of water. Suddenly, the voice shouting all around him started to sound different. The voice was loud, powerful, and still as menacing as before—but interwoven in all of these feelings there was something that sounded almost like pride.

“IN ALL THE REALITIES I’VE SEEN.”

Archer climbed to the top of the stairs.

“IN ALL THE FUTURES I COULD REACH.”

Archer placed his hand on the double doors.

“NO MATTER WHAT I LOOKED LIKE OR DRESSED LIKE.”

Archer searched for a door handle but found none.

“NO MATTER IF THE WORLD WAS BURNING OR DYING.”

He tried pushing on the doors, but they did not budge.

“NO MATTER HOW WE MET...”

Archer took a step back, ready to throw his shoulder at the doors—when suddenly he noticed something odd. The voice all around him, the thunderous voice he recognized as his own, had suddenly gone silent. Archer looked around, as though expecting to find the source of the voice standing behind him, but there was no one. He was alone in that world, alone at the top of that mountain of steps he'd climbed.

“In all the realities I've seen...” Archer found himself repeating the words he'd heard. He felt each word come out of his lips with a strange sense of familiarity. Yes. These words were right. They were the right words, at last placed in the right order. “In all the futures I could reach. No matter what I looked like or dressed like. No matter if the world was burning or dying. No matter how we met...”

Archer touched the base of his throat.

Had he been able to see himself—as I could see him—he would’ve been blinded, for there was light all around him, burning like a torch that enveloped his skin. The light that surged from him cast beams into the darkness, like a lighthouse, like a flashlight, like the burning spears that predated the brilliant sunrise.

The doors that stood before Archer were his version of the *Fabula Rasa*—*the mythical slate*—named this way not because of the psychic abilities it unlocked, but rather the fantastic lies each and every single one of us accepts as true and allow to become the foundation of our very being. If only one were to pierce the bedrock of the soul, one would gain the power to alter reality itself. But how? How could one achieve such a feat? How did one break the mold of our being? It was different for everyone. Though, most people could begin the journey of a thousand Facets with just one thought. One mathematical realization. One geometric truth to counteract the million fractal lies.

“No matter what... I... yes, I see it now.” Archer’s eyes burned like azure suns.

A crack appeared on the doors. This hair-thin wound began to spread onto the surface of the slate, covering the entirety of that butterfly—of that mythical moth—in a

spiderweb of fractures. Mortally injured, the Fabula Rasa began to tremble. The doors began to part, revealing a burning portal to the core of Archer's being. The young man, having at last understood truth in all of its Facets, stepped through the crumbling doors... deeper into his own wonderland, and soon found that he was somewhere else. Although this room had been with him always, this was his first time entering it.

Archer stood as though an ant in a room of humans. All around him stood enormous people, the scale of which made him think of kaiju and giant robots. Each of these people, each of these Facets, stood with their arms at their sides, as though action figures on a shelf. Archer was too small to see them all and there were too many to count. The inside of this room—this sky-high warehouse—was too dark to make out what these giants looked like. Save for one. In front of Archer, standing under a spotlight, was a giant person—an amalgamation of things familiar and not, real and imagined. This person looked neither male nor female. Their bare chest was covered in scars as well as strange x-shaped objects. These *crosses*, similar to those found on a first aid kit, were tilted, perfectly symmetrical and their surface was matte, like the

tip of a sketching pencil. This strange person reminded Archer of the cartoons he used to watch when he was young. Shows about young men going on adventures to master martial arts, taking on tournaments, and learning secret moves from demigods. Somewhere along the road of growing up, Archer had drawn this person in the pages of his notebook. This person's hair was long, bright blue, swooped back, and yet somehow spiky on the ends. Their pants and karate belt were ragged. They looked so strange—and yet so familiar. This giant person, this living collage and patchwork of concepts and images, looked down at Archer. Their face was youthful, yet intense. Those blue orbs seemed to know everything about Archer, everything that was, and everything that could be. This giant bent down and extended their hand to Archer, as though offering to carry him.

Archer nodded. Without knowing why, he walked towards the giant hand, climbed on top of it, and allowed this familiar stranger to hold him. Light began to envelop Archer, flooding out of him and into his senses, drowning him as he entered a new place—and a new self—for the first time.

“No matter what...” Archer’s lips released the words he’d been holding on to. “I will be loved, and cared for, and safe. So I will be whomever I want to be, whatever I want to be. So that I too love myself.”

The light pierced into Archer’s eyes, imprinting in them the secret spectrum of light. The secret color visible only to those who’d seen into the darkest night, the truest and most wonderful blackness, that stirs inside the human soul. It is this graceful impossibility that gives the world its consistency, reality its elasticity, and our dreams their splendor. Archer inhabited a new self, one of the many that existed inside of him, and when he open his eyes...

He saw the physical realm with blues anew.



10

Archer opened his eyes as though waking from a deep slumber. He blinked his little orbs, taking in a new spectrum of light. The world around him was real. He recognized the interior of Hoshi's kitchen. Its round table. The cabinet full of mugs over to one side. The little silvery toaster which was about to pop. Archer knew the toast was almost ready. He knew this with *certainty*, though he wasn't sure why. He'd never been good at timing things, even with the help of a kitchen timer or a smartphone app. Time always seemed to get away from him, or at least it

used to. For once, Archer felt as though the ticking of the clock—internal and external—was predictable. The silvery toaster may not have had a digital display telling you just how many seconds there were left before the bread jumped out, but Archer somehow knew there were three seconds left. Three seconds which he then spent looking around the room. First the kitchen; it looked just as it'd been before, except for the strange bluish hue everywhere. It was as though looking through a pair of tinted shades, though the effect was slowly fading away. Archer looked down at his mug, the one he'd picked from the cabinet, and saw the honeycomb pattern looking a little more green than yellow. Archer could've stared into his mug and seen the hue slowly return to normal, but something else distracted him: *himself*. Archer looked at his hands, at his arms, at his chest. He was not himself anymore. Or at least, he was not himself half the time. Archer saw his body flicker as though the pages of a flip-book going back and forth. Archer saw his right arm as he knew it, kind of thin, and always covered with a nice and loose sweater or hoodie—and then, without warning, it changed. As though a light switch being thrown, Archer saw his body transformed. His arm was completely bare,

suddenly muscular, and spotted with black x-shaped objects. He had several these shapes, these *crosses*, over his knuckles, and then larger ones on the top of his arm, going all the way up to his shoulder. They looked almost like the stitching of a stuffed animal. These crosses were so dark and imposing, they almost looked like censor bars, a thought that got only louder once Archer looked down at his chest. That was *not* him right there. That chest was muscular, and yet not masculine in nature. There were also a pair of crosses right over where his nipples would've been. He even had one over his navel, except that it looked more like a butterfly than a cross. The shock of seeing so many shapes on his skin passed when Archer realized that, although this was clearly not his body, he appeared to be in the pilot's seat. Archer lifted the arm, finding no resistance, and tried feeling for fluffy hair, which he did not find. His hair was now long, curved at the ends, and bright blue. Or at least it looked like this every other split of a second. Archer's body flickered between this appearance and the one he knew as his own, as though rapidly changing between two channels. This might've been enough for any person to completely lose all of their shits, but Archer was lucky in two regards. One, he had

just recently seen the body he was currently piloting; it was the body of the giant he'd seen inside of that weird dream place. Two, Archer knew the toast was about to pop, and like a good person, he thought of alerting everyone before the startling sound.

Archer looked up, formulating the words in his head as he did, and found his voice currently out-of-order.

The toaster popped and a hand grabbed the slices, placing them onto a small round plate. The toast and plate in question were both unremarkable, unlike the hand that currently held both of them. This hand looked as though it were made of stone like some Greek statue. Archer followed the hand, up the stone-like arm, and it was then that he formally and completely lost all his shits. All of Archer's shits scattered around him like marbles or dice freed from their bag. Archer stared at the creature in front of him. This monster's marble-like skin was broken in places, revealing a mess of computer components, and instead of hair, this creature had a mane of electronic cords and cables. Archer had seen something like that before outside one of the college's art buildings. It was like a sculpture made out of refuse. Except the statue in front

of him—the statue currently taking a seat and spreading some jam over their toast—was *alive*.

That monster, that living statue, looked up at him. Its marble face could not change, but there was something in those pupil-less eyes and that slight curve to the stone lips, that seemed to inspire serenity. Archer should've been freaked out; after all, he was still looking for the shits he'd lost; but for some reason, he felt calm looking at that immovable face. There was a strange sign on the creature's forehead. It looked almost like a butterfly. Seeing this strange symbol seemed to remind Archer of something. Or someone.

Archer blinked his eyes, and the monster disappeared. In its place was Hoshi, the wonderful stranger who'd been so kind to Archer. Hoshi smiled at him, inspiring in the young man serenity unlike anything else. Archer took a deep breath, readying himself. Shits or not, he had to ask.

“Um... what the hell?”

It wasn't a particularly good question, but he had to start somewhere.

“Looks like he's finally coming around,” Jason said. “Welcome back to the real world, kiddo.”

Archer looked at the other man, saw him as he had been before—shirtless and looking a bit hungover still—and enjoyed a short-lived relief. Then he blinked his eyes, and everything went topsy-turvy again. Instead of the shirtless Jason sitting on the chair across from him, there was now an even larger man, and even more naked. That right there was a mountain of a man. His olive skin was covered in golden glitter. His dark curls fell onto his shoulders—and what shoulders they were! The man who sat in Jason’s seat looked like a wrestler. No, not a *real* wrestler, but like a movie’s depiction of a wrestler; with fully defined pectorals and biceps the size of bicycle helmets. This man’s body was a sight to behold, but the same couldn’t be said about his face. There was a blinding source of light just behind the man’s head, as though a burning halo, obscuring the features of his face. Archer could never have noticed, because he was mesmerized by the perfection on display, but this man was not completely naked. In fact, there was a golden pendant—shaped like a butterfly—hanging from his neck.

“I... um...” Archer looked down at his mug, inspecting the liquids. He knew he wasn’t supposed to let

tea oversteep, but he never thought it would lead to something like this. “Am I... tripping balls right now?”

Hoshi and Jason laughed, though not at Archer’s remark or his expense. There was a curious glee in their laughter, as though they’d been watching a kitten being adorable. They were laughing at the wonderful innocence of not having all the answers.

“No, my dear Archer,” Hoshi smiled. “You’re not tripping balls.”

“You know, I just, I’ve never even smoked weed before,” Archer said, his voice quiet as though embarrassed. “I had edibles once, and it didn’t feel like this. I feel like, like I’m about to fall off a cliff. Is this vertigo? Oh my god, I think this is what vertigo feels like.”

“Have you ever been punch-drunk?” Jason asked.

Archer shook his head. He didn’t even *know* what punch-drunk meant. Was it drunk enough to throw punches around, or drunk enough that it felt like someone had punched you in the face? Either way, Archer had certainly never been that drunk in his life. He really wasn’t the partying type. Also he wasn’t old enough to buy alcohol yet. Though that’s never stopped anyone.

“Ever had your wisdom teeth removed?” Hoshi asked.

Archer nodded his head slowly. Just moving his body made him nauseous.

“Well, it’s kind of like that. It’ll wear off,” Hoshi added. “Your body is not going to feel like your own for a little bit—”

“That’s what it is!” Archer said out loud. “I feel like, like I’m not myself. I mean, I must be, but I feel like I am... I know this is nerdy as fuck, but I feel I’m like, a little pilot inside the cockpit of a giant robot. Does that—am I making any sense?”

“It does, you are,” Hoshi nodded. “It makes a lot of sense.”

“At least something does,” Archer said. “What happened to me? Did I, did I have a stroke or something?” Archer looked around, looking for clues as to what happened before he opened his eyes. “How did I? We were talking, and then I—I was in... am I... am I going mad?”

“We’re all mad here,” Hoshi laughed. “But that’s neither here nor there. Archer, whatever it is you’re feeling right now, don’t stress out. You were not out for long, and you didn’t do anything weird. You weren’t thrashing or making moaning sounds; you were just spacing out. Here, would you like some more toast? I

made it for myself, I haven't had breakfast yet, but I can make another couple slices—”

“If you were to make toast right now,” Archer’s eyes burned like torches, “it would take two minutes and twenty-three seconds for the toast to be ready.”

“Huh, is that so?” Hoshi maintained their usual calm tone. “That’s cool. I didn’t know that.”

“I didn’t either,” Archer said, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. “But I do now. It’s weird.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Hoshi said. “Just eat some—”

“Eat some tea and *drink* my toast?” Archer interrupted. “That’s what you were about to say.”

“Was I?” Hoshi chuckled. “All twisted like that?”

“All twisted like that,” Archer repeated. “I... I feel like I’m losing my mind. Whatever was inside my mind, it’s all spilled out, and I’m seeing things that aren’t there. I’m freaking out, like, my heart’s beating so fucking fast right now. I’ve never had a panic attack, but I wonder if this is what it feels like. I mean, if I didn’t know better, I would think this was...”

“Was what?” Hoshi asked.

“What dying felt like.”

“That can’t be it,” Hoshi shook their head. “You are alive right now.”

“Why do you—” Archer blinked his eyes slowly. “Why do you keep changing back and forth?”

“Changing what?” Hoshi played dumb. This was part of the way they did things. You may think it would’ve been best to just tell Archer what was going on; that he was currently inhabiting one of his many Facets, which just so happened to grant him the ability to see the future. But surely you realize how batshit crazy that sounds, right? Just like with love and life advice, people don’t actually want to hear the truth. Honesty is a razor-blade of a solution, and often just as razor-*thin*. In their time helping people understand their innate psychic powers, Hoshi had learned that taking things slow was best. If only they’ve had a chance to go slow with Archer. The young man had blown Hoshi’s expectations out of the water. It usually took weeks of sessions to guide a person to the bottom of their mind, to the root of their internal conflict, and it took longer to inspire them to break their Fabula Rasa. Archer had managed it in a matter of minutes. *Incredible* didn’t even start to cut it. *Prodigy* was close, but not quite right either.

“You’re lying,” Archer said. “You’re afraid to tell me because I might freak out. And I might. I can feel a high percentage chance that I would freak out if you were to tell me what’s going on with me right now. You’re hoping that giving me some time and some food will help me calm down. But it won’t. I’m going to freak out soon. Very soon. I can feel it, coming over the edge like... like water overflowing a tub.”

Hoshi’s eyes opened wide and they said something, their words were kind and compassionate, careful and loving—but Archer didn’t hear any of it. His mind was somewhere else. His attention in a different part of the timeline.

Archer opened his eyes, each burning like a supernova.

He saw through the layers of reality as though a physical roll of film. Without touching it, he unrolled the material, passing it through his scarred fingers. He advanced frame by frame. Seeing things as they would be, as they had to be. Archer skipped ahead. Archer saw himself as he had always been, and Hoshi as they appeared in the physical world. The two of them were talking in a different place. Archer was moving so fast, he could not tell where they were, but he could hear their exchange.

“*Am I special?*” Archer asked, in some not-so-distant future.

“*Yes and no,*” Hoshi replied. The Hoshi in this vision was wearing a janitor’s jumpsuit for some bizarre reason. “*You’re special, I mean most people don’t unlock their Facets like this. It takes months. There are people I’ve been helping for a year and they’re not that much closer than when they started. That being said, you are special but not exactly unique. Everyone has the potential to break through the wall, it’s just that most people don’t, most don’t ever look inside of themselves...*”

Archer skipped forward.

Archer saw himself inside a large room, surrounded by people. People like him. People cheering. People singing. People embracing. Every person in that room was happy because they’d found the answer to their own secret question; and the walls that previously entrapped them had long been shattered. Archer saw himself, happy and welcomed, loved and cared for. But that was not all he saw.

With burning eyes, Archer looked at Hoshi.

Archer did not yet understand the power he possessed and its limitations, but the sun never stopped us from putting on wax wings and trying to fly towards it. And so,

Archer flew as high as he could, as far into the future as his aching soul could gaze, and he saw something that turned his blood to ice. He looked into Hoshi, and saw a monster where they should've been. In the strike of a match, and the lighting of a cigarette, Archer made an assumption. The young man saw a three-headed monster, a chimera of a Facet, and assumed that it had to be Hoshi. Archer looked into the future—*Hoshi's future*—and saw that one day, one day far away, Hoshi would be entangled with a creature most powerful and most evil. Without knowing how, or when, or why, Archer realized that someday—someday soon—there would be a great evil. Something as pathetic and as pitiful and as insignificant as a seed would sprout horrible consequences. There would one day be a horrible person, broken beyond despair, who used their Facet to heal the pieces of their irreparable soul. This chimera of a monster would possess powers unlike any other. It would be able to change its appearance at will, modify other's memories, and cause harm from a distance. Three powers for three Facets working in tandem.

