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My Own Reality

TheMajorTechie

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Prologue

A shovel wedged into the ground.

“Wildcat!” a hooded figure snapped. “Is your groundbreaker ready?”

“Yeah, yeah, hold on for a moment, Night. Can you really believe these people stuck with *cables* for their networks? You’d think by now with all their ‘progress’ mumbo-jumbo that they’d figure out some crazy wacko satellite or something to keep these things hooked up.”

The man—*Wildcat*, climbed into the excavator’s cab. The machine roared to life, rumbling off its transport and onto the ground.

“Marked th’ spot.” Night tossed her shovel aside. “And you’re sure that we got no witnesses? We don’t want anyone to be caught like our drunkard was that one time. Blasted company only grew *stronger* from that event, thanks to his clumsiness. You know how long we had to lay low after that, don—”

“Yeah, yeah. Pretty Lady sent some goons to scout the place beforehand. We’re clear.”

The excavator’s shovel clawed deep into the ground, lifting a heaping pile of soil out of the way. Another scoop followed, and then another. Soon enough, Night signaled her second-in-command to halt.

“I’ll take it from here,” she shouted, picking up her shovel again. She slid down the pit, licking her dry lips as a dusty bundle of cables came into view. She raised her shovel, aiming the blade at her target.

“This is for our *jobs*.”

1 | Wake up.

“Rebecca! C’mon, sis, *wake up!*”

The girl groaned, swatting at her younger brother as he tugged at her arm. Though, he wasn’t wrong in stirring her from sleep. Her stomach was a bit more convincing than any dream she’d have, after all.

“C’mon, we’re heading to the pool today with Julie, remember? That whole *we should actually relax for once and go to the pool* thing that you were talking to mom and dad about?”

“Okay, okay,” Rebecca grumbled, faking a frown. “But *seriously*, Caleb. Just a few more minutes, m’kay?”

Caleb blew a raspberry at his sister. “Fine. I’ll be packing your swimsuit for you while you’re acting out *Sleeping Beauty*. I’ll probably tell Julie that you’re just gonna be late or something.”

He left the room with a huff, the door clicking shut behind him. Yawning, Rebecca sat up on her bed, rubbing her eyes. The faint smell of scrambled eggs wafted lazily into her room, prompting a grumble from her stomach.

Yeesh. Alright, alright, I’ll go eat breakfast.

A knock came at the door not too long after.

“Come *on*, Rebecca! Do you want to eat or not?”

Rebecca groaned again, running her fingers through tangled locks of hair. Maybe she’d comb it, maybe she’d—

“Sis? Dad and I are gonna be heading to the pool pretty soon! Breakfast is on the table, so you’d better hurry up unless you want cold eggs!”

“And maybe I *do* want cold eggs.” Rebecca stuck her tongue out at the door. “You think of *that*, Caleb?”

“Well, um... okay then. We’ll... I... I guess you can catch us at the pool when you’re ready then, ‘kay?”

“Alright.”

“Anyway, like I said before, breakfast is on the taaaaa—aa...ab...”

Rebecca frowned, hopping off her bed. She stepped closer to the door. Breakfast had left her mind just as suddenly as it came. It wasn’t like her brother to trail his words like this. He *never* trailed his words, let alone drew them out for seconds at a time like he was now. A faint buzz began to emanate from all around, but she ignored it. Caleb was what was important right now.

“Caleb? Are... are you okay? You don’t quite—”

“...bb-bll...llll...” the boy continued from behind the door.

She flung the door open, yelping as she caught sight of her brother—frozen mid-motion.

“...Hey. Hey, you alright?”

Caleb’s mouth twitched as he attempted to finish his sentence, his face a blur. Something wasn’t right.

“*Caleb*,” she pleaded, “t-this isn’t funny. Could you *please* stop that?”

An ear-piercing screech tore through the room. The girl cringed, clenching her hands over her ears. As suddenly as it began, the noise halted, replaced instead by strange, floating text that seemed to follow her vision:

Connection lost. Please try again later. Your paralysis will wear off shortly before you wake.

She scowled, waving her hands through the words. All at once, she felt herself lock up—frozen in place like her brother. Her eyes turned towards Caleb.

What... her mind raced, what the heck's going on?!

Frantic, Rebecca's eyes darted about the room; in the corner of her vision, she watched as a framed picture of herself and Caleb began to blur, rapidly pixelating before it vanished entirely, with only a brief flash of some kind of purple-black checkerboard pattern serving as a buffer. The morning light streaming from the windows flickered—once, twice, thrice, before fading away.

Wait, wait no, what's even happening? This can't be real... it's just a dream, a-and—

She looked down to her hands with what little light remained, watching with wide eyes as they too began to flicker away. This wasn't happening, was it? A flood of images flashed before her eyes, each one a snapshot of her own life—scenes of her and Caleb carpooling home from school, the boy sleeping on her shoulder; memories of the chocolate chip ice cream she'd shared with Julie just a week earlier; memories of... of a little girl, crying alone on her bed. Her vision began to waver—blinded by the onslaught of thoughts and memories running through her mind as a single, final question ultimately took hold:

Why?

2 | Take a look around.

Rebecca jerked awake, gasping for breath and sweating as she screamed. She sat up, the weight of some unwieldy object over her eyes beginning to sag. A second round of panic washed over her as she began to claw blindly at her face. Her fingers caught onto a thin, elastic strap, and with a resounding grunt of effort, she tore the heavy object from her face, tears welling in her vision. She finally began to take in her surroundings.

"H...hello?" she cried weakly, her eyes darting about the sparsely-decorated room. "I-is anyone there?"

Rebecca glanced back down at the object in her hands—a headset of some sort, from the looks of it. She blinked. An irritating hum echoed throughout the room. She turned her head. An *unsettlingly* large machine hummed beside her, complete with cabling feeding back into the headset in her hands. It was *certainly* more cabling in one place than she'd seen in her life; even more than the wireball behind the family TV.

She narrowed her eyes, turning the device around to the wiring side. Nudging aside the wires and the loose strap end, Rebecca caught sight of the heavily-worn text printed between the two.

Second Self™ virtual reality device, she read silently, her thumb underlining the barely-readable lettering. Pat. Pending. Manufactured 5026. Prototype model VR-01. Property of TechSIG/HybridAI Technologies.

With a frown, she turned the headset back and peered inside—darkness, save for the single string of text from before. Though, what else could she expect? *Narnia*? She set the thought aside. Now wasn't the time to be funny.

Rebecca set the headset down beside herself on the cot, turning her attention back to the whirring machine. She yelped in pain, her hand shooting down toward a painful yank in her side. Grimacing, she slowly turned back, finally noticing the mess of tubes running out of her side, out under her shirt, and into the machine.

Clutching the tubes in hand, she turned, clenching her teeth as she tried her best not to scream. Soon enough, the towering machine came into full view, complete with the assorted cables and tubing snaking out from within.

“What...” she raised a free hand to the machine’s smooth, metallic exterior. “What *is* this?”

Her question was met only by the continued hums of the machinery beside her. She braced herself against its metal railing to take a better look at the noisy machinery.

Up close, the machine appeared downright *alien* compared to anything she’d seen before. In place of where she’d expect to see a dashboard of dials, buttons, and meters reminiscent of old sci-fi movies she’d seen with machines similar to this, she instead found the contraption to have only a single panel, dimly lit as lines of text scrolled at a near-unreadable pace. Though she was unable to catch most of the text, a small box near the bottom of the display remained static.

User ID: 0 (Lisa Garnet)

User modifier tags: A, F

Username: Rebecca Waterman

Second Self™ software revision 4

Simulation: Reality₂

Fatal error: No network connection.

She blinked, leaning closer to the screen as she read the text again.

“Wait... wait *what*—” she stammered, the reality of the situation finally beginning to set in. “No. Oh, nononono... I’m *Rebecca*, a-aren’t I? This *can’t* be real... it just *can’t*...”

She gritted her teeth. Nothing around her seemed familiar. There were no bookshelves, no cluttered desk or even a table—just her, the cot she sat on, and the machine. She ran through the events she’d just experienced; if she really *did* wake from a simulation, then depending on how much of her life she’d spent in it, little to no amount of recollection would likely bring out any memory beyond what she knew from the supposed ‘life’ she had awoken from. Though, *something*—not quite a memory, but not entirely imagined, still formed in her mind: the sound of screeching metal.

Rebecca pursed her lips. Since when did she ever hear *that*? Though it was only a foggy memory, it still sounded distinctly like the shredding of metal, or maybe nails on a chalkboard, if the nails were also screaming along. She could remember absolutely *nothing* that could’ve made the sound, so why could she hear the noise itself so clearly?

She turned, glancing about the room; back to the window, then to the heavy door beside it, and finally to her headset.

Rebecca trembled, her eyes darting about. This wasn't where she belonged—she belonged home, safe with her family and friends. This... this was far from the home she knew. It *had* to be a dream... right?

She gasped, her hands shooting to her side as a thin blot of blood began to soak into her loose shirt. Clenching her teeth, Rebecca slowly stepped back to the cot and sat, her hands gripped tightly around the tubes the entire way.

Rebecca let out a heavy sigh, the cot beneath her creaking in response. Her gaze remained fixed on the door for a few minutes more, complemented only by the humming of the hulking machine accompanying her in the room. With the tubes in her side restraining her, would she *ever* leave the room?

She flinched as she felt something move on her wrist. For the first time upon glancing down, she caught sight of a small, plasticky wristband, not unlike the kind she'd seen during the few times she'd been in the hospital herself.

"...Lisa Garnet?"

Cocking a brow, she raised her wrist up for a closer look at the imprinted text.

"...Bah," she grumbled, dropping her wrist back onto her lap. "Same as what the screen's saying."

She let out another sigh, shifting as she lay back down on the cot.

Maybe she could put the headset back on; slip away into the darkness again, and wake up in bed—her *real* bed. Today was supposed to be the day she finally went to the pool. Maybe her mom might've even had the time to come as well. And... and Caleb—was he safe? Did the same thing happen to him too?

Would he even be recognizable outside of the supposed 'simulation' they'd come from?

She paused.

"Oh, who am I kidding?" she burst. "Look at yourself, Rebecca, you're stuck in some *weird* room, tethered to a big ol' noisy machine! Does this *feel* like something you can just *get away* from?! Stop letting your mind wander like this! *Focus!*"

She sulked for a few moments, turning her head to the headset sitting beside her.

But maybe...

She reached out, dragging the device closer.

Maybe I can still escape from this nightmare...

She placed the headset over her eyes, letting the strap hang loose over the top of her head.

Connection lost. Please try again later.

Rebecca Waterman—*Lisa Garnet* let out another huff, tearing the headset off and flinging it aside. It wasn't fair; she'd been yanked without warning from a perfectly normal life, only to be dumped into... whatever *this* place was. She looked away as she heard the device clatter to the floor. Whatever this new life was—whether it was a weird dream or something that was actually, legitimately happening—she didn't want any of it.

I just want to go home...

Lisa sulked on the cot, arms folded as she took another spiteful glance at the scuffed headset on the floor. The whirring of the machine continued to fill the room, though it was quieter now than before. She shifted, draping her legs over the side of the cot with a shallow huff, blowing a loose hair from her vision.

“We are currently experiencing technical difficulties with all our network connections,” a voice came. **“A technician will be with you shortly to remove your support hardware while we diagnose the issue.”**

3 | There's so much to see,

The voice seemed to come from all around. Slowly, she rose from her cot, stepping back toward the machine. On closer inspection, she noticed for the first time a small speaker embedded above the screen, complete with buttons for what she assumed to be some kind of radio station selector.

She felt a soft pull at her side again as she stepped away. Rolling her eyes, she carried the bundle of tubes close to her side. She *could* let them hang free, though she didn't want to pull out whatever guts the thing was probably attached to. She turned her attention to the rest of the room. Glancing out the dusty window, she could vaguely see the face of another building, its already dull colors appearing washed out and pale in the bright sunlight, not unlike some of the buildings in the photos she'd found in her parents' closet, she mused.

Lisa's mind raced. If this wasn't some kind of messed-up nightmare, then it was probably an escape room. It made sense—there was one obvious exit, but she'd have to work towards it somehow. Maybe she hit her head too hard, and her friends decided to move on without... no, they wouldn't leave her behind.

She glanced back to the door again and groaned, pacing back to her cot. The same text at the bottom of the screen once again caught her attention as she passed.

“Lisa Garnet. Again, who is Lisa Garnet? I'm Rebecca, aren't I? It... it can't all be a simulation, that stuff only happens in movies!”

A hard knock came at the door. Lisa yelped, nearly falling off the cot.

“Hello?” a gravelly voice began from the other side. *“Anybody awake in there?”*

Lisa's eyes widened. "Yes!" she shouted back, scooting further into her cot. "W-what's going on? Can you tell me why I'm here?"

"Hold on, lemme just unlock the door. May I enter?"

"Yeah," Lisa responded. She heard keys jingle as the doorknob began to turn.

Brushing a stray hair from her face, the beginnings of a smile formed on the edge of her lips. It was about time she started getting some answers.

The doorknob stopped mid-turn.

"Wait. Wait, hold on just a dang moment," the voice continued, "you're Lisa Garnet, aren't ya? Sorry for bringin' it up so late—just took a look again at the list. Just double-checking, y'know?"

Lisa cocked her head, her eyes turning for a moment to the name on her wristband. It didn't mean much to her. She was *Rebecca*, after all—just a regular high-schooler with her mind on life beyond college. Nothing more, nothing less... wasn't she? She kept her eyes on the name. It was like a distant memory, not quite her own.

"Lisa Garnet," she repeated to herself. She continued to repeat the name under her breath. She could feel it—there was *something* she could remember about it; something to do with the metallic screech she'd remembered from before.

"I... I think so? I really don't know anymore. Who are *you*?"

"Ah, just one of the guys who go around this place helping people out," The doorknob continued to turn. "Though, I didn't quite expect to see *you* on this list."

The door creaked open as a man in a heavy coat entered. He was a bit more on the heavy side, by the looks of it, though it was hard to tell through the multiple layers of jackets he had piled over him. At least to Lisa, he looked more the part of a soggy pile of clothes than anything *remotely* recognizable. Grunting, he heaved in a large briefcase and set it down in front of the machine. His eyes landed on the drying blood soaked into Lisa's shirt.

"Ya pulled on the tubes, didn't you?"

Lisa nodded slowly, her hand sliding down to the area where the thick tubes entered her body.

"Mm, yup. Hold on for a bit, girlie. I'll get you unhooked in a jiffy." The man unclasped the briefcase. "Let's see... no allergies listed, so that's good..."

He stooped down to eye level with her, gesturing to the machine. "This'll feel just a bit weird, but I'm 'a shut off the machine before I do anythin'. It's gonna hit you with some general anesthesia as well, so you shouldn't feel a thing while I do a bit of work, 'kay? You'll have to go in for additional surgery if ya don't feel like coming back anytime soon, though. Them valves ain't gonna hold for all that long, y'know."

Lisa nodded again, watching the man pull a portable keyboard from his briefcase and plug it into the machine. His fingers flew over the keys, rattling in a chain of commands. The low hum of the

machine ground to a halt moments later, turning instead to a brief hiss with the powering down of whatever internal mechanisms there were.

She winced as she felt the flow inside the tubes die down to a trickle, reaching a hand to the tubing. The heavy coated man stopped her.

“It’s alright, just wait a moment. You’re gonna feel a bit sleepy pretty soon, so I’d say you should lie down a bit, ‘kay?”

Lisa acknowledged his words, lying down on her cot. The man turned back to the display, typing in another string of text. She cringed as she felt a burst of some kind of cool liquid enter her through one of the tubes. Slowly, the world around her once again began to grow dark.

“Wait,” she muttered weakly, “h-how long... I...”

~*~

Rebecca let out a light gasp, opening her eyes to find herself once again in her bedroom. She spun around, staring out the window; Caleb and her dad were leaving the driveway, about to head off to the pool. She could smell her rapidly-cooling breakfast still downstairs, as if nothing out of the ordinary had ever happened. Yet...

No, she thought to herself, something doesn’t feel right.

Her eyes turned to the books lining the shelves.

It felt generic. Everything was still exactly the way she left it, yet everything around her rang alarms in her head. She still had small projects and stuff of the sort littering her desk, and the stack of old school assignments still sat in the corner by her shelf, but she couldn’t remember ever doing *any* of them. The familiar sky-blue drapes continued filtering morning sunlight into the room—but weren’t they a slightly darker shade of blue before? The books, in particular, were once part of her favorite series. But now, they were reduced to little more than blank covers; rectangle-shaped blocks of color tucked neatly away on the shelf.

Rising from her bed, Rebecca snatched one of the books off the shelf and flipped through the pages.

Surprisingly, the pages were blank, too.

Rebecca tossed the book aside, grabbing another one and flipping through it. Every single book she laid eyes on was the same: *blank*. She knew every one of these from cover to cover, so why were they different now? Why did everything feel so *off*?

She felt her phone buzz in her pocket. Reaching down, she felt only fabric.

This wasn’t right.

Without warning, she felt her body seize up again, falling back onto her bed as the world collapsed around her. This time, there were no memories that flashed before her eyes.

~*~

Lisa Garnet groaned, bringing her hands slowly to her face. Her stomach grumbled as she yawned, kicking away some of the sheets covering her on the cot. She moved her hands away from her cheeks, moving past her head as she stretched, yawning again. A dull *pang* and the feel of cold metal against her skin reminded her of what was nearby. Immediately, she darted up, eyes wide open. Hardly anything had changed—the room was still barren, but the machine was now silent, and to her delight, the tubes and wires were now gone.

She leaned back against the wall, closing her eyes again.

So it was a dream, then. But...

Opening her eyes again, she stared out the window to the building opposite to her room.

If that was a dream, and before that it was a simulation, according to all the stuff I've been seeing, then what the heck is this place I'm in right now?

Her stomach grumbled again, distracting her from her thoughts. An unfamiliar scent caught her attention, luring her eyes to a small paper bag left by the door. Oddly, the headset still sat scuffed on the floor nearby, but she didn't mind it. The man from earlier probably forgot to take it, she supposed. Wrinkling her nose, Lisa rose from the cot. She touched a hand to her side again, grazing her fingers across the soft plastic brace where the tubes once entered with a wince. Nevertheless, she shook her head, pushing the pain to the back of her mind as she stumbled toward the bag. After all, she never had the chance to eat breakfast. If it was food in the bag, then so be it.

Picking it up, she gave the paper bag an experimental sniff, raising a brow at the slightly sweet smell emanating from within. She turned the bag around, finding a hastily-written label scrawled across the back in marker.

"Food," she mouthed, reading the label. Looking into the open top, there was a small bottle that appeared to be filled, and a couple napkins.

Lisa brought the bag back to her cot, setting it down on her pillow as she sat beside it, reaching in and grabbing the bottle. An experimental shake proved that the contents were liquid.

"What is this? Yogurt?" She snorted, turning the unlabeled bottle with a hand. It certainly *smelled* like yogurt—that was the one thing that was certain. Peeling off the foil seal, she downed its contents.

"Huh," she muttered, pulling the bottle away from her mouth and peering inside for any more. "it *is* yogurt."

Lisa wiped her mouth on a sleeve, dropping the empty bottle back into the paper bag. Though she didn't pay much mind to it, she noticed that her nails had been trimmed. Was it the heavy-coated man from earlier who trimmed them for her? Or did they simply not grow at all while she was in the simulation?

Either way, with her stomach now satisfied for the time being—however short *that* may be—Lisa turned her attention back to the door. Stiffening at the familiar sight, her eyes trembled as she took a deep breath and stood up. One tentative step after another, Lisa stepped closer to the door. What

could she possibly expect? All she saw from the window was the plain face of some brick apartment across the street, so there couldn't possibly be anything *that* extraordinary, *right?*

She shook her head at the thought, turning the knob. Peering out from behind the door, Lisa saw nothing all that much out of the ordinary, as she'd expected. The door's dull creak echoed down the hall with her first steps beyond the room.

"Hello?" she yelled. "Is anybody there?"

Silence.

A stray lock of hair drifted over her eyes. She tucked it behind her shoulder and set off into the hall, letting the door click shut behind her. Wary, her eyes darted in the direction of every little noise that came from her surroundings. Step by step, Lisa made her way toward the stairwell entrance, one hand clutched firmly to the guardrail the entire time.

Clank. Clank. Clank.

The dull steps rattled beneath her bare feet, biting and scratching at her soles with every step. She spotted a few others along the way. They were like her—confused, distraught, even *angry* at times—wandering the halls, wondering what happened. The sound of conversation grew in volume the closer she came to the ground floor.

Careful steps hastened to a scramble; whether or not her feet would complain about the scuffing they received on each step was a problem for later, though her quick pacing came as a surprise to her—she'd spent who *knows* how long motionless on that cot, yet she seemingly already regained most, if not all her strength in under a day. Kinda funny, given how she tended to lag somewhere in the middle of the group whenever her gym class went jogging. But still—meeting people, maybe even finding out a bit more about this strange world she'd awoken in, was her priority. Thinking about her gym from two years ago could wait.

Lisa stopped at the bottom step, staring out at the gathering crowd outside. Another thought entered her mind. What if there were people she recognized? Maybe Julie would be in the crowd, or her parents. Heck, for all she knew, the elderly couple across the street from her house might've been in the crowd. She blinked, shaking the thoughts from her head as she resumed walking. Some muffled announcement rung through the street at the end of the final hallway, prompting the crowd to begin moving. Eyes wide, Lisa burst into a sprint, cringing at the rough concrete and small pebbles that scraped her bare feet with every step. Soon enough, she found herself standing on the edge of the sidewalk, eyes squinted in the blazing afternoon sun.

"Attention, all disconnected users must report to the town hall," the announcement repeated, blaring over unseen speakers in every direction. **"Those who do not attend the meeting may not be guaranteed food or utilities while we troubleshoot the network."**

Lisa stared in the direction of the shuffling crowd, watching as they filed into a large building down the street. She turned to the building they streamed into.

"That must be the town hall," she muttered under her breath, following after the rest of the crowd. However, a lone boy sitting on the curb caught her attention.

Clack. He stacked another flat stone on top of the small pile in front of him. *Clack. Clack. Clack.*

“Hey,” Lisa began, “aren’t you gonna go to the meeting with everyone else?”

The boy shook his head, his eyes still glued to his growing stack of stones.

“Why?”

No response.

“Don’t you want to make sure you can get enough food while this all passes over?”

Again, the boy remained silent, placing another flat stone on top of the stack.

Clack.

“Where are you even getting all this rock, anyway?”

“The *road*, okay?” the boy grumbled, feeling for another stone. He frowned upon the realization that his supply stack was empty, and glanced down to the cobblestone-paved street. “If you’re gonna stick around and keep asking me stuff, then would you mind prying up a few more slabs for me?”

Lisa let out a sigh, glancing once again at the vanishing crowd. It’d probably be a good idea to catch up soon. She turned back to the boy.

“First, answer my question,” she insisted. “Then I’ll come back to help after the meeting.”

The boy snorted, folding his arms. “Fine. *Geez*, you sound a lot like my sister.”

He turned, looking over Lisa’s body.

“Heck, you even *look* like her on the days where her hair is all crazy.”

“Er,” Lisa muttered, stepping away from the boy, “I... I just want you to tell me why you’re no—”

The boy stood up. Frowning, he took a closer look at Lisa’s face, scrutinizing her features as he leaned closer. Nearly a minute passed before he began speaking again.

“Are you my sister?”

“Huh?” Lisa choked, taking another step back from the boy. “Why do you ask *that*?”

“I mean, you know how there’s that whole thing going on with how we’re waking up with wristbands telling us that even our *names* aren’t the real deal, right?”

“...Yeah?”

The boy lifted up his wrist for Lisa to see.

“Says here that I’m *Timothy Carter*. And... I guess if that’s who I am out here, then that’s who I’ll be. Y’know?”

“You seem to be taking this whole ordeal pretty well. *But*, you still haven’t answered my question yet.”

“Wait, though. I wanna know if you’re actually my sister or not. What’s the name on your wristband?”

Before Lisa could respond, the boy grabbed her wrist, holding it out to read the plastic band around it.

“Lisa Garnet. Huh,” he mumbled, letting go of her wrist. He looked away. “Guess we aren’t related after all, then.”

“Okay, now my questi—”

“Wait!” Timothy gasped, “I forgot to read the other stuff besides your real name! What was the thingy about your username saying?”

“*Rebecca*,” Lisa seethed through clenched teeth, “now can you *please* tell me why—”

“Why do you want to know so badly why I’m not going to some meeting? Things are probably gonna be fixed up by like, tonight or something. I heard a few people talking about that earlier.”

Lisa closed her eyes, taking in a deep breath before letting it all out in a heavy sigh.

Timothy snorted, kicking at the ground. “...I’m annoying you, aren’t I?”

Nodding slowly, she backed away some more from Timothy. She still couldn’t quite see where the conversation was headed, and she *certainly* didn’t enjoy the idea of where it could lead.

“Er... sorry. Though, can you also tell me what your last name was in your username? I already answered your question after all.”

“Waterman,” Lisa stated flatly. “There, *happy now?*”

Timothy said nothing in response, instead gawking at her. Lisa groaned, turning around without a word as she began walking toward the rapidly-disappearing crowd.

“Wait,” Timothy began quietly, catching up to Lisa as she walked, “wait, Lisa, you said that you were Rebecca Waterman, right?”

“Yeah. Now can you *please* stop botheri—”

“...I’m Caleb.”

4 | So much to hear.

“So, do you think dad’s probably freaking out right now?” Timothy whispered. “Cause... yeah. You saw what happened to everybody here. Who *knows* what that looked like to people who saw it happening from the *outside?*”

Lisa shrugged, glancing again at the crowd entering the town hall. There weren’t many left lingering outside anymore.

“Also,” he continued, “do you think I can still call you ‘sis’? I mean, I’m not sure if we’re actually related or not out here, but I’m just used to... yeah.”

“Sure.” She nodded, still staring at the final people streaming into the building. She’d have to pull Timothy away from the conversation if she wanted to join them in the town hall for the meeting. “We should probably go with them, too. Just in case, y’know? We can’t be *too* sure that everything’s gonna be fixed so soon, so it’d probably be better to be prepared.”

“Fine,” Timothy sighed, “let’s go. Though I still think that it’s gonna be pointless to g—”

“This is a final call before the meeting begins. Please report to the town hall building in the center of town for a mandatory meeting discussing your current situation. I repeat, this is a final call. The meeting will begin in five minutes.”

“—Oh, well, I guess we’re *definitely* going then. That doesn’t really sound like they know they can get it all fixed by tonight, does it?”

Lisa shook her head, trailing behind Timothy.

“They mentioned something about food rationing earlier too, didn’t they?” Timothy made a face. “...*Any* food besides that weird goopy yogurt they gave us is probably gonna taste better!”

Lisa rolled her eyes with a smile and followed along. At least things were starting to become a *little* more normal again.

~*~

“So *this* is the town hall?” Lisa looked over the unassuming building. “Looks more like our school’s auditorium if it got turned inside-out.”

They entered the propped-open doors. Immediately, the collective voice of the crowd assaulted her ears, filling them with chatter and shouts from others like herself and Timothy.

“File in, file in,” an older woman ushered them from the stage. “Find a seat while we prepare. From the look of things, this meeting’s going to be a big one.”

“It looks like an auditorium *inside*, too!” Timothy snickered.

The woman onstage certainly didn’t *look* like everyone else, with her professional attire clashing against the generic medical gowns most everyone else in the room wore.

Lisa scanned the heads of the audience gathered all around for anyone else she might be able to recognize. Her frown deepened—no friends, no family, no nothing. Nobody in particular seemed to stand out amongst the crowd.

“Seems it’s just you and me, Caleb.”

Timothy pointed at an empty patch in the crowd. “Yeah, I know. C’mon, there’s some seats over there. It’s a bit off to the side from the center, but I don’t think we should expect anything front-row, y’know?”

He took Lisa's hand and waded past the people sitting along the row of seats, occasionally bumping into a person or two.