This monster was not Hoshi. It could never be Hoshi, but Archer didn't know that. Archer only knew what he

saw, and he saw printed on the film of the future a clash between Hoshi and this three-headed abomination. How could the young man assume they weren't aligned? How was it that the chimera flickered back and forth, just as Archer did? One moment it looked as it did, three-headed and evil, and the other it looked like Hoshi, calm and serene. How could Archer know? How could he not tremble at the thought of such power? How could he sit still? How could he not flee in terror? The human mind was an old machine, tried and true, and it had over the course of its history developed three ways to face destruction.

You stood your ground and *fought*.

You accepted death and *froze*.

Or you took your chances and *flew*.

Archer leaped out of his chair, ran out of the kitchen, down the hallway, and, shoeless, fled through the unlocked front door. Hoshi and Jason chased after him, equally as barefoot, but the young man had a head start, and the adrenaline in his bloodstream had him running for his life. By the time Hoshi and Jason made it to the door, Archer was at the corner of Golondrina and Main. I know this for a fact because I was at the opposite corner.

I'd left my cubicle under the excuse of having to pick something up from the post office; nobody else had the patience for awful chores like that. In truth, I had been working for only a couple hours, moving numbers from one column to another, and I was already bored out of my mind. So I'd gone out for a smoke. I stood there, at the opposite corner of Golondrina and Main. I was sucking on my addiction, and killing more than just time, when reality offered us yet another instance of geometry.

Hoshi walked out to the middle of the street, looking around trying to see where Archer had gone. With me being on one corner and Archer on the other, we formed another triangle without realizing it. Our gazes drew each of the sides.

Archer looked over his shoulder at Hoshi.

Hoshi looked down Golondrina Street, seeing only a stranger smoking.

And I, unaware of my role in this comedy, looked at the young man across the street, and saw that he was shoeless. Archer rushed out of view. Hoshi walked back into the house. And I, watching the young man running up Main without shoes, thought the only thought that would strike someone as pathetic as me.

“Gosh, I wish my life were that exciting.”



11

Life has a way of ebbing and flowing. Like a song, our lives shift through tempos and rhythms. Sometimes the world changes in one morning, and sometimes a week can pass without anything exciting getting in your way. That was the way the New Year started out for us. The universe was still conspiring in triangles, though the points of our geometry were too far away to notice without a satellite. I spent that first week of the year working at my terrible dead-end job, wondering if I'd ever feel truly alive. Every day, I moved numbers from one column to the other,

trying as best as I could not to notice how the numbers weren't adding up. I went out for smoke breaks multiple times a day, and whenever I found myself mortally bored, I would look out my little window at the pink house across the street. The young man I'd seen standing outside, and later witnessed running out without his shoes, had yet to come back. As for the residents of that pink house, they went about their regular business. The person with the sleeveless shirts would get in their car and drive in the direction of downtown Socorro, sometimes in the company of the strange tall person and the perpetually shirtless man. Though, this wasn't always the case. In those early days of the year, I saw the tall person—the one I would later know as Hoshi—leaving the house on foot and walking down Golondrina Street. I had no way to know where they were going or why, but now with the gift of retroactive omniscience, I can tell you with certainty what they did.

Hoshi went to work at *Coup de Jubilee*. The little coffee shop was located in downtown Socorro, the commercial lifeblood of our small network of towns. *Coup de Jubilee* was nudged right in between a street of busy shops and the Socorro Heritage Public Library. It was also half a

block away from the county building. The clientele varied from the usual broke college students, to the mildly broke office workers *slash* interns, to the doing-just-fine-financially-speaking-but-please-for-the-love-of-god-don't-ask-me-about-my-marriage crowd. The coffee shop was an oasis in the middle of the concrete wasteland. If you were tired of walking about, or just needed a place to share in a casual maybe-we-can-take-this-to-the-next-level date, then your first thought would've been to stop at Coup de Jubilee. The shop itself was a mishmash of aesthetic styles. The walls were painted a comfortable coffee-brown; the tables and chairs also shared those earthy tones. There were paintings hanging from the wall, most of them canvases without frames, forming a nonchalant art gallery showcasing local artists. The art clashed with the comfy look of the shop as loudly as if they'd been music videos stuck on repeat. Some of the paintings were nice, or could've been construed as being 'nice-looking' if you went cross-eyed while looking at them. Some were just bizarre. There was one particular artist who, without realizing it, was painting what they could see with the secret spectrum of light that only a few had access to. The impossible bodies painted on the canvases, at times

marble-like and at others a mess of tendons and exposed muscle, seemed to inspire as much awe as they did terror in the eyes of those brave enough to look at them. Of course, the coffee shop also had a blackboard hanging behind the counter, but considering how little the menu changed from season to season, you'd think it was a sign made to *look* like a blackboard. It was right there, between the counter and that blackboard, that Hoshi was making a little bit of a living and hardly any bit of actual work. It was the Saturday after Archer ran out of Hoshi's place. It was early in the morning, the lunchtime rush was still a faraway nightmare.

Hoshi was catching up with their best friend, who also happened to work there.

Makoto Yamanaka, or Mako for short, was the same age as Hoshi and she hadn't changed much since the days where the two of them attended Socorro High School. Mako was still barely five feet tall. She had brown skin. She kept her hair fluffy and short. It currently came down to her chin in a half-assed bob; though you wouldn't have been able to tell, because she wore a headband while working her barista gig. And, of course, just as she had when she was fourteen, Mako was still dying her hair wild

shades. Often without caring to bleach it beforehand. At that moment her hair looked like a mess of pastel tones, mostly teal and purple, though there was a bit of steel gray in there. And wasn't that odd? Mixing vibrant colors, paints or crayons, always seemed to have the opposite effect; instead of creating something as colorful as the sum of its parts, the results were often quite bleak. Colors aside, Mako was short, the shortest of Hoshi's friends. She had to stand on a plastic milk crate in order to work the espresso machine—but don't get this twisted. You *did not* mess with Mako. She was tiny, adorable even, but there were many Facets to her that you could not see with just your bare eyes. For one, she was ripped. The uniforms at Jubilee's—black shirt, pants and coffee-colored apron—did not do her figure justice.

“So...” Mako said, cleaning the espresso machine. “What happened next?”

Mako had recently been visiting family for the holidays. She hadn't been scheduled for work until that very Saturday. That was why she'd missed the commotion of the previous Monday.

By the way, Hoshi was also wearing the Jubilee's uniform, save for a long black skirt instead of the pants,

and they had their long hair up in a bun. It made them look rather mature, which was odd considering how they were sitting on a barstool and looking about as bored as a kid on a trip across the empty post-apocalyptic wasteland that was the Midwest.

“I asked Cami if they could help me find Archer,” Hoshi looked down at the sudoku puzzle they were working on. Hoshi thought their next move very carefully before filling in a number they thought had to be right. Sadly, they were already so many wrong moves deep that there was no salvaging their puzzle. “With Cami’s you-know-what it would’ve been a breeze, but you know how they are.”

“Cami chewed you out, huh?”

“They said I went too fast with the kid,” Hoshi wrote yet another wrong answer on their sudoku. “They said I should’ve tried to stop him before he went all bananas. They said—they made this point that, although what I did wasn’t *wrong*, I didn’t have to run all the yellow lights trying to help this kid.”

“Yeah. Cami’s right,” Mako nodded. “Sorry to break it to you, but you should’ve known better than to let him go all out. You’re lucky he didn’t have the you-know-what to

set things on fire. You wouldn't have a house if that had been the case."

"That's what Cami said..." Hoshi sighed. Resigned to their loss, they turned over to the next page in their little book of sudoku puzzles. "How about you? How was Maui?"

"Wonderful as always," Mako shot Hoshi a smile. "You should come next time."

"I'd love to but, *you know*, money and all that."

"Start saving," Mako raised her chin. "I'm already saving for next year's ticket."

"Always the overachiever," Hoshi said.

"Always the pantsier," Mako shot back.

"Um... excuse me? I've been waiting here for like, half an hour," said a third voice. This customer, an office worker in her thirties, had her arms crossed but her tone of voice betrayed her appearance. Sure, she looked all business—her hair certainly screamed that she worked in marketing—but she barely sounded annoyed. She was probably used to the service at Coup de Jubilee.

"Half an hour? Really? You must have a lot of patience," Hoshi held their puzzle book up to the customer. "What

do you think should go here? Right here above the two? Is it three? Or is it a four?”

“Um...” the office worker stared at the paper. It must’ve been a slow day at the marketing firm, because she actually looked at the puzzle. “It’s a three.”

“Thank you very much,” Hoshi wrote down the answer, then looked up at the customer for the first time. “Welcome to Coup de Jubilee, something-something, service, something-something. Anyhoots, what can I get you today?”

“Can I have an americano, please?”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Hoshi shook their head. “You’re starting the New Year with an *americano*? And you’re going to do exactly what with it? Take it black? Sure, you need your caffeine fix. We’re all addicted. But you can at least make it *tasty*. How about... a cappuccino? It’s sweet, it’s got that froth in there. Come on. New Year, new you.”

“I’m supposed to be cutting down on sugar...” the customer said, sounding like a child who’d been told they couldn’t come out to play.

“There’s sugar alternatives,” Hoshi smiled.

The customer covered her mouth. She looked over her shoulder, as though the chair over there or that painting on the wall were going to snitch on her. She then turned around, her eyes suddenly a lot brighter than before.

“Um, I’m going to get in trouble but, what the hell? I hate how bitter coffee is. Can I get a cappuccino with the sugar alternative?”

“You sure can.”

Hoshi rung up the customer while Mako worked on the drink. By the time the customer took her receipt, Mako was already calling out her name; it was Evangeline, by the way. She took the drink and was off to do whatever it was marketing people did on a Saturday.

“How do you get away with stuff like that?” Mako sighed.

“You know how,” Hoshi flashed a smile and—for a split second—their figure was replaced with that of their Facet. A marble body, as though carved by a master sculptor, was mixed with electronic parts, computer cables, and exposed copper cords. This mess of textures and materials was one of the many versions of themselves that Hoshi could inhabit; and through their marble eyes,

Hoshi could see into the labyrinth of a person's mind. "She just wanted the option to drink something sweet."

"I know, I know," Mako said, though she was shaking her head all the while. "I just—I don't know how you sit there and actually *say* those things to people. You're lucky Lee likes you. You would get the boot if you worked at any other coffee shop."

"I don't know about that..." Hoshi scratched at their chin. "I know the guy at *Surf's Up*, he puts up with my nonsense too. As does the owner of *Nun's*, and the lady who owns the tea house. Lots of people like me, though I guess not as much as Lee."

Hoshi felt the need to look over their shoulder at the swinging door behind them. Lee wasn't in that day. She usually took the weekends off. Hoshi didn't mind Lee. At all. She was young, and she was sweet, maybe too sweet. Hoshi just didn't like dealing with the whole unrequited-crush thing. Sometimes Hoshi wasn't even trying to look into Lee's mind. She was just such an open book. The things she thought about Hoshi... they weren't bad. They were sweet, lovely things, but Hoshi had the faint feeling Lee didn't really like them. Most people love the fantasy more than the reality. It's comforting to have someone

you can look at and think: ‘*oh, that person would treat me right, they would finally make me feel loved.*’

“You’re looking gloomy again,” Mako noted. “What’s on your mind?”

“Just... thinking about my you-know-what.”

“Really? That’s not like you,” Mako looked up at her friend. “I get you, though. Sometimes I wish I could close the door, but there’s nothing there anymore. At least not in my case. I kind of tore the door off its hinges.”

For a moment, Mako’s body appeared to flicker. In between frames, the film of reality malfunctioned, the bluest spectrum of light poured through the machine, and Mako’s body was replaced by their Facet’s. And it was unrecognizable. Standing in Mako’s place was a wrangled mess of ripe muscle. This figure was hunched over, they were so tall and wide they hardly fit around the espresso machine. This naked mass, hardly shaped like a person, could’ve crushed a hole in reality if it wanted. It could’ve crushed a hole in *anything* if it tried hard enough.

“Do you think about it?” Mako asked, back to looking like she always did.

“About what?” Hoshi asked.

“Going back to the way things were?”

“Absolutely not,” Hoshi smiled. “I’m happier now. I’m better now. And you are too. You were the first of us to awaken, Mako. I wouldn’t trade this for anything.”

“How about... for a ticket to Maui?” Mako forced a smile.

“Alright. Alright, I’ll start saving money,” Hoshi rolled their eyes.

“That’s one problem solved,” Mako nodded. “What are you going to do about the kid?”

“Well, I assume he’s safe wherever he is, otherwise Cami would’ve called an emergency meeting. Hell, if the boy was in danger, I would be texting everyone we know asking for their assistance, not just people in our circle.”

“Even *Ras*?”

“Yes, even him.”

Mako’s eyes widened. Hoshi had to be serious. There was no other reason why they would reach out to their clown of an ex-boyfriend. Hoshi and Ras still got along just fine, though—then again—it always seems fine to walk on thin ice until it starts to crack.

“What are you going to do, then?” Mako asked. “About the kid, I mean.”

Hoshi took a deep breath. The smell of fresh coffee worked its wonders on Hoshi's spirits. Yeah, they'd been waiting for Archer to come back for almost a week. The boy had left his shoes, and as a nearly broke college student, he couldn't possibly have that many pairs of shoes lying around. Although Hoshi wanted to help the young man understand his Facet, and also befriend him, in truth, Hoshi's goal was a lot more humble.

"I..." Hoshi exhaled. "I gotta return those shoes."

Humble, though no less complicated.

"So, let me see if I got this right," Mako nodded to herself. "You are going to go against Cami's wishes and launch a whole investigation to search for one young man in this entire county. All for what? Just to give him his shoes back? How are you even going to manage that? Who are you now, Sherlock Holmes?"

"I was thinking Nancy Drew actually..." Hoshi flashed a mischievous smile, and then leaned closer to their best friend. "How about it, Mako? Would you like to join me in a mystery?"



12

Hoshi was not a superhero, a superdetective, or a *superanything*. Although you may be led to believe that Hoshi's innate psychic abilities—their Facets—nudged them a little closer towards superherodom, you must not forget that these powers are not special. Everyone has them. At least, everyone has *access* to them. Everyone has the potential to shatter the Fabula Rasa, that forsaken final barrier, and learn to inhabit the many Facets of their being. As Hoshi has already explained, and would repeat soon enough, there were plenty of everyday people who

were inhabiting Facets without realizing it. The young Archer, who had been spending the whole week locked up in his college dorm room, was one of these individuals. He had been looking at the far future without realizing it—and isn't this amazing? Everyday people are incredible indeed, but... I must digress.

Hoshi was not a superhero and neither was Mako, so how were the two of them going to find Archer? They didn't know he was holed up in his room, paralyzed by the ability to see into the far future. In fact, the young man already knew what was going to happen next, and how it was going to happen. Just as yours truly already knows. But I would not dare spoil the ridiculous surprise, save for maybe the end destination. Archer was inside his room in the dorms of the *University of California Socorro County*. The school complex existed adjacent to the town of Socorro, and right at the center of the county and the network of small towns we all called home. Such was the way in this part of California. There was little to no room between towns. Sometimes the only thing dividing them was the freeway or the patchwork of inhabitable marshland right in the middle of it all. If one were to look at the whole of Socorro County, as though it were a

stained glass window, one would've seen a large chunk—kind of shaped like Pac-Man—that covered up most of the space. This big chunk, this lovely city by the sea, was Socorro. Around the proverbial Pac-Man there were little chunks of different colors; Redwood, Danse, and the tiny town of Checkers. Yes. It's true. The little town at the bottom right corner of this stained glass window was, in fact, named *Checkers*. This was because, during the gold rush, this whole area was known for two things: brewing alcohol and brothels. Socorro and Danse did most of the brewing, while all of the brothels happened to be concentrated south-east of the marshland. One of the most famous of the brothels happened to dress their sex workers in checkered outfits. I guess that's *one way* to hustle. You know a name's just a name, but sometimes a name sticks. That's how you end up with a town named after the undergarments worn by sex workers almost two hundred years prior. History lessons aside. Right at the center of this network of towns, shining brightly like the north star, was the school which had revived the county. Thanks to its influx of young people, the town of Socorro and its nearby siblings managed to stop their decline. The county owed a lot to that school, hence why they spoiled

it like the only child of a wealthy couple, though I guess you could say this university was raised by four parents. The county had turned the marsh in between their borders into a beauty. Most people didn't even know that, once upon a time, that spot in the map was colloquially known as 'the butthole of Socorro County.' Oh, how things had changed. The marsh had been turned to solid land, the dirty paths had become concrete, and right in this spot of wilderness now stood a fantastic array of buildings ready to enrich the mind.

There was just one slight, itty-bitty little problem.

The campus was closed to the public. This should not have come as a surprise. After all, it was the first week of January and classes would not reconvene for a little while longer. Mako had actually pointed this out long before they hopped on the bus, but facts never really seemed to bother Hoshi. Neither did fences.

"Hosh. Are we seriously doing this?" Mako narrowed her eyes.

The fence surrounding this side of the campus was about seven-feet high and mostly decorative. Looking through the metal bars, Hoshi and Mako could see a rolling field of grass undeterred by the Californian winter,

a couple naked trees, and—right over the hump—several boxy buildings.

“Doing what? Returning these shoes and checking in on a friend?” Hoshi held up the reusable bag they were holding in one hand, which contained Archer’s shoes. “Because if that’s what you’re talking about, then *hell yeah*, that’s what we’re seriously doing.”

Hoshi and Mako’s detective mystery had begun like no other, by which I mean that it began nothing like a paperback mystery novel. You have to remember that these two were not detectives. They didn’t go around scrubbing for fingerprints or contacting their hacker friend to run a background check or whatever it is hackers do. These two were a couple queer twenty-something-year-olds. Sure, they were queer twenty-somethings possessing psychic powers, but that wasn’t special. The Vietnamese lady down the street, the one who runs the doughnut shop, had psychic powers as well. She had no idea she had those powers, and even less of an idea that she was using them every day to make the tastiest doughnuts in town. Much like that digression, Hoshi’s plan to find Archer began in a pretty mundane place: their smartphone. Hoshi looked through their list of recent

clients. It actually took them a while to find Archer's friend *Emily*. It had been almost two months since Hoshi sat with the young woman. Hoshi had impeccable memory, and they knew Emily had been struggling with some family stuff. Their sessions together had been simple enough, Hoshi listening, guiding Emily to follow her heart. Hoshi assumed they'd helped Emily resolve her differences with her family since she hadn't come back after their last meeting in November. Hoshi never, ever contacted previous clients, bugging them to come back or anything like that. The only reason Hoshi had a phone number on record was because the tipping app they used gave them a receipt, often with a phone number. Reluctantly, Hoshi had dialed up Emily hoping she would know where Archer was. No dice. Emily wasn't even in Socorro County. She was in Oregon, where she was from, enjoying a nice time with her family. Which was a relief to hear. What wasn't a relief was what Emily said near the end of their call.

“Archer? He said he wasn't going home for the holidays. He's probably at the dorms.”

Of course, Emily didn't use that name, or those pronouns. Hoshi would've forgiven that, because their

heart was so damn pure, but not *me*. Emily knew there was something up with Archer. Emily knew Archer had been slowly changing the way he dressed and the way he behaved. Emily wasn't stupid either, though she sure could play the part. Forgive my intrusion into this moment, it's just that... I used to be like her. I used to be like Emily. I would play dumb to the changes around me because it was easier—more comfortable—to be a coward. Our poor little world was in dire need of courage, and most people did not heed the call.

Hoshi thanked Emily, then put into effect a plan that would have them and their best friend standing by a fence with the intent to jump it. Both Hoshi and Mako had taken the time to go to the pink house, change clothes, bag Archer's pair of shoes, and grab enough change out of the swear jar to pay for their bus fare. A twenty-minute ride later, they got off at the campus bus stop. No sooner did they look at the empty parking lot, and the locked front gates, that they realized their mystery had grown about seven-feet too high.

“Isn't this like, trespassing?” Mako crossed her arms.

“Oh my, that's rich coming from you,” Hoshi laughed. “You didn't use to care about silly things like that back in

high school. I mean, remember the time I punched a hole in the school wall so we could skip PE—wait, hold up, I’m wrong. It wasn’t *me* who did that. It was *you*, with your you-know-what, who punched a literal hole through six inches of concrete.”

“Every time you tell that story the wall grows by an inch or two,” Mako rolled her eyes. “And it wasn’t concrete. It was a chain-link fence. I didn’t punch it either. I just snapped the links, making a little door for us.”

Hoshi looked at the metal bars of the fence, gestured to them with their thumb, and spoke.

“You think you can bend these?”

“Well duh, of course I can bend that,” Mako shook her head, “but then what? Do I bend them back? They’re not going to look anything like they do right now, and what if someone sees me?”

As though tempting fate, both Mako and Hoshi turned their heads to look over their shoulder. The sidewalk they were on, a hundred feet or so from the locked gates of the campus, was an everyday sidewalk, with cars driving by at odd intervals. There were also normal, everyday townhouses across the street. Of course, just as both of these two gays happened to be looking over

their shoulders, an older lady walked out of one of the homes. She walked over to the house next door and then started up a conversation with her neighbor. Hoshi and Mako were right in that lady's field of view.

"You want me to bend these bars in front of Grandma over there?" Mako asked.

"No, that'd be dumb," Hoshi added. "That's why we're going to jump this fence instead."

"She's going to see us jumping the fence."

"Yeah, so what?"

"She's going to call the cops."

"She's *not* going to call the cops."

"How do you know that?" Mako frowned.

"You-know-how," Hoshi smiled.

"Bullshit. You can't do that from so far away."

Mako was right. Hoshi needed to be closer to a person in order to be able to read their mind.

"They're not going to call the cops for two very simple reasons," Hoshi said, pulling down their skirt and revealing the black booty shorts they were wearing underneath. Hoshi tossed the skirt through the bars, and then shot their friend a devilish smile. "One, people living so close to the campus see this kind of stupid shit happen

every day, and two, because I'm jumping this fence right now before they can ID us."

Hoshi bent down, then jumped as high as they could. Which wasn't very high, though it was just enough so they could grab onto the top bar of the fence. Once there, Hoshi pulled their body up, pushing on the bars for leverage, until they were caught in the upswing of a pendulum. Hoshi swung over the top of the fence, and dropped down on the other side, already picking up their skirt and putting it back on.

"Quick, Mako! I think I can see one of them calling the cops."

Mako let out a forced sigh. It had been a long time since she had gotten to do something that stupid. In fact, Mako had exclusively *not* been doing stupid things for the better part of a decade. She was working hard. She was helping her friends. She was covering shifts at the coffee shop, and helping at the arts supply store as much as she could. She was also doing a bit of writing on the side, though nobody knew about that. Not even Hoshi. Mako's desire to write words on the page lay so deep inside her soul, so far down the bottom of her inner ocean, that light could not pierce there. And yet, in spite of these years of

doing everything right, Mako had developed a longing for the days of her youth, getting in trouble with Hoshi, learning about herself, learning to inhabit LOVELESS. Mako longed for those days when everything was new, before life had become a series of checkboxes she filled day after day.

Mako took a deep breath, tasting a faraway sea spray in the back of her palette. She felt her mind slotting into a familiar spot of her mind. Mako had been inhabiting this Facet for a long time, this giant who looked like some impossible bodybuilder with a mop of messy colorless hair covering their face. Their body riddled with prime muscle, engorged and reddened. Their body covered in bizarre birthmarks. Some were geometric shapes: triangles, circles, stars. Others were even more abstract. Somewhere along one of the shoulders of this massive being, there was a mark—almost a tattoo—that looked like a butterfly. Mako had known this entity since high school. Their words filled Mako’s mind like a mantra.

“In order to comprehend the value of our true strength,”
Mako repeated inside her mind. *“One must see without Love for who we used to be. Without Love for the faults that used to*

define us. One must Love less of the things which harm us. That is true power.”

Mako bent her knees, and without as little as a blink, she bound high up in the air—her little body propelled upwards by a loophole in the laws of physics. In the middle of her jump she lightly touched the top of the fence, turning her body horizontally as though that of a professional vault jumper. She cleared the fence, fell into a roll, jumped back up to her feet, and was right beside Hoshi before the latter was even done pulling up their skirt. All of that, and she wasn't even breathing heavily or anything. Which wasn't the case for Hoshi. Adding further insult to exhaustion, Mako tapped Hoshi on the shoulder and told them to *start legging it*. The ladies across the street had, in fact, seen them jumping the fence, and one of them appeared to be tapping on the screen of her smartphone. Hoshi had not been wrong. These ladies, living so close to the campus, were in fact used to seeing that kind of shit every day. That was why they didn't call the cops. No, they were dialing *campus security*, but Hoshi didn't know that, and neither did Mako. The only person who knew was Archer. He had seen what would happen

that day and was currently conspiring to make one specific version of the future come true.

And in order to do that, he had to make one serious mess.



13

Have you ever considered what it would be like to predict the future? Have you ever found yourself holding a lottery ticket wishing it would make you a billionaire? Or maybe found yourself standing by the craps table, wishing you knew the number that was about to come up so that you could turn your life around with just one bet? Or have you ever found yourself looking into the eyes of your crush, hoping, wishing into the darkness inside your skull, that you knew just what to say to make them fall in love with you? Of course you have. *We all have.* We're all

human—some more than others—and we share in our ridiculous hubris. We think we know what we want. We think we can handle the pressure. We think we can turn on the faucet and keep the water from spilling everywhere. We think we can carry all those grocery bags without making a mess. We think we can run that red light without getting in trouble. We think we can get away with a little white lie. We think no one will find out our dark secret—and so, like the fools we are, we laugh and act as though we’ve outsmarted the whole world. But we haven’t. Secrets come out. We trip on our lies. A car comes out of our blind spot. Your groceries end up on the floor. The water rises and, before you know it, there isn’t room to breathe. Confronting our hubris feels like drowning; it is all encompassing, and it is so shameful. Of course you should’ve known better. Of course you should’ve known not to run that damn red light. Of course you shouldn’t have lied when you did. Now everything is a mess. And it’s nobody’s fault but yours. You feel that? That looming sensation on the back of your skull? That’s not a side-effect of our psychic link. What you’re feeling is a biological reaction—a mechanism of evolution—that’s allowed our species to survive in a world that was once filled with

dangers, wild animals, and famine. This feeling, this sting like a knife pressed to the nook of your spine, is the *amygdala*, an almond-shaped gland in your brain. It releases hormones whenever danger is near, drenching your brain in juicy dread. That little organ in the back of your brain is yelling at you, shouting at the top of its metaphorical lungs.

“STOP. JESUS CHRIST, STOP WHAT YOU’RE DOING. WHAT THE HELL IS YOUR PROBLEM? ARE YOU TRYING TO KILL US? FUCKING. STOP. STOP RIGHT NOW.”

That’s the amygdala.

It means well, but it’s a jackhammer of a solution when a light tap on the shoulder would suffice. Though, then again, humanity wouldn’t be here without it. As they say, one hand gives and the other... feels like it’s choking you. Now, some people don’t mind the feeling of a hand pressed tightly against their throat—okay, *listen*, I’m just a voice from the future talking directly into your head using my psychic powers, you’re not allowed to kink-shame me. Some people like the feeling. Don’t judge. Most people aren’t into it. And that’s fine. Archer very much liked breathing, though he hardly remembered

what it was like. It felt like he had been holding his breath for days, because he kind of had. It is a fact of life that most fantasies dissolve when in contact with reality. The latter has an acidic effect on the more alkaline element that composes our dreams. As you can no doubt surmise, it turns out that the ability to see the future was, in application, *fucking terrible*. Exhibit A. The young Archer, so sad and so gay, had been scared shitless by his very first vision of the future. Seeing as far as he could, he witnessed what he thought would be Hoshi's ultimate form: the three-headed Facet that sought only to hurt people. Upon seeing that possible future, the young man ran out of Hoshi's house, without shoes, and his amygdala hadn't stopped juicing since. Poor Archer had to get back to the dorms without his shoes, a feat that left his feet full of calluses and more than a little embarrassed. He was new to inhabiting his Facet; he didn't even know how to exit the metaphorical giant robot he was piloting. Those with practice, such as Hoshi and their best friend Mako, could step in and out of their Facets effortlessly. To them, it was another extension of their muscle memory. It was no different than reaching for their pocket after feeling the little rumble of a notification or incoming phone call.

Archer didn't know how to turn off his power. He was basically walking around unable to take his eyes off his brand-new psychic smartphone. Every step Archer took, every interaction Archer had, unleashed the relentless assault of the future. Archer could see what would happen to everyone, what would happen to the town, what would happen from the most mundane to the most extraordinary.

On that first Monday of the year, as Archer was fleeing barefoot, he saw a bus stopping by the nearby doughnut shop and rushed to get in. He thought distance would ease the visions. He was wrong. Even as he swiped his student ID, he found his mind flooding with spoilers of other people's lives. The bus driver was going to get pregnant soon, and she was going to have a baby boy who she would eventually name *Travis*. Every time Archer made eye contact with a stranger, he saw their future play out inside his head. By the time he sat down, he'd already seen too much. The young woman sitting in front of Archer was going to drop out of college and travel. She didn't know it yet, but she was going to end up living in Germany, and she would finally find happiness there. Archer's powers weren't only limited to people. The panel

next to him, that sheet of plastic, would one day be witness to two teenagers in love. One of them, a troublemaker with cyan eyeshadow, would make a promise of everlasting love. With the tip of a knife, they would write the letters *H* and *L*, surrounded by a heart. No matter where he looked, Archer saw the future. And some were more harrowing than others. At the next stop, an older man walked down the aisle and took a seat behind Archer. Their eyes met for one second—and Archer knew the man was about to be reunited with the son he abandoned a decade prior. The old man was finally going to apologize and beg for forgiveness. The alcohol had taken everything from him, but he had been sober for the better part of a year. He'd even ironed his shirt. This man—this stranger in the bus—was going into this meeting terrified that he might be turned away. He'd bought a new shirt and pants; he'd bought an iron so he could show up without a wrinkle on either. He'd rehearsed what he'd say—how he'd say everything—and how he would reach into his pocket and reveal his sobriety chip. And he had no idea his son would forgive him, hold him, and cry tears of joy because—after a decade adrift—their family would be whole again.

Baby boys.

Backpacking through Europe.

Pocket knives. Your lips stained with two different colors.

AA meetings. \$34.99 for the shirt and pants, \$12.99 for the iron.

Archer saw it all. His eyes overflowed with tears.

Trying for a baby. One last time.

Chasing your dreams.

Being in love.

Living through the worst. Getting sober. Emptying your bank account. Fifty dollars and forty-six cents. Just enough to carry you to his doorstep. And tell him how much you love him.

Archer tried his best to hold it in. He tried not to cry, not to make his sobs audible. *Everyone was so brave.* Everyone was trying so hard. And not all of them were going to succeed. Some people, lovely people, good people, kind-hearted and too-good-for-this-goddamn-world people, were going to fail. Some of them were going to die through no choice of their own. Their stories were going to end in the middle of a chapter, half-way through a mundane sentence—and they wouldn't even

know it. The world was going to change, progress would be made, victory would come, but not without setting aflame the pillars that lifted some above others. The forest would burn, but in time, nature would do as it always did. It would regrow, taller, wider, more colorful, and stronger. But not everyone would make it there. And it was here, in this contradiction, this oxymoron of Facets, that had Archer behaving more like a zombie than a living being. The future was cruel, but it was also incredibly generous, and merciful, and a bitch like no other.

Archer managed to get back to the dorms that first Monday of that fabulous year, entering the campus through the student entryway that most people didn't know about. He pressed his key card against the lock of the dorm entranceway, then his room, and even then—all alone inside that glorified closet—he collapsed. The thoughts didn't escape him. Even though he had no people to look at, no other futures to gaze, he was still seeing what lay ahead for him, what might happen, the opportunities missing him, the chances that would never pay out. Each and every single one of these options spread out across his mind—and across the better part of that week—like the branches of a family tree. If he did *this*, and

that, he would go *there*, and meet *them*, and then *that* would occur. Except maybe he could meet *them* instead, and go *there* instead, and witness *that*. Option after option crashed against his conscious mind like waves against the shore, carving cliffs out of the coast and turning rock into sand. Archer would have never stated so out loud, but he properly and completely lost his mind that week. Whatever his mind had been like before, however he'd communicated through reality, all the beliefs that he held in conflict with his own person—all of it shattered along with the Fabula Rasa. Archer was no longer the same person. He'd struggled during those days, just as a caterpillar might struggle to seal itself inside a cocoon. Did caterpillars know what they were in for? Did they know what was about to happen to them? Did they hear a voice inside their little head, shouting the most bizarre things?