"Ahem," the first speaker of the meeting—the same woman from earlier—cleared her throat, pulling the microphone onstage a little closer. **"Hello, everybody. My name is Melina Daalmans, and I am the coordinating officer for the town of Snowbush, where you have recently awoken. We will begin this meeting with an overview of the main issue that has impacted our networks, and from there we will delve into discussion over town operations while we fix the issue."**

Daalmans stepped back, letting the man in the heavy coat take her place onstage.

The man began to speak, pausing with a frown and tapping the microphone when nothing came over the speakers. He looked to some unseen stage technician to the side, his words silent while he gestured at the faulty equipment before him.

"...name i..." his voice flickered as the microphone's signal sputtered back to life, **"...imulations were impacted early this morning by an unexpected outage. We are still in the process of diagnosing the issue, but given the remote location of this town, please expect anywhere between a few days to a week for connectivity to be restored."**

"What's with him?" Timothy whispered, leaning closer to Lisa. "Like, the whole heavy jacket getup he's got. Does he get cold easily or something?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Now, as for what will happen in the meantime, we have ordered emergency supplies of food to begin distributing later today here at town hall. Given the circumstances you have collectively awoken into, this food will be formulated to be similar in content to the liquid food supplied during your time in the simulations in order to avoid any stomach troubles. Semisolid food will be shipped in a couple days' time to those who may be able to tolerate it. We do not recommend for anybody to attempt to forage for food in the surrounding nature, either."

He paused and stared blankly into the audience. Was he waiting for something?

A goofy grin spread across his face as he continued, **"...We're lookin' at you, trailblazers."**

The man chuckled at his own words, clearly believing that he made a funny jab with the remark. He glanced over the audience before clearing his throat. An awkward laugh or two came in response from the audience, though they were far more muted than his own amplified snickering. He stepped back to let Daalmans take the stage once more, still regaining his composure.

"Now, as for what will happen while we wait for the infrastructure repairs to complete, we encourage you to mingle with one another in the meantime—potentially even find friends and loved ones amongst yourselves. However, we will also be policing the town to maintain safety and order, so do not think that you may be safe from the law outside of your respective simulations. And of course, volunteers are welcome to help out."

Lisa turned her head to see the reactions of the crowd around her. A few awkward stares were shot back and forth between various clusters of people around the room, and once or twice a person faked a cough, as if they *knew* that Mrs. Daalmans was addressing them.

“Continuing on, if you would like to remain disconnected from the simulations once network connectivity is re-established, then you may report directly to me or one of my colleagues, and we will take care of your request from there. However, it is recommended that you reconnect as soon as you can once our infrastructure is repaired, as there are potentially-negative mental effects that may set in place after a certain period of time without professional intervention.”

The chatter of the crowd resumed. From the few nearby conversations she could make out, it seemed to Lisa that most people didn't see any point in staying disconnected. And why would they, anyway? There wasn't anything *else* for them, and out here, they'd have to start over from scratch. And what of the whole 'potentially-negative mental effects' bit? The most *she* noticed from looking over the crowd was a general sense of fear. It certainly made sense, given what had happened earlier. Either way, she didn't see any point in remaining disconnected either.

Daalmans paused, letting the crowd settle before continuing. A girl ran onstage, clutching a sheet of paper. She showed it to Daalmans, whispering something into her ear. The woman clearly seemed puzzled by both the contents of the paper and whatever it was that she'd been told.

“Oh? Rioting? Yes, yes that isn't quite ideal.” She looked around the room, leaning back into her microphone. **“...It has come to my attention that there are multiple towns that have been impacted by this outage. I will be spending time later briefing any volunteers who may step up to the task, but beyond that, I may be unavailable. Though this meeting is rather short, we will be holding an additional meeting in the near future with a guest speaker. For now, I believe this is all we have to say for today. You may leave as you wish. Follow-up questions may be submitted with the forms near the doors, and if you'd like to volunteer, feel free to come in later today for an application and briefing.”**

Murmurs and conversation steadily grew within the crowd again as people began to trickle out, with many of them pausing to write their thoughts at the door. In her peripheral, Lisa spotted the man in the heavy coat and Melina Daalmans leaving the stage, disappearing to some backstage room against the protests of the people yelling from the front row. The lights steadily grew in brightness until the room was fully illuminated again.

“Was it just me, or did 'Melina Daalmans' back there feel a little... er... *robotic*? I mean...” Timothy trailed off, following Lisa past the clustered groups of people huddled around the doors. “I-I mean, just the way she was talking that whole time! And the guy in the jacket, too! He didn't talk at *all* like the guy who took out the tubes and stuff for me! Was he even the *same person*?”

“It's probably because he was in a professional setting back there,” Lisa held the door open for him. “Same goes for Mrs. Daalmans.”

“It's still weird though,” he grumbled, pausing. “They really didn't say all that much anyway. Why do you think they called everyone for a meeting if they could've just blasted all of that over the creepy town intercom thing?” He glanced down at his wristband, then back to Lisa. “Do you think *they* might've been in the simulations too?”

“C'mon, let's go.” Lisa ignored the barrage of questions. “Anything in particular that you wanna do?”

“Idunno, rock stacking maybe? I like to try getting bigger rocks to balance on top of—”

Lisa shook her head, cutting him off. "Nah, I think that's more something only *you* like doing. How about we look around town a bit?"

Timothy shrugged.

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"Let's take a look over here." Lisa peered around the corner of a block. "...Nevermind about that. It's just more apartments again."

"*Rebecca*," Timothy groaned. "We've been running around town for, like, an *hour* now, and everything around here looks the same! Shouldn't we do something else?"

"Not rock stacking."

"I'm not *talking* about rock stacking! I just wanna do something *else* besides walking around looking at big ol' buildings all day!"

He had a point; all they'd seen for the past several hours were rows upon rows of apartments, with only one or two occasional other buildings breaking the otherwise monotonous view. It kinda made sense, in a way—with the vast majority of the people in town being constantly wired up to the machines in their rooms, it'd be pointless to add any sort of stylization to the outsides of the buildings.

"...Yeah, that's probably a good idea. You wanna see if there are any volunteer positions open back at the town hall or something? Mrs. Daalmans *did* mention something about volunteers being welcome to help, after all."

"Sure... I guess," Timothy mumbled, folding his arms. "It's not like there's really anything *else* to do from the looks of it."

"Kay then. Let's head back and see if they've got offices there."

A cold gust of wind abruptly roared through the street, throwing wispy strands of hair into her face.

"...And maybe ask if they've got a pair of scissors, too," Lisa deadpanned, brushing her tangled hair from her face.

Timothy shrugged, chuckling. "Or, y'know, you could *keep* the locks. Become Rapunzel or something. Wait for a *dashing* prince to rescue you from one of these apartments, maybe?"

"I am *not* doing that."

"It'd be cooler if you did," Timothy earning himself a playful jab in the arm. "Hey! Fine, fine, I'll stop."

"*Anyway*, we should probably get going now. Who *knows* how many people are going to be there? C'mon."

She began walking again, glancing over her shoulder every so often at Timothy, who trailed close behind.

“...Do you even know the way?”

“I think so.”

Building after building passed the two on either side of the street; large, looming behemoths of concrete and brick that served little purpose beyond housing their occupants. Not much else served to break the skyline, save for the occasional gap between buildings created by a street or an alleyway. Either way, there was little to see in town.

“How many people do you think live here, Rebecca?”

Her steps slowed to a stop as she scanned over the apartments surrounding them. A minute passed. Two. Who *knew* how many people were housed in each one? At the meeting earlier in the town hall, it didn't exactly *look* like there were nearly enough seats for everyone, either.

“I have absolutely no idea. C'mon, Caleb, you said you wanted to do *something else*. Let's go voluntee—”

A hooded figure in the shadows shifted, holding something to their ear.

“Hey,” Lisa called. “Hey! What are you doing in the alleys?”

The figure froze, slipping whatever they were holding into a pocket and vanishing deeper into the shadows.

Lisa turned to Timothy, pointing a thumb at the alleyway. “What do you think *that* guy was up to? He... doesn't really look like anyone else around here. You think he might be working with Mrs. Daalmans and the others? Y'know, like... reporting on how smoothly things are going, or something like that.”

“Dunno. C'mon, you said we were gonna volunteer. Let's get going already!”

## 5 | There are new people to meet,

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Pretty Lady tapped on her mic, her face illuminated by her laptop's flickering screen. “Report?”

“The girl and her brother have been sighted. Though... I believe they saw me as well.”

“Messy, messy. No matter, we know where they are. Let's hope this fares better than that time with Night's drunkard.”

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“Grace, would you bring these over to the printing room for me? I'll need to scan them in later,” a muffled question came from behind the door. Lisa shifted in her seat, fidgeting with her wristband.

Timothy poked her in the arm. “You alright there, sis?”

Shaking her head, she sunk further into her seat.

“Are you nervous about volunteering?”

“N-no,” Lisa stammered, “it’s just that... well, *everything* today’s been hectic. Like, there’s the whole thing with people being disconnected, for one, and that *person* we saw in the alley earlier... Do you think they were watching us before I noticed them?”

“I have no idea. Maybe they were just someone watching out for trouble since there were so many people that got disconnected? Y’know, like an undercover police officer or something.”

Lisa looked away. “Maybe. I... I’m just a little surprised that you’ve been able to keep so *calm* after everything, too. It’s still hard for me to believe that after all this time, our lives were basically some *video game* that we were hooked into.”

Timothy pursed his lips, glancing down at the floor.

“I mean, you’re not *wrong*, but maybe you could try looking at the bright side of things a little, y’know? Be a little more positive!”

“I’m *trying* to! But all I keep thinking about is the fact that my entire life’s a lie! It’s... it’s just hard for me to actually accept that.

“How are *you* able to handle this so well, anyway?”

Lisa huffed, folding her arms and shrinking back even further.

Timothy shrugged. “It’s just a change of pace, that’s all. Also, kinda because this is the sort of stuff that I liked reading in my comic books. Movies, too. It’s *exciting*, don’t you see? Out here, we don’t have to be *ourselves*. It’s not like back home where everything happened in a certain way because everybody else did it. Here, we can be pretty much anything we want, *do* anything we want!”

Fair enough. Lisa smiled, her mood beginning to lift. She watched Timothy whoop quietly, pumping a fist in the air.

“Hello there,” a middle-aged man greeted, pointing at a seat beside Timothy. “This chair taken?”

Lisa shook her head.

“Great.” The man sat down. “Been a long day for all of us today, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah, *no kidding*,” Lisa snorted, rolling her eyes with a smirk. “Nothing like getting booted out of your life in the morning, right?”

“Heh.”

“Hey!” Timothy grumbled. “I wanna be in the conversation too!”

The man chuckled again, holding out a hand to Timothy. “And what’s your name, young man?”

“Which one?”

“Witty, too! Ah, let’s just let your wristband speak for you.”

Timothy raised a brow, staring at the tag around his wrist before lifting it up.

“Hm. Timothy Carter. Good name for a boy like you. That your sister next to you?”

“We... actually don’t know for sure,” Lisa answered. “We *were* related before all of this happened, but I’m not really so sure about that anymore.”

The man shrugged. “Fair enough.”

“I’m guessing you’re volunteering as well?” She cocked her head. Not *everyone* was going to be looking for the staff-only door leading into the office they were running applications in, after all. Though he didn’t quite look like he was in top-shape—even when considering his age, he looked more like the kind of guy who’d be knocked over by the *wind* before anything else. If he was seriously considering volunteering, then there likely wouldn’t be much he *could* do in the first place.

“Yup, I might as well make myself useful ‘round this place for a while. Though I’m not entirely sure if I’m gon’ follow through with it. These old bones ain’t as sturdy as I thought they’d be, y’know... Anyway, I’m just wondering: What was life like for the two of you *before* today? Either of you do anything interesting? Any summertime adventures in the woods?”

“Ehh, not really. Unless comics count as interesting,” Timothy replied. “Games, too. I’m really not sure if—”

“Games?” The man raised a brow. “What games do you enjoy the most? I’m more of a Monopoly man myself.”

“Er, I meant *video games*.”

“Video games? Describe, if you so please. I don’t believe I’m familiar with the term.”

Lisa frowned. He really didn’t know, did he? Did he come from a simulation that didn’t have computers or something?

“They’re games that I play on the computer. How haven’t you ever heard of them before?”

“My, you must be quite the privileged one, boy! Mister Watson *himself* once said that there’d be a market for five or so computers in the world. Guessin’ you two come from a government family of some sort? Never heard of computers being used for anything beyond that sorta stuff.”

“What.”

“I second that. What are you even *talking* about?” Lisa chimed in. “Just about *everything’s* computerized these days, right?”

“Aw, phooey. Forget ‘bout it. I’m not going to pry any deeper into your life anyway.”

“Next applicant,” a voice came from behind the door. “You may enter now.”

Lisa grabbed Timothy by the hand. “C’mon, Caleb, let’s go.”

She pulled the door open, stepping in with him in tow. The same girl that ran out to Daalmans earlier stepped out at the same time, staring at Lisa for a moment before shuffling down the hallway with a small stack of papers in her arms. Lisa kept her eyes on the girl for a few more seconds before continuing inside. They had an interview to do.

The room, for the most part, was empty, save for a lone desk and a few chairs in the center. Lisa glanced at the bare walls—nothing but the same, off-white drywall panels on every side of the room.

She turned her attention to the woman sitting at the desk—*Melina Daalmans*.

“Hello,” Lisa greeted, taking a seat with Timothy. “Quick question—who was that other girl that just left? Another volunteer? I noticed that she was staring at me just before she went down the hall.”

“She is my daughter.” Mrs. Daalmans bobbed her head, her eyes still set on the laptop in front of her. The gentle clicks and taps of her keyboard rang in the room for a few more moments before she closed the device, glancing up at the two applicants.

“Mm, a duo, I assume?”

“Yes,” Timothy blurted, “though... I *guess* it’d be okay if we applied separately. Is there any difference?”

The aging woman shook her head. “For the most part, all volunteers are entered on equal terms. Work ethic and merit are what determines any privileges. Normally, we would use a digital system, but at the moment paper will have to do. Just read through the terms and sign once you’re ready. Print both your real name and username as well, if you please.” She slid two sheets of paper across the desk.

Lisa raised a brow. Wasn’t one of the two enough? Though, given how the entire situation with everyone being *different* from who they were in the simulations has been going down, it did kinda make sense.

“Seems simple enough.” Lisa took a form. “Er... could we have something to write with?”

Two ballpoint pens rolled across the desk.

“Thanks.”

“Alright. Let’s see here...” Lisa scanned the document. “Do not abuse your privileges, job is to keep the place in order, blah blah blah, et cetera et cetera...”

She looked at Timothy, then to Daalmans. The aging woman didn’t appear to be very lively, though Lisa guessed it was likely from her job—it didn’t particularly seem very interesting.

“So... I just sign my name once I read and agree to everything here?”

“Yes, and print both your real name and your username.”

“Yeah,” Lisa scribbled on the paper, “um, does it have to be a signature that’s used *legally*? ‘Cause I’m pretty sure that mine doesn’t apply to my... ‘*real life*’ identity.”

“You may use any signature you’d like, so long as it proves your agreement to the terms.”

“Kay. Thanks for clarifying.”

Lisa handed back her completed application, with Timothy following seconds later. Mrs. Daalmans fell silent for a moment. Her eyebrows raised as she skimmed over the applications. She cleared her throat, setting the papers aside.

“Thank you for applying to volunteer. We will hold a brief meeting down the hall in about five minutes, so please wait there in the meantime.”

Daalmans opened her laptop again as Lisa stood up.

“Grace?” Mrs. Daalmans called, still focused on the device. “Gracie? Could you lead these two down to the other room?”

The woman typed something on the keyboard. Lisa cleared her throat, glancing over her shoulder at the door. Nobody came.

“Oh,” Daalmans looked up from her work, “I must’ve forgotten that I sent my daughter off to scan some papers in. I’ll lead you to the volunteer meeting myself. Are there any other applicants waiting?”

“There was just one other guy out there last I saw.” Timothy shrugged. “He’s a little bit weird, but I’m pretty sure he wants to volunteer too.”

“I see. I will deal with him on the way then, if there is nobody else.”

The woman shut her laptop, pushing herself out from behind her desk.

“Come along then, it’s just down the hall.”

~*~

There were only a few others in the room, not counting anyone who’d just entered. There wasn’t anyone that Lisa recognized, save for Mrs. Daalmans’ daughter. The room itself was largely devoid of any decoration too, much like the apartments.

Lisa glanced out the cobweb-ridden window beside her. The crowd from earlier had since reformed, though was visibly less chaotic now that most people’s fears had been quelled. She stepped aside, pulling Timothy away as well to let Daalmans pass through. Strangely, however, the man from earlier was nowhere to be found. Though, that was likely due to him changing his mind, Lisa supposed. It wasn’t like people *weren’t* allowed to back out of volunteering after they said that they wanted to, in any case.

“Thank you all for volunteering your time and efforts.” Mrs. Daalmans stood in the center of the room. “In the midst of the abrupt disconnection, we were unable to free up very many of our own colleagues in time. As such, we greatly appreciate your willingness to help during a time of need.” She cleared her throat, scanning over the small collection of people before her. “We will be holding meetings in this room to coordinate whenever they are necessary. As for the current state of affairs, we will run through task assignments for the time being.”

Task assignments? What kind of task would *anyone* in this room be qualified for?

“To begin,” Daalmans continued, “I would like for anyone with prior leadership experience to raise their hand.”

Timothy elbowed Lisa in the arm. “Hey, you did help co-lead some clubs at school, didn’t you?”

Lisa raised a hand. The clubs weren’t really all that significant, being little things like fanclubs for TV shows and books, and even then, ‘co-lead’ was a bit of a stretch when the only events that were ever held were discussion groups and the occasional fan project.

“Would anybody else please step up?”

Much of the room shifted uncomfortably, shooting glances amongst themselves.

“Very well, then. Lisa Garnet, you will help coordinate volunteer efforts whenever I am not available, and simply pursue your own methods of help when I am.”

Lisa’s brow furrowed. “Er... could you repeat that?”

“You will essentially serve as a stand-in for me, as I expect to be unavailable for some time. However, it is much more likely that you will simply join my daughter in assisting me.”

“Your daughter? Isn’t she supposed to be in school or something? She still looked pretty young.”

“She has already graduated.”

“Oh. Sooo... is there anything to help with, then?”

“We will need somebody to oversee ration distribution later today. I will tell the delivery workers to expect you in my place when they arrive. From my personal experience, the task shouldn’t be cause for any trouble, so I do not expect this task to be difficult for anyone involved.”

“Is there some sort of map that I can use, though? Or at the very least could you tell us where we’ll be handing things out?”

Lisa eyed the window for a moment. Given how similar the buildings were to each other, it’d be an absolute *nightmare* for anyone to find whatever building the rations would be handed out in. A map might not even be *enough* without anything unique to set the streets and buildings apart.

The woman smiled politely. “We will distribute rations here at the town hall. There is no need for a map. Though, in the meantime, I believe we should all prepare for a couple of guest speakers arriving tomorrow morning. They have close ties to the simulations, so I felt it would be appropriate to invite them.”

For a moment, Lisa *swore* she could see a sly smirk from the woman. Something about it told her that being chosen to lead wasn’t based entirely on being the only one to raise her hand.

Lisa wiped the sweat off her forehead with a sleeve. Overseeing rations wasn't quite as exciting as Daalmans made it sound, but it was far better than moping around waiting for the network to come back up. The weather outside was pretty nice as well anyway, with a bit of a breeze picking up every now and then.

"Here you go." She smiled, handing another bundled package over the makeshift counter. "Try not to finish everything too quickly. The rations should be able to last about a week."

The man nodded, taking the bundle.

"That everyone, sis?"

Lisa leaned back in her seat. Timothy had clearly been pretty hard at work too, given the buckets he was sweating. "Yeah, I think so. At least, for *now*. You think the others finished handing out rations at their own stations?"

"Yeah, they're done too. I was checking up on them not too long ago. We *do* have a little bit extra just kinda sitting around, though."

"Well," Lisa dusted off her hands, "I guess that does it for today then. Who do you think Melina Daalmans was talking about earlier when she mentioned guest speakers? I'm not entirely sure about it, but I think I might've seen her smile at me, too."

"Dunno, maybe someone special or something like that? I didn't really see any smile, though."

Lisa frowned. The first thing Daalmans did after mentioning the guest speakers was look at her. Maybe it was a random coincidence or something?

She shook her head, pushing the thoughts to the back of her mind. It was probably better not to dwell on them, even if the whole ordeal *was* a bit strange. Even her surroundings made her uncomfortable. For a city girl whose hometown was defined by constant construction and high-rise offices, the mix of identical apartments and cobblestone streets just felt *off*.

Lisa shaded her eyes with a hand as she gazed at the setting sun. It looked for the most part like the one she knew from the simulations—orange-yellow, big, bright... like the *sun*. She'd probably be in an even bigger panic if that wasn't the case.

"Caleb?"

"Hm?"

"What do you think it looked like back at home, when we got 'disconnected' or whatever it was that happened?"

"Didn't you already ask something like that before?"

"Did I?" Lisa paused for a moment, her eyes still glued to the amber skyline. What kind of world did they live in where it was possible to simply *wake up* from reality? Wouldn't there be some kind of organization that could handle events like their disconnection a little better? It wasn't out of the question for *this* world to be a simulation as well. "...I think that was you. You were saying something about imagining dad when you disappeared, weren't you? Caleb, do you think we—we're *dead*?"

“Woah, *hold up*, sis. Where’d *that* question come from?”

“No, I mean,” Lisa gestured to the looming buildings around them, “think about it. Did you see me when *I* got disconnected? What did it look like?”

Timothy shrugged. “Beats me, you were just stuck in this jittery blur before everything went dark for me. Guessing it was the same for you?”

“...Yeah. I’m... I guess you can say that I’m just worried about what’s gonna happen to us when we get back in, y’know? It’s not *every* day when a big ol’ slice of the population just ups and vanishes. What if when we got disconnected, our bodies just fell to the floor? If we were controlling... um... *ourselves* all that time, then all that’d be left behind are our bodies! Mindless... a-and—”

“Okay, okay, Lisa. I get it, you’re still freaked out by all of this. I’m still kinda worried too, but at this point, I think it’s better to—”

“Caleb, did you... did you just call me ‘Lisa’?”

“Huh. Did I? Slip of the tongue, I guess. I’d be fine if you called me Tim or something like that, if you really wanted to. Did you not like it?”

“No, no, I’m fine with it. It’s just... *weird*, that’s all. C’mon, Caleb, we should probably head inside now.”

~*~

“Y’know, it’s kinda funny how they still have a stocked library in a place where nobody’s going to use it.”

“Mm-hmm.” Lisa browsed past the spines of countless dusty tomes. “That, and the fact that they ran out of rooms for the volunteers. Who would’ve thought that we’d get the *library* as our room?”

“I mean, to be fair, it’s a pretty *small* library, anyway. Like, it’s probably only about the same size as our living room. *Maybe* a little over. Why do you think they’re letting us stay at the town hall while everyone else goes back to their apartments, anyway?”

She pulled a book from the shelves, wiping a thin layer of dust off the flimsy cover.

“Oh, you’re going into workaholic mode again. I’ll leave you alone. I’m gonna go see what everyone else is up to.”

Lisa’s attention was still fully invested in the shelves of books before her. Only the pattering of fat raindrops hitting the window across the room broke the silence. “Let’s see... law book, law book, modern agriculture... *geez* are these things old. When’s the last time they stocked new books in this place?”

Further down the shelf, she spotted a yellowed, acrylic magazine rack. Surely in a magazine, tabloid or not, she could find something—*anything* on whatever it had been that led up to her current circumstances. Picking up one of the issues from the rack, Lisa sat down on the floor, and began to read over the cover’s headlines. Hardly a second passed before she groaned, tossing the magazine aside. *Of*

course they weren't going to be relevant to her search for answers. What did she expect? *Instruction booklets*?

Lisa's gaze drifted to the dimly-lit streets of Snowbush beyond the streams of raindrops. "...Hm. Actually... there's a lot of machinery around here, so it'd make *sense* if they stocked up on manuals in case something breaks..."

Grunting, she pushed herself back to her feet.

"Manuals, manuals, *where are the manuals?*" she mumbled her thoughts as she browsed the bookshelves. "Let's see... manuals should be over... here we go, manuals on setting up whatever the heck that machinery in the apartments is."

Stifling a light yawn, Lisa slid the dusty paperback from its place, and sat down to study.

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"Lisa, Lizzy, come *on!*"

A familiar voice echoed again through the darkness.

"C'mon, Mister Argall said that today's the day we can start!"

*Start what?* Lisa's thoughts countered the voice.

Dim flecks of light began to gather around her. She saw a floor now—and walls, lined edge-to-edge with whiteboards and pencil sketches. A classroom of some sort, she presumed. An elementary school-age girl was tugging at her hand.

"I said *come on!*" the girl repeated. "You said you wanted to join the class when you saw the poster! Why aren't you moving?"

*Class?*

She glanced about the room again as she began to walk, led by the little girl clutching her hand. It was clearer now—she *was* in school. But at the same time, *why?*

*Why is this familiar?*

*Is... is this another level of reality? Was the one I woke up in earlier also a simulation?*

Her vision was plunged into darkness again as she was led into the hall.

"Rebecca?"

This time, the voice sounded a little more familiar. The darkness of the hall faded away the further she walked, still guided by the strange little girl. Lisa squinted, shading her eyes with a hand in the suddenly blazing bright light of a summer's day.

"C'mon, everyone else is in the pool already!" Caleb laughed, splashing a wave at his sister.

She felt the pressure around her hand dissipate. A quick side-glance proved that the child too had vanished without a trace.

A piercing electronic buzz filled the air without warning. One-by-one, things began to vanish, exploding into countless points of color and light before ultimately fading from existence entirely, leaving Lisa once again alone in the dark.

*This is a dream, she realized, it's got to be a dream. Come on, wake up. Wake up. **Wake. Up.***

"Sis, wake up, breakfast's ready! They made scrambled eggs!"

Lisa groaned, peeling her imprinted face off the pages of the open book in front of her. She squinted past the small stack of books on the table, making eye contact with Timothy as he opened the door.

"...*Yeah,*" Timothy explained, flashing a sheepish grin. "You were kinda completely absorbed by the books you were reading by the time I got back, so I just went straight to bed without you even noticing. I *maybe* probably should've at least tapped your shoulder or something just to tell you to get some sleep. By the time I woke up this morning, you were pretty much using that book as a pillow."

"Oh."

"Anyway, we're being treated to a complimentary breakfast for helping out and stuff, so you'd better get going if you want any food. And we're getting the guest speakers later today too, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah," Lisa yawned, stretching in her seat. Though, her mind was still solidly set on the strange dream she'd had, and *especially* the strange child who led her way in it.

"Well, you coming or not?"

"Okay, I'm coming!"

~\*~

"You want any more?" Timothy asked between mouthfuls of food, pushing the platter closer to Lisa.

Lisa portioned out a chunk of the eggs and pushed the platter back. "I think I'll have a little more. I probably shouldn't splurge *too* much though. Who knows whether or not the food I ate back home was actually *real* or not?"

"Eh, makes sense. You want my yogurt thingy? I *hate* that stuff."

The door opened before Lisa could respond.

"Hey, you're not a volunteer! How'd you get in?" Timothy exclaimed, standing up from the table. His eyes widened. "Wait. Wha—"

"Lisa?" The door opened a little wider. "Lisa, is... is that you?"

Lisa's brow raised a little as she looked toward their intruder. Something about that voice felt... *familiar*.

“Julie? Julie!” Lisa jumped from her seat. “I wasn’t sure whether or not you got disconnected too, but I was thinking that you might’ve been in the crowd from yesterday during the meeting and—”

“Woah.” The other girl stepped back. “First of all, you *are* Lisa, right? I just want to make sure that the person I asked earlier was telling the truth. I really wasn’t sure if I even *recognized* you there when I checked this room!”

Lisa frowned, furrowing her brows. “Er... huh?”

“Same,” Timothy added. “Could you maybe say that again?”

The newcomer nodded, letting go of the doorknob. “I’m Samantha Hayes. I... I just want to know if you’re actually *Lisa Garnet* or not. Late last night I got a message from a friend saying that she saw you in the town I was headed to today. I’m honestly a little surprised she even knew *what* you looked like, given how old she was back then. She was still in, like, *third grade* the last time she saw you.”

*She’s probably Julie*, the thought entered Lisa’s mind, *she’s a little off, but so was I when I woke up. Maybe she’s still a little loopy after all that’s happened?*

“So... are you or are you *not* Lisa Garnet?”

Lisa glimpsed at her wristband. “I *think* so. I’m guessing you were Julie in the simulation?”

“*Was, is.*” Samantha shrugged. “Honestly, even *I* can’t quite tell sometimes. Like, *sure*, you’re right about me playing as Julie and all, but could you really say that it was *me* playing her, or was she a completely separate person from me? Either way, I *do* sometimes have to turn down the volume on her a bit. She likes to get a little loud every now and then.”

Was Julie saying that she had multiple personalities? It certainly seemed so, with ‘Samantha’ being so comfortable introducing herself by her *actual* name. The bit earlier about getting a call was probably a fabrication, too—Julie *was* a bit of a storyteller from time to time. What was one more story to make finding her friend a little more exciting? A more troubling concern, however, quickly surfaced as well: if Julie really *did* have multiple personalities, then which one was the dominant one, and why didn’t she ever notice them before?

Lisa glanced up, her eyes meeting Samantha’s.

“Heh, I know that look, I’ve got you completely lost, don’t I? Don’t worry, things should hopefully clear up a bit soon. See you then!”

A buzz came from her pocket. She pulled out her phone, a frown growing across her face the more she read the message she’d received.

“Something wrong?”

Samantha looked up at Lisa, her eyes wide open as she forced a smile. “Nothing! Nothing’s wrong. I... I need to go. We can talk later.”

She left without another word, her attention glued to the glowing phone screen.

Timothy made a face. “I *still* have no idea how she got in here.”

“Lisa, Timothy,” Daalmans knocked at the door, “the guest speakers are going to be ready in a few minutes. I would recommend you attend the presentation with the others.”

Lisa pushed in her seat. “Y-yeah, we’re coming! C’mon, Caleb. Let’s go.”

~~~

As usual, the crowd roiled with conversation. People were shouting as Mrs. Daalmans stepped onstage, asking an avalanche of questions the moment she appeared. Lisa and Timothy stood against the wall with the other volunteers, listening.

“Quiet down, quiet down!” Daalmans hushed, pulling the microphone stand closer. **“We will begin the presentation shortly. I have no words to say at the moment myself, so I trust you will all wait patiently for our speakers.”**

Hushed whispers and conversation spread through the audience once again as she stepped offstage.

Lisa, for her part, beamed at the quick work she and the others made the day before of the auditorium. In only a matter of hours, they’d wiped down each and every seat, removing years’ worth of dust and grime that had built up on their surfaces. Not only that, but the stage *itself* was now gleaming in the stage lights. It was a wonder how much a small group of volunteers could accomplish.

The echo of footsteps on the hardwood stage silenced the crowd entirely.

7 | You’ll never know what’s in store,

“*Samantha?*” Lisa muttered, brows raised as her supposed friend from the simulations walked across the stage. Since when was *she* a volunteer? Did Daalmans accept her application late or something?

Samantha stepped up to the microphone.

“Hello, there!” Samantha greeted, grinning from ear to ear. **“My name is Samantha Hayes, and I will be your first guest speaker for this morning’s presentation.”**

What. She was a guest speaker? Wasn’t... wasn’t she Julie, though? Lisa had seen her in the simulations practically every day of her life, but here she was, up onstage as if none of it had ever happened! How could she be in *both* places at once?

Samantha remained still, her pupils shrinking in the spotlight. **“Er... I... I should probably talk about your situation or something, shouldn’t I?”**

A roll of chuckles and snickering made its way through the crowd.

“Ahem. Continuing on, I was called here today by a friend of mine. Originally, my former colleague and mentor, Professor Argall, was supposed to be the sole speaker, but hearing about—”

It didn't make sense—even if she *could* be in two places at once, Samantha wasn't exactly acting the way *Julie* would've; the former seemed to be off on a tangent explaining the entire situation of even *being* there. If that really *was* Julie onstage, there already would've been at least a *couple* jokes thrown in here and there. It didn't particularly bother her *too* much that the jokes were missing, but it certainly stood out. This 'Samantha' was being too upfront about things.

“—but really, pretty much the only reason I came here was because I heard that an old friend of mine was here. Honestly, I really have no idea why I'm up here, even. I'm the tech girl, not a public speaker! I think I *probably* should've come on a personal trip instead of saying that I'd tag along as a guest speak—”

...Okay, there was maybe *one* joke there, at the very least.

“I believe that will be all for Samantha's introduction,” Mrs. Daalmans cut in. **“Samantha, would you like to introduce Professor Argall to the audience?”**

Samantha took a deep breath, giving a quick nod to the woman.

That was the *second* time somebody had mentioned 'Professor Argall'.

Lisa watched a man step onstage. He was visibly older than just about anyone else in the room, save for possibly Daalmans, and didn't have any sort of briefcase or luggage with him like the heavy-coated man did. A simple wave of his hand appeared to captivate the audience entirely. Samantha had since stepped back, standing a foot or two behind Argall.

“Now, now, I know you've all got questions, but let's make this quick. You already know my name. Years ago, my good friend and I founded the company that hosts the simulations you are familiar with today. I was notified—”

An odd quirk of his actions caught Lisa's eye. Throughout his speaking, he seemed to be almost *distracted* by something; his eyes were constantly moving, sweeping back and forth through the audience, hardly ever staying still on any single person, as if he was looking for something. Or *someone*. Samantha, whether or not she really *was* Julie, *did* mention that he was her former mentor.

Could it be—was Professor Argall searching for *Lisa*?

When the professor set his eyes on her, his speech slowed to a trickle, soon dialing down to complete silence.

She felt a tug on her sleeve.

“Sis?” Timothy whispered. “Why is that Professor Argall dude staring at you?”

“...and... I suppose it would be a good idea to discuss the cause of the outage as well. We discovered that our network cables for the region were severed sometime earlier. We don't know for sure what might've caused this, but we do know for sure that access to the simulations has been completely cut off across multiple towns. We believe there may be a chance that the cables were intentionally cut, but this is based solely off the existence of a previous attack on the company. I... don't think there should be anything to worry about for the most part.”

Lisa scratched her face, shrugging as she narrowed her eyes. For his part, the professor had already turned away the moment he noticed her returning the look, and was now discussing something about how the whole simulation industry came to be with some kind of joint venture. Though, Lisa paid little mind to his words. Maybe it was his stare, maybe it was the way he slowed his words the moment he saw her, but there was absolutely *something* tying her to Argall. But... there was also what he'd just said as well. *Severed?* Who in their right mind would go ahead and just *cut* whatever cables he was talking about? Maybe it was some kind of accident, or even an animal. She'd heard stories before about animals taking down the power of entire neighborhoods, so it very well could've happened here as well.

She blinked, pulling her attention back to the stage. The professor was looking at her again—though this time around, he continued to speak normally.

"I believe that that should be just about it for now," he murmured through a sad smile. **"I will stick around for a couple more days in the meantime if anyone has any questions."**

He shot one final glance at Lisa before stepping away, disappearing offstage.

~*~

"Lisa?"

Lisa looked up from her book. Based on the voice alone, she could tell that it was Samantha—or 'Julie' ...*both*, maybe? It really didn't matter that much anymore, she supposed. The two probably had less of a link to each other than she first thought.

"Lisa, Professor Argall wanted to see you again." Samantha pushed the door open, walking up to Lisa. "He's been sitting around telling people how long it's gonna take to get everything fixed for the past half an hour. I'm pretty sure that now's the only time he has to talk."

Lisa furrowed her brows. "Talk? I... he... why does he want to talk to *me*, of all people?"

"Just to catch up, that's all. Come on!"

"Wait."

"Hm?"

"About Argall: he said something about being a co-founder of the whole simulation business?"

Samantha sat on the floor. "Yeah, why? Is there something you wanna talk about?"

Lisa kicked at the floor. "Yeah... he said that he founded the company with a friend of his. Do you have any idea who he's talking about?"

"...Yes, but I'm not going to tell you. Not yet. But *come on*, we've gotta go now!"

Lisa set her book down, pushing herself away from the table. Even if *Samantha* wouldn't say a word about it, talking to someone who seemingly came from *outside* the simulations would be a nice change of pace. Especially so, in fact; if the professor *really was* someone that she remembered well enough to dream about, then she'd *certainly* learn more from him than if she kept fruitlessly poring over

book after book. Whatever Argall's significance to Lisa was, he was *certainly* someone important to her in some way or another.

"Lisa—"

"Yeah, I'm coming," Lisa interrupted. "Where is he, anyway?"

Samantha chuckled. "Last I saw him, he was taking a break from the crowd in the alley behind the town hall. I'll bring you to him, and then I'll take over answering questions to leave you two alone." She tugged at Lisa's hand. "C'mon now, he hasn't seen you in *years!*"

~~~

"Argall should be just around the corner somewhere over there." Samantha pointed, turning to Lisa. "And maybe if I have some time later, *we* could actually sit down and do some *real* catching up with each other, just you and me." She paused, her gaze turning downward. "...Though, Tim could join too if he wants... But *anyway*, I gotta go answer some of the questions people submitted on paper. I'll leave the two of you to talk a bit. Though, now that I'm thinking about it, I *probably* should've just said everything during the meeting earlier instead of rambling on like I did."

She turned away, disappearing through the town hall's doors. Lisa turned her focus to finding Professor Argall. Of course, he was in the alleyway between the town hall and the next building over, just as Samantha said. Lisa half-expected him to be smoking a cigarette, or leaning coolly against the wall in wait for her to come, but this wasn't like the movies she'd seen. He looked to be typing something on his phone.

"...Professor?"

Argall glanced up from his phone. He blinked a couple times, apparently confused at hearing Lisa's voice. He moved to pocket the device, fumbling before dropping it to the ground.

"...Hey," was the only word that managed to escape his lips at first. "...Um... hi."

He facepalmed, earning himself a chuckle from Lisa as he bent down to pick up the phone. He seemed innocent enough, given how flustered he was quickly growing. Maybe he'd actually be *willing* to tell her some things, unlike Samantha. It'd definitely be a nice change from everybody skirting around her questions.

"Okay, *that* was awkward as heck," he grumbled under his breath, stepping closer to Lisa. "Do... do you remember me at all, Lisa?"

She shook her head. "I don't remember much of *anything*," she began. "I *wish* I could remember a bit more, but there's just been so much going on recently, and I've got my own worries still about whatever might be happening back hom—"

"So, you *don't* remember?"

"No no, I *do*, but only barely," Lisa explained. "And only because of a weird dream, too."

"Hm. Alright," the professor continued, cocking his head. "How about things that happened *before* you connected to the simulations? You certainly had quite the childhood, in my opinion."

"...Could you maybe tell me something about my childhood then?"

He fell silent for a moment, his excitement fading to a frown. "Actually, now that I think of it, I... I think it's probably best you don't remember some things about that."

The professor pulled out his phone again, glancing at its screen before slipping it back into his pocket. "Anyway, I think we should talk about something else now."

"What about the simulations? You have something to do with them, don't you? Samantha, too."

Argall scratched his head, still apparently on edge about their conversation. "Yeah. The two of us have been working on them for quite a while now. Though, I retired a few years back, so it's mostly Samantha and whatever team she's got at the company these days."

Lisa raised a brow. With how vague the man was being, it seemed that he was trying to hide something. Unlike Samantha, it was blatantly obvious that he was visibly concerned about something. Yet, instead of warily glancing around, his eyes remained solidly set on her. The fact that he hardly even held a conversation *at all* also factored into his odd behavior.

"That... really doesn't tell me all that much. I think I might've already heard something like that about you somewhere before, though. Why do the simulations exist in the first place, anyway? Did *I* have something to do with them as well? Besides actually *being in them*, I mean. I keep catching people being surprised that I'm here, an—"

"Er... I can't quite say for the first one. Second one, yeah, I guess... you were on the project too. But—"

"Okay, okay. *Hold up*, you're saying that *I* helped make the simulations?"

Lisa's frown grew. 'Make' was probably a pretty big understatement, too...

"Yeah, more or less." He pulled out his phone again. "I should probably get going now."

"Wait!" Lisa urged. "One more thing, what will reconnecting be like? Is my body in the simulations *dead* with me out here?"

"Don't worry, you're perfectly fine still in the eyes of anyone who wasn't disconnected." Argall smiled. "It's a bit of a failsafe I made a while back."

"So, I'll be fine when I go back?"

Professor Argall pursed his lips, fidgeting with the phone in his pocket. "...Yes," he responded, a gentle smile spreading across his face. "Though, you should honestly spend a bit more time outside. Explore a little before you go back to your normal life, y'know? Nothing bad's gonna happen if you stay a little while longer."

*Stay?*

## 8 | If you never open up the door.

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“Stay?” Lisa repeated her thoughts. Professor Argall didn’t seem to have any malicious intent in his words, but then again, could she *really* trust him just yet? “I... why would I want to stay away from my family?”

She watched him turn pale. *That* question definitely seemed to strike a chord in the professor.

“O-oh, okay then, I guess. I’ll... I’ll see you ‘round then.”

He checked his phone one more time, shuffling out of the alley. Lisa huffed, staring after him. Was he really the same Professor Argall who was onstage earlier? He was *clearly* disconcerted about something by the time he left, and his answers only left her with *more* questions.

“He said that I was on the project as well,” Lisa mumbled under her breath. “That, at least, *kinda* explains why people were surprised—they didn’t expect to see someone directly related to the simulations waking up from one. But to what *extent* was I involved?”

She blinked, hanging her head. If she wanted to learn more about her past—about *Lisa Garnet*, then she’d likely have to follow Professor Argall’s advice, and stay here, *outside* of the simulations. But then, she’d be abandoning her family—and Timothy... *Caleb*, as well—who would be with him when *he* returned? The professor said there was a failsafe, but how could she tell if he was really telling the truth or not? He was *already* holding back on whatever it was he didn’t want her to hear, and all *she* had to go off of were hunches and a weird dream. And what about what he was typing on his phone? He certainly seemed to be a busy man.

Lisa stared at the towering apartments around her. Maybe Argall *did* have a point. Returning to her old life would mean that she’d *never* know who she *really* is... or at least, *was*. Caleb had a point as well—though she didn’t quite admit it, or even really put much thought into it, the experience of being in a completely unfamiliar version of yourself was actually pretty exciting. *Nothing* back home could even come *close* to rivaling what everyone in this town was going through right now.

Maybe she *should* stay a while longer. There wasn’t any harm in doing so, after all, if the professor’s words were true. She’d be fine when she came back; it’d be like she never even left! Maybe she could explore *beyond* Snowbush, see the greater world that she’d been missing out on. It’d probably be better than just going back home to the simulations empty-handed, anyway.

“Sis, I think you should probably come out from there, now.”

Lisa glanced up, spotting Timothy standing at the end of the alley. “Hm? Oh, yeah... yeah, I probably should.”

“C’mon then. Lunch is coming up pretty soon, and apparently *I’m* the one cooking.”

“Isn’t it a little early for that?”

Timothy shrugged. “Dunno, one of the other volunteers just asked me if I could cook, and when I said yes, they told me to prepare something for lunch.”

Lisa smirked. While he was no chef, Caleb *did* have a bit of a knack for cooking every now and then. Though, whether that would translate over to Timothy was an entirely *different* question. Who knew whether or not cooking food was the same across both the simulations and real-life? For all she knew, maybe something he'd *normally* make back home might end up as some mess of brown goop *here*. Either way, whatever it would be that he made would still be *far* better than the yogurt mix thing that everyone else had been having.

"Now are you gonna be coming out of there or not?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming already."

~\*~

"Pretty Lady, do you read?"

The woman tapped on the side of her headset, transferring the call to the device.

"What do you want *now*, Wildcat? I was about to dive in. It always helps to see exactly what your goons are up to."

"Night asked for me to check up on you and your team. I ain't got the time to flirt today."

Pretty Lady rolled her eyes, picking up her controller. "Well *that's* a relief. Maybe you should try doing that *all* the time. Definitely would make Night a little less cranky." She heard her superior holding back a growl. "Anyway, don't bother me. I'm working."

"But—"

"Tell 'er I'm *working*."

She pressed another button, ending the call. She turned back to the glowing screen in front of her, smirking as she pulled the headset down over her eyes.

~\*~

Lisa flipped a page, stifling a yawn. Her reading was interrupted by a brief rap on the door. Samantha peeked in before anyone could respond.

"Hey, Lis. Do you have time to talk a bit? Y'know, catch up a little on what's been going on lately?"

Lisa set down her book. This was her chance. Professor Argall only told her snippets of what she wanted, but with how close Samantha seemed to be to her, maybe she would finally get the answers she wanted.

Samantha sat down across from her. "So, how's it been going for you, Lis?"

"Pretty good, I guess. Yeah, it was definitely hectic to wake up fro—"

"No no, I mean in the *simulations*. Guessing you've been getting along well with Julie?"

"Wait, I thought *you* were Julie! You even said it yourself the first time we met earlier!"

Samantha shrugged. “Once again, that’s actually kinda completely up for question. For one, the Julie *you* know is just a digital model of myself that I control every so often. And probably some ninety percent of the time, you’re just interacting with her while she’s on autopilot, too.”

“T-then what about everything that you were saying about ‘*keeping the voice down*’ or whatever?”

“Oh, *that*? I didn’t think that you’d pay much mind to it! I like to leave myself connected to Julie at work so that I could hop on every so often and chat with you. Problem with that is that she tends to be a bit... *chatty* at times while on autopilot, so I end up turning everything down a few notches.”

Lisa made a face. Samantha and Julie *were* one and the same after all, as she suspected from the start. Though, the way they were linked to one another was more than just a little unconventional. How many times had she been talking to Samantha *through* Julie and never realized it? And why didn’t the ability to live separate lives carry over to herse—*Rebecca*?

“Sorry if this is a lot to take in all at once. It’s been *so* long since we’ve been able to talk face-to-face, so I’ve just been kinda excited about all this happening.”

Lisa leaned in, pressing harder with her questions. “And what about Professor Argall? I was talking to him earlier, but he seemed to be holding back a lot of things the entire time.”

“There’s a few things that I know he’d rather not talk about around you, that’s all. And like I said, he was our mentor throughout the course of the project. Do you really not remember *any* of that?”

“Nope.”

“Right. So, I guess I can catch you up a bit then. Though I think it’d be best to just skim the parts that Argall doesn’t want to discuss. Even if you *don’t* remember them, the topic might be a bit... *touchy*, so to say.”

“How so? Was it something bad?”

“Y-yeah, yeah it was... but that’s all I think I should say for now about that. I don’t want you to start all over again with everything you did afterward.”

She felt her heart sink. Whatever it was that they were keeping from her, it was for her own good. “Wh-what do you mean?”

Samantha shook her head. “Just gonna say it now, Lis, but you needed to let go of the past. You let things get to your head, and you dwelled on those thoughts for *years* on end. Even back in middle school, all you really ever did at lunch was daydream. Though, that’s all I’m gonna tell you about that. Maybe sometime in the future I can fill you in on the rest. I’m just not sure if you’re ready right now to hear it all.” She sat completely still, staring into Lisa’s eyes. “But anyway, I think that’s enough talk about your past. What’ve you been up to lately in the simulations?”

Talk about turning the conversation around.

Lisa twirled a lock of hair around her fingers. “*Well*, for starters, I was going to go to the pool with Caleb and you... er, *Julie* right before everyone got disconnected.”

“No, I mean what have you been doing *during your time there?*”

“Geez.” Lisa scoffed, letting her hair fall over her face. “What, do you want me to tell my *life story?*”

“Just as far back as you remember. Try and start close to the beginning.”

“Right. Um...” she brushed the stray lock out of the way. “I...”

She racked her mind, biting her lip. How far *did* her memory go? She knew she was in high school at the moment—her senior year. Middle school was also pretty memorable as far as levels of schooling went. Her teachers were always nice to her, and the school hardly had any bullying problems at all. Elementary school, however—she could remember back to around third grade, but things became foggy from there on. Sure, she knew for a *fact* that she attended second and first grade in the same elementary school, and that she’d been friends with Julie the entire way through, but names and faces—even those of her teachers—were lost to her. Beyond even that, everything was lost on her.

“Guessing second grade was the cutoff point?” Samantha smirked, resting her head on her palm. “You can remember just about everything back to third grade, but beyond that, things almost seem to be some kind of surreal dream of vagueness?”

“Okay, stop, stop! *How did you know?* How did you know exactly how far back I could remember?”

Samantha winked, pushing herself away from the table. “Just a hunch. *Anyway*, I think I’d better get going for now. Talk later?”

Lisa nodded, still at a loss for words. Samantha *definitely* had something up her sleeve—who knows, maybe she’d been able to somehow read her mind, even. With the simulations existing, it didn’t quite seem so farfetched, after all. Though, given how much she and Argall seemed to be holding back when it came to Lisa’s questions, it was probably likelier that they just knew something she herself didn’t. Or, once again, it could’ve been something to do with the company they were involved in. Either way, she wouldn’t exactly be able to figure any of that out if she reconnected, would she?

Maybe staying out of the simulations wasn’t going to be so bad after all.

## 9 | You have the power,

---

“Sis!”

Lisa looked up from her book.

“Did...” Timothy panted, “did you hear that they’re already starting to reconnect some people?”

“I... no, no I haven’t. Where did you hear that from?”

“Just some people standing around on the street. They said they saw some technicians going door-to-door not too long ago.”

Was it already happening so soon? It'd been, what—one, two days at most since the network went down? And what about *her*? If the simulations were up and running again, then why should she wait any longer before returning to her old life? That 'failsafe' that Argall mentioned before was only meant to hold out until people reconnected, wasn't it? She'd probably have to reconnect soon, anyway.

"Rebecca?"

But *staying out*, on the other hand, was already her decision. There was still so much more she wanted to learn—her past, her relationships, even maybe the history of the simulations *themselves*. Who *knows* what good she could bring back to her life in the simulations with the knowledge she'd have of the *real* world?

"Sis? Helloooo? *Earth to Rebecca!*"

Lisa blinked, derailing her train of thought.

"So, are you planning on going back yet? I'm fine if we do at this point. It's getting a little boring out here now."

She shook her head. "Not yet. It's... I—I want to learn a little more about myself first, that alright with you?"

"Yeah, I guess. Do you know if they've got anymore comics in the library? Maybe a series that doesn't mess everything up with a twist at the end?"

Lisa shook her head.

"Alright," the boy sighed, turning away. "Just tell me if you do find any. I'm gonna see if there's anything else to do."

He left without another word. Though he didn't admit it yet, it seemed like he might've been getting just a *little* homesick.

*Then again, Lisa smiled, he still acts just about the same at home too when he's bored.*

A knock came at the door.

"Come in, Samantha. Was there somethi—"

Mrs. Daalmans' daughter opened the door. She hesitated, looking away while holding out a bundle of newspaper printouts.

"Oh, um... thanks..."

"Grace." The girl nodded, stepping into the room with the bundle.

"Yeah. How did you know I was trying to learn about what happened?"

Grace set the old newspapers on the table. She hung her head, shying away from Lisa. "...Samantha told me. Said you could look through some things she printed off the internet back when I was little."

"Well, tell her thanks for me then. These should hopefully help quite a bit."

Grace gave a single nod, hurrying out of the room. Lisa turned her attention to the newspapers.

~\*~

**Dynamic Duo of Teens Co-Develop Innovative VR Technology**

**Teen Carries on Late Father’s Legacy—But for How Long?**

**Prof. Argall to Reporters: This is Personal to Miss Garnet**

Headline after headline ran past Lisa’s eyes. Could it really be—was she *really* the same girl that these newspapers reported on years ago? The publication dates caught her eye. Though she still did not know the current date, the yellowing edges of the papers were already more than enough to tell her that these were events from long ago.

How old was she now, anyway? She did not know. All Lisa could figure from the papers was that something *big* happened, kickstarting the project that she apparently worked on with Samantha and Argall that would lead to the simulation she’d emerged from just days ago.

Either way, though the newspaper articles were *tremendously* helpful, they still left her with even more questions than before. A mostly-torn paper caught her attention as she shuffled through the articles:

**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW: Mr. Argall, Mentor and Ad—**

Lisa wrinkled her nose. Unlike just about every other printout, this one was only the article title—not even the full one, either. Why it wasn’t removed altogether from the stash of articles was lost on her. It didn’t really make sense to include half a headline in a stack of full articles.

Nevertheless, cutting off ties with Samantha and Argall to return to her old life in the simulations at this point now seemed downright *stupid*. There was too much that she’d leave behind unanswered—chief among them: who were her *real* parents? Were they the same people as the ones she called ‘mom’ and ‘dad’? Based on the headlines, it certainly didn’t *seem* like her dad in the simulation was the same guy as the one the newspapers talked about. After all, he apparently was dead, if the “Late Father” part of some of the headlines was any indication.

Why did she even join the simulations in the first place, if she had all *this* going for her in real life? Why abandon such a groundbreaking project just to live life as a nobody? She could be famous, maybe even *rich*, yet for some reason or another, she chose to give it all up. And for what? The *simulation*? What was it that made her decide to start her life over from scratch, anyway?

*What were you even doing?* She rolled her eyes, leaning back in her seat. *You had so much to live for, and you threw it all away...*

Closing her eyes, Lisa took a deep breath. She’d been spending *hours* studying since Grace had given her the printouts. There wasn’t any doubt that dinner would come around soon—or at the very least, her stomach certainly hoped so.

But maybe dinner would give her some time to speak again with Samantha and Argall. Now that she knew a bit more about herself, maybe she’d finally have a chance to hear out what they’d been keeping from her. Maybe she could even tag along with them! Though... what would she do about the



life she'd be leaving behind? Even if it was only a simulation, surely there would still be *real people* that'd worry if she didn't come back soon. The failsafe would only really be able to go so far without her there, right? And the funny thing about it all was that she was skipping out on her old life to try and rediscover an even *older* life from before then. Whether or not she'd ultimately stay a little longer would be something she'd answer sometime else for now.

Lisa pushed herself away from the desk, standing up as she stretched. She'd might as well check to see what the other volunteers were up to at the moment. Maybe Timothy was picked again to cook, even. Though, *maybe* she should lay off on eating so much. Who knows whether or not what she ate back in the simulations was actually the real deal?