“YOU WILL BE INCREDIBLE.”

“YOU WILL BECOME AMAZING.”

“SOON, YOU WILL FLY ON PRISMATIC WINGS.”

After many days trapped inside his room, barely eating, hardly sleeping, and with eyes wide-open to the whole of causality, Archer's amygdala dried beyond recognition. It

was here, at the bottom of the night, that Archer managed yet another impossible feat.

He befriended fear itself.

On the morning of that fateful Saturday, Archer rose from his bed, having failed to capture any sleep. It had been five long days, and though he should've been too weak to move, Archer rose from his bed with senses as sharp as the tip of a spear. Archer was aware in all senses of the word. He knew exactly what would happen in a matter of hours, just as he was fully aware of that metallic bird looking at him through the window of his room. Our poor Archer, so tired and so gay, was also aware that unless he did everything in his power that day, the future would *win*. Archer knew what was at stake. He wanted Hoshi to teach him how to shut off his Facet. He wanted to follow that branch of the tree of causality. He wanted to befriend Hoshi, to learn from them, to stand by them, for the day in the far, far future when geometry would once again draw a triangle in the sand.

The future was scary, and it was wonderful, and it was fabulous. But, in order to get there, he had to get through that Saturday. He had to meet with Hoshi. He needed Hoshi to teach him how to shut off his Facet. He had to

prop the back door of the dorm open. He had to break into the janitor's closet. He had to stand up to that mean security guard. Archer had to be brave, but above all, he had to stop thinking about all those villains of tomorrow...

And face the dragon named *today*.



14

How many lucky streaks is too many? Like, say you were to find a twenty-dollar bill on the floor. You grab that twenty and, just as you're thinking what you're going to spend that money on, you stumble upon another bill on the floor—but this one is a fifty. Do you take it? I can expand on this metaphorical scenario and say there's no one around looking for the money. Nobody dropped it. It's just you. Maybe you're in the empty hallways of your dorm room. Maybe it's early in the morning as you're walking to the coffee shop you work at part time. Maybe

it's in that dirty alley you use as a shortcut to get to that nice doughnut shop. Either way, first you found a twenty, and now a fifty. Do you pick it up? How much good luck is *too much* good luck? Would you bend over for a third time if there was a one-hundred-dollar bill on the floor? What if there was a five-hundred-dollar bill? Did I even *have* five hundred bucks in my bank account at the time? Depressing thoughts aside, at which point in this trail of money would you have turned around and fled the other way? Personally, I think most people would leave the hundred on the floor. A couple strokes of pure good luck is enough to scare the average person shitless, because no matter how much we'd like to think that we want to stumble ass-backwards into fortune, our survival instincts are not properly equipped for that. It's the same reason why our little human brain can hold the nonsensical belief that *too much* of a good thing is bad for you. Or that you can have *too much* fun. Or that you can be enjoying yourself *too much*. I'm drifting away from the point I wanted to make, much like a person fleeing from the sight of a one-hundred-dollar bill. So, I'll say this and be done with my digression. The human mind is geared—fine-tuned like a machine—to hyperfixate on the bad. That is

why our brain can, *somehow*, trick itself into believing that having *too much fun* is a bad thing. Do you know why we can believe such a terrible lie? It's because spring turns to summer, summer to fall, fall to winter, and winter? Winter fucking sucks. 'Save some of that fun for later when it's winter,' that's what our brains are saying, a sentiment that makes literally zero sense in a world with immediate access to cat videos on the internet. You don't need to save that fun for later, you literal cave-person, specially when all of the best new anime comes out on winter to begin with. Okay. *Listen now*. You're not allowed to judge me. Don't even try. No, huh-uh. I'm the one talking here. Talking inside your head. No. I said, *no*. Stop it. I'm turning this psychic car around, and I'm refunding these tickets to psychic Disneyland. That's right. I'm pulling out the big guns. *Good*. Now that you're a little more docile than before... where was I? Oh yeah, *luck*. Most people get a little bit of luck and are happy. The more luck one stumbles upon in quick succession, the more likely one is to think that something weird is going on. Because usually it is. Reality is a mean bitch. Nobody goes around dropping hundred-dollar bills willy-nilly. And reality sure as hell will never leave a duffel bag full of money in a

public bathroom so that you can pay your student loans. Get out of that freaking bathroom—no seriously, I don't care if you needed to go number two. There is an FBI sting about to happen in that bathroom, and unless you turn around *now*, you're gonna catch more than a few stray bullets. And then you'll be shitting your pants for a completely different reason.

Now, Hoshi and Mako didn't stumble onto a one-hundred-dollar bill, or a duffel bag full of money, but they got something that was pretty damn close. At least, considering their current state. You see, the dorm building had a nice set of glass double doors which required a key card to open. Unlike jumping a fence, breaking and entering was actually a crime, and well outside of Hoshi's ability to egg Mako on. The two of them had walked around the perimeter of the dorm, that boxy building made of concrete and glass, and were just about to give up on returning Archer's shoes, when Hoshi spotted something incredible. One of the side doors had been propped open with a bucket. Now, Hoshi—as careless as can be—took this as mere happenstance, a lovely case of serendipity, and walked into the building without a second thought. Mako was not the type to pick

up money off the ground, even when she was completely alone, so her curiosity was piqued.

“This is... weird,” Mako muttered as she reluctantly followed behind Hoshi.

The inside of the dorm building was as made of glass and concrete as the outside. The interior of that place was airy and cold. It felt more like a storage facility than a place people were meant to live in; and yet, there were about three stories worth of little closet-sized rooms. What Hoshi and Mako didn't know was that the building was originally supposed to be an art installation. Unfortunately, when the plan to build dorms off-campus fell through, someone had the genius idea of turning that useless art installation into something that would bring the university a little more money. In truth, the dorm building was *fine*—Archer would've shrugged his shoulders and struggled to find something wrong with the place—but it sure echoed with the piercing resignation of a racing horse being forced to pull carriages for a living. As for the layout of the building, there was a small living area on the first floor, communal bathrooms, and the first of many rooms. All three stories were covered in them, each no bigger than the tiny apartments they

could've been renting in town. That was the Socorro County experience. Thankfully for Hoshi and Mako, they were breaking into this building in the middle of a Saturday while the university was closed to the public. Anyone who might've been in the living area was either out on the town or out of state. Were it not for the light of the sun peering through the tall glass windows, it would've been spooky. It was this very thought, and the sight of Hoshi tip-toeing, that inspired Mako's next remark.

“Okay, we've made it inside. What do we do next Scoobs?”

Hoshi had never, in their life, turned around so fast. Their hair whipped about like a cat o' nine tails.

“Excuse me?” Hoshi narrowed their eyes. “*Scoobs?* I beg your pardon?”

It wasn't that Hoshi didn't know of the cartoon by the name of *Scooby-Doo*, where a party of twenty-somethings break into places they aren't allowed in and—for some bizarre reason—apprehend possible criminals. Cartoons are very forgiving when it comes to vigilantism. Telling by the way Batman uses extreme force on the regular, you'd think he was a member of the police—wait, hold

on. Silly me. Batman *is* a cop. Sure, he's got okay intentions, but that doesn't give a rich white man the power to put on a skin-tight suit and punch people in the face. And it's not like Mr. Batman over here is going to ever show up on court to give his testimony, so all the evidence revealed through his *actual breaking and entering* has to be rendered inadmissible by the court. It's no wonder Gotham City is crawling with criminals. The prosecutors can't build a case when all of the incriminating evidence gets thrown out because Mr. Batman didn't get a warrant. Sorry. Sorry, *sorry*. I told you not to get me started on Bruce-Actually-a-Cop-Wayne. *Anyhoots*. Where was I? Oh yes, Scooby-Doo. Hoshi knew about the cartoon dog and his troupe of twenty-somethings. The thing they were most concerned about was the allusion Mako had drawn: the implication that if their own gang of twenty-somethings were the characters of the Scooby-Doo cartoon, then Hoshi would be, well...

“The dog? You think I'd be the *dog*?” Hoshi was no longer sneaking. They had their arms crossed. They had pulled the metaphorical car over on the side of the road and killed the engine. Nobody was going to Disneyland now.

“I wish I was Scooby,” Mako shrugged, “but telling as how you keep roping me into stuff like this, I have to be the Shaggy of our group.”

Mako’s open acceptance of her role as the party’s loser struck Hoshi harder than the Scoobs comment.

“Whoa, hold on here, you don’t smoke enough weed to be Shaggy,” Hoshi shook their head.

“It’s process of elimination,” Mako added. “Who’s the brain of our team?”

The answer came to Hoshi in an instant.

“Well, duh, that’s Cami.”

“So Cami has got to be Velma.”

“Okay... so who is Fred?”

No sooner had the words escaped Hoshi’s lips that the two of them answered the question in perfect unison.

“Jason is Fred.”

“Then how come I’m not Daphne? I want to be Daphne,” Hoshi said.

“Daphne is kind of useless and is sadly an example of the damsel in distress trope.” Mako flashed a smile. “You’re too self-reliable to be Daphne. And if you’re not the brains, and not the damsel, and not the beefcake, and you’re not the loser, then...”

“I’m the dog,” Hoshi took a deep breath, and cherished the quiet resignation that echoed inside that building. “So... I’m Scooby-Doo. At least I’m cute. Which of us is Daphne, though?”

Mako already knew. She nodded her head, as though readying to break out some awful news.

“It’s Ras.”

Hoshi covered their mouth but did not contest Mako’s words. It was true. Hoshi’s ex-boyfriend was the Daphne of their group. Good-looking. Well-dressed. Easily simped for. It sucked, it really sucked for Hoshi, but it was true. Damn. Ras was so gorgeous. It was a shame he was a clown.

Mako stared at Hoshi, as though expecting something to happen. Hoshi narrowed their eyes and spoke with the tenacity of a jagged knife.

“I am *not* doing a Scooby-Doo impression.”

“I don’t think I could do a Shaggy one either,” Mako looked around her. They were in the middle of the first floor of the dorm building with no idea as to where Archer could be, and the tangent about Scooby-Doo was one reference away from running thin. “So, we’re in and

we have no idea of where to go. How are we going to find the boy?”

Hoshi stopped themselves from physically reacting and instead looked around; in hopes of finding *what*, even I can't tell you. Hoshi had never considered asking Archer for his room number. Even if Archer had paid Hoshi for their services, it was unlikely that the address on the receipt was going to say something like ‘*Socorro County University Dorm, Room #333.*’ By the way, Archer's room was in fact number thirty-three on the third floor, but Hoshi didn't know that, though someone else did. Archer had foreseen that the two intruders would have difficulty finding Archer's room, so he left behind a little clue. Actually, it wasn't little. Archer had to make sure the Scooby gang knew where to go.

In looking down corridor after corridor that looked exactly the same, Hoshi found themselves searching for anything to grab their attention and—my, oh my—did they get grabbed.

“Mako... are you seeing this?” Hoshi gestured down one of the corridors.

“What in the hell is *that*?”

At the end of the corridor in question was a flight of stairs, but that wasn't the thing Mako was talking about. Right at the foot of the steps, there was a wet floor sign, except it was on its side, and lying in a puddle of liquid soap. Hoshi and Mako moved closer, careful to watch their feet for any more puddles of the slippery stuff. The liquid in question was bright blue. It reminded Hoshi of Archer's hair. Now, what happened next requires a bit of an explanation. It may be easy to look at this moment, knowing what Hoshi and Mako didn't, and shout at the cinema of our imagination.

“HEY DUMBASSES, ARCHER IS TELLING YOU TO GO UPSTAIRS!”

But do you realize how batshit crazy that sounds? Who would see a big mess of soap and think to inspect it closer? That's the thing about the future, when you are able to see the interlocking mechanisms of fate you begin to realize how little things can make for big changes. Nobody knew this better than Archer. He'd foreseen all the possible ways that day could've gone, all the ways Hoshi and Mako could've been prevented from finding him, and his final solution—the best possible timeline—was the one where he had to make a big mess. And it worked. Hoshi and

Mako were both intrigued by the bizarre mess, and their attention was fully grabbed—but, *man*, it really makes you think, huh? We wouldn't be talking right now—sharing in this one-sided conversation—if Archer hadn't taken a gamble with the blue soap. I can't help but laugh at how life can change in just one silly series of mistakes. Life's a mess, and sometimes you just gotta raid the janitor's closet, but more on that later.

Running on a cocktail of shock and curiosity, Hoshi and Mako navigated around the puddle of soap, and quickly realized there was a trail leading up the steps. The bright blue liquid was easy to spot against the white and grays of the interior. Hoshi and Mako took the stairs one step at a time, eventually making it to the second floor landing, where they were greeted by a dozen wet-floor signs creating a make-shift barricade. The trail of soap continued up the stairs, all the way to the third floor, and so the Scooby gang reluctantly kept climbing. I would be lying to you if I said that Hoshi and Mako weren't starting to get worried. They were in that building trying to return a pair of shoes, but the trail of soap—which had to be the cleanest mess they'd ever witnessed—felt like they were being lured by a serial killer, or worse, a bunch of sorority

hazers. Thankfully for Hoshi and Mako, there was good news and bad news. *Good news*: the third floor landing was devoid of psychopaths wearing hockey masks or chanting in Greek. *Bad news*: the trail of soap ended at the landing. Hoshi and Mako both tip-toed around the corridor without realizing it, trying their best to sneak around, when they noticed two things. One was bad and the other was terrible. First, Hoshi and Mako spotted an open door. If they've had the time to stop and look at it, they would've seen that the plaque on it read '*janitor's closet*,' but those two didn't have time. No sooner had they seen the open door than they heard someone swear so loudly that it carried from the staircase on the first floor all the way up to the third.

“What the *fuck* happened here?”

There was a burst of static, like that of pressing on the receiver of a walkie-talkie, but the words that followed were not loud enough to carry. Not like they needed to. Hoshi and Mako had heard enough. The two of them looked up at one another, seeing a flash of the people they'd been in high school just off the corner of their eyes. They really hadn't changed much. They were still getting in trouble, though Mako would've liked to think that she

was a little less stupid than she'd been back then. If she really had grown smarter, Mako was about to do a bad job at proving it. Without objection or even a '*zoinks*' freed from their lips, Hoshi and Mako did the only thing they could do. This was not their first time hiding in a janitor's closet, and it would certainly not be their last.



15

Archer walked out of his room and into the corridor, ready to do something very brave and very stupid. He walked past the janitor's closet where Hoshi and Mako were inside of, currently attempting to disguise themselves. In all honesty, Archer would've been happier with a disguise of his own, though not to hide his identity. He just wanted to hide how much of a mess he was at that moment. He hadn't slept at all in the last five days. As if that wasn't already bad enough, Archer was also currently inhabiting his Facet, and any kind of eye contact would

force him to see the future. The communal showers were simply out of the question. So, Archer looked like someone who hadn't slept *and* showered in almost a week. He also hadn't changed his clothes, and he wasn't wearing shoes. His socks, the only saving grace during that walk back home on that first Monday of the year, were stained up to the ankles. Had you not known what he'd been through, or that he was even a student at the school, you would've assumed he was the survivor of some apocalypse. In a way, he was. Being able to see the future had its upsides... and its many downsides. On one hand, Archer had managed to coordinate the timeline of events so that Hoshi and their friend would get to the dorms and find the floor he was on. It had taken a bit of fidgeting with the lock of the janitor's closet, but that wasn't something an online video tutorial couldn't fix. Archer had then used a bucket to prop one of the side entrances, then taken a bottle of liquid soap—as bright and blue as the world he'd seen inside his head—to draw a trail leading upstairs. He knew with certainty that Hoshi and Mako would get through the side door, that they would spot the liquid soap, and that their curiosity would make them follow the trail. Archer also knew that they would hide in the

janitor's closet while he... well, while Archer did the heavy lifting. Breaking into the closet and making a mess was easy for Archer. He was so sleep-deprived that his otherwise loud conscience was as quiet as the walls of the nearly abandoned dorm. All that was left for Archer to do was, of course, the hardest part. He had to talk to the security guard. He knew what to say, and how to say it, he'd even rehearsed his lines in front of the mirror as though taking part in some college production of a very silly play. But, you see, that didn't change a damn thing. Archer still had to talk to someone he'd never liked, who clearly didn't like him, and who was going to be in a rotten mood. Sure, Archer knew what was going to happen, and just how to navigate that conversation so that he would come out of it unscathed, but that didn't change the fact that he still had to *do it*. All by himself. While feeling like trash and looking just as good. And, before you even puff your chest and think how you would have handled things differently were you able to see the future just as Archer could, I'd like to remind you that you are not *infallible*. You have no doubt in your life rehearsed what you would say, and prepared yourself mentally, only to lose all composure the moment you step to the front of

the classroom; the moment your driving test begins; the moment you are about to ask that certain someone out on a date. Certainty—even the certainty of the future—was meaningless when we were acting participants in the events to come. Of course, we know that roller coasters only look scary, that the vaccine is going to sting a little, that airplanes are safer than walking on the street, but in that moment of human bliss, just when the seat belt clicks, and the needle is about to pierce your skin, and the plane’s turbines are about to spin, that you suffer the same thought that Archer faced at that moment. Another terrified whisper coming from his exhausted amygdala.