She pushed the thought aside. Food was food, anyway, and now wasn't the time to worry about overeating. She'd probably be reconnecting in a week or so, anyway, so it wouldn't matter all too much if she splurged a *tiny* bit, right? And the rest of the newspaper printouts could wait as well. It seemed like most of them were more or less covering the same thing, anyway.

~~~

Lisa looked up at the sound of the door opening. "Oh, you're sitting with us today?"

Samantha shrugged, sitting down beside Lisa. "Yeah, we kinda have to head over to another place tomorrow, so I was thinking that we should join you guys tonight before we leave."

"Leave?"

"Yup. Daalmans did say that the outage hit an entire slice of our network. They were doing fine for a while, but their resources are spread pretty thin and they want us to come in and try and keep the place under control. From what I heard, they're far worse off than Snowbush, so we'll probably be doing a *lot* more there than we have here."

Lisa cocked her head. "Really now. Do you know what's causing the outages?"

"Nope. We just know that they're on the same network as Snowbush. All we know is that they went down not too long after we lost connection. In fact, they're *still* down, even though we're starting to reconnect some folks ourselves. They should be ready pretty soon though, if I remember correctly."

"Yeah, I heard about that... by the way, where's Professor Argall?"

"Ehhhh, *somewhere* around here. You could talk to him if you'd like."

Lisa shook her head. "I'm more comfortable talking to you. Argall's a bit too awkward to talk with."

Samantha paused, pursing her lips. "No, he's a lot more open, normally. I think he's still trying to get a grip on the idea that you're awake and out of the simulation for the first time in like, a decade. Anyway, did you enjoy reading those article printouts? They're from a while ago, but they're kinda nice to have around as a sort of memento of how far we came. Er... we as in us as the simulation developers and all. Y'know?"

"Yeah, they were nice."

“I thought so.” Samantha folded her arms, looking past her friend. “What about you, Tim? Anything you’ve been doing lately?”

“Eh, not really. All I’ve been doing is reading some dusty old comic books I found.”

“Mhm. Anyway, Lis, I was wondering if you’d like to come with us to the other town. Given what I’ve heard about the place, it’d probably be a good idea to have some more people join us.”

“Sure,” she eyed Timothy, “not like there’s anything *else* to do here. Could Cale... *Timothy* come along as well?”

“I don’t see why not. Anyone else up for joining us?”

Nobody else in the room responded. Though, it *did* make sense to Lisa—they were just like her; torn from their regular lives, and thrown into an unfamiliar world where everything they knew from before was a fabrication. Why *would* they want to go? They’d only be keeping themselves away from their family and friends for longer than they needed to, even if they weren’t necessarily *real*. It’d certainly explain why none of them had even so much as spoken to her—their minds were still set on what they left behind. Then again, if that really was how *they* acted in this situation, why was she any different?

She blinked, making a face. The whole ordeal was kinda creepy now that she put more thought into the concept. It wasn’t *every* day when an entire mass of people is torn away from what they thought was real, after all.

“Alright then,” Samantha pushed herself from her seat. “We’ll get ready to go once you’re done eating. I guess we’ll just have to make do with what we have for the time being. I already told Melina that I’d be pulling some volunteers away with us to help, so everything should be set.”

The room fell silent for a moment, save for the occasional clink of utensils. Samantha remained still, staring at Lisa before continuing.

“Anyway, we’ll leave tomorrow morning. Make sure you’re ready, alright?”

10 | It’s your choice.

“How many have we gotten so far?”

Pretty Lady’s voice cracked with static, a tinge of bitterness seeping in. “The second one’s come back up. Our work with the first two’s been virtually wiped in a matter of days. They’re already reconnecting people.”

“That’s the one your brother was in, wasn’t it? The second place, I mean.”

“Don’t you bring that up, Night. That freewheeler took my family’s life savings and splurged ‘em on his own interests.”

“Well *excuse me*. All I asked was a progress report. Family matters have no place here. Not right now. You know that well already, Pretty Lady.”

“Whatever. I got some of my team into Mountain’s Rift this morning to stir things up a bit more. The place is *crawling* with techs after some idiot started a riot. At least with that we’ll have a better cover while we dismantle some things.”

~*~

Lisa stood beside Timothy on the roadside. The sun was still low in the sky, casting long morning shadows over the streets. It turned out that many of the people in town had opted to be reconnected overnight, so the streets were largely empty now, leaving an uneasy silence to settle over everything.

“Hey.”

Samantha stepped out of town hall, a keychain dangling from her fingers. Professor Argall followed close behind.

Lisa smiled. “Hey yourself. I’m guessing you’re gonna be driving?”

“Yeah, at least, for *now* I will,” Samantha stuffed the keys in her pockets. “I’d figured I’d might as well let you and Argall have some time to talk. I’ll just switch out with him somewhere down the road. I’m starting to get a little worried about what we might run into though. I’ve been getting reports that more outages have been rolling through the network, and that’s *on top* of the fact that a riot apparently broke out earlier today in the other town. I’m just hoping that the two aren’t gonna be connected in any way...”

Her eyes turned downward.

“Wait hold up, neither of you even have *shoes*? And have you two been wearing those hospital gown thingies *all this time*?”

Lisa glanced down, then back to her friend, nodding.

“Well, I can fix that. Just wait here, I’ve got some clothes for you two in the bus. I was thinking that I’d might as well bring some extra clothes just in case if something got messy, but you two can wear them instead. Might be a bit loose on Tim though.”

Timothy wrinkled his nose. “I’m gonna wear a *girl’s* clothes? Yuck.”

“Yeah, what’s wrong with that?” Samantha chuckled, “It’s just a few T-shirts and stuff, nothing a guy would mind wearing as well. What, were you thinking I’d put a *wedding dress* on you or something?”

She paused, turning her head. “Anyway, we should get going now. The trip isn’t gonna be *that* long, but you could sleep some more on the bus if you’d like.”

Lisa raised a brow. That was the second time her friend mentioned a bus. Neither Samantha nor Julie ever struck her as the type of people who’d drive a *bus*, of all things. She’d figured that they were more of a compact car type.

“Why the face, Lis?”

“N-nothing. I was just wondering why we’re taking a bus instead of a regular car.”

“Oh, the bus is Argall’s. I *think* he might’ve had the idea of bringing along more people originally or something like—”

Professor Argall cleared his throat.

“Ahem. *Anyway*,” Samantha continued, “Yeah, let’s go. You two can change later, anyway.”

She reached into her pocket, pulling the keys out again and pressing a button.

“It’s kinda amazing just how much has happened while you were gone, too. I can show you later on if you want.”

A light whine of electric motors filled the air as a minibus approached, stopping itself before them.

Samantha smirked, opening a door. “Self-driving cars, for one, are reliable enough now to actually be *trusted*. Just pick a seat in there. Some of them might have boxes on ‘em, so just leave those alone.”

“How long is the trip gonna be, anyway?” Timothy chirped.

“Probably only an hour or two at most. The town’s a bit far from here, but we don’t have to worry about any traffic, so that’s good...” She gestured inside with a grin. “Now get in already!”

~*~

It was strange.

Lisa laid her head against the window, watching the scenery rush past as they drove. It’d only been a few days since she’d been disconnected, yet her entire world had turned on its head. Everything she thought she knew—her identity, her family, friends—even her very perception of *reality itself* had been shattered in a matter of days. What could there possibly be left to discover?

She shifted her gaze to Professor Argall, who seemed to be watching the road ahead.

Right. Me.

Or more specifically, her *past*. Every single time she’d tried to probe either Samantha or Argall for information, they either redirected the topic, or remained tight-lipped as ever. Samantha, especially—she made it seem like things were being hidden for the sake of *protecting* her friend, like there was some kind of dark secret that deserved to be buried and forgotten.

But what could Lisa possibly know about it? *She* wasn’t the one holding secrets, after all. Maybe there was something deeper about her father’s supposed death—was he some kind of kingpin figure? Were there any secret dealings that ran in the family, but stopped at her? And what about her mother? The newspapers didn’t really ever mention *her* in any way, and she hadn’t bothered to ask either Samantha or Argall yet. The most she knew was that the “Simulation Project”, or whatever the heck it

was actually called, tied together herself, her father—her *real* father, Professor Argall, and Samantha in some way or another.

It was strange.

“Professor Argall?” she felt herself murmur, “What was I like before I joined the simulations?”

Did she actually say that? She couldn’t tell anymore. Her life was more surreal now than any time before, and every day less things made sense to her.

“Hm? Oh, Lisa,” Argall breathed, tearing his attention away from the windshield view. “Could you repeat that again?”

Lisa straightened herself, moving away from the window.

“What was I like before?” she repeated, a little more aware again, “Y’know, my personality. *Me.*”

Argall chuckled. “Well, for one, you were always a little on the reckless side of things. You were more the kind of person who’d drill a hole *before* you measured it, so to say, or shooting before aiming... writing a story before planning it? ...You get the point. Samantha usually had to help patch up whatever it was that was broken by the end of the day, if I remember correctly.”

“Yup!” Samantha piped up from the driver’s seat, “And you kept forgetting to save for a while, too!”

“Yeah... you were also pretty narrow-minded, too,” the professor continued, “You were driven mostly by blind passion and emotion back then, and didn’t really let *anything* slow you down. Pretty dreary as well, quite a bit of the time.”

“I... I was?”

Professor Argall nodded. “Yeah. Though, you started toning things down and brightening up a bit after a few years. Definitely saved a few headaches on my part with you being a little less hotheaded about what you could and couldn’t do... or, y’know, just moping around. It kinda depended on what happened that day.”

Lisa leaned back in her seat. There was a lot to take in—for one, she didn’t quite expect herself to be so *feisty* in the past, based on what Argall just said.

“Anything else you’d like to know for now, Lisa?”

She shook her head. She could always ask about her parents later. It wasn’t like she’d have the *choice* to go back and reconnect now, not when she’d be who-knows-how-far from the little town she’d awoken in. Whatever it was that’d come in the future, she would just have to take it head-on.

And what about Timothy? Er... Caleb? Whichever one he preferred at this point. He was sound asleep in the seat behind Lisa, based on his silence. Was there anything to hide about *him*? Based on the fact that his last name was different, maybe he’d actually have a *chance* at meeting his parents. At the very least, maybe they’d both be alive still, unlike her own.

Lisa turned her gaze back to the window. There were a few patches of farmland and the occasional ranch, but for the most part it was barren land. Why were these towns so *remote*?

Her question returned unanswered as her eyelids began to droop.

~~~

A searing white light beat down on her from all sides.

"It's nice to finally meet you."

Lisa spun around at the sound of her own voice. "Who—who was that?"

"Who are *you*, Lisa?"

The endless white plane around her shifted, peeling back into a landscape of mirrors.

"Who are you, Lisa? Or is it *Rebecca*? Are you me?" her voice began again.

All around her were reflections. Some of them were the same ones she'd see in the bathroom mirror, while others were twisted and distorted to ridiculous lengths, as if they'd come straight out of a circus funhouse. She stepped closer to one of the them.

There she stood—*Lisa Garnet*; some girl she didn't know; a girl she couldn't recognize, standing in front of her. But every move she made was hers—every little tremor, every nod or shake of her head—of course they were, they were part of *her*.

But what did *she* know about this... this *Lisa Garnet*? At least, what did she know *anymore*? All she could see was Lisa, standing in the mirror.

Where was the her that she'd known all these years? Where was *Rebecca*?

"*Lisa* is here."

Before she could respond, the mirrors around her shifted. Now the reflection of *Lisa* was nowhere to be seen, replaced instead by one of *Rebecca*.

"*Rebecca* is here, too."

"But who is *Rebecca* anymore? *She doesn't exist!* She never existed! It was all a simulation, wasn't it? Was it only a dream? Will I wake up back home in be—"

"You are here."

A blink. "Wh-what do you mean?"

The mirrors began to sink into the ground, revealing again the endless white void.

"It's your choice."

The world around her plunged into darkness. She felt the ground fall out underneath herself, yet she herself did not fall.

"Make a choice."

“I-I don’t underst—”

“*Make a choice,*” her voice demanded again, “*Who are you?*”

“I... I don’t know. I used to know, but I don’t anymore.”

“You are *me!*” her voice echoed across the darkness. “You are *me*, and I am *you!* We’re one and the same, two sides of the same coin! You are *Lisa*, and you are *Rebecca!* Whoever you *truly* are is *your choice!*”

Somehow, she felt the darkness seize up around her, plunging into her very body.

“*Who am I?*”

## 11 | Piece together the puzzle,

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“Lisaaa,”

“Liiii-saaaa,”

She felt a nudge on her arm.

“Lisa,” Samantha repeated, her hand on her friend’s arm, “You alright there? You weren’t really saying anything, but it seemed like you were having some kind of nightmare.”

Lisa squinted in the daylight, taking in her surroundings. They were still on the bus, though Professor Argall was driving now. There wasn’t any mysterious, disembodied voice to nag at her, nor were there sets upon sets of mirrors.

“Y...yeah, I guess I was having a nightmare or something,” she sighed, “Though, it wasn’t like *anything* I’ve had before.”

“Oh? Would you like to share?”

Lisa shook her head. The memory of the dream was already fading, though the question it left her with still stuck: *Who was she?*

“Alright then. I guess... since we don’t have anything better to do, we could maybe talk a bit more again. Just answer some of each other’s questions and stuff, y’know? You can ask first.”

Lisa lowered her head. Would Samantha even be *willing* to answer some of the questions she had? Though, whether or not she *would* answer them was also an issue.

“Who am I?”

“Hm?” Samantha leaned closer, “Could you say that a little louder?”

"*Who am I?*" she repeated, her voice wavering. "I was 'Lisa Garnet' at some point or another, and then I was 'Rebecca Waterman'. I... I don't know who I am anymore. I was hoping I could find out, but nothing ever comes up."

"Heh, just give it some thought for now. It'll come back to you eventually."

"Samantha, why does nobody ever answer my question?"

Her friend cocked her head. "What do you mean?"

"You and Professor Argall. I always try to ask you guys something about my past, and you *always* end up changing the topic. I just want to know *for once* what happened to make you and him try to hide my past from me!"

Samantha looked away, watching a stack of hay bales pass by on her side of the bus. "It's... complicated. You'll learn in time, just not now."

"You make it sound like you're trying to protect me from the answer. What are you trying to hide?"

"Lisa, I—"

"No. Samantha, *please*," Lisa interrupted, "I just want to know. I can take it. All I want to know is why you and Argall keep trying to avoid talking about my past."

"...We don't want you to go back in the simulations."

Lisa furrowed her brows.

"That's it?"

"...Yeah, more or less. It's the reason behind why the simulations existed in the first place, and why you ultimately joined when I didn't myself."

*The printouts*, Lisa's eyes widened, *it's something to do with my parents*.

"My *real* dad is dead, isn't he?"

Samantha froze. Obviously, *something* had just struck home.

"He's dead, a-and Professor Argall and you and me continued his legacy by building on top of his work. Right?"

"I... geez, I must've missed that article when I was picking out the ones to let you see," Samantha huffed. "I take it you're alright with that at least?"

Lisa looked away, scratching her neck. "...I *guess* so. I don't really remember him much anyway, so..."

"Lisa?"

"Hm?"



“I was wondering just now, would you like to go home?” Samantha hesitated before continuing, fiddling with a loose seam on the seat. “Not home like in the simulations, but your *real* home, out here—y’know, the one you grew up in when we were still kids.”

“You want me to visit my childhood home?”

Samantha nodded. “Once this whole fiasco with people getting disconnected and waiting around to be reconnected is done and over with, we could drive this thing all the way back to home. Last I knew of, everything’s still just the way you left them on the day you hooked yourself up.” She paused, snickering for a moment. “Honestly, you can probably thank Argall for that. He really doesn’t want to let go of the past just yet, from what I’ve seen. I’m pretty sure that what happened to *you* all those years back might’ve scarred *him* a little as well.”

“Yeesh, so he’s doing all that just because my dad died who-knows-how-long ago?”

Samantha cringed. “Ehh... *kinda*? There’s a lot more to it than that, but it’s probably gonna be better just to let you see for yourself when the time comes.”

“...okay.”

“So, we’ve kinda been talking about some pretty dreary stuff for a while now. Let’s talk about something a little less depressing. How about the place we’re headed to? What do you think the other town’s gonna be like?”

Lisa scrunched her nose, leaning away from Samantha after the sudden outburst. If she’d ever seen a mood swing, then Samantha’s *by far* was probably the most bipolar she’d seen in a while.

“Well, for starters, I *did* remember hearing at some point that it’s a bit more chaotic than Snowbush was when *we* got disconnected.”

Her friend shrugged. “Yeah, that’s definitely true. Pretty sure it’s got a much smaller population as well, even if they *are* supposedly rowdier there than they were in Snowbush.”

“Samantha?”

“Yes?”

Lisa hung her head. “Samantha, do you know if I dragged anyone *else* into this mess?”

“What do you mean?”

“The other town. Do you think there’ll be anyone we know that got disconnected *there* as well?”

“No. For the most part, it was only you and me. There were a couple others that were on the project for a bit of time, but as far as I know, they’re still out and about with their lives.”

“...alright.”

“Lisa, is there something bugging you again?”

Lisa shook her head, though she knew that was a lie. *Everything* was bugging her—her dead father, her connection to the simulation project, even the very *concept* of the simulations—it was all still

surreal to her, like everything she thought she knew was only a dream. Though, to be fair, with how the simulations apparently worked, a dream wasn't *too* far off from the truth.

"Okay then..." Samantha trailed off, "Well, I guess if you've got any more questions, then feel free to ask. We'll be right here."

It was quiet. Samantha made mention of the trip being nearly over not too long ago, and that she wanted to get a bit more sleep before they arrived.

Lisa watched her friend. Did *Samantha* have anything she wanted to hide about *herself*? All this time they'd spent since meeting each other seemed to be focused on *her*—*Lisa Garnet*, or at the very least who she was *before*. What life did Samantha take on for herself in the years since she'd last seen Lisa? That girl she knew before was gone now. The 'Lisa' Samantha knew disappeared into the simulations that she helped create, and never returned. Maybe that was part of the reason why Samantha and Argall continued to discourage her from reconnecting? Surely, they didn't expect her to still be the same person after all those years under a completely different identity, did they? Was it even possible for her to find herself again?

Lisa leaned back on the seat, staring up at the plain ceiling of the bus. Samantha didn't seem to be fazed by her shift in personality. Heck, maybe Samantha *herself* might've encountered some tragedy or another over the years. She certainly seemed to have a thing for acting in uncomfortable situations, so maybe everything she'd been doing around Lisa was a mask of sorts.

*Overthinking again, she stopped herself. Nothing's wrong with Samantha.*

As for herself, there was a *lot* that she probably missed out here in the real world during her time in the simulations. Not that she'd remember much about how things were *before*, though. Memory loss was annoying that way. Maybe one day it'd all come back to her when she least expected it, or something like that. It's happened before in movies and books, after all, so why wouldn't it be possible for that to happen *here*? Everything *else* was already quite unbelievable already, so nothing could really be ruled out.

For now, though, there was something *else* to pay attention to: the rising skyline of apartments on the horizon.

## 12 | Forge your own path,

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"Well, here we are," Argall beamed from the driver's seat. "Mountain's Rift. Bit of a weird name for a town, but who cares?"

Lisa held a hand over her eyes, taking in her surroundings. For the most part, it looked absolutely *identical* to Snowbush—the looming apartment buildings still went down long rows of streets for who-knows-how-far. People chattered about their former lives, and the predicament they now found themselves in. The cries of joy from finding a loved one among the crowds also bubbled up from time to time.

“You think things might’ve died down a little?” Samantha asked, “It honestly doesn’t seem nearly as... well, *chaotic* here as I thought it’d be when the situation was described to us. Especially when you consider the fact that this place doesn’t have any coordinator assigned to it like Snowbush did.”

Professor Argall shrugged in response, shutting the door of the bus.

Lisa turned her head, spotting a young man staring toward the top of the apartments. Maybe it would help to ask about the situation? He certainly didn’t appear to be bothered by much at the moment—Just a little distant, though given how ‘Mountain’s Rift’ was supposedly left in the dust when the simulations went down, it might’ve been at least a *little* understandable for him to still be confused.

“Excuse me!” she yelled, waving her hand, “Mister, could you—”

“OFFICER JONES, AT YOUR COMMAND!” The man shouted, swiveling into a salute before she could finish. He stood completely still for a moment, only staring straight ahead as if he’d been trained for the action.

He turned his head, lowering his hand and clearing his throat. “O-oh, I’m sorry ‘bout that... I haven’t been feeling much like myself these past days, not since the whole ‘everyone was trapped in a machine’ fiasco that went down...”

Samantha crossed the street, passing by her friend and holding out a hand to ‘Officer Jones’. He shook with her, though his grin was rapidly beginning to fade. “I suppose you are here to present plans to transition all the civilians away from this... this—” he gestured wildly at the looming apartments around them. “Just... *this*. Can you *believe* how everything we knew and loved was nothing but a lie?”

“I can indeed believe it, sir, but I wouldn’t necessarily call it a ‘*lie*’, per say. Connecting and disconnecting from the simulations is a choice that the users decide themselves.”

“But—”

“It’s alright, sir, I understand that you may be concerned. Rest assured, my colleagues and I were sent to help maintain order, and ensure that reconnecting to the simulations is as smooth as possible.” she smiled, glancing back to Lisa for a moment. “I believe we are due for some introductions. I’m Samantha Hayes.”

Lisa raised a brow. *Colleagues?* For all intents and purposes, she still only considered herself a *volunteer*, regardless of her relationship to the simulation project and whatnot. Samantha’s shift in tone was also a little unsettling as well. Was she really *that good* at maintaining separate personas for whatever came up?

The man, however—he didn’t appear to be taking so well to Samantha’s words. He made a face. “*Reconnecting?*” he spat, “Honestly, that sounds like bull to me. What’s the point of letting some faceless company take complete control over your life again when you’ve only *just* started seeing the world for what it is?”

*That* was certainly a new point to Lisa, even if she *did* have something to do personally with the company in question.

Samantha maintained her smile, still holding out a hand. “The decision to return to the simulations or readjust to real life is yours, sir. We do not force anyone to return, though it *is* strongly recommended, given how most people tend to prefer resuming their old lives uninterrupted rather than starting over again out here.”

Frowning, the man shook Samantha’s hand. “Alright then,” he huffed, looking past Samantha at Lisa. “I will trust your word. What of the little lady who called me in the first place? She with you?”

“...Yes,” Samantha nodded, “Yes she is. She’s actually quite a bit like you, in fact—she decided to join us here rather than returning to her own life in the simulations. Same goes for her little brother.”

*Speaking of which...* Lisa turned, glancing at the bus. *Right, he’s been sleeping the entire time from the moment we started driving.*

“...I suppose you’ll be needing my name as well,” the man sighed, his steps growing closer to Lisa.

“Yeah, though we didn’t think we’d need to bring any volunteer applications with us. Just tell us your name and we’ll write it down somewhere for the time being. You said you were Officer Jones?”

“No, no, that’s just my job.” The man paused. “Or at least, it *was* my job. The tag on my wrist says that I’m Andrew Smith, though, if that’s any help.”

“Yes, that’s about all we need,” Samantha nodded at Argall, who was typing something into his phone. “Do you know where the majority of the people in town might be, Mister Smith?”

“Just call me Andrew, please. Mister Smith sounds a little too out-of-place for me.”

A cocky grin spread across Samantha’s face. “Right. So, Andrew, would you lead the way for us then?”

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A hooded figure stood in one of the many alleys, walkie-talkie in hand. He shrunk back at the sound of footsteps, retreating deeper into the shadows as he held up the device. “I see ‘em walking.”

“I’ve mostly stayed out of the way, but there’s definitely a few crazies running around,” Andrew gestured in the direction of the figure. “Like that one, for example. Based on how they acted, I’m pretty sure that they might’ve been performing illegal operations in whatever the heck we all woke up out of. Y’know?”

“Mm-hmm,” Lisa hummed her response, still walking beside Samantha. Timothy had since woken up as well, tagging along and making random comments every so often about their surroundings... not that there was much *to* comment on in the first place, with every brick apartment being identical to the next. Though, occasional broken windows and missing bricks did help set them apart every now and then.

As for *herself*, her mind was still set on what Andrew had brought up earlier—was the life she lived actually *real*, or was it some cherrypicked story she got to write out for herself before she entered? She took a moment to let the idea simmer. Life, at least in *her* eyes, was no more special or ‘perfect’

than anyone else's. She went to school, she made friends, she did her homework—nothing in particular really stood out when compared to anybody else.

Her thoughts wandered back to Andrew. What about the whole *illegal activity* that he was spouting? Were people actually *able* to get away with those things? Was that why he was a police officer in the simulations?

And what about decisions in general? How much freedom did people have in what they could and couldn't do? What if everything was just written up like a script, and everyone else *besides* Lisa was forced to follow the script, and—

"Do you think we're gonna end up staying in a library *here*, too?" Timothy asked.

"No, Tim. Argall and I confirmed that you'd be staying with us in a dedicated suite this time around."

Even then, the company that Samantha and Argall ran certainly didn't *seem* like it'd be in any way malicious in how it ran the simulations. Samantha *herself* already said that connecting is a choice, so it wasn't like the company was going to risk its reputation by *forcing* people back in. What went on *in* them didn't particularly stand out, either. Sure, there were still the usual ads that came up from time to time on TV and while she was browsing the internet, but they were *far* from what she would've defined as 'intrusive'. All in all, she really didn't see any issue with the simulations, from her standpoint. But still, Andrew's remarks on the very *idea* of returning to them bugged her.

The group turned a corner, still led by Andrew. Like the previous street they'd walked through, and the ones before even that, this one was eerily quiet. Only the wind made noise, whistling and howling through the dark alleys around them. Broken shards of glass littered the ground around some of the windows, and pieces of brick and cobblestones piled against the curbside.

"Andrew," Samantha paused at the sight, "are you *sure* you know the way?"

Their steps slowed to a stop.

"Sure?" Andrew grumbled, slowly turning to face the rest of the group, "Of *course* I'm sure! I've known this place like the back of my hand! What else do you think there was for me to do those past couple days?"

Lisa cringed, flinching away from the man's sudden outburst. Andrew was supposed to be a police officer in the simulation he came from, wasn't he? So why was he being so hotheaded over such a little thing?

Samantha, on the other hand, kept her calm demeanor, seemingly unfazed by the abrupt movement.

"Alright then," she nodded. "Let's keep going. I'd like to make sure everything's under control sooner rather than later."

Turning, Lisa noticed that even *Professor Argall* seemed to be surprised by Andrew. How Samantha was able to have so much control over herself, she didn't know.

They continued walking. Brick and concrete monoliths of apartments towered high above them. Long shadows darkened every street they walked, accompanied only by the occasional burst of wind through an empty alley. The old cobblestones and cracking asphalt forming the roads and sidewalks came off in chunks in some places, much to the excitement of Timothy. In fact, save for the eerie lack of people and the piles of rubble left by rioters, the place looked practically *identical* to Snowbush. Now that she thought about it, wasn't it a better idea for them to just take the bus all the way downtown? It'd probably save them quite a bit of time, not to mention the amount of walking they would've saved—outside of Samantha and Argall, they were still shoeless, and the rough slabs of asphalt and cobblestone certainly didn't help, either.

"We should be getting close," Andrew muttered, "Just keep your eyes peeled for trouble."

What was up with *him*? It was like he turned into a completely different person since they met him earlier! Something about that made Lisa a little uneasy. Then again, whoever... *whatever* it was that he pointed out earlier in the alley was more off-putting than a simple personality shift.

The sound of shattering glass pierced the air.

Yelling came not too long after. It wasn't the confused shouting that Lisa was familiar with.

"...And there they are," Andrew shook his head. "Like I said earlier, I've mostly tried to stay out of it. It started out pretty slow, with only a couple people freaking out here and there. But at some point or another, some weirdos in hoods decided to chip in, and... well, you can definitely see the results of that."

"Yeah, certainly seems that way," Samantha remarked, gazing at another broken window. "Do you know what they're rioting over?"

Andrew shrugged. "Pretty sure it's got something to do with the fact that they were just given the boot from their lives. Maybe a few of them could've picked up a thing or two as well, but who knows?"

He paused, frowning at the growing ruckus from the neighboring streets. "Though, that's just my guess. Once again, I haven't exactly been *trying* to associate with those people, so I might have a thing or two mixed up."

They kept walking, though Professor Argall now seemed to pick up on the same realization Lisa had before about taking the bus with them. It was a bit of a random quip, but she *swore* she overheard him muttering something about pants. He was likely just talking to himself about getting her and Timothy their new clothes from the bus, but she wasn't going to place any bets.

Further down the road, she spotted what appeared to be another town hall building.

"*That's* the place?" Timothy balked at the battered building in the distance. "I mean, yeah, it looks like the other place from where we came from, but *that* doesn't even look like it can hold *itself* up!"

Andrew shrugged. "I don't exactly see any *other* building that doesn't look like an apartment complex around here, so I'd assume that's the right building."

He shot a wayward glance back in the direction they came from, then to Professor Argall.

“Say, maybe it’d be a better idea to run everything from that bus of yours?”

Argall only grumbled to himself in response, rolling his eyes. He dug around in his pocket for his keys.

~*~

“Careful now, Prof,” Samantha cautioned, “Someone could step out from between the buildings at any moment.”