“WHAT IF EVERYTHING GOES WRONG?”

Archer wiped his sweaty palms on the sides of his jeans. He took a deep breath. He could feel his heart thumping at the base of his neck. If he hadn’t been in a constant state of psychic-induced anxiety, he would’ve probably been handling things a lot better. Or maybe not. Archer was not himself then; he was piloting a Facet, and it filled his senses with a dreadful detachedness. He really felt like he was inside the cockpit of some giant robot. There was almost a tangible delay between him moving the levers up in his head and the body moving. This was all a side-effect

of inhabiting a Facet so suddenly and for such an extended period of time. Regardless of why he felt the way he did, he was glad for the psychic-tipsiness. Without it, without that haze over his better senses, Archer would've probably been shaking. He might've even fainted. He wasn't the kind of person who gravitated towards conflict, lied brazenly, or did both while in the presence of someone in a position of power. In any other world, Archer would've fled back to his room, but he wasn't in Wonderland, though he sure felt like he had been transported somewhere else.

Archer heard hurried footsteps climbing up the stairs, at times interrupted by explicit and comments spoken into a short-range radio. The roller coaster was about to zoom across the rails, the needle was going to stab him, and the plane was about to take off. There was no turning around anymore. Archer took another deep breath and stepped out into the spotlight of the ridiculous play of his own design.

"Security? Oh, thank god," Archer walked a couple steps down, careful not to trip on the soap. He tried not to react when he made eye contact with the security guard

and saw the woman's expression shift from sheer shock to shock *and* apprehension.

The security guard's name was Laura Baker. She's not particularly important to this story, save for the role she was about to play, but I would be amiss not to tell you a couple things about her. Formerly a PE teacher, Mrs. Baker—not that anyone actually called her that anymore—was built like a brick wall, and her stare could be just as cold. She had her short hair always gelled back, looking slick in both senses of the word. Her security uniform was composed of black pants and a puffy jacket, both of which she wore with pride. She had the patience of a ticking time bomb. She was, in fact, mean to everyone because she saw all students as potential troublemakers. I do not mean to excuse such behavior, but Laura had good reason to be this way. College students are not known for making good, sensible choices. Specially not after a night of drinking. And even so, there were plenty of sober young people who still did stupid things on the regular. It was Laura's job to look after people just a couple years older than the students she knew from her days as a PE teacher. She was always no-nonsense, and why would that attitude be different during winter break? Even when the

dorms were mostly empty, stupid students did what they always did: very stupid, and very inconvenient, things.

“Oh, *great*, just the man I wanted to see,” Laura stomped towards Archer.

The young man in question took in a deep breath, priming himself for what was to follow. What *always* followed every time Laura saw him at the dorms. You see, Laura took her job very seriously and she was as old-fashioned as could be. The dorms of the university had been co-ed for decades, but you know how it is; some people choose not to see the change around them. That dorm wasn't female-only. That floor wasn't female-only. Hell, not even that part of the hall was female-only. The empirical evidence here was massive but... you know how people are. Laura thought most of the people in that dorm were female—or at least *female-presenting*—and in her mind, that meant the building was the ‘female-only’ dorm. You can imagine the kind of scrutiny poor Archer had to put up with on a daily basis. Never mind the fact that he was an introvert, shy to a fault, short of stature, and the biggest nerd around. In Laura's eyes, Archer was the blue-haired fox that had snuck into her chicken coop.

Laura walked up to Archer, popping his personal space bubble, and stared at him with the tenacity of a farmer brandishing their shotgun.

“What the *hell* happened here?”

Archer sighed. At least Laura had downgraded her explicit.

“I don’t know what happened, that’s why I came out to see,” Archer said.

“Is this part of some prank?” Laura narrowed her eyes. “People could get hurt. The whole school could get sued if one of you preppy little kids did as much as break a toe. There’s soap all the way up and down the stairs, do you know who did this?”

And then came the hard part. Archer knew what he had to say, he knew just how to twist and turn the lockpick of the conversation, but there was a lot that could go wrong. In this case, Archer didn’t only have to say the right things. In fact, he had to say the wrong things, in the *right* order.

“Um... maybe the janitor? Maybe he left the bottle open, and it spilled all the way down the stairs?”

“The janitor? Are you serious?” Laura took a look around, seeing if there was anyone else in the corridor.

There was not. At least, not within view. “Kid, I just sent word for the janitor. I think he would’ve known if he’d spilled soap all over the stairs. Jesus Christ, this stuff is everywhere. Hey—do you...”

Laura took a long, hard look at Archer, like some superhuman body scanner. She noticed Archer’s disheveled appearance, how nervous he looked, and how he didn’t have any shoes. She took a step forward, stepping over the puddle, and looked right into Archer’s eyes. She then lowered her voice and asked a question as familiar to her as the driver’s seat of her ‘96 Buick.

“Kid. Are you high right now?”

“Ma’am,” Archer said, going off script. “I wish.”

That seemed to amuse the older woman. She broke eye contact, fidgeted with the receiver button of her radio but didn’t fully press it. She looked back up, one corner of her mouth twisting into a smirk.

“Well, it looks like *someone* made a mess here,” Laura said.

“Yeah, it’s crazy, huh?” Archer replied.

“Most students are out on winter break. This floor here is the emptiest of them all. There’s probably only two, maybe three kids who didn’t go home for the break.”

“I wouldn’t know... I don’t socialize a lot.”

“You don’t seem like the talking type,” Laura noted, as though that was a bad thing.

“I’m the listening type, though,” Archer shot back. “I heard something that sounded like two people running up and down the hall earlier, that was the reason I walked out of my room—”

“Two people?” Laura raised the volume of her voice by a couple decibels. “Did you see them?”

“No, I only heard them,” Archer nodded to himself, then gestured up and down the corridor. “My room is over there, number thirty-three; it’s right in the middle of the corridor, so I heard them running up and down. It was so loud, I thought it was someone on a skateboard.”

Laura walked down the corridor, Archer following behind. And then came the scary part. The security guard turned to look at Archer’s door, then looked up and down the corridor, as though doing some mental arithmetic. All of a sudden, the two of them walked past the door to the janitor’s closet, and Archer did the best he could to distract the security guard. If Laura thought to open the janitor closet door, then things would’ve gotten a lot more complicated. Sure, Archer knew what he had to say, but

he had already gone off script, and the certainty of the future was drowned by another, louder thought.

“WHAT IF EVERYTHING GOES WRONG?”

Archer shook his head. He could not let himself slip and start seeing what would happen if he messed up; the branching tree of options was infinite, and time was precious. He had to say the wrong things in the right order. He had to convince Laura to turn around and leave.

“You said you heard a skateboard?” she asked.

“I thought it sounded like a skateboard,” Archer replied. “That’s why I came out to see. It could’ve been two people roughhousing for all I know.”

“Two people, huh?” Laura fidgeted with her radio. “Say, when did you hear these noises?”

“Just now, like, a minute ago. I walked out of my dorm, saw the soap at the top of the stairs, and that’s when I heard you coming up—”

Laura had heard enough. She walked away from Archer, bringing her radio up to her mouth, and speaking into it with the tired resignation of someone used to chasing children around the daycare.

“Hey, Jorgi. You know that call we got about the trespassers? Well, I think I know what they were up to. Wait until you hear this nonsense...”

Archer called out to Laura, asking things like ‘*what trespassers?*’ and ‘*should I call you if I see them?*’ and other rehearsed lines that sounded like something he should say in a situation like that. Of course, this was all part of the act. The older woman didn’t even acknowledge Archer’s words; she had two trespassers and mess-makers to apprehend. And she wasn’t going to catch them. At least, not for a *long* while. The branch of that timeline wasn’t even a bud, but we would someday get there. Waiting an extra second just to make sure Laura wasn’t coming back, Archer walked over to the janitor’s closet and lightly knocked on it.

“You can come out now. It’s safe.”

The door swung outwards, revealing two idiots wearing matching janitor jumpsuits. The taller of the two was holstering a broom over one shoulder—you know, just like real janitors do—and then spoke with the confidence of someone being recorded for a reality TV show.

“Oh, hi there Archer, fancy meeting you here. You won’t believe this but, I just so happened to be in the neighborhood.” Hoshi picked up the reusable bag from the floor containing Archer’s shoes and offered it to him. “You left this at my place on Monday. I thought I’d give them back. Sorry for not getting them back to you sooner, I couldn’t get a hold of you, but I’m glad I finally did. So, yeah. Anyhoots, I guess we’ll be making our leave now. Nice to see you, Archie.”

Hoshi looked down. Archer held the reusable bag in one hand, while the other was currently gripping a corner of Hoshi’s jumpsuit. It didn’t look like he was going to let them go.

“Thank you,” Archer let out a sigh so long, so painful, that he felt like he was going to collapse there and then. “Before you leave, if you may, could you please teach me how to shut this thing off—this, this *power*. This giant robot I’m piloting. I—I would like to get off this ride.”



16

Archer took a deep breath, easing a mechanism deep inside his mind. He let his eyelids fall, shutting his vision to the world around him. He should've seen darkness; he should've found himself inside a sphere of blackness as he had his entire life, but something was different. Behind closed eyes, Archer saw himself as he had been up until that week. His short stature. His black-blue hair. He really needed to cut it, but Matthew told him he liked how fluffy it was. Archer wanted to hear more compliments from his Lovely Boy. He knew he would get them, if he chose to.

There were many paths ahead of the young man, but for the time being, he wanted to look away from the cheat sheet of the universe. And so, he looked down at himself, inside that cockpit he'd created with his imagination. There was a seat, like those racing arcade-game seats, with a panel of controls and brightly colored buttons. There were also screens in front of him, three panels drawing one hundred and eighty degrees of his field of view. The screens were dark, most of the buttons were off as well. Archer had imagined himself inside of a cockpit all week, but he had not actually been in that imaginary place. And yet, once he found himself there, he knew about the switch just under his seat. He tugged on it, as though adjusting the position of his car seat, and felt jets of air brush against his face, causing his dark-blue bangs to flutter like the wings of a butterfly. The screens and console in front of him opened up, reminding him of those cool 80's cars with the gull-wing doors. The cockpit opened up. Archer stood on his feet, recognizing the room he was in—the enormous hangar at the bottom of his mind—and recognizing the giant hand coming towards him. Archer hopped down onto the palm of that giant he now knew by name, and felt no vertigo this time

as he was brought down to the floor of that room. Archer looked up at that giant—that person with black crosses on their skin, and long blue hair—and then looked around him. There were countless giants in that room, some of which Archer recognized from fever dreams and nightmares. Most of these giants were nothing but outlines, for their real faces were covered in shadow. Maybe one day he would get to know them all, but for now, Archer was glad he was back on his two feet, specially now that he had his shoes back.

Archer opened his eyes slowly...

The hangar was gone, as were the giants. Archer was back in his room at the dorms. The glorified closet was hardly big enough for him, let alone for him and two additional guests. He suddenly became aware of how barren his room looked and how much of a mess it was. There were dirty clothes on the floor, the wastebasket was overflowing with vending machine food wrappers, and his desk—which should've been covered with the winter homework he was supposed to be doing—was cluttered with graphic novels, role-playing books, an outstanding collection of brightly-colored dice, and Archer's portable gaming console. No one was going to judge him for being

a college student living in a college student mess, but Archer felt that if there'd been a poster on the wall it would've at least felt like he *owned* that mess. Currently, it felt like he was being a total mess in someone else's closet-sized room. Maybe it was because he was self-conscious about his mess, maybe it was because Archer was finally not distracted with visions of the future, or maybe it was because Hoshi was currently paging through one of Archer's role-playing books, but the first words that escaped his lips were as much of a non sequitur as yours truly could muster.

"I'm so sorry for the mess, I—I just, I haven't had the time to clean."

"You have nothing to apologize for." Mako, who was leaning against the wall, tried her best not to laugh. She then pointed a thumb at Hoshi, who was sitting on Archer's desk as though at the waiting room of a doctor's office. "You've been to Hoshi's place. Trust me, this is not that messy. There's a box about this big," Mako drew an imaginary box the size of several pillows stacked together, "that has been in one corner of their dining room for like, two years. Nobody knows what's in the box, and nobody seems to mind that it's in the way."

“Well, *yeah*. That’s where that box lives,” Hoshi said, like that was something that made sense. They looked up at Archer, inspecting the young man, and then flashing a smile. “What’s it like being back on your own two feet? Already excited to go for another ride?”

Archer shook his head, though not for the reason you might be thinking.

“I can still see you...” Archer frowned. “I can still see the, um, the other people. They flicker like, like I have double vision or something.”

“What do you see?” Hoshi asked, smiling.

“Sometimes, you look like this *other* person,” Archer began. “Like a statue, except parts of you are broken, revealing cables. I see you, and then I see them. It doesn’t stop. As for you... Mako. I see this other person, taller, bigger, they look really strong. They’re naked. I can’t see their face. They’re honestly, kind of scary.” Archer rubbed at his eyes. “Why can I still see them? I thought—you said this whole meditation-thing would make the powers go away.”

“It has,” Hoshi nodded. “Can you still see the future?”

Archer shook his head, slowly.

“Can he really do that?” Mako asked, eyes narrowed.

“Yes, he can. It’s incredible, but it’s true,” Hoshi smiled. “I knew it from the moment I saw you, Archer. Your indecision was caused, for the most part, by your innate ability to predict the future. You were really close, I must add. You might’ve gotten there on your own. You had already contextualized it in your mind; you were *seeing* things that could be, but now you know how to turn this power on and off. Or, as we like to say, how to inhabit this Facet of your person.”

“But...” Archer wrinkled the leg of his jeans. “I can still see you.”

Hoshi knew the thoughts circling inside of Archer’s mind, and so they decided to help in the only way they could. They took the feelings that loomed inside of the young man and arranged those words in the right order.

“It’s sad, isn’t it? People are not as they seem.”

“Yeah...” Archer let the words fall out of his lips. “This week, I saw people’s futures. I saw all their struggles, the good stuff coming their way, and the bad too. Some of them are going to try really hard only to fail at the end. Others will never even try. Some will stumble their whole lives, making the worst choices at every turn, and... you know what?”

“What is it?” Hoshi asked.

“They will be happy.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Hoshi added.

“It’s not, it’s just—I, I used to look at people and think nothing of them. Now, I realize nobody is like they seem. It’s just so... sad; we’re all wearing masks, some of which don’t even fit right, but we wear them nonetheless.”

“Archer, could I hold your hand?” Hoshi asked.

In spite of his hesitation, the young man held out his hand. Hoshi took it in both of theirs and began softly caressing it, drawing some strange shape on the palm of Archer’s hand. To the young man, it seemed like Hoshi was drawing the wings of a butterfly on his skin.

“I had a realization similar to yours a little while ago,” Hoshi began. “And it troubled me deeply. You see, the Facet that I inhabit most often, the one that you can see, their name is MAZE, and they’re a very dear friend. The mess of marble and computer wires you see, they’re able to look into people’s minds and know what hurts them. I use this power to help people.”

“Yeah, I know that,” Archer sighed. “I knew you would tell me that. I mean, I knew you would tell me something about your power, but I didn’t know for sure

what it would be. The future is weird—it’s like trying to make out one of those images where you have to go cross-eyed. I knew that if I did what I did today, you would teach me how to get out of this Facet-thing, but I didn’t know *what* you would tell me. It’s so weird.”

“How so?” Hoshi asked.

“I thought having superpowers would be... cool?” Archer sighed. No, that was not the right word. Archer knew Hoshi could read his mind if they wanted, so the young man felt no need to hide what he really felt. “Okay. What I meant to say was: I thought having superpowers would be *easy*.”

“Those were my thoughts exactly when I first got started,” Hoshi looked up at the ceiling, reminding themselves of all the many times they tried to fly and fell instead. Archer was right, many people spent their whole lives making mistakes, and they still found happiness; Hoshi was one of them. “I struggled for a long time thinking I couldn’t trust people, because like you said, we’re all wearing masks, but I’ve come around. It’s not that people are not as they seem, but rather that we cannot trust our perception of the people around us. Just because we see them one way, or think of them one way, it doesn’t

mean they can't be more. Inside of every single one of us lies hundreds of Facets, hundreds of people we could be if we wanted to, roles we could inhabit, and they are all just as true as the person we present to the world. They are all true. This mess of marble and wires you see? It's *me*. It's a version of me that cares so much, so deeply, to understand the problems of others." Hoshi let out a soft laugh, like some jester laughing at the secret joke of life itself. "I can't speak for everyone; we all experience these powers differently, but I am so glad I found MAZE. Knowing there is someone inside of me who cares so much, who wishes to help everyone regardless of their choices and their mistakes. Knowing there's someone like that inside of me, it inspires me to be better. There's no reason I can't be more open, be more kind, be more compassionate, even when I turn off my superpower."

Archer nodded along to Hoshi's words. He heard them. He believed them. And yet, there was a part of Archer, deep inside the labyrinth of his psyche, that could do nothing but think about the vision he had on that fateful Monday. He knew Hoshi was looking into him, and that he could not hide that thought for long, and so the young man did as best as he could to change the topic.

“How do these powers even work?”

“Oh, it’s really simple,” Hoshi straightened their back, “the human mind, when it coalesces through one’s conscious and subconscious, possesses the ability to resonate with a certain psychic frequency, the same kind of magnetic resonance that vibrates along to the—”

“We have no fucking clue,” Mako interjected.

“Ah, thank god you stopped me,” Hoshi laughed. “I wanted to see for how long I could technobabble; I felt like I was on an episode of Star Trek or something.”

“For how much longer do you think you could’ve gone?” Mako asked.

“I was already struggling to be honest,” Hoshi shrugged. “I was going to start making up stupid things like dark matter, the morphogenetic field, and Phillian’s Theorem.”

“Phillian’s Theorem!?” Mako faked shock.

“That’s right. Just as it was foretold in the Dead Sea Scrolls.”

Hoshi and Mako looked at each other, maintaining serious expressions for approximately one tenth of a second, before bursting into laughter. Archer was amused by the display, but not enough to share in the laughter.

“You guys really don’t know how any of this works?” Archer asked.

“All we know,” Mako began, “is that we have all unlocked these powers after breaking this *tablet* in our minds—”

“Mine looked like a wall,” Hoshi interrupted.

“Regardless,” Mako continued, “after some great moment of introspection, or in the case of some of us, great distress, the tablet breaks, and suddenly we become aware of all these other people living inside of us. These entities are, as far as we’ve come to understand, parts of our ultimate self; that’s why we call them Facets.”

“Does that mean... am I special?” Archer asked.

“Yes and no,” Hoshi replied. “You’re special, I mean most people don’t unlock their Facets like this. It takes months. There are people I’ve been helping for a year, and they’re not that much closer than when they started. That being said, you are special but not exactly unique. Everyone has the potential to break through the wall; it’s just that most people don’t, most don’t ever look inside of themselves. So they go through life unaware of their hidden potential. There’s also the opposite, where people are able to peer at the wall inside of them, or tablet, or

doors in your case, and though they're never able to break them fully, they are still capable of drawing a shard of their true power through this microscopic crack."

Archer shook his head, trying to clear this curious feeling of *déjà vu*.

"Are you..." Archer cleared his throat. "Are you telling me there's everyday people with superpowers walking around town, and they don't even know it?"

"Yup," Hoshi nodded. They then provided several examples of locals Hoshi knew who had unlocked some of their hidden potential, all of them without even realizing it. Here are some of the most notable examples. Andrea Herrera, the sixty-five-year-old owner of an antique shop on the west side of town, had the power to tell the time with one-hundred-percent accuracy. Van Stingray, the twenty-eight-year-old bartender at the town's least popular gay bar, had the power to fill a glass right to the top of the brim without causing it to spill. Jennifer Looney, the eighteen-year-old dropout working at the local burger joint, had the power to change the length of climate events in multiples of fifteen minutes. And, of course who could forget, Nguyen Thu Mai, the

forty-nine-year-old owner of 24-Hour Donuts, who had the power to make already tasty things even tastier.

“Oh my god...” Archer put a hand over his mouth. “I’ve been there. This one time, I only had enough money for a coffee, and the lady just handed me a doughnut for free. It tasted so good, I think I actually cried.”

“Yup, that’s Mai,” Hoshi nodded. “She’s an angel.”

“So, all these normal people have superpowers and they don’t even know it?” Archer already knew the answer to that question, so he instead phrased the words that were stinging his poor little gay heart. “And none of them, you know, have turned into supervillains?”

Hoshi took a deep breath. Archer couldn’t read minds like Hoshi could, but even so, he could read that body language and know what it meant. Hoshi had answered this question many times in the past, and with each telling it grew shorter. The explanation Archer was about to receive was the shortest yet.

“I don’t know how any of this works,” Hoshi steadied themselves, then looked Archer right in the eye. “But I know one thing: in order to break the wall, you need to come to terms with some hidden truth about yourself. It’s the only way to see all the infinite people you could

inhabit. It would take more than a supervillain; it would take *real evil* to look at all these Facets, all the purest forms of all the best parts of you, and think you could use them to hurt others.”

It would take more than evil. It would take a tiny, pathetic being. Someone so good at lying to themselves that they could turn darkness into light, azure seas into crimson ones, and trick themselves into believing that—if they made other people suffer—there would be more happiness available to them. Only the worst of the worst, the tiniest and most insignificant of people, could sink that low.

“So, no supervillains, huh?” Archer held a hand in a fist, as though reading a punch. “Here I was hoping I’d get to clobber some goons at least.”

Hoshi turned to look at Mako, so Archer did the same. Mako let out a sigh. This was her cue to tell her own old, tired story.

“That’s how I found my powers,” she began. “It happened in high school. There was this stupid boy; he’d been bullying me for years. I’ve always been short, and he made me feel so small. He used to push me and push me—and Hoshi would push him back, but he got me this

one day when I was all alone. He started roughing me up, and I... I couldn't help but think about *mice*. Have you ever seen a cornered mouse? Those little things, so small and cute; they can fuck shit up if they try. All my life I'd been told I was small, and I *was*, but that didn't mean I couldn't fight back. So I did. I punched that bully in the gut."

"What happened next?" Archer asked.

"He flew back about two hundred yards," Hoshi said, drawing the rise and fall of a projectile flying through the air with the tip of their index finger. "He crashed through the window of an empty classroom on the other side of the school. He had to get stitches for the glass, and... well, he did also kind of suffer a broken solar plexus and a spine fracture."

"Did—did you," Archer stumbled on his words. "Did you get in trouble?"

"Nope. Nobody even knew I did it," Mako shook her head. "And nobody believed his story. Hoshi barely believed me. It's not everyday that someone flies like they've been shot out of a cannon. Everyone thought he'd been trying to break into that classroom, even if the science didn't add up. I mean, what were people supposed

to believe? Even that guy, the bully, started thinking that maybe he *had* tried to break into the classroom. He smoked a lot of weed back then, and it was either that or accepting the truth that the tiny little girl he bullied had punched him across the school.”

“I heard this rumor that a ghost did it,” Hoshi shot Archer a wink.

“We’ll never find out,” Mako muttered under her breath. “It’s one of the great mysteries of Socorro High.”

“Socorro?” Archer frowned. “You guys are from here? Does that mean that guy—”

“Oh yeah, he’s still living here,” Hoshi said. “He works at the pier. His name is Wayne, nice guy. He got married last year. I think his wife is expecting.”

“And to this day, he’s got back problems,” Mako added, “because of me.”

“Because he was a dumbass,” Hoshi said, baiting Mako and succeeding.

“I was a dumbass too, I was scared, I didn’t want him to hurt me. I can’t change what I did.” Mako looked up at Archer. “But I can choose not to punch people anymore. That’s my redemption.”

“What’s that old comic book saying?” Hoshi looked up at the ceiling again, as though hoping it would be written for them. “With great power comes great... *humanity?*” That wasn’t the quote, but you can’t blame Hoshi. They’d never held a comic book in their hands. “And I think it’s true. It takes a great deal of humanity to get here Archer, and even more humanity to use these powers right. That’s not to say the world is full of good people who mean well. You and I know that’s not true, but everyone who’s broken the wall inside of them has the chance to know better. It’s hard to learn to love yourself, and all the things about you, without also learning to love others.”

Oh, Hoshi. You and your infinite patience.

How infectious it was. You thought the best of everyone.

“Maybe someday I’ll get there,” Archer said.

Hoshi looked at the young man, offered him a smile, and spoke a terrifying question.

“Do you regret it? Do you wish you hadn’t opened your eyes?”

Archer sat in silence. He’d seen so much. He’d witnessed the best in people and their worst too. He’d seen hope be rewarded and cruelty be punished. He’d seen

what could be, what had to be, and what would never—ever—come to fruition. It was hard for him to put his feelings to words, specially because it felt to him like he was still bleeding from a thousand cuts. A thousand little injuries he'd endured by crawling through the thorned branches of some invisible tree.

“Do you regret it?” Hoshi repeated.

“Can I...” Archer sighed. “Can I get back to you on that?”

“Of course,” Hoshi smiled. “How about this upcoming Friday? We have an event at the queer youth center, and I would love for you to come. There'll be free food and lots of wonderful people like you and me. How does that sound?”

“I...” Archer smiled back. “That sounds amazing.”



17

Hoshi and Mako stood outside of the pink house on Golondrina Street. It was a couple hours after they'd chatted with Archer. Their adventure getting out of the college campus was nowhere near as exciting as their adventure getting in. By the time they made their leave, the mess in the dorms had been cleaned, and the security guards had grown bored looking for the trespassers. All it took to escape was Archer guiding them to the side exits students and teachers used; the ones that linked up with the second parking lot on the other side of the campus.

Hoshi and Mako waved goodbye to Archer, and had just been about to wave goodbye to one another and split, when Hoshi's smartphone buzzed. It was a text message from Cami, because of course it was. Hoshi looked around, searching among the treetops and electrical poles for the sight of their silvery bird who was always watching over them like a guardian angel, but didn't find it. That didn't mean Cami wasn't using their Facet; it just meant Hoshi didn't see it. It was getting late in the day after all. The sun was sinking into the horizon. The streetlights were coming on. The coastal chill wove between the buildings. Deep inside them, Hoshi felt the primal instinct to go back home—though that was not Cami's demand. Hoshi read the message on their smartphone, and instead of waving goodbye to their best friend, they took Mako's hand. The young woman furrowed her brow, but was too used to Hoshi's antics to contest. *'You're invited to dinner,'* was all Hoshi needed to say. The two of them took a bus all the way back to the intersection of Main and Golondrina, right by the doughnut shop. They walked the little ways down Golondrina Street until they were standing right outside of that lovely house, closing the circle and ending right at the beginning of this digression.

Hoshi and Mako walked up the steps of that pink house, opened the door that was always unlocked, and were immediately greeted by the scent of something wonderful cooking in the oven. The hallway of that house, its backbone as well as its esophagus, wafted with a cornucopia of oregano, basil, rosemary, and that yeasty scent of freshly baked bread. Hoshi was not psychic—at least, not the kind of psychic who could see through walls, like yours truly—but they trusted their senses and they knew what was coming out of the oven at that very moment. Hoshi and Mako took off their shoes and walked down the hallway, their feet making *pitter* and *patter* against the wooden floor. They walked under the archway that led to the kitchen and... Hoshi could not contain themselves. They rushed towards Cami, ducking under the freshly baked pizza Jason was pulling out of the oven, and hugging Cami in spite of the flour staining their apron, which was now staining Hoshi's clothes. If Hoshi was capable of caring about something like that, they sure didn't show it. Instead they kissed Cami's lips, cheeks, and nose, the latter of which also happened to be stained with flour. Cami was not the best cook—and neither was Jason—but what the two of them lacked in culinary

prowess, they made up in confidence. They followed the instructions, sometimes measuring twice before pouring the sauce, but they never made a bad meal. Hoshi knew, with just one look at Cami's eyes, that Jason had been the one to propose cooking something special for that night. They'd already baked one pizza and it was cooling on the cutting board by the sink. Hoshi also learned that Cami's motive was solely to reward Hoshi for what they'd done that day.

"Baby... are you serious?" Hoshi kissed Cami again. "You could've at least made one with meat, Mako is a growing girl. She needs the protein."

"They didn't have pepperoni at the supermarket down the street," Cami laughed, then gestured to the cans of pizza sauce that had been gutted for their crimson goodness. "We were originally going to do this all from scratch, the dough we did from scratch, but I mean, it's just flour, water, and yeast. Even we could figure that one out. At some point Jason and I were looking at the sad tomatoes we have in the fridge and thought, 'oh hell no we ain't gonna make a sauce with these' so I sent him down to the supermarket while I started kneading."

"All this..." Hoshi fluttered their eyes. "For me?"

If those two were any other two people in our rotten world, existing in their nebulous, amorphous relationship, this would've been the moment where Cami denied the truth. They would've taken Hoshi's question and deflected, saying something like...

“No, it's not for you. Of course not, that would be like, showing you that I love you.”

That's what normal people do. Normal people in our rotten world seem to think affection is this strange—highly sought after and severely limited—resource. I was once a normal person, an everyday stranger in that strange land, and I carried inside of me the words of my parents. The cruel words they spoke without a hint of irony or sarcasm.

“Never tell anyone you love them, or they might believe you.”

So that's what I did. I held on to the phrase *'I love you'* like it was the last drop of water in my canteen. Normal, every day people didn't say how they really felt, because we are all terrified that the way we feel isn't the way things are. We are scared that the reality we perceive is inconsistent with the reality others are living through—and the truth is, *yeah*, reality is inconsistent. Reality is a

mess, and easily manipulated by those with psychic abilities, some of which don't even know they are doing it. But in this digression lies a piercing truth, like a spear of light cutting across the ashes of the sunset: Hoshi and Cami knew each other, and they knew each other's secrets. Cami's Facet, whose name was OPERATOR, allowed them to witness things from a far. Hoshi's Facet, whose name was MAZE, allowed them to read people's minds. Cami could always know where Hoshi was, and what they were doing, what they were saying. Hoshi could always look into Cami's eyes and know what they were feeling and thinking.

And it was here, in this bizarre romance—which was open in more ways than one—that two people found the freedom to be completely honest, red-hot in their words, heated in their love, because there was no point in hiding anything. Those two had crushed their *Fabula Rasa*, learned a deep truth about themselves in the process, and understood that with their great powers also came a great *humanity*. Whenever Cami thought to look for Hoshi using their power, they didn't do so for long. They never judged. They never asked questions or interrogated Hoshi. In turn, Hoshi never dug around Cami's mind, never tried

to guide Cami's thoughts, never offered advice unless it was requested. What these two shared was more than just trust. It was a brazen kind of acceptance. It was as though the two of them were fully naked before the other, their minds as open as the pages of a book, and—when faced with this equal power—both felt the same emotion quake the very foundations of their being.

“You are perfect just the way you are, and I’ll always love you.”

So, when faced with the question of why Cami went through all the trouble of coordinating a bake-off with Jason, running up and down the street to gather ingredients, and getting flour stains all the way up their elbows, the answer was simple. It was the truth.

“Of course this is all for you,” Cami kissed Hoshi. “I am so proud of you.”

“I jumped a fence today!”

“I saw that. I saw how you helped that young man...” Cami's voice drifted. They turned to look at Jason and Mako, both of which were caught staring. “What are you two standing there for? We're not going to eat here, are we? This table's a mess. Jason, set that down and go wash

up. Mako, would you please grab the tablecloths? They're in the dining room cabinet, the one in the corner."

"The one by..." Mako peeked around the arch leading to the adjacent dining room. "The one by the big cardboard box that's been there for like two years, right?"

"That's the one," Cami shot Mako a wink. "That's where that box lives."

Mako rolled her eyes, and Jason left to wash up, leaving the two lovers alone in that kitchen. Hoshi and Cami looked into each other's eyes, examining those colorful, beautiful orbs. All of a sudden Hoshi reached over to the kitchen table, stained with flour, and painted a little white stain right on the tip of Cami's nose.