Lisa sat in the back of the bus, staring out the window at the passing buildings. Every so often she’d spot someone in the alleys, staring at them. Some of them even seemed to be focusing on *her*, specifically. Though, every time she tried to get a better look at them, they seemed to disappear back into the shadows, as if they were afraid of being seen.

She heard Samantha shuffling through some papers. “Alright, our first order of business is to restore order to this place. It’s a mess, based on the accounts of the standby techs that were called in here a few days back. *Apparently*, the majority of the simulations here were designed to be utopias, with a few smaller ones here and there focusing on more specific things. Soooo...” she cleared her throat, reorganizing the sheets and chuckling. “...yeah, they aren’t exactly *happy* about finding out that everything was a lie. Good times, am I right? Doesn’t quite help that we’ve still got some people running around making messes.”

The bus slowed as it neared the town hall.

Andrew snorted in response, folding his arms.

“So, remind me again just *what* your company’s orders were?” Andrew grumbled, glaring at Samantha. “Cause it sounded to me like you guys were sent here to stop a rebellion *caused by your control over their lives*.”

Samantha set her papers down. “Again, we do not control whether or not people would like to return.”

Andrew threw his arms out. “Well *maybe* it’s more than that! Maybe if they never joined in the *first place*, this wouldn’t be happening!”

“Please, just listen for a moment, Andrew. Many times, people join *willingly* because they have a *reason* to. Our official simulations, such as the one Lisa and Timothy over there came from, are meant for use as a parallel layer of reality to our *own* world, where people can have a second chance at life where their first chance died out for whatever reason.”

“And what about *here*?” Andrew yelled, “The life *I* came from wasn’t exactly screaming *give ‘em another chance*, y’know. It was filled with high-speed chases and crime!”

Samantha read over her papers again. It amazed Lisa how calmly she was reacting to the whole situation—argument included. Though, she *could* hear a hint of irritation growing in her friend’s voice.

“It says here that our company only does routine maintenance and support on the infrastructure here. The simulations in this town aren’t owned by us, and were designed for leisure and excitement, not rehabilitation or general access.”

“So,” she stood up, “That means that most everyone here, *you included, made the decision to pay*. You put yourselves into simulations that were *meant* to be unrealistically perfect or action-filled, and likely knew what could happen if something like this happened. You aren’t thinking clearly, Andrew. That’s all I have to say. Now excuse me, but I have some people to explain a situation to.”

Lisa watched her friend storm off the bus in a fit. Andrew remained standing, his rapid breathing finally beginning to slow.

13 | Be your own guide,

Andrew stood up from his seat. “Well,” he grumbled, seemingly defeated by Samantha, “I suppose we’d better head out as well. Crowd out there looks pretty wild if you ask me.”

“Great!” Lisa heard her friend chirp from outside the bus, “C’mon then, help me get on top of this thing!”

A thin smile spread across her face. At least *Samantha* was back to her usual self again. One of these days, she’d have to ask about how she manages to switch between her various personas so quickly.

“Wait, hold on!” Professor Argall jumped back as Samantha lifted herself partway up the cab. “Samantha, what in the world are you doing? We’re supposed to make an emergency announcement to give the techs time to work, not parkour!”

“Forget about that run-down town hall building!” Samantha reached an arm up, pulling herself higher with the help of Andrew. “We’ll have more luck getting people’s attention this way and it’s probably gonna be safer too, given the open space.”

Lisa saw her friend’s hand point Andrew at the curious mass of people approaching them. Her voice was far too distorted now by the metal plating of the cab to make out anything decipherable, though she presumed that Samantha was telling Andrew to try and keep everyone calm.

Samantha poked her head down into the bus doorway.

“C’mon, we got stuff to do!”

“Yeah, we’re comin’. Hold your horses, Samantha,” Argall pushed himself up from the driver’s seat with a heave.

“Caleb,” Lisa called, “Caleb, come on, let’s go.”

No response.

She stood up from her seat, staring down the row.

“Caleb, you awake back there?”

She flinched at the sound of pounding on the side of the bus. Peering through the window, she could just *barely* see Timothy staring back up at her. Apparently, he’d slipped out while she wasn’t looking.

At least that was one less thing to think about for the time being.

The screech of a megaphone shattered any thought floating in her mind, anyway.

“May I have your attention, please,” Samantha’s amplified voice echoed through the streets, **“We are here to help maintain order in town while you are being reconnected.”**

Where the heck did she get the megaphone from? She wasn’t holding one when she climbed onto the cab of the bus. Maybe there was one already up there?

Lisa shook her head, stepping out of the bus. She needed to *focus*. Thinking about Samantha’s megaphone could wait. Staring out in front of the bus, it was clear that Samantha had at the very least gotten their *attention*. Whether or not they were *listening*, however, was a different question entirely. She spotted Andrew walking amongst the crowd, occasionally stopping to talk before continuing. He certainly seemed to have things under control, so that was good. They’d even quieted down somewhat for Samantha to speak.

“Did you do this to us?” a lone voice shouted from the sea of faces.

“We have no affiliation with the simulations you were disconnected from. We’re only here to help out until you may return.”

From beside the bus, Lisa saw Andrew shaking his head, a sour look on his face. He *clearly* didn’t look like he approved of what Samantha said just then. Samantha, on the other hand, didn’t seem to notice.

“Now, I’d very much like to know how the rioting broke out. Maybe there’s something we could do to help out with that?”

“How about giving us our lives back?” another voice shouted from the crowd.

Steadily, more and more voices bubbled up, shouting louder and louder until the entire area was frothing with shouts and cries. Even Andrew, who’d since returned to the bus, seemed to be at a loss for how to handle the endless flurry of questions being thrown at them. The screech of Samantha’s megaphone cut through the noise.

“Okay, let’s start off from the beginning. I heard something about returning you all to your respective simulations?”

The crowd immediately burst back into fiery rhetoric, hurling another barrage of questions at the girl atop the bus. It was becoming obvious that they wanted answers ASAP. Andrew’s efforts to keep them calm weren’t exactly helping, either.

“The network connection is already being restored as I speak,” Samantha continued, her voice reverberating through the streets. **“We were called only to keep order while our technicians worked**

on the issue. I *promise* you that your normal lives will be restored by the end of the day. You won't remember any of these events—it'll be as if you were never disconnected at all."

That last part caught Lisa's attention. *Wouldn't remember any of these events?* She didn't exactly realize that the simulations could even go as far as *wiping memories*. Maybe *that* was what happened to her? She'd have to confront Samantha about that later.

"...actually, hold on a second," Samantha paused, leaning over the side of the bus. "Professor, what's the progress on getting things fixed here? I'm not sure if I'll be able to keep their attention for much longer."

Argall pulled out his phone, tapping on the screen a few times before holding up three fingers. His eyes remained on the screen.

"Three hours," Samantha turned back to the crowd. **"In three hours' time, we will begin reconnecting people to the network."**

That seemed to help calm people's nerves, at least. The constant rumble of murmurs even died down a little.

"In the meantime, feel free to ask questions individually if you have them. Three hours is plenty of time."

A hand raised near the front.

"You said that we won't remember any of what's been happening for the past few days," a young woman began, lowering her hand. "What do you mean, specifically?"

"That's a good question. Thank you for asking. What we mean is that you are given the option to overlay your recent memories with ones generated based on what happened while you were disconnected—we call it 'memory masking'. She paused for a breath. "...They're still there, just buried. There *is* a slight chance, however, that they may trigger and resurface. This is because we can't actually *remove* memories, per say, but even if you *don't* choose to have your memories masked, we've found that people tend to eventually lose most recollection of what happened anyway."

She smiled for a moment at Lisa, then returned her attention to the crowd.

"Anyone else?"

Memory masking.

"I have a question as well!" another voice chirped from the crowd. Whatever it was, whatever her friend's answer would be, they didn't matter right now. Lisa's focus remained solely on what Samantha had mentioned moments before.

Memory... *masking*. It *had* to be the reason why she couldn't remember anything of her past life. What else could possibly explain it? The faded memories of her years in elementary school, the strange familiarity of that dream she had of herself and Samantha as children... it made sense now; her old memories were coming back to her in bits and pieces. But then what would happen to *Rebecca*? Would she just disappear? Sure, there was still whatever version of herself that there was now running

around *acting* like her in the simulation, but that wasn't *her*. She was *here*, in real life. The memories she had were her own, even if they *were* fabrications.

She didn't want to lose them—lose *herself*. She was still *Rebecca Waterman*, but somewhere inside herself, she had the memories, the thoughts, the *character* of *Lisa Garnet*.

How long would it be until she identified more as *Lisa* than *Rebecca*? What would she be able to hold on to when she made the switch? Would she even *recognize* the family and friends she left behind in the simulations by then?

It was too much for her to think about right now. She needed to sit down.

~ ~ ~

"How goes the destruction?"

Pretty Lady lounged in her chair, resting her feet on the table. "We've driven out most of the techs and took some sledgehammers to the town hall, but I've been getting reports that the Big Three have returned. Even found my brother with 'em. He doesn't seem to remember much, and based off what he's been saying, there's a decent chance that we could perhaps turn him to our side."

"The... Big Three. Even the girl?"

"Yes. We've been keeping an eye on her. She's more confused than anything, really. I wouldn't say she's gonna be a problem anymore, though. She's a clean slate from the looks of it, and even if she was, I'm not gonna take her out. Though, if you *really* think you have to carry out a hit on her again, here's a suggestion: check for survivors."

~ ~ ~

Lisa sat curled in the corner of her seat, pressing herself against the cool window of the bus. She could still hear Samantha speaking through her megaphone, and she could still see Timothy and Argall standing close by, ready to supply whatever information her friend needed while answering questions, but none of it mattered right now.

She *had* to remember. It wasn't only a matter of curiosity anymore—it felt like just about *everything* at this point hinged on the identity she'd left behind and buried. Her *real* parents, the connections she had, even *Timothy*... they all had at least *some* kind of link to her forgotten past. Leaving it all unanswered and returning to the life she had in the simulation, even if she *did* choose to do whatever the 'memory masking' thing was that Samantha mentioned before, would *by far* be one of the biggest mistakes she could make at this point.

Her eyes wandered to Professor Argall. Was this what he meant? She remembered something about him saying that she was once narrow-minded and driven by blind passion, or something along those lines. Whatever it was that she felt now, it certainly *felt* like what the professor described.

A hand touched her arm.

"Lisa, you alright there?"

She looked up. Samantha stood over her, a frown on her face.

“Is something bugging you?” she continued, sitting down beside her friend. “Heh, last time I saw you do something like this was back when you were split on whether or not you would permanently join the simulations.”

Again with talking about things she didn’t remember. Half the time, it seemed like Samantha was talking to Lisa as if she still remembered *everything*.

Samantha leaned back against the seat herself. “Not talking? I... I guess I could stay here with you for a little while. Argall and your brother are out there handling questions right now, though they aren’t standing on the bus like I was.”

“How long are we staying here?”

“Hm? Oh, I think we’ll probably only be around for a day or so at most, give or take a few hours. Most of the town’s already under control. They needed some help keeping everyone calm while they worked, that’s all.”

Lisa glanced out the window. Andrew was still pacing through the crowd, stopping every so often to talk to someone before continuing on. It sure seemed nice to decide so quickly what you wanted to do—no past memories, no connections, nothing to worry about. It all relied on a single decision, and nothing could sway it. Sure, Andrew likely had family of *some* kind out here in the real world, but unlike herself, he didn’t ever learn anything about whatever past life he had, nor did he seem to care about the idea.

That’s what she wanted—to be *carefree*. To be able to guide herself towards whatever path she wanted, regardless of what she or anyone else thought.

“Lisa,” Samantha repeated, intruding on her thoughts, “You’ve spent the past several minutes huddled in the corner now. Are you *sure* you’re alright?”

She nudged her friend’s arm.

“Lisa?” she repeated, her voice growing frantic, “Lisa, do you hear me?”

“Lisa?”

14 | Fractured shards,

Lisa’s eyes shot open. She couldn’t see anything—there was nothing to see. There was darkness all around her, and all sense of direction seemed to be lost.

“H-hello?” she stammered, trying to sit up.

A flash of light lit up her vision for a moment before fading away. She could feel the ground now, though it wasn’t remotely like anything she’d seen before; solid, featureless black, much like the darkness that surrounded her moments ago. The light from before still lingered, casting an off-grey sky above the horizon.

The ground rumbled for a moment, shifting with a jelly-like consistency under her feet before settling down again. The entire time, a wet, sloshing groan roared overhead.

“Where am I?” Lisa shouted, “Where is this place?”

Of course, there was no response.

A sharp pain flared at the back of her head, like something was trying to tear its way out. A piercing screech followed immediately after as the world was bathed in color. Everything seemed to be happening at once—the ground had once again begun to warp, the sky was now flashing every color of the rainbow, and the noise—the noise—the noise!

Lisa clenched her teeth, pressing her hands over her ears. Whatever the source of the screeches was, it seemed to be following her, or even possibly coming *from herself*.

It stopped just as suddenly as it had begun. The ground stopped moving again, the sky returned to its pasty-grey coloration, and the noise ceased without so much as an echo.

“Liiii-saaaaaa,”

No, her eyes widened, *no, not again, not another one of these dreams! Wake up, dangit! Wake up!*

“Liiiiii-saaaaaaa,” her voice repeated again, closer this time. She still couldn’t see the source, however.

The pain in her head flared again, almost knocking her to the ground. She caught herself, falling instead to her hands and knees. Right in front of her, she could see... a pair of shoes?

Not only *a* pair of shoes, but *hers*—or at least, the ones *Rebecca* had.

“Hey,” Rebecca squat down. “Long time no see, Lis. How’s it going?”

“W-wait,” Lisa stammered, pointing at her doppelganger, “Wait hold on, you-you’re... you me what huh?”

Rebecca pulled her counterpart back to her feet. “Yeah, it’s been a little weird for me, too. One minute I was just waking up and getting ready to go to a pool party, and the next? *Boom!* I’m playing backseat driver in a body I can’t control!”

Lisa cringed, staring over Rebecca. “Uh-huh... could I maybe ask *how* this is all going down? I’m sure this is all just a dream or something now at this point, but—*ow*, hey!” Rubbing her arm, Lisa glared at her double. “What was *that* for?”

“Hm, not a dream,” Rebecca brought her hand to her chin. “It’s all actually happening then, I guess. Still don’t really know why I can talk to you all of a sudden though. I was really only along for the ride up until this point.”

“What are you even talking about?”

“I don’t know, and I’ve been finding that pretty exciting!”

Lisa made a face at the remark. As weird as it was to be talking to herself—like, *face-to-face* talking to herself, maybe there was something she could learn. It was basically like an out-of-body experience of sorts after all, right? Only, she still had her own body, but now so did... herself?

“You know, I can hear your thoughts.”

“Wait *what?*” Lisa shrunk away. “How? Wha-what the *heck?*”

“Once again, don’t know. All I know is that I can hear your thoughts out loud.”

She took a deep breath, staring into Lisa’s eyes.

“Alright, let’s start over. I’m Rebecca, you’re Lisa, and... I’m also Lisa, I think.”

Lisa hesitated, avoiding eye contact as she shook her counterpart’s hand. Save for the shorter hair, Rebecca looked almost *exactly* like herself. Even...

She leaned forward, staring directly into Rebecca’s own eyes. They were *green*—emerald green, in fact. It was a far cry from the deep brown that she herself had.

“You aren’t me, are you?” Lisa whispered. “Not anymore, at least.”

“I... *guess* not. I don’t feel any different myself, though.”

“Is... is there any reason why you can talk to me now?”

“I have absolutely *no idea*.”

Lisa sat down, staring blankly at her counterpart. This really *was* happening, wasn’t it? For a while, she thought it was *Samantha* who had multiple personalities, but... she shook her head. It was too much to take in at once. She wasn’t only herself anymore, she was herself *and* Rebecca. Or was it the other way around? Rebecca seemed to be completely aware and separate from herself—from *Lisa*—now, so why could she still remember the time she spent *as her*?

“Hey, it’s alright, take it easy on yourself, Lisa,” Rebecca pat her on the back. “I know all this is a little crazy, but at this point, what else can we do? We just gotta keep going and see what happens, y’know?”

Lisa fidgeted, looking away as she curled up, resting her chin on her knees.

“B-but what about *you*? Don’t you want to go home too? What about mom and dad? Caleb? What about them? Won’t you miss them?”

Rebecca shrugged. “I know they’ll be alright. Even if I’m gone, they’ll still be there. Not that I really have a *choice* in going back or not.”

“I could still reconnect.”

“*No*,” her counterpart scolded, “*You* just keep going. *You’re* the one you should worry about, Lisa. I’ll be fine.”

“You sure?”

“*Sure, I’m sure!* Lisa, all this time since we got disconnected from the simulation, I’ve been sitting around wherever the heck I am in your head. Every thought, every action, *everything* you’ve done has also been experienced by me. This entire time, you’ve been caught in this unending loop of doubt! Listen. What I’m saying here, is that you shouldn’t worry about me. Don’t worry about whoever it is that you left behind. *I’ve* accepted that they aren’t real either, and besides, like I said already, they’ll still be there if you want to go back when all this is over. What you should focus on *right now* is—”

“Lisa, come on, wake up! We know you’re still in there!”

Lisa raised a brow, looking around for the source of the voice.

“Wake up already! Don’t leave us hanging!”

“...It’s time to wake up, Lisa,” Rebecca flashed a sad smile. “Go on, I’ll be alright.”

~*~

Lisa groaned, lifting her head. Was it darker outside? It seemed darker outside now.

“Holy *crap* did you spook us there, Lis!” Samantha gasped, taking her hands off her friend’s shoulders. “What happened back there? You were out for *hours!*”

Lisa shifted away from the corner, wincing. “I... I was?” She lifted a hand to her cheek, feeling the deep imprint on it from the window frame. “...Oh, I was.”

“Heck, if it weren’t for the fact that he’s a little scatterbrained sometimes, Argall would’ve freaked even *more* over this than he already did! Again, *what happened*, Lisa?”

“Nothing. I’m fine now, Samantha.”

“...Yeah, I can see that, but that’s beside the point, Lis. Are you feeling okay? Do you want me to call someone for help? It’s not normal to be completely unresponsive for several hours at a time, y’know.”

Lisa shook her head, stretching. “No, I think I’ll be alright. I just... had another weird dream, that’s all.”

She avoided her friend’s concerned stare. What would Samantha say if she told her about what she’d just gone through? She’d think she was *crazy!* Sure, both Julie *and* Samantha had some acting chops to them for whatever reason, but to actually, *legitimately* have an alter-ego living in her head was an entirely *different* can of worms. With Samantha, she explained that the reason why she and Julie were separate was because they *really were* two different people. Just... one was based on the other, that’s all. With *herself*, however...

“Lisa—”

“I said, I’m *fine*.”

15 | May drift apart,

“Feeling any better yet?” Samantha tossed a pillow at Lisa. “Professor Argall said to try and take it easy on yourself for now. We don’t want something like that to happen again when we’re out in such a remote place.”

The pillow landed with a soft *thud* against Lisa’s chest.

“Yeah, I guess. Though, I still don’t really want to talk about it...”

Samantha sighed, slumping against her seat on the bus. “Alright then. Just... try not to scare us like that again, okay?”

Timothy stuck his head through the doors. “What happened? I was with Andrew earlier, and I couldn’t really tell what was going on.”

“It’s nothing. Speaking of which—you should go ask him if he’s gonna sleep in his apartment or if he wants to stay with us for the night. Argall’s got some extra blankets if you want ‘em.”

“Okay.”

He disappeared behind the doors. A lurking worry stirred in the back of Lisa’s mind: would the same thing happen to Timothy? Maybe it already happened, and he was hiding it just like she herself was. It wouldn’t be *that* far-fetched of an idea—after all, it only took a few denials and a bit of silence. Maybe a little bit of apathy on the side, too. Wait, what was she even *thinking* about? Now wasn’t the time to plot ways to take people’s minds off her mental troubles, there was a town to tend to!

Professor Argall boarded the bus, some thin blankets bundled in his arms.

“I decided to take a look in the town hall building here.” He dumped the blankets in an empty booth. “Building’s probably not going to be safe to stay the night in. I *did* snag some stuff from inside, though.”

The overhead lights flickered on as he sat down.

“She doesn’t want to talk about it,” Samantha commented. “Pretty sure at this point that whatever happened is pretty sensitive to her.”

“Right.” Argall leaned back, folding his arms. “Alright.”

“Andrew said he’s going back to his apartment,” Timothy wheezed, stepping inside. “Holy *crap* was he a long way away from here. And that was *on top* of finding him in the dark!” He glanced at the pile of blankets, then at the professor.

Argall shooed him away. “Go ahead, take one already! I didn’t haul a pile of junk out of town hall to make a *statue*, y’know.”

Samantha craned her neck, her brows furrowed. “What *else* is in that bundle, anyway?”

“Snacks.”

“Snacks?”

“Snacks,” the professor repeated, jamming a hand into the pile of blankets. He pulled out a granola bar, frowning. “Though, I’m pretty sure most everything’s stale.”

Argall proceeded to flick the granola bar against the top of the seat to prove its staleness, resulting only in a half-bent granola bar and a flustered old man. It felt unreal to her—she’d known these people for only a handful of days, and yet here they were, messing around like they’d known each other since practically *forever*. Though, to an extent, that *was* kind of the case.

He frowned at the bent granola bar, then at Samantha. “I thought this thing would’ve snapped in half at this point.”

“Guess not. C’mon, you should get some rest. It’s getting pretty late now.”

Lisa stood up, glancing at Samantha. “I’m just gonna go out for a bit of a walk, that alright with you?”

“Sure. Oh, by the way—*clothes*,” Samantha leaned over, rummaging in some unseen bag under her seat. “Nearly forgot to give ‘em to you. Last I remember, we wore pretty much the same size, so these should all fit.” She sat up again, lobbing a tightly-packed bundle at Lisa. “Here ya go. It’s dark out, so I suppose it *should* be alright to just change in the back of the bus or something.”

~~~

The sound of footsteps echoed over the moonlit road. For what they were, Samantha’s old sneakers were *much* better than walking barefoot on the cobblestones—*especially* when it came to the occasional sharp rock that jutted out from the path. The rest of the clothes were alright; they didn’t necessarily fit her *style*, per say, but at the very least they were *actual clothes* rather than a loose medical gown.

Lisa closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. It was still hard to believe. This *really was* her life now. In only a matter of *days*, her life turned on its head. Everything she knew, or at least, *thought* she knew had been uprooted; The people and places she grew up around proved to be fabrications, at least *one* of her parents no longer existed, and even her own *thoughts* might not have been her own. That last part was the most disturbing of them all.

*Incredible.*

That was the word. Everything that’d happened over the past few days, all the things that seemed to be happening at once—heck, even the things that *didn’t* happen yet—would make for more than simply an interesting story if she ever came around to writing it all down. Would people even believe it? Even if she *was* apparently known to be a figurehead in the whole simulation business, *surely* people would’ve forgotten about her after so many years of hearing nothing, right? The fact that she was actively *living* that story, *experiencing* every little part of it—that was all she had to tell herself she wasn’t crazy.

Then again, putting it *that way*, it *did* sound a little crazy.

“Rebecca?”

Lisa turned around, spotting Timothy as he approached.

“Guessing you’re taking a walk too, Caleb?”

Timothy shook his head. “No, just trying to find you, that’s all. Samantha said you should probably put a jacket on, by the way. Apparently, we’re gonna be due for some colder weather soon *on top* of the rain we already got,” he nudged Lisa on the arm. “Hey, you alright there? I didn’t see what happened for myself, but did something bad happen?”

“I—” Lisa looked around, scratching her neck. “I guess I can tell *you*. Promise you won’t say anything to anyone else? I don’t want Samantha or Argall to get the wrong idea about what I went through.”

“Alright then. I promise.”

“I...I think I somehow *separated* from Rebecca. The reason why Samantha was so worried earlier was because I was completely unresponsive in the bus. You know why?”

“No, not reall—”

“I was *talking* to her. She’s... surprisingly fine with the whole ordeal, almost as if she’s given up on trying to figure it out herself. She wants me to go on and make my own decisions, instead of worrying about mom and dad, a-and everyone *else* we left behind...”

“So?”

“So? Aren’t you bothered by *any* of this? This never happened before, and now all of a sudden, I’ve got an entirely separate *me* in my head who’s just about accepted her own fate!”

“I don’t see any problem with that. If she’s alright with it, then why aren’t you? She’s *literally* you, after all. Wouldn’t you at the very least trust *yourself*?”

“I—”

“And *so what* if you can’t? Sis, you’ve been acting a little off since everyone got kicked out of their lives! I’ve gone through all this crap *myself* too, and I don’t see anything wrong with stepping out of my comfort zone a little! C’mon, loosen up a little, would ya? It wouldn’t *kill* to let some things go the way they’re going.”

“But what about separating with Rebecca? I-I can’t confidently say that I’m even your *sister* anymore. Not when I know that those memories aren’t entirely real.”

“Sure, that’s a good point, but who cares if we’re actually related or not? If you want to stick around out here instead of going back, then so be it! Same goes with hooking yourself back up to the machine thingies! It’s *your decision* to make. Not mine, not the professor’s not Samantha’s—*only you*.”

Lisa shook her head, trembling as she balled up her fists. “But that’s the *problem*. I don’t know *what* to decide! I still want to learn more about myself out here, but at the same time, I still want to go back home. I’m... I’m *tired*, Caleb. I’m tired of all this stuff we’ve been going through; The disconnection, volunteering, digging up my past—*everything*. I’m sick of it, but... I’m still not ready to go home.” A tear rolled down her cheek. “I-I don’t know *what* to think anymore, Caleb. Rebecca says that I shouldn’t

worry about the people I'm leaving behind, but could I really? That... that was the life I *wanted* to live, an-and—”

Timothy held up a hand. “Wait, *wanted*? What do you mean?”

“Huh?”

“You... you said that the life we had in the simulation was the one you *wanted* to live. What's up with that?”

“I said that?”

Timothy nodded.

Lisa fell silent, staring at the ground. The remark seemed to just slip out of her without warning. Perhaps it was something stirring deep within her memories that finally resurfaced?

She felt Timothy's hand on her shoulder.

“Hey, how about we don't worry about those sorta things right now. You're putting far too much stress on yourself again.” Timothy pulled away, strolling back to the bus. “C'mon, let's get some sleep. Samantha says we're probably gonna be working on getting people reconnected tomorrow.”

## 16 | The past never dies—

---

Lisa cradled a headset in her arms as Samantha carefully strung another tube into Andrew's body. Sure, she wasn't necessarily *doing* anything when it came to reconnecting everyone to the simulation, but reading the manuals for the machinery did at the very least give her a vague idea of what was what. Still, she didn't necessarily read *everything*. Those manuals were about as thick as her *calculus textbooks!*

“...Andrew said that he wanted to go back to his family, right? Even after all he said against the simulations?”

Samantha nodded, still focused on the operation. The tube mounted against the brace in the man's side with a light *click*.

“That was last night?”

She nodded again, leaning in a little.

“What are the headsets even *for*, anyway? Aren't we technically *dreaming* all of this?”

“Couldn't quite work out how to pass good-enough quality images and sounds to the brain without it.”

Lisa turned to the machine, then back to the headset.

“There aren't any wires?”

“It’s wireless. The thing is powered by an induction coil built into the wall, and a small backup battery.”

Samantha leaned back with a sigh, looking over her work. There was hardly any blood spilled, given the modular nature of the tubes and cabling, and from the look on Andrew’s face, the anesthesia worked perfectly fine.

“Alright, now we just need to put on his headset.”

*The headset.* She lifted the device closer to her own face, squinting at the little lenses inside. What kind of life did *Andrew* live? She cupped the headset over her face. It was dark.

“C’mon, Lis. Don’t try to peek into his life! Heck, I haven’t even *activated* the thing yet. These headsets are linked to the IDs of their users, so you wouldn’t exactly be *able* to see anything, anyway.”

Lisa pulled the headset away, handing it to Samantha.

Samantha took the device, kneeling down beside Andrew. She fumbled with the strap for a moment, lifting Andrew’s head to slip the elastic band behind his head. “I’m not really sure if you really remember this or not, but *these* headsets scan for a little chip embedded right under the skin on the backs of people’s necks. That’s the reason why nothing happened when you put it up to your eyes. The regular headsets that people like *me* use don’t have that sorta thing. They just work off of biometrics instead. *In fact—*”

She tightened the strap around Andrew’s head. “You should have one of those implants too, Lis. Feel around a bit if you want. The chip’s going to feel like a little hard chunk under your skin.”

Lifting her hand, Lisa paused. The chip was on the back of her neck—*right where she’d been scratching*. Did Rebecca splitting off into her own consciousness have something to do with it?

“Something wrong, Lisa?” Samantha took a step toward her friend.

“The chip,” Lisa felt her neck, bowing her head down. “It’s... it’s just that I’ve had an itchy patch of skin right where you said it’s implanted.”

“Should be alright, so long as it doesn’t tear out. Just... try not to scratch it *too* much, ‘kay? Here, lemme see if you damaged it or not.”

Lisa turned around, letting Samantha have a better view of her neck. Samantha ran her fingers over the itchy area.

“Mmm, yeah, I think you should be fine. I don’t feel anything *sticking out*, at the very least. We don’t have any anti-itch cream on us in the bus, but I *guess* if you wanna come along with us *all the way* back, we could stop by a convenience store or something.” She glanced back at Andrew again. “Anyway, we should probably move on to the next person. I’m just glad that Snowbush wrapped up as smoothly as it did after we left... *geez*, I don’t want to even *think* about how much work we would’ve had if we didn’t have the teams from Snowbush arriving today!”

“How long does it take for Andrew to wake up in the simulation?”

“‘Bout a half-hour or so. C’mon, let’s get going.”