"Oh, don't you start with me," Cami narrowed their eyes. "You're about to start a flour fight in this damn kitchen, *Little Star*."

By now, you already know a name's just a name, and names only mean something if they mean something to you. Hoshi's name meant 'star' in Japanese—though to Cami, it meant *everything*. There is not enough room for me to contain all of Cami's life leading up to that Saturday night. But, if I must summarize their journey there, I—
PAGES—would say this. Cami's life had been hard; they'd

spent so much time feeling lost, but all of that changed when they found their own north star to guide them.

“Your eyes...” Hoshi caressed Cami’s cheek. “There’s so much love in them.”

“And pride,” Cami said. “You did really good today.”

“Even though you told me not to go?”

“I don’t see why it has to be right or wrong,” Cami smiled. “I still don’t think you should’ve gone, but that doesn’t mean what you did is wrong. The world isn’t so simple.”

“You were keeping an eye on him the whole time, weren’t you?”

“Of course I was. His reaction to getting superpowers wasn’t destructive. Honestly, it was better than what most people go through. Jason is still coming around, and it’s been *months*. In the course of a few days, Archer understood the nature of his abilities and used them to coordinate a way to get help.”

“You think he would’ve gotten better on his own?”

“Of course I do, I still do, but I don’t think what you did was wrong.”

“Sounds to me like...” Hoshi searched the back of their mind for the right words. “Nature versus nurture, or something like that.”

“It doesn’t have to be a binary state,” Cami winked. “Why can’t nature also nurture?”

“This is valid.”

“I was right before too, you know.” Cami narrowed their eyes. “This boy is your responsibility. He may not be sleeping on our couch like Jason, but he’s still as much of a stray. You have to make sure he stays safe. His power is... well, to put it mildly, fucking terrifying.”

“You’re right,” Hoshi said. “But, there is no one else I would trust more with the power to see the future than a young person in love.”

Cami wasn’t sure if they felt the same way, but they trusted—and followed—their north star. Each of them had found an answer to their secret question, but there was no need for one of them to be wrong when they could both be right. The world was not as simple as black or white, right or wrong, male or female. There were shades of gray and—oh, oh so many—shades of blue.

The lovers broke their embrace. They cleaned up the flour stains on their skin. They helped set the table. And

then, their little found family shared in some laughter, freshly baked pizza, and the satisfaction of a hard day's work.



18

Archer's plan had been to lightly set his head on his pillow and sleep until the new semester started. In the end, he only slept for sixteen hours. The young man woke up the following day around lunchtime, feeling more human than he had all year. He was still a mess in more ways than one. Thanks to the stress of the last few days, he'd barely been eating, showering, or sleeping. He'd already taken care of the resting part and a granola bar from his backpack was working on the hunger. All he needed to feel like a real person—and not some wooden

homunculus—was to feel warm water running down his face. Archer walked out of his room, navigated down the squeaky-clean corridors and stairways all the way to the communal showers. The dorms were as empty as they'd been all winter break, and he was glad for that; peace and quiet were a luxury in college life. Archer showered for what felt like hours, just letting the warm water flow down his head, his shoulders, and down to the rest of him. He looked down at this body expecting to see black crosses, but there were none. The body he piloted then was his own, the same he'd known all his life. With curious fingers, he touched his body, feeling his birthmarks as though they were new. This body felt strange to him. It was his. It was all he'd ever known—at least, until that first Monday of the year. He searched his skin for something... though he wasn't sure what. If Archer expected to find a zipper on the back of his neck, as though his skin were some disguise, he was failing miserably. No, that young man was looking at his body with wonder. This was the body he'd always known. For a time, he'd hated it. He'd been taught to hate his body for how masculine it was. Archer's flat chest. Archer's narrow hips. Archer's collarbone, so defined, another

object to be bullied about. All his life, Archer had been expected to fill a certain role, to look a certain way, to behave like a *lady*.

But he wasn't.

Archer didn't even know if he was a *gentleman*, though he'd always had a gentle nature. He'd never hurt anyone; he hardly ever raised his voice. Archer knew how much it hurt to be bullied, to be beat up, to be made an alien and an outcast. He could never do that to another person. Not before, and certainly not now that the future was one psychic click away.

Hoshi had taught Archer how to exit his Facet, how to turn off its powers and return to the flexible, malleable, state of living. Archer hadn't tried looking into the future since talking with Hoshi. In between sleeping, waking up, and walking down the empty dorm, he'd almost forgotten he had such power. As he showered, Archer could feel his hands, like those of a phantom, caressing the imaginary cockpit. It was there. *It was still there*. It hadn't gone anywhere. Without realizing it, Archer closed his eyes, feeling the warm water flowing down his bare skin, as he imagined that hangar deep inside of him.

He stood inside that room with an impossibly high ceiling, surrounded by giants. Ever the geek, Archer had always wondered what it would be like to see a real giant robot or a giant monster. He'd seen movies and shows, and instead of being struck with awe at the action sequences and computer generated graphics, he had instead been terrified by the sense of scale. What would it really be like to stand at the feet of *Godzilla*? What would it be like to look up and see the towering form of a *Gundam*? Now he knew. It seemed so simple in practice. It was no different than standing at the base of a skyscraper. The top of those giants seemed so distant, and Archer's human eyes struggled to make out the details of their upper bodies and faces. Archer's vision felt distorted, as though looking through a fisheye lens. Those giants... they looked so far away, so impossibly large compared to Archer's human body. He should've been scared of them. They could've crushed him with ease. They could've taken a step forward and killed him without even realizing it, just like some pitiful autumn leaf. And yet Archer felt no fear. Inside the darkness of his mind, he heard a friend's words echo.

"Have you ever seen a cornered mouse?"

Archer looked up at those giants.

“Those little things, so small and cute; they can fuck shit up if they try.”

Archer nodded. He was so small, so cute, so gentle, but he knew that if he wanted to, if he had the need to, he could stare down giant monsters and *fuck them up*. Archer was not the person others wanted him to be, but he wasn't weak. He wasn't helpless anymore.

Archer opened his eyes.

Once upon a time, the lies he'd been told about himself sank to the bottom of his consciousness, and over the course of a lifetime, they'd solidified into a door. This obstacle was no more. And it would never again limit his potential. The path to Archer's infinite well of possibilities was open. The young man drank and bathed himself in the wonderful realization that he could be whatever he wanted, could be whomever he wanted.

Archer dried himself, dressed, and walked back up the steps to his room.

Refreshed of mind, body, and soul, the young man looked at himself in the mirror. For the first time in his life, his reflection didn't antagonize him. The mirror didn't remind him of his parent's expectations. It didn't

relive his past failures. It didn't repeat the words of his bullies. For the first time, Archer saw himself as he was, a blank slate, a handful of clay, that he could transform as he wished.

Archer grabbed a pair of scissors from his desk. He stood in front of the mirror, looking at his messy black-blue hair and wondering what to do with it. He hadn't cut his hair in a while. He knew he shouldn't do it himself, but he was a broke college student, and the pair of scissors weren't going to tell him hairstyles had gender. Archer parted his hair, held a handful of strands between his index and middle finger as he'd seen hairstylists do, brought the scissors closer... but did not cut.

Archer looked at himself in the mirror and thought, just for a second, that he could see his Facet looking back at him. It was at this moment that Archer remembered this other person had a name. The other self didn't introduce themselves; they didn't speak their name out loud. Archer simply looked in those eyes—so similar to his—and knew this other self was named CROSSROADS. Archer considered the word, feeling it on his tongue as though the first taste of a new dessert. The name wasn't *crossroads*, or *Crossroads*. It was CROSSROADS. Just to

think about it, to consider this name, seemed to fill all of Archer's mind. The young man looked at his reflection, at this other self, and smiled to them. They were on the same team. They were going to do great things together. But before that could be...

Without a word or thought, Archer inhabited this Facet of his being. Reaching out through the fabric of reality, Archer opened the door to a secret place. He found himself at the back of the theater where life happened, beside the creature of chrome with its spinning spools and light. Archer reached for the film, skipping ahead, navigating through the branching paths of causality as though the pages of a novel. He did all this to find the answer to a simple, and very silly, question.

“Would he love me more if my hair was short or if it was long?”

Inside this imaginary cinema—you and I, and everyone else watching—shouted loud enough that it carried across the very ribcage of reality. Our words were so loud that even across time and space, and the secret substance that forms the third point of that triangle, even everyday people found themselves hearing our reply.

“HE WILL LOVE YOU NO MATTER WHAT YOU LOOK LIKE.”

And Archer knew this to be true, for he knew what we would say. He had seen through the films that could be, the stories that had yet to start spinning, and the pictures that had yet to move. Archer saw what would happen were he to cut his hair short, grow it out, shave his entire head, and all the things in between. Leave it to Archer, our youngest oracle, to find the only choice in all of the history of humankind—and of all living things in the realities henceforth—that truly did *not* matter. No matter what choice Archer made that day, Matthew would still be madly in love with him. Matthew would love him, care for him, open up to him, and tend for him like he was the greatest treasure in all of existence.

Because he was.

Archer set the scissors down. Tears flowed down his face, though the feeling that inspired them was not sadness. Archer parted his lips to speak and found the words stuck at the base of his throat. Inside his mind, he replayed glimpses of what he'd seen in the futures that could be. No matter what Archer did, how he dressed,

how he presented, how he cut his hair, Matthew always fell in love with him.

Archer fell to his knees, sobbing, crying tears of pure joy.

Everyone wants to be loved, but hardly anyone's brave enough to open their heart. There's too much cynicism in the human consciousness, too many abusive relationships, too many bitter divorces, too much bad blood. The average person believes love is real, but doesn't see themselves as worthy of love. And isn't that the *damn* thing? It doesn't matter what you think. You may see yourself as worthless, and someone might still fall madly in love with you. The inverse is also true. You may think you're all that and a bag of chips, but that doesn't entitle you to a happy ending. Life is a comedy—and the mythical butterfly is in constant rapture—because there's no way to know what's going to happen. Sometimes everything goes wrong. Sometimes everything goes *right*. The perfect boy goes to the same college as you. He attends the same class as you. He falls in love with you. And even then, against all odds, we choose not to see what's going on. We are physically unable to believe our good luck. We believe in the contradiction that you can

have *too much* of a good thing. We don't see ourselves as worthy of love, so we ignore the signs. We turn left. Over and over. And we wonder if we'll ever feel the real thing.

You will.

But first, you must open your heart.

I have seen all there is, and though I cannot speak for the existence of a higher power, I can tell you one thing with certainty. Reality, in all its blissful symmetry, has a tendency for making the right people meet under the right circumstances. Everything that is, and that ever will be, exists on the graph paper of reality as triangles—and do you know what those are made of? Do you know the geometric root of all things? Points forming lines. Silvery stars in the darkness of night, bound together into constellations. When two or more, seemingly unrelated points are drawn together—*everything changes*.

Archer, so happy and so gay, picked up his smartphone and began typing a message for a certain Lovely Boy. Our young oracle understood what he had to do next. So he gathered his courage, wrote his feelings in words that could hardly contain them, and did the scariest thing of all.

He drew the line.



19

They say time flies when you're having fun, but that isn't necessarily true. Time flies when you're busy or when you're not paying attention to the clock. Time can also fly, or even zoom, when you're unhappy or heartbroken. The only thing certain about the fourth dimension is that it *ticked* and *tocked* whether we liked it or not. Buses circled the town, following their routes as though little trains in a miniature city, always on time—can you believe that? Buses in Socorro County were always on time. As was the mailman. He always swung by my apartment at the same

time every weekday. I would hear the engine of his little boxy white truck just as I finished making coffee. Some people were so punctual. Some people made the most out of their limited time on this Earth. I wished I were one of these people. The only thing I was good at was getting up on time, making coffee on time, and showing up to my dead-end job on time.

Every day was the same. The clockwork of the universe *ticked* and *tocked*, and I repeated the same behaviors—made the same stupid mistakes—as though a little wooden person peeking out of a window at the ring of every hour. I felt like I was a reverse-Pinocchio; I had once been a real person, with real-person emotions, but somewhere along my story, a fairy had turned me into a wooden puppet. Every day, I let those strings dictate my movements, my actions, and my words. Sometimes I found myself repeating things my parents used to say to one another in the middle of a fight, or the things the mean girls in school used to write on my skin with black marker. There were so many awful things people said about me, and I'd grown to believe each and every single one of them. Every day I got up, pulled out of bed by the

invisible strings, and I went along pretending I was a real person.

“Good morning, everyone!”

I would speak through my wooden smile.

“I am so excited to get back to work.”

I would move my little feet over to my littler corner.

“The numbers are looking real good, Mr. Reed.”

I hated lying, but no matter how often I did it, my nose never seemed to grow. So I lied more and more. I figured that if my nose didn't get longer whenever I lied, then I couldn't be Pinocchio; I had to be a real human. So I kept lying. I told Mr. Reed just what he wanted to hear. The numbers were good. The business was doing fine. Nobody knew about all the money he was pilfering. Not even me. Least of all me. I didn't know where the money was going. I didn't know why all the client's bank accounts were drying up. I didn't know there were internal talks about laying off half of our staff by the end of summer. I didn't know any of that. I was just a little wooden puppet, and whenever I tried to move my hands or my legs all I felt was the tug of those strings, like the strum of a guitar, and music would chime in my ear.

“EVERYONE THINKS YOU'RE WORTHLESS.”

“THEY ARE ALL USING YOU.”

“THEY LOOK AT YOU... AND SEE ONLY A PUPPET.”

So I stopped pulling on the strings. It hurt so much to hear those words, so I didn't do anything that would cause the music to start up again. I stayed in my lane. I stayed in that little corner, moving numbers from one column of the spreadsheet to another. And it wasn't all bad. I had my little window, and I could always look at the pink house across the street, that lovely house full of lively people.

“I wonder what goes on there...” I would mutter under my breath.

But I never went there. I never knocked on that door.

At least, not yet.

My first week of that year was uneventful. I lived through the same mechanisms I'd created the year before. I got up on time, made coffee on time, heard the boxy mail truck drive past my apartment. I took the bus, got off by the doughnut shop—the best in the county—and walked down to work. *Work. Work. Work.* That was my life. That was what I did. No adventures. No tragedies—at least, not yet—and certainly no comedies or romances. The first day of the year came and went, as did the following Saturday, and all the way back to Thursday.

Everything went as expected. I worked. I messaged *her*, she seldom messaged back. She'd been so quiet recently. Time flew, I let my New Year's resolutions sink to the bottom of my mind where they would have good company. I didn't know what was in store for me—I'd yet to obtain the powers I do now—but there were a few things I was certain about.

I had a date. Friday, after work. I was going to see *her* again. We were going to have lunch at this lovely little place downtown. I didn't know it, but I would soon taste the last of my blissful ignorance, for the place we were going to meet at just so happened to be across the street from *Marsha Hall*. I had no way to know, no way to see the symmetry I was living through, but soon enough, I would. In time, I would know the cruel geometry of the universe by another name.

IRONY.



20

There is no greatest, more foolish human conquest than the desire of wanting things to remain the same. There is nothing to conserve, for it is the very nature of reality to constantly shift. Metamorphosis is not just coded into our genes; it's a mechanism of time itself. Things change. The seasons pass. Years come, they go, they linger in our memory for a while, and—if we're lucky—we remember them. People change too. Everything we do is just building castles of sand, and those

that are not washed away completely are permanently changed nonetheless.

The building that housed the queer youth center of Socorro County hadn't always been there or been what it was. Once, it'd been an apothecary; twice, it'd donned the role of a restaurant, and since those days, it'd claimed many minor roles. The locals who'd spent all their life in that town, such as Hoshi and Mako, had known that two-story building first for the martial arts center it had been when they were young, then as the ballet school it'd been when they graduated from middle school, and now—a couple hundred years in the making—that old building was home and shelter to queer people all around the county. While it may be easy to fall into the false assumption that some things never change, this is simply not true. Everything changes; some things just take better to said change. The wide windows that had once served to display medicinal goods, then offer a view of the people dining, then the people exercising, were now windows into the lovely people who gathered there nearly every day. This little nook, nestled right in the middle of the busy commercial district, was the place where Hoshi felt happiest, where they felt they were making a difference.

Hoshi knew that the best way to make the world feel less lonely and less hostile was to be welcoming, to be warm, and to be the best version of themselves possible. And the best part? You didn't need superpowers to do any of that.

It was Friday afternoon and reality was drawing triangles yet again.

I was at the restaurant across the street from Marsha Hall, sitting by the window, waiting for a special someone. It wasn't often that the two of us went out on a date. We'd barely been messaging the last few weeks. I didn't know what was in store for me. I couldn't see the future, like *some people*. I didn't think I was about to have my heart broken, but then again... even the person who could see the future hadn't spoiled himself on the surprises that were about to find him. We like to think we're the main characters of our stories, but we're not. We're fools, stumbling ass-backwards into trouble, sometimes falling off cliffs or into the mouths of rabid beasts. This may go against all common sense, but although we are fools, that doesn't mean we ought to quit living our stories. I know better now. This may be hard to believe coming from yours truly, and certainly there ought to be a better way to phrase this, but the juice is certainly worth the squeeze.

Falling teaches you how to get up. Messing up teaches you how to do better. I could not have told you this then, on that Friday, because I had yet to fall hard enough to learn, but it is okay to stumble.

Sometimes, fucking up is the best possible thing you can do.

I sat on my chair, trying not to look at the time—my date was already half an hour late—so instead, I looked out the window of the restaurant. I saw a young man with black-blue hair walking down the street, I saw him wave, then I connected the last two dots of our triangle. Right across the street from me, standing outside the door to Marsha Hall, was that strange person with long black hair. I didn't know their name yet, but I knew where they lived.

“It's that person from the pink house...” I muttered to myself.

Then my phone buzzed, and everything changed.

Across the street, Hoshi and Archer shared in a quick hug. You didn't have much of a choice when Hoshi decided they were going to give you one. Once the greeting was complete, the taller of the two led them into the building. The first floor of Marsha Hall was wide and open; the walls were covered in pride posters. There were

lots of people already inside, sitting at the tables eating, chatting, and even doing some dancing. There was a table at the back of the room with a laptop and a set of speakers that, although small in size, were perfectly able to inspire even the prudest person to shake their bum a little. Archer was not a dancer, but even he felt his spirits lift a little by just listening to the upbeat tunes. Or maybe it was the bookshelf behind said table? With one look, the young man could tell the bookshelf was overflowing with queer literature, board games, and a certain arrangement of books, the spines of which Archer recognized very well. Hoshi guided Archer to that table at the back, to the bowls full of pronoun pins. The young man recognized the *'they/them'* pin Hoshi had been wearing when they first met. Hoshi took another one of those pins, even though they probably had one in their purse at that very moment, and offered Archer a *'he/him'* pin. He went to put it on, when he noticed the person behind the laptop was looking at him—and smiling. This was Vicky. She had dark skin. It looked like she'd shaved her head recently, for her frizzy hair was coming back perfectly even. She was wearing a comfy-looking romper and loop earrings. Vicky was trans and wore two pins on her chest,

indicating she used she/her and they/them pronouns. Vicky was one of the senior organizers at Marsha Hall. Age-wise, Vicky was three years older than Hoshi. Maturity-wise, Vicky was several decades ahead. Vicky had married her girlfriend of ten years the previous summer. She drove a car. She worked at the publishing company a couple blocks down the street. Of course, Archer didn't know all of this, but he knew one thing for sure: Vicky was in charge.

“You must be Archer,” Vicky extended a hand. “Nice to meet you. Hoshi’s said so many lovely things about you.”

“Nice to meet you too,” Archer shook Vicky’s hand.

“Say Vics,” Hoshi shot Vicky a wink. “I’m taking Archie here upstairs, gonna prime him on how we do things around here.”

“Uh-huh,” Vicky looked down at her computer, smiling. “Sure you are.”

“Cool-cool, thanks Vics. Come on Archie, this way.”

Hoshi led Archer up the flight of stairs. Unlike the first floor, the second one was a series of smaller rooms, kind of like the study rooms at the college library. Hoshi walked over to one of the doors and opened it outwards, revealing the sheet of paper taped to it. Archer expected

to see the sheet say something like ‘*Orientation Room,*’ or ‘*Room A,*’ or maybe even ‘*Hoshi’s Office,*’ but none of those were the case. The sheet of paper contained a child’s drawing of a tall person with long black hair, which Archer thought looked an awful lot like Hoshi. Inside the room, there was a small desk, a sofa, and a few floor cushions. When offered a seat, Archer took to the sofa and Hoshi—being who they were—sat cross-legged on top of the desk. Hoshi exhaled, savoring the peace and quiet of that little room, and then broke the silence as though popping the cork in a champagne bottle.

“So! I am suddenly realizing this is all a little funny,” Hoshi smiled. “Since, you know, I’m talking with someone who already knows what’s going to happen.”

“That’s not necessarily true,” Archer smiled back.

“So... you haven’t been using your powers?”

“Actually. I have.”

Archer took a deep breath and told Hoshi how he had been using his powers. Much as he always did, Archer had rehearsed in front of the mirror in the days leading to that Friday, and—as with any school presentation or social event—it was over before he knew it. Archer let the words

fall out of him until there were none left, and he felt so much better for it.

“Well, I am glad you helped that lady.”

“She was going to fall,” Archer shrugged. “I had to help her.”

“You know, when you said you’d been using your powers, I thought you meant stuff like... I don’t know, spoiling yourself on upcoming movies, mapping out the next decade, or seeing what life is going to be like in a million years.”

Archer recoiled so hard, he nearly jumped out of his seat.

“Absolutely *not*,” the young man shook his head. “I—I don’t think I want to know. I, I know this may sound dumb, but I’m starting to feel like someone in a time traveling movie, you know? Like, yeah I could know what’s going to happen, but you have no control over whether it’s going to be good news or bad news. It could be that I might die tomorrow, or eighty years from now, and honestly I don’t think I want to know. Just like I don’t want to know how the heat-death of the universe is going to pan out for humanity.”

“Valid,” Hoshi nodded.

“What was that thing you said?” Archer looked down at his hands. “With great power comes... great humanity? I think I get it now. Just because there’s this, um, *button* in my head that lets me know the future doesn’t mean I should press it. Like, who am I to know the future? Why do I get to spoil myself? Honestly, I should watch the movie like everyone else, not just skip over to the interesting parts.”

“So...” Hoshi fluttered their eyelashes. “You are not winning the lottery anytime soon?”

Archer’s eyes widened. He shook his head very slowly. This reaction seemed to take Hoshi by surprise. They leaned forward, and lowered their voice.

“Are you winning the lottery right now?”

“I looked into that...” Archer frowned. “I was curious, but then, I guess I flew too close to the sun. I—I think you already know what happened. I mean, you can look into my mind.”

“I’m not always looking,” Hoshi smiled.

“I...” Archer gathered his courage. “I, you know, I have student loans that I might be paying for the next thirty years. So, you know, I thought I would see what it would be like.”

“How did that go?” Hoshi asked.

“Fucking terrible,” Archer sighed. “I followed the trail. I kept seeing further and further into the future, and I saw myself at the end of my rope. I thought money wouldn’t corrupt me. I thought I would handle the money well. It turns out I’m wrong. If I won the lottery, I would crash and burn. And then, then I...”

“Then what?”

“This is going to sound weird but... in my vision, in this version of the future, I saw myself washed out. I saw myself at the brink and then, then—this doesn’t make any sense, but then I saw *Jason*. You know? The guy who lives with you? He brought me to the house. The pink house, and he made me sleep on your couch. That living room became *my* home. I don’t know why, though.”

Hoshi was about to say something, to explain in a few words that Archer wasn’t their first friend to win the lottery, but a knock at the door interrupted Hoshi’s trail of thought.

“Hey Hoshi, you’re not going to believe this,” the voice was Vicky’s.

“Try me,” Hoshi said in sing-song.

“There’s someone downstairs looking for you.”

“Pronouns?”

“All of them.”

Hoshi’s face grew pale. They stuttered a little, trying to put their words in the right order.

“Um, ah, just to make sure. Could you, um, describe this person to me?”

Vicky had been ready for this.

“Well-dressed. Three-piece suit. Wingtip shoes. Eyeliner like nothing you’ve ever seen.”

“Fuck,” Hoshi ground their teeth. They noticed the shock in Archer’s face and did their best to remain calm. Hoshi took a deep breath, steadied themselves, then spoke. “Vics, would you mind keeping this intruder busy for a little bit? I’ll be downstairs in a jiffy. He won’t bother you. Trust me. He might make small talk, kiss your hand, make you blush, but he’s no danger to anyone.”

Vicky let out a quiet laugh, then walked away. Once the sound of her heels could not be heard, Archer leaned forward and whispered.

“Everything okay? What was that about?”

“I *hope* everything’s okay,” Hoshi forced a laugh. “It’s not everyday that your ex-boyfriend shows up unannounced.”

“Well, in that case, I won’t keep you—”

Archer went to get up, but Hoshi held out a hand.

“Not yet. Let him suffer a little. He’s very good at that,” Hoshi looked up at Archer. “Just looking at you, without digging deep at all, I can sense that you’re feeling better. I’m glad for that, but I would like to get the answer to the question I asked you when we last met.”

Archer took a deep breath. He’d been thinking a lot about what he would say, though he had not rehearsed those words at all. He figured he would know exactly what to say when Hoshi asked him and, though hesitation seemed to bite at him like some pesky gnat, Archer did not flinch. He knew that something inside of him had changed; he wasn’t the same person he’d been before New Year’s, but it wasn’t until this moment that it began to dawn on him. He *was* different. He *had* changed. The person he used to be seemed so far away, felt so small, and so insignificant. Archer steadied himself, and let the unspoken question thunder inside of his mind.

“Do you regret it? Do you wish you could go back?”

Archer considered all he’d learned, not just all the futures he’d spoiled for himself, but all the things he’d learned about his identity. He’d spent a long time feeling

like a square-shaped peg trying to fit through a triangle-shaped hole. Society did that to a lot of people, as did families, friends, and cliques. A lot of people were happy enough fitting in, feeling welcomed in the world around them—but that wasn't the case for Archer. He wanted to feel welcomed on the inside. He wanted to become someone he could be proud of. He wanted to be the ultimate version of himself. He wasn't there yet, but he knew he would get there someday. And, no matter how long it took, there would be a Lovely Boy taking care of him.

“It's funny,” Archer looked up. “I thought knowing the future would make my life easier, but...”

Their eyes met, and a memory flashed through the young man's mind like a knife being drawn. Archer remembered the vision he had on the day that he shattered his *Fabula Rasa*, the vision of the three-headed monster that looked so much like Hoshi. Archer had tried his best to not look into Hoshi's future—it was not his place to meddle in—but he could not deny the cold sweat on the back of his neck. Something was coming. Something that could change shape, harm from a distance, and alter people's memories as it wished. Archer still

wasn't sure who, or what, this entity was, if it was Hoshi or someone else. But there was one thing he knew for certain. He had a hand of cards to play, and he would partake in that cosmic gambit.

“But, what?” Hoshi asked.

“But it didn't. Knowing the future only makes life more stressful,” Archer forced himself to smile. Through the fear, through the uncertainty, he steadied himself and smiled. “I realize now that the real reward wasn't this superpower, it was... finally understanding myself. You and your friends, you gave me the right answers all along, but I couldn't believe them until I was ready. You're right. You, and Jason, and the rest of your friends. I don't have to be anyone or *anything*, and I have all the time in the world to figure out who I want to be. Finally, those words make sense.”

Hoshi got up and enveloped Archer in a hug.

“I'm so glad to hear that,” Hoshi whispered. They planted a kiss on Archer's forehead then reached into their purse. Hoshi produced their smartphone, unlocked it, and dialed a number. As they waited for the call to connect, Hoshi flashed a mischievous smile and spoke. “By the way, completely unrelated, what is the opposite of

throwing someone under the bus? Wait. Hold up, the call's getting through. Desde? Hey girl, is Aaron and Winona there too? *Awesome*. Would you mind bringing them up to the second floor? You know how you were talking about starting a new role-playing group? Well, I've got your new game master right here. Come meet him."

Archer flinched so hard, he nearly jumped out of his sneakers.

"Whoa, whoa, slow down I don't even know what system they..."

Hoshi ended the call. Archer meant to extrapolate, but the words seemed to escape him. Yeah, Archer didn't know what role-playing system those people used. He didn't even know the people at all, but as much as he could've complained, he found a different feeling blossoming in his chest. He was *excited*. He loved role-playing games. They'd been an escape for him, a safe place to be someone else. The prospect of sharing this hobby with new people who welcomed him in all his queerness was nothing to be mad about. Sure, it was a little startling to be made game master of a group he didn't even know, but he assumed that if Hoshi coordinated all this, then it

couldn't be *that* bad. Archer exhaled for what felt like the first time in a long time, and looked up at Hoshi.

“Things never go as planned around you, do they?”

“Never,” Hoshi smiled. “And I wouldn't have it any other way.”



21

She never came. I sat there, waiting, hoping she was safe, believing that she still loved me. But she didn't. She broke up with me over text. Told me she hadn't loved me in months. Told me I was distant. Told me I never made her feel loved. Told me I wasn't fun, that all I did was complain about work. She was right. She was right on all accounts. Every cell in my body, every atom in my being knew she was right. I read over her message, over and over, hoping that—maybe, just maybe—I'd misunderstood her,

but there was nothing to misunderstand. It was plain and simple, and I had no refute.

I cried. I buried my face in my hands, sobbing in despair.

I was all alone again.

I was surrounded by people in that restaurant. People who were ignoring me. People who were trying not to have their days—their dates—sour by some poor thing crying their eyes out. They ignored me. I tried ignoring myself. I didn't want to be there. I didn't want to be anywhere. So I descended into despair again, sinking, sinking deep into my mind. I thought maybe I could drown in my thoughts, but instead, I hit rock bottom. Inside my head, I cried out in anguish. And then, amidst the darkness, a voice spoke loud enough to carry across the storm in my eyes.

“YOU CAN'T DEPEND ON OTHER PEOPLE.”

“YOU ARE ALL ALONE.”

“YOU CAN'T GO ON LIKE THIS.”

And I knew it was true. It had always been true. I would always be alone. I couldn't depend on anyone else. I had to fight for myself. I had to stand up for myself. I would always be alone—so why did I even need people?

This question I could not answer. I felt cold. I felt empty. I felt something inside of me break. I thought it was my poor heart; I thought I'd taken the final blow, but I was wrong. Something else had broken inside of me. I opened my eyes, tear-stained and sore, and found myself looking through the window of that restaurant.

Across the street, I saw that person—that stranger with long black hair—walk out of the building filled with happy people and happier faces. This stranger stood by the door, looking down the street, at someone else just as strange. I didn't know this yet, but this person's name was *Ras*. This person used any and all pronouns, though he liked it best when Hoshi used 'he/him.' Ras was sharply dressed. He wore a mauve-colored suit with a vest. There was a brightly colored handkerchief, as wild as peacock's feathers, poking out of the blazer pocket. He had fair skin. His hair was platinum-blond and styled back. He reminded me of a young David Bowie—except the jawline wasn't right, and the cheekbones weren't high enough. Ras was also wearing makeup; there was bronzer on his cheeks, pale lipstick, and his eyeliner was so sharp—so confident—that it was no different than the final stroke of a master painting.

I blinked my eyes. I could see this person so clearly, as though I were right up in front of him, but I wasn't. I was across the street, cars driving between us, and yet I could hear this person's voice, soft, intimate, worried. It was nothing like the sharpness of his makeup or clothes.

"Hi, Hosh. It's been a while."

"Skip it. What do you want, Bozo?"

I rubbed my eyes. I thought I was going crazy. In between blinks, I saw the two people across the street transform. One second, they were as I had seen them, one with long black hair and the other sharply dressed, and the next second, they were completely different. One looked like a marble statue exploding with computer cables and the other... suddenly looked like a *court jester*. This person's clothes were fluffy and oversized. Their shoes seemed as if they could squeak with every step. The face was even paler, and instead of a nose, this stranger had a bright red orb. I thought I was going crazy. I could see those two people switching back and forth between their two forms, as though the pages of a badly drawn flip-book. I could see them, and I could hear them, and I could feel in my eardrums how both of their hearts were beating faster and faster. I felt my own heart quicken, sharing in

the same awful emotion those two were feeling. It was suffocating, all encroaching, like digging trenches in your heart just to be buried alive. I had no name for this feeling, but I knew one thing for certain. It wasn't love.

“Hosh... I need your help.”

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M. KIRIN (*they/them*) is a queer author and artist.

Raised by two completely different countries, M. Kirin's writing has its roots in the grounded personal conflict of the American novel as well as the magical realism of Mexican fiction. The works of M. Kirin are often about the clash between the fantastical and the mundane.

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