~~~

"You *idiot*. You really let 'em hook everyone back up? Next place we take down, I'm going the—"

"Yeah, so what? It's not like we *needed* anything from this place. It's supposed to be a distraction, isn't it?"

Night closed her eyes, drawing in a deep breath. "*Right*. Right, I... must've gotten a bit overexcited. You have my permission to leave th' place with your team."

"...Andrew's hooked back up."

"Nobody cares, Pretty Lady. Go kick 'im out again on your own time if you want."

~~~

Three hours.

Three hours, and hardly even *ten minutes* per person. It wasn't even lunchtime yet!

Lisa scratched her neck, paying care to avoid the chip the best she could. Why didn't Timothy have the same problem? Surely *he* had the same sort of implant as she did, so why didn't *he* seem bothered by it? Maybe she could ask him later. He was tagging along with Argall at the moment.

"I... I think that's actually it," Samantha scrubbed her hands with an antiseptic wipe, glancing at the sheet of paper beside her small tool bag. "Yeah, that's the last name on our list. Wanna see if anyone else is finished yet? Ooh, or maybe we can finally *leave!* Oh, I can't *wait* to show you all the stuff you've missed out on back home!"

Samantha rushed back to her tools, replacing them inside the bag. She hadn't even used them *once* the entire time they were working, let alone *touched* them, given the easy reconnection process. It was far simpler than *dis*-connecting people, apparently.

Lisa's thoughts turned back to Andrew. He was probably fully re-immersed into the simulation by now. Would he even *remember* being disconnected, with all the stuff about 'memory masking' that Samantha had talked about before?

"He'll be alright," Rebecca's voice mumbled in her head.

Lisa jumped, gasping at Rebecca's voice.

"Wait, you can hear me now?" Rebecca seemed taken aback by the reaction.

Samantha looked over her shoulder, sliding another instrument into her tool bag. "Hm? Did you see something, Lis?"

"N-no," Lisa furiously shook her head. "Nothing! I didn't see anything."

"Okay... just tell me if there's anything wrong."

"You should tell Samantha about me," Rebecca's voice advised, "It's probably gonna be better than waiting until something bad ends up happening."

“Wha-no! Are you *crazy*?” Lisa whispered to herself. “Samantha’s already got *enough* to do as it is!”

Rebecca’s voice grew quieter. “...Then you should probably stop talking to yourself.”

Samantha tightened her grip around her tool bag, cocking her head. “You were saying something about me having enough on my hands?”

Lisa locked eyes with her friend. “I... yeah, I was just saying that you *really deserve a break* after all you’ve done!”

“You’re really bad at lying, y’know. Is something wrong?”

Well, it was now or never. Samantha wasn’t taking the excuse, so what was there to lose?

Lisa drew in a deep breath. “I... so... you know how my character in the simulations is Rebecca, right?”

“Yes?”

Good. Samantha seemed to be taking it for now.

“Keep going, Lisa,” Rebecca’s voice pushed.

“Is it normal for her to separate from me?”

“What.” Samantha deadpanned, “I-I’ve never heard of that happening before. Does this have something to do with what happened last night?”

Lisa shrugged.

“Cause if it does, then we should probably look into that a bit more. That definitely isn’t normal.”

“Now?”

Samantha shook her head. “Don’t have the right tools to do much anything here. We’ll probably need to look at your implant when we get back. Just... hang on there for now, ‘kay?” She stood up, walking towards the door. “Come on now, let’s catch up with the others, alright?”

## 17 | It only departs.

---

“Got everything, guys?” Professor Argall looked over his shoulder. “Anybody need to use the bathroom before we go?”

“Already went,” Timothy chirped, settling into his seat. “How long’s the trip gonna be?”

“Four, maybe five hours tops. Depends on if we stop anywhere along the way as well.”

The bus rumbled to life, a mechanical *whirr* buzzing through its frame. Lisa glanced out the window. This was really happening—they were *actually leaving*. There was no chance now for her to return. Wherever Argall drove would be where she went, regardless of what she thought on the matter.

*Home.*

Samantha was talking about it earlier.

Lisa felt the vehicle begin to move. Slowly, the familiar view of towering apartments began to shift, panning further and further out of view until the next block of buildings replaced them, and then the one after that, and so on. The pattern repeated for some time—earthen reds and greys, intermixed with the clear blue sky. They passed by the town hall building. It seemed that at some point or another somebody had taped it off. There were a few company employees she could spot passing in and out of the building, apparently salvaging what they could of the mess before whatever demolition crew came to take down the rest. The old view of the apartments returned, flashing over and over past the window until the final building rushed past, leaving only the open horizon in her view.

*Home.* Not the one she'd known in the simulations; no, this was her *childhood* home, from what she understood. Would she even remember it after all these years? Surely it couldn't be the *exact* same as how she'd left it however many years ago for the simulations.

Samantha turned around, peering at Lisa from her seat. "Hey, feeling better yet?"

Lisa nodded, her gaze still fixed on the blurred colors in the window.

"Has Rebecca done anything recently?"

"No."

Samantha pursed her lips, turning back.

"Samantha?"

"Yes?"

"Do... do you think you can tell me more about myself now? It's not like I can go back anytime soon now..."

Lisa heard a sigh come from Samantha's row.

"Well, to begin... this entire project—the simulations, the infrastructure, *everything*—it was all because of *you*."

"Because of me?"

Samantha nodded, turning again to face Lisa. "You were the mastermind behind all of this. Yeah, Argall did give you the starting point for everything with the after-school classes and all, but beyond that? Pretty much *everything* revolved around you, Lis. I was just your partner in all that."

"I-I know *that*. You already told me about how you and I worked on making the simulations together, but me, the *mastermind*? A-are you *sure* you're remembering correctly?"

She received a flick on the head.

“Helloooo, I’m not the one with memory loss here!”

Lisa rolled her eyes, brushing a stray hair out of the way. “So it’s true then. I had a bit of an idea about that with the printouts and stuff, but... wow. I... I really did all that?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And what about my mom? I know my dad’s gone, but I never read anything about *her*. Is she still living at my old house?”

Samantha’s playful demeanor immediately dropped. “That... that I think would be better for you to find out yourself.”

Lisa folded her arms. “Fine then. Besides that, what *else* are you gonna tell me?”

“Mmm... well, I *can* say that I know for *sure* that you and Tim are biologically siblings.”

“That’s certainly a relief,” Rebecca’s voice echoed. “Would’ve been *pretty* awkward if Caleb and I weren’t related in real life.”

Lisa ignored her counterpart’s remarks, pressing on with another question. “So why don’t we have the same last name, then? Was one of us adopted away?”

“Yeah. Tim was taken in by the neighbors since Argall didn’t think he could take care of *both* of you while still working.”

*Wait.* Wait—Professor Argall, taking care of *them*? But... that meant—

“Then *she’s* gone too,” Lisa lowered her head. “So much for hoping.”

“O-oh... I’m—I didn’t mean to break it to you like that but—”

“No, it’s alright. Not like I’ve really got much of a connection to either of them anymore. Heck, I don’t even remember their *faces*. Was there any chance that my—*Rebecca’s* parents in the simulation were modeled after them at the very least?”

Samantha shook her head.

Lisa returned her attention to the window. “Hm. Okay then.”

With the monotonous skyline fading behind them, Lisa focused instead on what she could immediately see. For miles around, a seemingly-infinite stretch of land reached for the horizon, interrupted only by the occasional barn that came rushing by. Argall said that it’d take some five or so hours to get back. Were they really that far away?

Then again, with the chaos they saw back in the last town, maybe it was for the best that people living in the simulations were set aside from the rest of society.

“Horses!”



Lisa jerked her head towards Samantha, who was pressing her face against the window. Sure enough, upon turning back to the window, she could see a herd of horses grazing near the side of the road. Whether they were wild or not, she couldn't tell.

"There's a lot of them there."

The car began to veer towards the side of the road, slowing to a stop.

Lisa braced herself against her seat. "Wait, what are we—"

Professor Argall opened the bus doors. "I don't see any ranch or farm nearby, so I suppose it'd be alright if we stopped for a break. Y'know, pet some horses, stretch our legs a bit?"

"But we *just* left!"

"Hey, it's alright Lis," Samantha got up from her seat. "We aren't exactly in much of a rush anyway. Loosen up a little, will ya? I don't really think you ever had much of a chance in the simulations to see any horses either, so you'd might as well take the chance while you've got it."

The distant rev of an engine caught their attention. Lisa squinted, staring out the back window of the bus. Some other vehicle was approaching them *fast*. It didn't appear that they were even *trying* to slow down, either. In fact, they—

"Brace yourselves!" Argall clutched the steering wheel, slamming his foot on the accelerator.

Lisa nearly fell back at the sudden movement, holding onto Samantha's arm for support as the bus lurched forward. The approaching car narrowly missed them, careening off the road instead. It continued driving, plowing through the otherwise untouched ground before grinding to a halt in a ditch.

"Wha-why were they trying to hit us?" Timothy draped his arms over the seat, staring at the smoking vehicle in the distance.

"It's self-driving," Samantha muttered, "I... I didn't see anyone in it. It must've malfunctioned or something. Accelerated instead of applying the brakes. That's... that's all. Someone must've botched a firmware update, and then called the vehicle to come to them. The company guys we passed by earlier came in cars that had self-driving capabilities. Yeah, that's under—"

Lisa tuned out her friend's rambling. It seemed that she'd been a bit shaken up by the near-hit. But still, the car didn't exactly look... *corporate*, per say. Though it was now engulfed in flames, what she saw earlier looked more like some kind of *sports car*, not the typical company van sort of thing. She could see a second vehicle coming up, though this one was more along the lines of what she expected. The unmarked van rumbled down the road, passing by without trouble.

"—and... oh? They're already starting to leave?" Samantha eyed the van. "That's certainly early. I haven't gotten any... wait, th-that's not our van, is it?"

The bus doors closed.

"Not our van? I say we follow 'em then," Argall pulled the vehicle back onto the highway. "It's about time something *interesting* happened these days."

~~~

“That didn’t work.”

“Whatever,” Pretty Lady looked away from the flames from the camera stream. “It was an attempt. Those cars are replaceable, I think. Just keep driving for now, Wildcat. When did you even get in? I thought you were with Night. Did you get my team out of there too?”

“...Yes.”

“Don’t *yes* me, *did you* or did you *not* prepare a way out for my guys?”

“*I did, I did, okay?*” Wildcat seethed, “They’ve got another van heading out from the west. We’re only going *this way* ‘cause you wanted to send your *toy car* at them. What have *you* been doing this entire time? Seemed like whenever we called in, you were away somewhere while your goons handled the dirty work.”

Pretty Lady smirked, tapping the headset resting above her eyes.

18 | Something lurks;

“Y’know, do you ever feel like we’re blowing this all out of proportion? Like, sure, we lost quite a bit after we got booted from our jobs, but... I mean, we’re straight-up committing acts of *terrorism* at this point over it. Isn’t there another way? Maybe one that doesn’t require trying to kill off entire families? *Or*, maybe we could just, oh you know, *suck it up* and get ourselves trained for *new jo—*”

“*Shut it.* Some of us lost more than just our jobs. Not like that was really something *you* went through, anyway.”

“Yeah, yeah, we’ve all heard your sobstory, Night. Anyway, we’ll be back soon.” Pretty Lady hung up. “*Sheesh*, does that woman have a problem! It’s like she sees the entire world is out to get her! If it weren’t for the fact that this is more action than I would’ve *ever* seen otherwise, then you can bet your behind that I’d be the *owner* of one of those companies she’s always railing against!”

Wildcat kept his eyes on the road. “Yup, that’s The Nightmare alright. That old hag just doesn’t know *when* to stop.”

“Like, when was the last time she legit *tried* to get a job? All our money’s been coming from *me* doing odd jobs! And outside of my team, our group’s basically only the three of us! Heck, I hardly even remember *why* I joined this blasted group in the first place. All I know is that Night ordered a hit on the first company she was fired from, it flopped, and before I knew it, I somehow ended up with *you guys*.”

“I mean, that doesn’t have to necessarily be a *bad* thing...”

Pretty Lady pulled her headset over her eyes. “Says that guy who used to constantly hit on The Nightmare *herself*. We’ve got a signal out here, so don’t mind me while I put in some actual *effort* into this whole plan.”

“...We’re being followed.”

“What?”

“Big Three. They’ve got a bus. I can see it in the mirror.”

Pretty Lady sat back, folding her arms. “Well, that’s *your* problem to deal with. You’re the one driving. Just speed up or something.”

~~~

The unmarked van pulled further away from the bus.

“Oh no you don’t,” Argall pressed harder on the pedal. “Y’all ain’t getting away from *me*.”

“Ram them like in the movies!” Timothy cheered, “The car chase scenes are always exciting!”

“Not gonna do that. I don’t really think buses are *designed* to ram things.”

The van in front of them jostled for a moment, nearly coming off the ground. Moments later, the entire bus jolted as well.

“And *that* there, kids, is a *pothole!*”

Lisa tightened her grip on the seat, glancing at Samantha.

“Let ‘em have some fun, Lis. It’s been a while since I’ve seen the professor so excited about something. And besides, the road’s empty for *miles* ahead.”

The bus accelerated further, a tinny rattle beginning to ring from its metal paneling. Some loose granola bars slipped from the bundle of blankets and slid down the floor. All the while, a single thought entered Lisa’s mind: *What did she get into?* She came along to learn more about herself, and now she was in a *car chase*? Maybe she should’ve gone back after all. Maybe this was all a big mistake, and her best bet was to forget about it all, and... and hook herself back up to the simulations... carry on with her old life, like none of this stuff ever happened...

The bus began to slow, sending the granola bars in the opposite direction.

Timothy grinned, staring out the windshield. “C’mon, we can go a *little* faster, can’t we, Professor?”

“No, Timothy. I don’t think this thing can handle going much faster. We’ll have to let ‘em go.”

Lisa watched her brother’s grin fade. He wandered back to his seat.

“Caleb.”

“Yeah, sis?”

Lisa smiled. “We’ll get them next time, alright? Maybe one day, when all this craziness is over, *you* could be racing some cars.”

She watched the van gradually shrink into the distance. *Would* this ever be over? In the short time she’d spent out of the simulations, she’d already found family and friends, volunteered to first

hand out rations and later keep a city under control, and... *heck*, sometimes she felt like she was even being *watched!* What else could possibly happen on top of that?

Rebecca's voice chimed in. "You've only really been to a couple places so far, so I'd guess that there's still a *lot* that could happen. For all we know, Professor Argall might as well be driving us to New York, and from there we could maybe run into some mobsters!"

Lisa shook her head. No mobsters. From what she could tell, they weren't even *close* to New York, let alone—

"You *think* we're not close to New York, but you never know!"

Now it was beginning to become understandable why Samantha was talking about 'turning the volume down'.

Rebecca's voice quieted. "...Sorry. I got a little carried away."

No matter. Rebecca was still as much *herself* as... well, *herself*. Even as *Lisa* she got carried away at times, especially when it came to trying to decide whether or not to go back into the simulations. Boy, were *those* doozies.

She turned her focus back to the road ahead. Just like before, the land around them was arid and barren, with only claw-like shrubs breaking through the ground every so often. The horse pasture was far behind them now, and from the looks of it, there likely weren't going to be any more coming up.

~\*~

A ripple of air tore through the woods, ejecting Pretty Lady's character onto the leaf-covered ground with a light *thud*. Sparks ran across her body, cracking and snapping in arcs. A bird fluttered away from the sudden disturbance.

"Well—" she pushed herself up— "that's one *more* way to get in right there." She flicked her wrist, projecting a statistics page in front of her face. "Hm. That's a pretty long-distance teleport, too. Heh, let's see Night just *try* to pull this off in the same amount of time. She'd probably clip into a tree or something, with how rusty she is."

The rustle of leaves caught her attention.

"Who's there?" she whirled around, a dagger materializing in hand. "Come out! Show yourself!"

She trudged through the leaves, still holding the dagger. Sure, she could certainly just return with a new character if something happened to this one, but that was annoying. It was easier to defend herself instead. In fact, heck, why not try something new while she's at it?

Her character froze in place, the sounds of keyboard typing emanating from her mouth. Electric sparks began to shower from the dagger before it ignited, casting an eerie glow against the sunlit ground. The typing noise stopped, and her motion returned. Pretty Lady smirked, holding the flaming dagger to the sun. Without warning, her vision went dark. A siren wailed directly into her ears as a familiar line of text printed itself across her viewport.

“Ha. Banned again, I’m guessing? You always push things a little too far when you’re doing stuff like this. What was it this time? Another wall of smoke out of nowhere?”

Pretty Lady unmounted her headset. “Fire dagger. Now shut up and keep driving, Wildcat. I’ve got work later today, and I can’t risk being late again from Night yelling at us or whatever. We *need money*. I know she doesn’t exactly show it to us, but we’re dirt-poor, and with all these vans and that one car we wasted back there? We’re up to our *necks* in debt. It’s only a matter of time before something or another gets repossessed.” She paused, staring straight ahead. “...Okay, now that I think about it, I *probably* shouldn’t’ve tried running ‘em off the road earlier. That’s easily some... what, thirty? Forty-grand down the drain? It’s a good thing it’s already been paid off, if you ask me. I’d... I’d hate to have to ask my parents if I could borrow more money...”

Wildcat continued muttering under her breath, eventually stopping with a defeated sigh. She slipped the headset back over her eyes.

## 19 | The rift grows,

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Lisa stared out the window, watching the landscape around them gradually grow greener again. They were nearly there, if Timothy’s pestering of Professor Argall was any indication. Maybe she could spend some time just... *relaxing* when they arrived. It’d be a nice break from all the craziness that’d been happening for the past few days.

“Lisa,” Rebecca’s voice began, “What do you plan to do when this is all over?”

Lisa lifted her head, blinking.

Samantha glanced at her friend. “Guessing Rebecca started talking again?”

“...Yeah.”

“Alright. Just tell me if something feels wrong.”

Rebecca’s voice continued. “So, what do you want to do once you find out all the things you’ve been wondering about? I... I know that I said I’m fine hanging around away from home, but there really hasn’t been all *that* much happening since we got disconnected. I’m starting to feel a little homesick, honestly.”

Lisa frowned. What *would* she do next? She could always perhaps return to the simulations again and live out a somewhat-normal life... at least, as ‘normal’ as she could possibly have while knowing that everything around her was a fabrication... but that’s beside the point. It’d probably be the best option for Rebecca. Though, with everything her counterpart knew after all the time she’d spent outside of the simulations, it’d be a bit hard to keep believing that *her* life in there was real. Staying *out* of the simulations was an option, too—just... not the one Lisa quite preferred at the moment. Something *in-between* would be ideal, though how that’d even *work* was still beyond her.

“It’s alright, take your time. You don’t have to answer right now. I-I’ll be fine, like I said before. It’s just a little homesickness, that’s all.”

Rebecca’s voice silenced itself. Homesick or not, even though she’d said multiple times now that she didn’t mind staying out of the simulations, it was clear that she’d rather not. After all, even with everything that’d been happening over the past few days, the most she could ever do was sit back and *watch*. She didn’t have any control—really, Rebecca was more a *prisoner* in Lisa’s head than anything else.

“Guess what, Tim?” Argall’s voice chirped from the driver’s seat, “I can see some buildings in the distance!”

*Tim*. Her mind turned to the boy; Given his tendency to speak his mind, he clearly didn’t seem to be bothered by much. Heck, he probably didn’t even separate from Caleb in the first place, unlike herself. In any case, he was still her brother, and if he ever does begin to go down the path of an existential crisis, she’d be there for him.

“You see those tall buildings in the middle? One of those over there is ours.”

Lisa raised a brow, cutting in before her brother could respond. “But I thought we were going home!”

Argall waved away her concern. “Don’t worry, Lizzy, we are. Though, if you’d like, we could stop by headquarters for a tour. We don’t need to take the bus, either, by the way. I’ve got a smaller car at home.”

“Heh,” Samantha chuckled, “A tour. Geez, it’s been... what, four? Yeah, ‘bout four years since we moved out of the old one, though the location’s still the same. You should really take a look for yourself, Lis.”

The skyline expanded as they approached. Suburban homes sprawled outward from the inner city, gradually replacing the familiar view of barren land with shopping centers and townhomes. Professor Argall shifted lanes.

“Almost there. We’ll take the ramp off the highway at the next exit, and from there we can maybe stop somewhere for dinner. Any of you guys hungry?”

Something clicked in Lisa’s head. Since when was Argall so friendly and open? He was a nervous wreck when they’d first met – re-met? – but *now*, he was... almost *fatherly*, to be honest. She hadn’t quite noticed when or how the shift started, but he was clearly a lot more comfortable now being around Lisa again. A smile surfaced on her face.

“Sure, food sounds good right about now.”

~\*~

*Plap.*

Rosanne Smith poured the noodles into a colander.

*Plap.*

She watched the steaming water drip down, vanishing into wherever the drain led.

*Plap.*

One serving of pasta.

*Plap.*

Two. She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. The lengths she went to just to earn a bit of money... and for what? So that Night could splurge on some new trinket for her to accidentally destroy in under a week? So that Night could buy another hit on some unsuspecting person? *Night, Night, Night*, it was *always her* that was burning through the money. And who was it that was *earning* all of that? Who was it that would retire every night to a home she paid off using her parents' money, only to spend the darkest hours working *another* job just to make ends meet? If it weren't for *her*, *Night* would probably be some cranky old lady at a homeless shelter!

*Plap.*

Three servings of pasta, with a side of salad.

Serves her right for quitting her job to join The Nightmare. All she wanted was some excitement, something that she could do with everything she learned about the simulations, and instead she got—

She heard the cashier's gruff voice come from out front. "We need one more pasta, Rosanne!"

*Plap.*

At least she was putting in honest work for the money. Sometimes she wondered about how her brother was doing in the simulations. Andrew certainly made a fuss when their parents first refused to give him the money. Obviously, given how he was in whatever fantasy he was pursuing now, he eventually got what he wanted.

She placed the plates on a tray, portioning out meatballs and pasta sauce for each one. This was the one part of her life that Night wasn't allowed to touch. The only time she *truly* had to herself—no leading a ragtag army of bored whack-jobs and internet trolls, no getting micromanaged by Night over every little thing, no reports, no—

She spotted Professor Argall waiting in line, reading the menu. What was *he* doing here? The last time she was *this close* to him was... was...

Rosanne stepped away from the tray. This couldn't be happening—her old professor? Seeing her working *here*? What would he *think*? By the time she quit, he'd already picked up two protégés in the girls—the very same ones that Night now ordered her to sabotage the works of. A tremble ran down her spine. If she tried taking them out *right here, right now*—no. She shook her head. What she was considering would be *murder*. She wasn't a killer. But even then, if she did, Night would be forever grateful, and she'd finally be *free* of the whole operation. It'd all be over. They'd be done with the single task that'd taken over Night's mind since the beginning.

She pushed the thoughts to the back of her mind. In here, she wasn't Pretty Lady. She was regular ol' Rosanne Smith. And even *if* she carried out a hit, murder was out of the question. She wasn't that kind of person.

“The pasta, Rosanne.”

Right. The pasta. She picked up the tray, walking to the front counter. Maybe she could talk a bit with Argall when he got to the front of the line. Even have a word or two with Lisa and Samantha. It’d be a nice break from constantly trying to break into their company’s stuff and wreak havoc, that’s for sure. Just... a friendly chat, between the former student and the teacher. Heck, she could maybe even bring up the simulations in the conversation. After all, before she quit, she *did* spend a bit of time working at the company as an intern. Not that she was allowed to access anything all that critical, but for some time she *did* have the ability to read through the source code that Lisa and Samantha wrote. She could ask about as much as she wanted to, and then later that night when she got back, she could tell everything to Ni—

*No*. She was *not* Pretty Lady here. She wasn’t a hacker, or a spy, or anything of the sort. She was Rosanne the waitress girl, and that was that. A regular conversation would be her best option. No shady business.

“Number twenty-four!” she placed the tray on the counter, sliding it forward. If there was going to be any chance to talk, she’d have to open the opportunity *herself*. She turned to the cashier. “Hey, Wanna switch out? I can take the next customers.”

“Sure,” he replied with that same grumbly voice. He stepped away from the counter, wandering deeper into the kitchen. “Food’s prepared?”

“Yeah.”

The next customer came to the lane. She took their order, as she was supposed to. She typed it all in as they spoke, of course. Just like the many times before, she sent the order down the line to be filled. Another customer stepped up. Everything was beginning to blur together—the people, the orders—if it weren’t for the fact that she’d been typing, she would’ve long-forgotten them already. Her mind was set on Argall.

The professor finally made it to the front of the line. Lisa and Samantha certainly looked older now than when she’d met them years before. Did they grow taller? The same went for Timothy.

Luckily enough, Professor Argall didn’t seem to fully recognize her. Though, he did indeed have a sort of curiosity showing through his face; A sort of half-stare while he paid for their order, really. *Samantha*, on the other hand...

“...Rosanne?”

She reacted without thinking. “Hm?”

“Yeah, *there’s* the name!” Argall exclaimed, “*Rosanne!* I wasn’t quite sure whether it was actually you or not there! Long time no see, girl! Y’know, we actually came across your brother not too long ago!”

Rosanne froze. She’d talked about this with Night not too long ago—about how taking down the simulations was for the most part, a distraction, and how she could break Andrew out again on her own time.



“You alright there, Rose? You look a little pale.”

“Yeah, yeah I’m fine,” she blurted through clenched teeth. “Um... is there anything else you’d like to order? Any drinks?”

“Water’s fine. How about you come to our table and talk a bit when you have some time? It’s certainly been a while since you quit.”

There was her opportunity. She could make the excuse that Argall was the one that started the conversation if she got yelled at later.

Professor Argall nodded, wandering off with the others to find a seat. The next customer arrived at the counter.

“Uhh... I’ll have a... no, forget about that. I’ll...”

Time to count the number of stains on the counter for today.

~~~

So, it turned out that they stayed the entire time. She was getting worried that Argall and company would leave before she ever had the chance to speak after the place got busy for the night. At least now she didn’t have to worry about being yelled at.

“How’s it been going, Rose? Ever find anything exciting to do?”

Rosanne shook her head. She eyed Lisa from the opposite side of the table. Did she know that she was sitting directly across from the person who was ordered to destroy her life’s work?

“Hm. What about your family? You still live with your parents?”

She shook her head again.

Argall’s enthusiasm dropped. “Oh. I take it that things haven’t been going all that well for you then, have they? You could always come back if you’d like. We’ve still got *plenty* of job openings since the time you interned. I’ve even got a friend whose daughter could show you around!”

“Really? I—” she held her tongue. No matter how badly she wanted that old life back, she’d always have to worry about The Nightmare. Night wasn’t one to take kindly to failure already, but a *betrayal*? That screamed ‘murderous intent’ *all over it*. “I-I’m sorry, but I can’t accept the offer. I still have other things to do.”

Rosanne stood up, walking back to the counter. Pausing, she looked back at Professor Argall. Maybe she could return to his offer once the dust settled down.

20 | Reaching deeper.

Lisa listened to the quiet rumble of the bus. They were on the road again. Though, this time, instead of endless deserts and plains, they were surrounded by businesses and housing subdivisions.

Argall mentioned while they were boarding that she could tour the building tomorrow instead, since it was getting dark out. The *main* thing on her mind at the moment, however, was the exchange they had with Rosanne. She certainly seemed *familiar*... at least, to Argall and Samantha she did. Whatever memory of her that Lisa had herself was likely nothing more than a faded memory at this point. But nevertheless, she stood out more than anyone else she'd met since disconnecting. There was some aura of mystery around her, even if they'd only spent at most a few minutes talking before she retreated to the employee area.

Heck, now that she thought about it, the professor seemed to be more familiar with *Rosanne* than he did with Lisa *herself*! He was outspoken and friendly right from the beginning when he realized who he was speaking to with Rosanne, and compared to how he kept holding back and skirting around questions with Lisa, he outright *dove* into talking about family! The same seemed to apply to Samantha as well, to some extent—after all, she *was* the first one to recognize Rosanne at the cash register. Maybe they'd met at some point or another?

Lisa sighed, resting her head on the frigid window. Her breath fogged up the glass. She hadn't quite noticed it until now, but it seemed to be getting just a little colder each day. Though, whether that was just part of some weather pattern or because it was changing seasons was still beyond her. Not that it mattered much to her, anyway. She was only counting the days.

The bus rolled to a stop at an intersection. Now that they were still, she could *really* take in the scenery around her. The city seemed to be in the process of modernizing, from the looks of it—older, worn storefronts still dotted the streets around them, but in many other places, tall, gleaming buildings now rose toward the sky, illuminated faintly by whatever lights they happened to have on. They joined the low-rise apartments that populated the silhouette of a skyline, casting a twinkling glow off into the night.

A distant screech of tires filled the air, followed by a hard *crunch*. She could hear police sirens approaching. Before long, several officers zoomed on by, trailing an ambulance. All of them had their lights on. The light turned green, but the bus didn't budge.

"Professor, the light's green."

Argall stared ahead. The orange-yellow flicker of flames rose from the intersection up ahead, illuminating a thick plume of spiraling, black smoke.

A car honked behind them.

"Professor Argall—"

"Y-yes, yes, I... I know. I'll drive."

The bus pulled slowly through the intersection. Lisa watched the inferno up ahead. It was... oddly familiar, though not quite in the same way that Rosanne was earlier. She could only *vaguely* remember the woman from wherever it was that they'd met before, but the crash up ahead? She... she could feel the heat of the flames. The impact, the sudden lurch into the air—she could feel it now. The world turned on its head, then back over, then flipped again. A terrified scream filled her head. Over and over the world seemed to flip, before finally settling overturned. Loose glass narrowly missed her face. Smoke clouded her vision.

She heard a cry. Was it her own? She couldn't tell. The flames grew closer. Two figures, unmoving. She heard the cry again. She heard voices. She heard footsteps. Hands reached through the broken glass. Someone fell to their knees. An empty can fell to the ground. Sirens. Flames. Smoke. Dark.

"Lisa!"

Flames. Smoke. Dark. Sirens.

A voice—*her* voice.

M-mom? Dad?

The flames crackled around her. There was no response. She squirmed in her seatbelt. She could hear more voices.

I see someone moving! Does anyone have a crowbar or something? I can try prying the doors open!

She could see reds and blues flashing just beyond the smoke. Upside-down boots appeared outside the crushed frame of the window.

A face—*her brother's face*. A thin layer of soot already settled on him while he cried. He choked, coughing on the smoke before continuing his wails.

And then he stopped.

~~~

"TIMMY!" Lisa burst. Tears streamed down her face as she blinked. There was no fire around her. No smoke, either. She felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Shh, it'll be okay, Lis," she heard Samantha whisper, "You're safe in here. Nothing's gonna hurt you or your brother."

Lisa sniffed, peering over her shoulder. Timothy averted his gaze, sitting back down.

*Safe*. It was all in her head... the fire, the cr—the *crash*. Was that what killed her parents?

She felt Samantha's hand lift.

"Professor, take her home."

Through her tears, Lisa watched the smoldering wreck pass by. A man was led into a police cruiser in handcuffs, while a family hugged on the sidewalk. A news van idled nearby while a reporter prepared for the camera.

She couldn't remember much else of the trip.

~~~

Rosanne yawned, staring at her laptop's screen. She heard Night stalk past her room for another cup of coffee. Nighttime was one of the few precious times of day when she was *entirely* to herself. Yes, she still had to work, but what she did was entirely on her *own* terms.

Night's shouts echoed from the hall. "WHAT DO YOU MEAN THERE'S NO MORE COFFEE?"

She snorted at the remark. For all she was, Night still acted like a child sometimes. Technically, all of this—the hits, the infiltration—it was all because Night threw a fit years ago about losing her job multiple times. It was funny to think about given how she never bothered trying to look for a job since. She always spent her time complaining about how *'technology is taking all the jobs'* and such when she wasn't scheming or ordering everyone else around.

An email popped up in the corner of her screen. Something about another job offer. She dismissed it. Night didn't need to know. Not right now. The *last* thing Rosanne wanted at the moment was to witness the rage of The Nightmare.

Paradoxically, the thought made her smile. Maybe the reason *why* Night was given the boot from all her jobs was *because* of that rage. The idea injected some much-needed humor in the whole fiasco that was her life.

"WELL, MAYBE I *DO* WANT IT BLACK, WILDCAT. HEY-DON' TOUCH MY ARM!"

She rolled her eyes. Wildcat was always trying after Night for whatever reason. What did he even *see* in that woman that he was attracted to?

Rosanne turned her mind back to her work. It wasn't all that hard this time around—just a little bit of website designing. It certainly didn't pay as well as some of the harder jobs in the field, but it was what she could find tonight as a freelancer. An image here, a little bit of text over there; simple things, really. But work was work, and money was money. Before long, her thoughts wandered to Andrew. During her time interning at the company, he'd gained an interest in the simulations just like she did. Though, unlike her, he was only interested in using them to entertain himself. Now he spent every day to the fullest, hooked into a simulation designed solely for people like *him*—people with deep pockets and an even *deeper* boredom.

Sometimes, she wondered what life would've been like if she joined her brother in the simulations. Would her relationship with her parents fray just as quickly as they did when she quit the company to join Night? Sure, it was still quitting out of a want for excitement, but at least she wouldn't be *harming* anyone in doing it. She wouldn't even need to put up a front like she did around Night and Wildcat. Maybe one day, when she had the money and didn't have to worry about Night anymore, she could fund her own little sandbox simulation, and make whatever kind of world she wanted. Maybe she could even mend her relationship with her parents!

As if. Rosanne published the new site, shutting her laptop screen. What was she even *thinking?* *When* she had the money? With Night breathing down her back with every penny she earned, the best she'd probably *ever* be able to get were the dreams and fantasies in her head. She set her laptop aside, pulling the thin blanket over herself.

Lisa stood in the shadows. She took a breath, taking in her surroundings. It was... *comforting*. The old railing on the banisters, the arched entrances into the kitchen and the living room—it was beginning to come back to her. This was *her* home. She *grew up* here. How could she possibly forget it?

Argall emerged from the kitchen, a glass of water in hand. Lisa stared at the ice cubes bobbing in the cup, then to his face.

He blinked, following her gaze. “Hm? Oh, are you thirsty, Lisa? I should’ve gotten you a glass as well... hold on, lemme—”

“No, no, not that. How... how long have you been living here?”

The professor sipped his drink. “Mmm, nearly twenty, at this point. It’s... it’s certainly been a while.”

He finished his water, jingling the ice cubes at the bottom before starting toward the kitchen again.

“Wait!” Lisa burst, “Wait, professor, are... are you saying you’ve lived here alone all that time? Don’t you have a family?”

Argall shook his head. “Never married, and at my age, my *own* parents are long-since gone too. The only family I have anymore is you and your brother.

“Even then, back in the day, I didn’t have the time to watch over *both* of you while you two worked, so the neighbors took Tim in so that you two could still be close. I think Samantha might’ve already told you that earlier. Though, as far as the Carter family goes, they moved quite a while back, so there’s not much of a chance that we’d be able to meet them again. Your brother’s old enough to watch after himself anyway, so he can stay here with you.” He disappeared into the kitchen, returning without the glass. “Speaking of which, you *are* planning on staying, right? I... I know that you probably would prefer returning to your family in the simulations eventually, but it would be nice to have a couple more people around.”

Something clicked in Lisa’s mind. *That* was why Argall acted so strangely—he was lonely. The only family he had was her and Timothy, and... and reconnecting to the simulations would be taking them away from him again. Avoiding her questions, holding back on details—they were all to keep her out of the simulations for just a little longer. He missed her, missed having a *family*.

She nodded a little. It wasn’t a full ‘yes’, per say—she wasn’t ready for that just yet. But at the very least, she’d stay for a little longer. There was still *so much more* to learn about herself, a-and maybe she and Timothy could give the old professor some much-needed company, too.

At the very least, her half-nod seemed to satisfy Argall. He wandered back into the kitchen, making a beeline for the fridge. Lisa turned her attention back to the house around her. Everything was familiar, yet nothing was familiar; the pictures on the walls, the worn furniture—they came from a time that’d long-since faded from memory.

Before long, Lisa found herself at the foot of the staircase, peering up to the overhanging hallway at the top. *This*, she remembered; it was part of the architecture of her... *Rebecca’s* home in the simulation. No doubt that it likely drew some inspiration from *this* house.

She lifted a bare foot, setting it gently on the bottommost step. Another step. And another and another. She felt her feet pound against the carpeted steps in a mad scramble. She swung around the turn in the stairwell, ascending the second half of the steps. Her heart pounded in her chest as she reached the top. Was this really it? It *couldn't* be—everything felt like a dream to her. This *couldn't* be real. It was coming together *too* perfectly—her disconnection, Argall and Samantha arriving in town, the very *existence* of this home—it felt too good to be true.

Lisa reached out, placing her hand on the doorknob to one of the many rooms lining the hall. It was real, alright. She was *living it*, whether or not she believed it herself.

She turned the doorknob, pushing the door open.

It... it was *her* room—even after all this time, she could still recognize it. The old desk, her bed, the bookshelf—everything was still just as she'd left it when she first left her life behind. Then again, Samantha *did* mention that Argall kept everything the way it'd been for however long she'd spent in the simulations. She'd have to thank him later.

Lisa stepped into the room. A dusty, warm smell immediately hit her from all sides. The room was unlit, save for what light filtered in through the door behind her, and the twinkling stars just outside the window.

"Welcome home, Lisa."

She whirled around to find the professor standing in the doorway. He looked tired beyond his years, now that she had a better look at him; he'd spent a *lifetime* on his work. He never had anyone to come back home to, nobody to speak his mind to, nobody—

Lisa felt his arms wrap around her in a fatherly embrace.

"It's been a long decade for the both of us. I'm glad you're back."

He released her, stepping back into the doorway.

"Goodnight, Lis."

Argall turned, leaving the room. Once more, Lisa was alone with her thoughts. Curiously, it'd been some time since Rebecca had spoken anything. The transmitter wasn't quite so itchy anymore, either. Perhaps the issue was fixing itself? She pushed the thought to the back of her mind. Rebecca would resurface at some point or another.

She drifted to her desk. Old papers still remained stacked in the corner, a thick layer of dust turning the white pages to a creamy-grey. Something caught her eye, however—a book.

Lisa brushed the papers aside and picked up her diary. This was it. This was what she'd been missing all this time. She'd come all this way, relentlessly pummeling those around her with unending questions, and it all came down to a single book. Lisa rubbed her thumb across the cover, watching rolls of caked-on dust flake away to the floor. Everything she knew, everything she *wanted* to know—it was in these pages.

She flipped to the first page.

22 | Find your roots.

A story unfolded before her—the story of a life; the story of girl; the story of *Lisa*. Once upon a time, a little girl received a diary on her birthday. Once upon a time, a little girl lived her life carefree, as all children should. Once upon a time, a little girl was writing in those pages.

Once upon a time, a little girl lost her parents.

Lisa ran her fingers across the tear-stained page. The hand that wrote it that day was shaky, *fearful*, even. The crash they'd passed by earlier—the flames, the cries, the sirens—it happened to her once, many years ago. The words on the page told it all.

Once upon a time, a little girl survived.

She... the... the accident was what took her parents' lives. They told her they died on impact, that there must've been something wrong with the airbags, or that perhaps the other car must've hit them in some unexpected way. What mattered in the end was that two children survived the accident—herself and Timothy. While she was able to escape with relatively minor injuries, Timothy had to be treated for more severe burns and a bit of smoke inhalation. Evidently, however, he turned out fine in the end. Though, without her parents...

Once upon a time, a little girl was adopted.

Professor Argall was a close friend of her father. They'd founded a company together some number of years before she'd been born, focusing on research and development in artificial intelligence. They were on the verge of being acquired by a more established firm on the day of the accident. Argall's priorities immediately were put on hold, and the deal eventually fell through. He stepped down from his position not long after. In turn, he would use the extra time he had to adopt Lisa, in order to ensure her a relatively normal life again. Even after stepping back from his full duties, however, he didn't have the time or energy anymore to watch over *two* children—especially when one of them could hardly even speak yet. Timothy would be taken in by her neighbors not long after, just like Argall himself told her.

Once upon a time, a little girl couldn't let go.

As the years went on, nightmares of the crash would haunt her dreams through the entries. Every so often, Lisa would flip to another tear-ridden page, seemingly written in the dead of night. Shifting shadows and phantom flames would cloud her mind, cloud her words from time to time, plunging her back into the long-ago moments she wished to forget.

And as she grew, something took hold of her.

Once upon a time, a girl grew fanatic.

It started simple, like any obsession did; Argall brought her a flyer from work, one advertising some after-school classes the company was hosting to teach kids programming skills. She would go on to join the class with her best friend, Samantha. They mastered the classes, moving into higher and

higher tiers until all that was left was what the company *itself* was researching. Evidently, she'd found an opportunity with what she learnt.

Virtual reality, at the time, was still somewhat of a niche segment of the market. Many developers had moved onto augmented reality, where much more use could be made of the technology. Though, not much focus had been placed on *combining* technologies—namely, virtual reality and artificial intelligence. It was deemed as an unnecessary combination—after all, personal assistant technology was more than good enough, and even then, there was hardly any use seen for such a combo beyond gaming.

But somehow, *Lisa* was the first to find a use. Somehow, Professor Argall agreed with her.

Somehow, she began work on the simulations.

And on and on would she work, day in and day out. Every waking moment of her life beyond school was now funneled into the project—*her* project. She would recreate the world the way she wished it to be, recreate her *life* the way she *dreamed* it could be—that was her master plan. She'd use the simulations to *escape*, to run away from everything she saw wrong with the world. Argall would warn her against doing so, but hesitantly supported her efforts. But he too was part of her plan; he would be launched back into relevancy, paraded as the one who 'started it all'. *He* would be the one that was celebrated, *he* would be the one everyone came to with questions.

He would be *Lisa's* mask, letting her slip away forever and ever into her *own* reality.

And so, the story halted.

The fanatic girl shot for the stars, and hit her mark. There was nothing left for her to do.

Nothing, except... putting on the headset.

Lisa stared at the final entry in her diary. That was really it. All the questions she had—they were answered now. For the first time in what seemed to be an eternity, her mind was silent. No questions, no thoughts... even *Rebecca* kept her silence. She closed the book, closed her eyes; *Lisa* let herself fall. She felt herself hit the bed. She felt her diary slip from her hands. She felt... nothing.

Her life, no matter how much effort she'd put into her work in the past, was pitiful. Everything she did—no, everything she *stood for* went towards *running*. Running from her past, running from her problems—never once did she seem to ever face them herself. The simulations were her escape, her way of getting away from reality *once and for all*. Not once did she ever appear to think about anything else.

This... this was what the professor meant. She *used* people. Argall, especially—she used them to further only her own goals. They were only her... her *tools* in the end. All she'd ever thought about was herself. That one-track mind he spoke of—that was her, both then and now. All she wanted were answers, and what she received was regret.

It hurt.

Everything hurt.

She wanted to cry.

She wanted to scream.

But nothing came out.

Worthless.

Lisa stared at the ceiling, measuring her breaths. She wanted to feel sorry for herself. Really—but she couldn't. It was her single-minded drive to get what she wanted that put her where she was today. Argall and Samantha skirting around her questions, Rebecca's very *existence*, even the simulations as a whole—they were all because she couldn't let go. *She* caused all of that.

All because of *her*.

As her eyes began to close again, she heard Rebecca finally say something for the first time in *hours*.

"I'm sorry."

~*~

Rosanne shoved her laptop in a flimsy bag. A few of her clothes followed, as well as a small wad of cash—her tip money from the past several months. It certainly wasn't much, but if she was ever going to get away, it'd be what she would rely on.

What was she even *thinking*? *Running away*? When it came to The Nightmare, doing so would practically be *suicide*! It only took a moment, and she hadn't even fully realized what she was doing quite yet—she'd sprung out of bed, covered in sweat and trembling in the darkness, her mind racing as she began tossing her things into a bag. That was it, plain and simple. It... it was just a reflex... a fight-or-flight response, triggered by the bad dream she just had... the bad dreams she's *always* had, ever since she moved in. She... she wanted to stop. No, she *needed* to stop, before Night hears the commotion and comes in!

Her frantic hands continued to grab at her things, shoving them into the increasingly-bulging bag. Old printouts of the things she knew went in next. It'd be best if Night couldn't use them herself.

Stupid—that's what she was. She shouldn't keep going. Not now, when she was so close to making Night proud... to making *someone* proud, regardless of what had to be done. She couldn't go on, not if she wanted to... to...

Her favorite hoodie. A few more stray bills. Her headset and controller. She reached for her phone.

...What *did* she want to do, anyway? It's not like she ever knew in the first place.

STUPID!

But what have they ever done for *her*? She threw away her future—no, her *life*, and for what? So Night could finally fulfill that petty fantasy of 'getting back' at those she thought wronged her?

STUPID!

Have *they* ever given even a thought to her troubles?

Stupid!

Have *they* ever supported her the same way *she* supported *them*?

Stupid...

And even then, if it all crumbles around her—if the masses of internet trolls and vigilante ‘spies’ she controlled finally turned on her, if Night realizes what’s going on, and makes *her* the next hit target—she’d find a way around it. She’s always been able to.

...Stupid...

Rosanne’s breaths slowed. It felt almost as if she was ripping duct tape off every inch of her body. To tear herself *yet again* from the life she’d grown accustomed to—it scared her now, just as it did when she first came to Night and Wildcat.

Her sights landed on some of the items spilling out of her bag. The old nickname she made for herself, the one she scrawled across those very same items in permanent marker—it was her mask; Her way of fitting in with Night and Wildcat, her way of saying she wouldn’t be afraid of them.

But she was afraid. She always had been. After all, her *own family* could very well be on that mad woman’s list of targets.

Rosanne scooped her things back into her bag. She’d might as well finish what she was doing, now that she’d already gotten so far. It was funny, in a way; the middle of the night, serving as the backdrop to her escape *from* Night. Or, perhaps, it was the ultimate banishment of The Nightmare that haunted her, both figuratively *and* literally. Whatever the case, tonight was the night she put herself back on track.

Tonight, Pretty Lady would vanish off the face of the Earth.

Maybe she could move back in with her parents.

Whatever the case, she’d finally be free of her nightmares. She heaved her bag over her shoulder, unaware of the flash drive that’d tumbled out at the last second.

23 | Start over.

“Sorry...”

Lisa shaded her eyes from the rising sun. Since when did she fall asleep? She... she hadn’t *imagined* everything she’d read in the diary, had she? She sat up. The old book fell to the floor with a light thump, fluttering open to the final entry she’d been reading.

Not a dream... None of it was a dream.

“Lisa,” Rebecca’s voice whispered, “Lisa, it’ll be alright. I... I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier. I knew the entire time.”

Lisa shook her head. It *wasn't* alright! She still used people in the end for her own selfish reasons. It didn't matter whether Rebecca would've told her beforehand.

"Lisa—"

And all of this because she lost her parents? How far did she even *go*? How far *could* she go? What if it was happening all over again, and she simply never noticed until now? All the questions she'd been trying to ask... was she trying to pull as much information as possible out of the people around her, or was she genuinely trying to learn more about herself? At the very least, she could do *something* to repay the kindness of those who helped her. Argall and Samantha, especially—if it weren't for them, she'd still be—"

"Lisa, I made breakfast," Argall opened the door. His eyes fell Lisa's tear-streaked face, then to the diary on the floor. "...Oh, oh—"

"I'm worthless."

"Lisa, don't say—"

"I'm *worthless!*" Lisa blurted again, "You told me I was driven by blind passion, that I was narrow-minded and didn't let *anything* get in my way! That's why... why I *used* people like you back then. You and Samantha—I don't think I ever cared about either of you back then, so long as I could keep running from my problems." She wiped her face with a sleeve. "I was too afraid to face them myself. I'm *still* afraid. I just never realized it until now."

She felt a hand rest on her shoulder.

"Well, Lisa, the past doesn't define you. You don't have to be the little girl I adopted anymore. Think about all the good that you've done; even if you only did it for your own ambitions, in the end it's still *your work* that's helped countless thousands out in the world!"

"I don't deserve the credit," Lisa pushed the professor's hand away. "I only ever did it out of my own self-pity. You and Samantha are the ones who let me. That's all."

"But... the things that you've done—I already said it before, and I'll say it again. It doesn't matter what your intentions were. You helped a great number of people whether you wanted to or not. You *do* deserve the credit!" Argall grabbed her hand. "Lisa, you don't have to be thinking like this. Let go of your past. What's happened cannot be changed, so all you can do is look forward and keep going."

She shook her head again. "I don't deserve it."

"You deserve it just as much as I do, as Samantha does! Lisa, you might not've realized it before—heck, you probably still don't even now—but your ideas have brought hope to people *across the world!*"

"Rehabilitation, especially—do you realize *how many* people a year need to re-learn even simple things? Imagine if you suddenly found that you could no longer walk; not because you physically *couldn't*, but because you had essentially *forgotten*. The technology you designed as part of the simulations is now used to assist those people in their recovery. Mental health, too—you wanted the simulations to heal your own mental wounds, didn't you?"

Lisa looked away.

“Whatever the case, the ability to create whatever world you could *possibly imagine* has changed *so many* lives for the better. How can you not see that?”

“I’m... I’m tired, dad...”

She felt Professor Argall’s hand tense.

“I’m tired of everything,” Lisa continued, “It’s like what I told Timothy when I went to take a walk two days ago. I don’t want to care anymore about anything. I... I just wish that the world could *stop*.”

She heard the professor sigh. “I understand.”

His grip softened as he pulled away, walking back to the door. Pausing, he turned back to Lisa, one hand grasping the doorknob.

“...Do you still want to visit headquarters today?”

~~~

“Headquarters? You wish to reapply for your old job?” an aging man mumbled, “So, you’ve finally decided to pull yourself back together. Very well then. I’ll tell your mother later. She’ll certainly be proud of this turnaround.”

The worn couch groaned with his movements. “Do you promise not to associate with those weirdos again?”

“Yes,” Rosanne nodded. “I promise, father.”

“Hmph. At least you still plan on doing something with your life, unlike your brother. You still need a ride?”

Rosanne shook her head. “I can bike there. I’m... sorry for disappearing on you and mom. I’m sure I scared the both of you.”

“Go. Just don’t do it again.”

~~~

Maybe this was how it would happen after all.

Maybe she’d finally move past everything that’s happened.

Maybe she could find her purpose again.

Lisa watched the buildings pass by her window. Maybe she could try working on the simulations again... join Samantha and Argall, make something new. It’d be a good first step, right? Whatever the case, she was done with doing things only for herself. It certainly took more than a little coaxing from Professor Argall, and Timothy was for all intents and purposes probably still asleep, but somehow, she was on her way to where it all started.

“You feeling any better, Lisa?”

“Yeah.”

“What about Rebecca? I overheard that she could communicate with you directly. Has she been saying anything lately?”

“No.”

“I suppose you might’ve scared her then. If you’d like, we could remove your transmitter and merge her back into the simulations.”

“...Maybe.”

“Don’t feel like talking much, do you?”

“No.”

The car slowed to a stop at an intersection. Lisa heard the window open.

“Rosanne! You headed for headquarters as well?”

“...Yeah.”

“You want a ride? Car’s still got some seats. Just dump your bike in the trunk or something. Better hurry if you do, though.”

“I’m... I’ll be alright. It’s been a while since I’ve had the chance to ride this bike anyway. See you there, I guess.”

“See ya.”

The window closed. Lisa watched Rosanne shrink into the distance as the car pulled away. Why was *she* going to headquarters? She had a stable job back at the restaurant they first met in, and based on how Argall was talking to her, it seemed like she *quit* a job in the company sometime in the past.

She leaned back in her seat, closing her eyes. It was probably best if she didn’t worry about others right now. There was already enough on her mind.

“Lisa, wake up,” Argall’s voice cut through her mental fog. “We’re here.”

Didn’t she close her eyes just a moment ago?

The professor opened her door. “Come on, Lis. You said you wanted to tour the place, didn’t you?”

Time was passing too fast. It felt like mere *seconds* ago when she woke up that morning, yet here she was now, standing in front of an unfamiliar building. Its mix of angular rooms that jut out from the sides and smooth, glass-wrapped offices gave it an almost cartoonish look, like as if its design had been copied off of some superhero comic’s hideout. It made her feel... *small*.

Argall took her by the hand, leading her inside.

It was... quiet, short to say. She'd expected to see people of all sorts hustling about, or maybe a line of clients somewhere waiting to meet with someone. It was how these sorts of companies worked, right? She'd heard something about licensing out their technology, so where were all the clients?

"Oh, Professor Argall! I didn't know you were coming today!"

A *startlingly*-young girl stepped out from behind the front desk, a plain mug in hand. She looked no older than... what, ten? Eleven? It was a little hard to tell through the oversized labcoat she wore. Wasn't this *child labor*?

"Well, I *did* promise Lisa here a tour. Your dad's busy as usual, I'm guessing?"

"I think he's talking to Samantha, actually. Something about making sure the company's stuff is protected better after the whole thing about the outage happened. *Anyway,*" a grin spread across her face as she turned to Lisa, nearly spilling the contents of her mug. "Lisa, I've heard *so much* about you from Professor Argall! Did you *really* do *all that stuff*?"

Lisa stepped back. "I..."

"Now, Zoey," the professor reprimanded, "let's not get ahead of ourselves. I know you've wanted to meet her for quite some time, but try not to scare her, alright?"

"Okay!" Zoey took a long sip from her mug and wiping her mouth on a sleeve. "Oh, by the way, Lisa, you want any?"

"Oh, no, that's fine. I don't really like coff—"

"It's not coffee, silly! It's hot chocolate!"

Coffee or not, Lisa still refused. She had some questions of her *own* to ask the kid.

"So... how old are you, anyways?" Lisa twirled a stray hair in her face. "You said something about your dad meeting with Samantha?"

"Twelve, and I don't really think I'm allowed to talk about that second thing with anyone. Not like I'm actually *working* here in the first place, though..."

"Roger Ascher is the company's current CEO," Argall cut in, "Zoey just likes to be here with her father when she isn't busy with school."

Lisa let out a sigh of relief. So, the company *wasn't* using child labor as she'd feared. After all the things that Andrew put into her head earlier, she'd begun to expect the worst from the place that started it all.

"Oh," Zoey gasped, "you should talk to my friend Ellie sometime! She *really* looks up to you! She says that one day she'll be working here too, and that she wants to work on the simulations and make robots and make lots of friends and—"

Lisa's mind began to wander. She gazed up, staring at the faraway ceiling, then back down to the front desk. Headquarters looked even bigger on the *inside* than it did on the *outside*. Even for a front lobby currently headed by a *child*, of all people, the place looked more like a small showroom than a

proper lobby. Past and prototype products lined every wall on shelves, accompanied by little plaques describing each and every one. She wandered to one such display.

“and—hey! Lisa! I—” she grew quiet, looking to Argall. “I was rambling again, wasn’t I?”

Lisa stared at the worn headset under the display glass. Scuff marks covered its edges, and its strap looked filthy with sweat, among other things. A single cable ran out the side, laying disconnected on the platform.

“Prototype headset,” Lisa read the plaque, “tethered model.”

She looked back up, spotting her translucent reflection in the glass. The reflections of Argall, of Zoey, standing behind her.

There was still so, so much more that she didn’t know...

...That she didn’t *remember*.

24 | It begins here.

Lisa wandered out another room. The building was colossal, no matter *what* angle she looked at it from. The hallways, the office spaces—everything seemed larger than life. The place was so... *open*. It wasn’t like how it was back in those strange cities that housed the people in the simulations, either. *Here*, everything looked unique; ceiling-high windows wrapped many of the meeting rooms, while earthy, neutral tones bathed both the hallways and the break rooms in cool blues and browns.

To be honest, the place felt more like some sort of museum, or even a *temple*, than a corporate headquarters. Then again, the sleepiness of the place may have also just been because it was a weekend. Come to think of it, what day *was* it even? She’d never asked when she first disconnected, had she? There wasn’t much of a chance to ask Argall at the moment either, considering how Rosanne arrived not too long ago. Maybe she could ask him later in the day.

She stopped in front of another set of windows, these ones overlooking an outdoor break and recreation area. Beyond that, the city. This was it. This was what became of her work; The simulations—*her* simulations—they helped move the world forward, even if she herself wasn’t there to see it happen.

“Lisa?”

The sound of Rebecca’s voice nearly gave her a start.

“Lisa, I’m—”

There was no need to be sorry. It would’ve happened anyway. Even if she *didn’t* read the diary, she’d already been picking up bits and pieces of her old life, anyway.

She *swore* for a moment that she could hear Rebecca sighing in relief.

“So... you’re alright with this?”

Alright?

“Knowing your past. Having to have it loom over you again. With how Samantha and Argall kept acting, even *I* was afraid that you would give up and go back again. Are you *sure* this is what you want now?”

If alright meant that she could finally accept her past again, then yes, she was alright with it.

“Oh? Lisa?” Zoey’s voice cut through her thoughts. “I didn’t think you’d be in here! Do you like the window place too?”

Lisa smiled, giving a single nod toward the girl.

“What do you like about it?”

She let the question simmer for a moment. Even after staring outside for so long, she still couldn’t quite come up with the words to describe the view. A small garden of flowers stretched immediately below the window, lining the pathway to a patio and a few wooden tables. Just past that were a handful of outdoor recreation areas, and then the rest of the city.

“Everything, I guess. It’s just... nice.”

Zoey joined Lisa’s side. “Well, *I* like the little creek that goes through the garden. Sometimes, in the spring, I can find little fish in it!”

Lisa leaned closer to the glass, peering at the landscape. “There’s a creek?”

“My dad said that the land this building was built on had a creek going through it a long time ago, but then it got covered up and buried, so when they started building the...” she grinned at her wordplay. “...the *building*, they decided to unbury the creek and put back the little fish and animals and plants and stuff that used to live in it!”

“Hm,” Lisa hummed, turning her gaze from the window. “Zoey, could I ask you something?”

“Yeah?”

“Why do you want to be here? Isn’t there anywhere else that you’d like to be when you’re not busy?”

Zoey shook her head. “I just like it here, that’s all. It’s close to a lot of the places I usually go to like school and stuff, and I get to do a lot of fun things too, like test out a bunch of the new stuff people here are making!” she cocked her head. “Come to think of it, Lisa, why *did* you make the simulations and stuff, anyway?”

“I... I wanted to run away, I think.”

“Run away? What were you running from?”

Lisa shrugged. “Life, I guess. I don’t think I was ready to face it yet back then. I’m still not sure if I am now.”

“Well,” Zoey grinned, “My dad says that if you don’t think you’re ready yet, then you should try anyway, and get all the help you need. I blew up the coffee machine *two* times before I figured out how to use it, and the reason why I didn’t blow it up *three* times is because my dad was watching me that time!”

“Um...”

“But, he *also* reminded me that the reason why it started smoking the *last* two times was because I kept forgetting to put water into the machine first before starting it up, so it instead just burned up the stuff I put in.”

Lisa nodded. Zoey was certainly unconventional, but she did have a point. The only reason why she *herself* was where she was now was because of Samantha and Argall. If it weren’t for them, she’d probably be back in the simulations again, none the wiser of what she was missing out on. Not that it was even *remotely* related to this girl’s story about operating a coffee machine properly, but the point still stood. Whatever it was that’d come next, she knew *for* sure that she wouldn’t be running from it.

“By the way, do you wanna go to the break room with me and get a drink? There’s juice boxes there if you want any.”

Drinks sounded nice right about now.

~*~

“Wildcat, gimme my keys.”

“What, gonna try and stage a hit *yourself* this time?” Wildcat tossed the keys onto the counter. “What’re you gonna target, the *building*?”

“Just gimme. Pretty Lady left and took all ‘er stuff. I’m gonna count this as payback for abandonin’ us the way she did.”

“Hmph. At least grab something better to wear if you’re gonna head out. You look ready to hole up with some raccoons with *that* getup.”

Night snatched the keys from the counter, glaring at her partner.

“I’m *going*. Stay here and wait for my command.”

“Bu—”

Night’s glare shut him up. She walked to the door, keys dangling from her fingers. “And also, call up Pretty Lady’s scrappy little troll army and tell them that *I* will be leading them from now on. If they need proof, send ‘em a bit of th’ stuff on that flash drive of hers.”

“Right. On it,” Wildcat pulled out his phone, typing up a message.

“What’d you type?”

“Pretty Lady is gone for good. Report to Night ASAP.”

25 | Beyond what's seen,

Rosanne read over the contract in front of her. It didn't look any different from the one she remembered signing years ago, but it certainly *felt* different... though, that could've honestly just been her nerves playing her.

"Anyway, Rosanne—" Roger Ascher clapped his hands together. "—I'd like to know why you originally quit. Were you being mistreated by other employees? Too much stress? Did the coffee machine blo—"

"No, no, it wasn't any of that," Rosanne chuckled, dismissing his questions. "It was personal, don't worry about it."

"You sure?"

Rosanne forced a smile, nodding.

"Alrighty. You read over the contract and everything, yes?"

"Yeah."

Roger pushed the paper closer to her. "Well, you should already know what to do next. With how busy *Samantha's* been these past few days, I believe your skills will be *greatly* appreciated. Again."

She rolled her eyes at that last part. Being hired for a job she quit several years ago wasn't *that* big of a deal. She took a pen from her old boss's desk, signing her contract.

"So..." Rosanne tossed the pen back onto the desk. "Should I just find Samantha, or should I introduce myself to the other employees? I know it's been a while since I last worked here, so would I also need to take some training or something to catch u—"

"Personally, I'd say that your best bet would be to head to Samantha. She should be able to walk you through anything you don't know."

"Alright. And—"

"She'll either be in her office, or the connected workshop. First floor in the R&D hall next to the garden. You can't miss it. Though, I'd recommend touring the building first with the professor in case you get lost."

Rosanne nodded, leaving without another word. This was the second step in taking back her life. She couldn't afford to mess it up.

~~~

"Seriously, though. You should probably stop drinking so much hot cocoa if you keep getting bloody noses after."

Zoey stuck out her tongue, still pressing a tissue against her nose.

"How many cups do you drink a day, anyway?"

“Around three or four.”

“You do know that you probably shouldn’t be drinking so much given the sugar content in those.”

“Yeah, I know, but my dad said I’m still a kid, so it’s okay!”

Lisa snorted at the remark. Then again, if she at least knew that she’d have to stop *sometime* in the future, maybe she’d be able to avoid having to go through this every day. Or something.

“I think the bleeding stopped now. Should I check or should I wait a little longer?”

“I think it’ll be fine now,” Lisa pulled another tissue from the box on the table. “Try not to drip though if it’s still going.”

Zoey reached for the tissue. “Thanks. I’m still go—”

“There you guys are!” Samantha threw the door open, rushing into the break room. “Lisa, Zoey, come with me.”

“Wait wha-hey!” Zoey complained as Samantha took her by the wrist. “What’s going on?”

“We’ve got some trouble brewing. It doesn’t involve you, but you’re coming with us anyway.”

“What’s the trouble? Ack, my tissue!”

“You’re not bleeding anymore.” Lisa followed close behind. “You’ll be fine.”

“Lis,” Samantha continued walking, still leading Zoey, “Remember that one time when Andrew pointed at somebody in an alleyway?”

“I... yeah?”

“There’s someone here that looks *really* shady, and from what I saw on the security cameras, it looks like they’re trying to find the server room. I really—hold on a moment—” she let go of Zoey’s wrist, stopping to pull out her buzzing phone. “Hello? Yes, wait-*what*? Please tell me you’re kidding, Grace... o-oh, okay.”

Samantha slipped her phone back in her pocket.

“Daalmans says she’s seeing some networks going down again.”

~~~

“You.”

Night glared over her shoulder at Rosanne.

“What are you planning on doing, Night? You know you’re on the security footage now, don’t you?”

The woman smirked, turning to face her former subordinate. “This isn’t like in th’ movies, Pretty Lady. I ain’t gonna tell you anything. Stay out of my way and I might call off the hit I ordered on you.”

“You know you’re being petty, right? Just get another job for once, Night. It’s what I did.”

“Petty is as petty does. They take my job and I’ll take their company. Don’t you *dare* drill me on whatever friendship wishes you’ve got in that head of yours. Now, scram.”

“Rose,” Professor Argall’s voice echoed down the stairwell. “you ready to continue the tour? The server room’s a *great* place to catch up o—” he paused at the bottom step. “Rosanne, who’s that?”

“A good *friend!*” Night laughed, slapping Rosanne on the back. “I *just* got here a few minutes ago. Rosanne’s been talking nonstop about this place, *right?*”

Something pricked Rosanne through her shirt. It wasn’t sharp like a knife, but it was clearly metallic, like some kind of *conne*—her eyes widened; *Her flash drive!*

“*Give it back,*” she snapped. “I know you have my stuff.”

“Doesn’t look like much of a friendship to *me,*” Argall deadpanned, walking closer to Night. “Say, I... I think I recognize you from somewhere. The name’s... Selene, isn’t it? Or something along the lines of it. Can’t remember quite well, but you *did* work with me and my colleagues some time ag—”

“Your *colleagues* were *idiots. Especially* that Garnet fellow! The way he always talked about his family only rubbed things in for me!”

“I-I’m sorry?”

“Oh, so *you* never noticed either?” Selene stepped away from Rosanne. “Never noticed the woman who lost her parents? Never thought that maybe she needed a bit of *help* in her life? *I had to watch them pull the plug on my mother, Argall.* And when I came back to work, nobody seemed to care one bit! Everyone was always so *busy*. They say that technology’s the future, but that *technology* killed my parents!”

Rosanne raised a brow. *This* was something she’d never known about Night before. All she ever mentioned until now was losing her job. Heck, even the *name* was new to her.

“Selene,” Argall continued, “your parents were already old. Your father died in his sleep, and your mother was already bedridden with cancer when you joined us. I don’t know if you ever—”

“You could’ve at least saved *her*, then!” Selene burst, “You had the technology! You could’ve saved her!”

“That’s... not how it works, Selene. Your mother’s cancer was detected far too l—”

“*I’m not done yet. Y’all fired* me, even after all that I’d been through! Didn’t care for me, didn’t care for my family—and when I tried getting’ another job, your *technology* swooped in and *took* it from me! How would *you* feel if you woke up one day to find out that you were replaced by a self-checkout kiosk?”

There’s the part about losing her job.

“No, no—” the professor shook his head. “You were fired because you were becoming violent in the workplace, and not long after the issue was brought up, you stopped showing up. If I’d known better back then, then I would’ve repor—”

“I... augh! Just stay out of my way!” Selene turned foot and fled down the hall, disappearing around a corner.

~*~

“Welcome to the company, Selene.”

The words still burned in her mind with every pounding step she took.

“We’re still a pretty small startup, but with the tech we’ve been patenting, we’re hoping to do some great things in the future.”

Like what? Like saying that they couldn’t save a *single* cancer patient?

Selene stopped in front of a door. Her hand grasped the doorknob. A smirk grew on her face when it turned. She was *done* with waiting around for something good to happen to her for once. The bigshots say that her mother was a goner? So be it. They’ll be saying something else *entirely* when she brings their company to its knees.

And this would only be the beginning.

“Night! Wait—” Rosanne’s voice echoed through the hall as the sound of footsteps approached. “Night, why are you doing this? You always said that it was because you kept losing your job, but now you’re saying that you’ve been holding a grudge against the company *all this time* for not being able to save your mom. *What else are you hiding?*”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? *Really?* So it’s still boiling down to pettiness then. You *know* this company doesn’t specialize in healthcare, don’t you?”

“I said *nothing!*” Selene shouted down the hall. “Now stay away, unless you want to get hurt.”

The footsteps paused. She could hear some sirens approaching the building. This would have to be quick if she wanted to get away. She flung open the door, stepping inside and locking it behind her. The room was pitch-black inside, save for the arrays of blinking LEDs lining the various racks of servers.

“So.”

She felt something slam into her body, pinning her against a rack.

26 | Beyond what’s known,

“Hey, get off of me, you little—” Selene’s struggling was met with even more resistance than before.

“You’re the one that’s been causing all this trouble, huh?”

There was a person—no, *two* people standing in front of her. It was a little hard to tell who they were given her eyes hadn’t adjusted yet.

Her phone buzzed. She felt a small hand slip into her pocket. The light of her phone’s screen illuminated the faces of her captors. Wait—was she being pinned by a *middle schooler*?

“Thanks, Zoey,” one of the two others—the blond one—took the phone. “Reporting for duty, took down a local node, et cetera, et cetera... heh, *somebody’s* been busy.”

“Give it back.”

“The flash drive first,” Rosanne opened the door, flicking on the lights. “Listen. Night, Selene—*whatever* name it is that you want to go by. You need to *let go*, okay? What’s the point in trying to hurt *so many people* for something neither you nor they could control?”

Selene grit her teeth, staring down at Zoey, who continued to press her against the server rack. She was *definitely* stronger than some punk kid, so why’d she let herself be pinned by one just now? She still had her arms free, after all. She set both hands on Zoey’s shoulders, forcing her aside and fleeing deeper into the labyrinth of racks.

~*~

Rebecca’s footsteps pattered down the stairs. She grabbed the handrail, swinging herself around its end post into the kitchen. “Caleb, come on, you’re gonna be late for school!”

“Psh, yeah, right.” Caleb yawned, flipping a page in his comic book. “Sis, you’re *always* trying to drag me to school half an hour early. Lemme finish breakfast first and *then* I’ll go, ‘kay?” He set aside his comic and stuffed a spoonful of cereal in his mouth. “An isf nof lie I’m miffim amyfinm amyway.”

Rebecca rolled her eyes at her little brother’s antics. “Er... right. Nearly forgot about that part.”

Come to think of it, why *did* he study at a higher grade than her? He was only younger than her by a few minutes, and yet he was already partway through *college*, when she herself was only a senior in high school! And the *weirdest* thing about the whole ordeal was that he still went to the same high school as her! Like, he still goes to the same classes and all, but instead of *high school* level topics, he’s doing credit-hours for university! What’s up with *that*?

Caleb made a face, cramming another heap of cereal in his mouth and wiping the milk off his chin. “Whatever. I was done eating anyway.” He leaned over and picked up his backpack. “Let’s go! I’ll race ya to the car!”

He took off, sliding across the hardwood floor on his socks and disappearing into the garage. “C’mon, you said that we were gonna be late! Why am I already putting my shoes on, huh?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m coming, I’m coming. Do you *really* need to make everything a competition?”

“Nope! But hey, I’m opening the garage door now!”

The familiar sound of the door opener's motor grumbled through the house, complete with the same old creaks and groans that came with the aging metal door. Rebecca slipped her shoes on and joined her brother.

Caleb opened a car door, bowing with a wild grin. "Your ride, madam slowpoke."

He got a noogie for that.

~~~

"Caleb, I wanna ask you something."

"Hm?"

"Why are you always so far ahead of me? We're almost the exact same age, but... you just always... well..." Rebecca sighed. "What I'm saying is, you always seem to be *further in life* than I am. Just look at school, for example!"

The car slowed to a stop at an intersection.

"Well, as far as schooling goes, I used to wonder the same as well. Nowadays, I've basically given up on trying to figure it out myself. Mom and dad don't really have a clue, either."

Rebecca laid her head against her seatbelt. "Maybe it's always been this way, then. What do you think, Caleb?"

"Dunno much about it myself, like I said. If you think it's always been like this, then I'm fine accepting that."

The light turned green. Caleb eased the car into the intersection, humming along to the song on the radio. A beam of light shot into the sky in the distance, followed by an immense shockwave. He slammed the brakes, pulling into the next lane over just in time to avoid being rear-ended.

"*HOLY CRAP,*" he wheezed, still gripping the steering wheel. "What the *heck* was *that*?"

Rebecca shrugged. How was *she* supposed to know? Though, whatever it was that just happened, it *probably* wasn't a good thing. She gazed out the windshield; the light was still there. Something dark flickered in the distance. "Caleb—" she pointed, "did... did you see that too?"

"See wha—"

Another shockwave rippled through the air, rattling the vehicle. Faraway, the beam of light finally subsided, shooting off into the sky beyond the clouds.

"Urk," Rebecca groaned, rubbing her head. "I... I was pointing at the dark patch in the distance. Did you see that?" In the corner of her eye, she spotted *another* patch of darkness flicker, this time over some of the homes in the neighborhood. "Caleb, did you—"

"Big ol' patch of freakin' *void*? Yeah," Caleb grumbled, shifting the car into park. "*Welp*, world's corrupted now. *Somebody* needs to reload their savegame."

"Sure."

“Hey, kidding! Sheesh, you don’t have to take *everything* so seriously.”

“Now’s not the time for jokes, Caleb. Let’s go.”

“Okay,” Caleb shifted to drive, pulling away from the curb. “Go *where*?”

Rebecca’s eyes met her brother’s in the rear-view mirror. “*Away from here.*”

~~~

Selene’s fingers flew over the keyboard, typing in command after command into the system console. She shifted her attention for a second to the flash drive, watching its activity light blinking in the darkness before resuming her typing. There wasn’t *too* much she still remembered off the top of her head, but with the documentation *Pretty Lady* had on this flash drive of hers, wrecking the thing that *started it all* was going to be a breeze. That wasn’t even taking into consideration the fact that the *account information* on the drive still worked, too! For someone who seemed to always be looking down on *her* for not being too tech-savvy, *Pretty Lady* sure seemed to like keeping her passwords unencrypted!

Rapid footsteps approached in the distance—she’d have to be quicker than she already was if she wanted to pull this off. While it did help to have been one of the fastest sprinters in her younger years, it’d only buy her so much time before *they* caught up. She entered one more command; this time, to *delete all backups*.

“Hurry!” a voice echoed down the corridor. “I don’t know *what* she’s gonna do with the stuff I have on that drive, but I know it’s *not gonna be good.*”

So, it was the *flash drive* that they were worried about? She didn’t even have the same level of respect as a *convenience-store item*? Selene tore the drive from the computer’s port, pocketing it. Once she could shake off her pursuers again for a time, she’d continue her *work*.

After all, the simulations weren’t going to trash *themselves*, were they?

27 | It isn’t hard to agree,

Lisa panted, sprinting after the intruder. How was a woman *Selene’s age* able to still run so fast?!

“Samantha!” she yelled back, “How many more service consoles are there?”

Her steps slowed as they neared the one Selene had been at. Samantha pointed at the console, smirking. “Just this one.”

“Good. You stay back here and check the damage she did, and *I’ll* go after her. If anyone else arrives, tell ‘em to guard the exits! Heck, just go ahead and call the police or something if nobody else has—I don’t want Selene to have *any* chance of escaping!”

“Got it.”

Lisa nodded, turning foot and continuing her pursuit. Samantha cracked her knuckles, reaching for the keyboard.

~~~

Rebecca watched another humanoid mailbox saunter past, scraping its metallic claws against the sidewalk with every step. Absolutely *nothing* seemed to make sense anymore; she'd stopped *trying* to make sense of it when the magic horses started talking. Caleb didn't seem to be faring much better, either—not that she could really even *check*, with him currently slumped over in a deep slumber.

Her brother let out a loud snore. She glanced at the mirror again. The dark patches were still flickering in the distance, though they'd *clearly* spread since she first spotted them. Though, her *main* concern at the moment had more to do with the cars phasing in and out of existence as they passed. If it weren't for Caleb managing to stay awake long enough to run the vehicle into a ditch, they would've *surely* been in a collision by now.

She groaned, leaning back in her seat as a lion soared overhead.

"Rebecca!" a familiar voice yelled amidst the chaos, "Beck! You're *okay*?"

"Julie?" Rebecca rolled her window down. "Julie! What the *heck* are you doing out there?" her eyes widened at the approaching truck rumbling towards her friend. "Julie! Watch ou—"

"Don't worry—system perms," Julie continued walking, both her body and amplified voice simply *phasing through* the passing vehicle. "I kinda figured that this was gonna happen, honestly."

"What."

"No time to talk, there's a *heckuva* lot going on right now. Come—" Julie flickered for a moment, a pixelated texture spreading in ripples over her skin before dissipating again. "Hurry!"

Rebecca hesitated, remaining firmly in her seat.

"Beck, do you wanna live or not? There's someone I know that'd *probably* want to see you live through this."

"Wha—"

Julie flickered again, stretching her hand through the window. "Come on!"

The ground tremored as another patch of sky went dark.

"HHhhfine—" Rebecca flung her door open, ignoring the fact that it too phased through her friend. "Let me get my brother. I don't know *what's* going on anymore, but whatever is screwing up *this place* is affecting *him* as well."

"I know. He's not gonna be the only one."

"...What?"

~~~

Andrew Smith ran a trembling hand over his resting face. His fingers grazed over the headset's strap.

"No..." he whispered, his other hand shooting to the headset's smooth surface. "No, not again..."

A faint, muffled voice echoed through the streets outside.

"Unfortunately, we have encountered yet another outage. We have already identified the cause, and are actively working on resolving the issue. Please remain calm as we work. This message will be updated as needed."

He groaned, letting his hands slip off of the headset. Hopefully, things wouldn't take as long as the last time around. *One* disconnection was already more than enough.

~~~

"Please," Grace pleaded into the microphone, broadcasting once again over the twice-distraught town. "I... I know that we're dealing with the same predicament that we were in the last time around, but mo—*Melina* is currently busy. I..." she cleared her throat. "We are working as hard as possible to get to the root of this mess!"

~~~

Selene's heart raced in her chest, echoing the rhythm of her pounding footsteps. She'd... she'd actually done it! Racks upon racks of server equipment passed by, each one slowly succumbing to the destructive chain of commands she'd entered. Maybe, by the time she got out of the building, the entire storage array could be wiped *clean!*

Her eyes set on an emergency exit door. Everything was falling into place—the entire *network* of simulations would crumble without its backbone, people would begin filing lawsuit after lawsuit against the company when their *promised little fairytales* fell out from under them, and drive the entire *business* into the ground!

She slammed her body against the steel door, forcing herself into the blinding midday sunlight. A wide grin spread across her face. It was done.

Her joy was quickly cut off by a prick in the back of her neck.

~~~

"This..." Rebecca raised a brow, grunting under her brother's weight. "This is just your house. Why'd you lead us *here?*"

Julie didn't respond, instead unlocking the door and gesturing once again to follow.

The *inside* of the building, however, was... *off*. There was no discernable separation between *anything*—rooms and halls blended together, and save for the *front*, there wasn't a single door in sight! The place looked *nothing* like it did the *last* time Julie had invited them over!

As for the girl *herself*, Julie breathed a sigh of relief, slumping down against an oddly-colored bookcase. “There,” she whispered, “We’re safe.”

“Safe?” Rebecca set Caleb down, wincing as he toppled face-first to the floor. “Julie, are you *crazy*? How is your house *safe* when it looks like you were in the middle of a *renovation* when the world started breaking down?”

A sly smirk spread across Julie’s face. “Honestly, with all that’s been going on, I’m surprised you haven’t figured it out yet.” She froze in place for a moment, emanating a faint rattling noise from her body.

The room around them began to shift, doing away with the familiar windows and hallways Rebecca had always seen before in her friend’s house. The walls and ceiling fell away next, dissipating into nothingness as if they were nothing more than dust. A coat of pasty-white flashed across the floor, stretching off into a seemingly-infinite horizon.

Julie’s body relaxed again. She turned to her friend, tilting her head. “This is a simulation, Rebecca, and it’s under attack. I honestly don’t know *any* other way to say it.”

It took a few seconds for her friend’s words to sink in. The shock of the house just... *disappearing* was already enough, but to think that it was all a *simulation*? Rebecca sputtered, frantically looking around at the empty canvas around them. “J...Julie—but what about this place, then? If this is a simulation that’s *‘under attack’*, then why is *this* place any safer than others?”

The same, strange smile from earlier returned to her friend’s face. “It always helps to have a *personal* server to run things on, doesn’t it?”

Rebecca opened her mouth, but she couldn’t manage any words. *Crazy*—that’s the only word that could describe today. After almost a full minute of panicked stuttering, a single word finally managed to escape her lips:

“What.”

## 28 | How far you’ve grown.

---

Lisa panted, every step pounding against the bare concrete floor. The fact that she was even *keeping up* with Selene still was a miracle at this point.

“Wait—” Rosanne shouted behind her, “Wait, Lisa! This isn’t working; Selene’s going to keep outrunning us ‘till she gets away. Out of the three of us, I’ve had the *most* experience working here, and given how I was usually working on the backend stuff, I know this place well. There’s only *one* emergency exit in the direction she’s running, so—”

Lisa’s steps slowed. A smirk grew across her face. “So, we can *ambush her*.”

“Touché.”

“If I remember correctly, up ahead should be some storage racks. If you can manage to slap a transmitter on Selene, then we *should* be able to knock her out for a bit. Past the storage rack’s a

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quicker path to the emergency exit that skips an entire section of the datacenter, so try and catch up using it.”

She stopped beside a rack filled with boxes, looking back to Rosanne for confirmation.

“The transmitter patches look like large bandages, last I remember. You see any in there?”

“Yeah.”

“Grab one and go, then! I don’t remember how long the sedative lasts or how strong it is, so I’m gonna have to loop back and tell Samantha to activate it. What’s the serial number on the one you got?”

“Hold on, hold on!” Lisa fumbled through the boxes, pulling a sealed transmitter from one of them. “The serial’s eight-five-zero-six-zero-four!”

Rosanne nodded, running off in the opposite direction. Lisa lowered the package, staring down the corridor past the shelves.

~\*~

(end)

**Note: This is only a first draft of what’s to come. The second draft will revamp the entire story from the ground-up to build better character interactions, backstories, and a completely new ending, far different from what was originally planned to be written within this draft.**

~~Chapter builds towards encounter between Lisa, Rosanne, and Selene, either in simulation or outside of it. Reveal the things they do agree on (ex: the ways tech can be used) versus what they don’t agree on (Lisa and Rosanne now adamantly push against the idea of using tech to run away from your problems, while Selene is still more or less fantasizing of the things that *she* could do.)~~

And as always, thank you for reading. 😊