***To my son Ezra, may you persevere and find your hope and your place in this world one day.***

**Chapter 1: For you, I’ll wait. Even for a 1,000 years.**

**X**

I suddenly jolted awake, a mixture of panic and confusion completely engulfing my mind at the very vivid, and extremely realistic dream I just had the frightening experience to wake up from. A wave of relief steadily flows throughout my mind and body as my tense muscles start to relax. I’ve never had a nightmare, let alone a dream anywhere close to the frightening experience I just received. What in the world was that just now?

After a moment, I came to a conclusion ‘it doesn’t matter’. This could be said about my dream, as well as my outlook on life. In the end, what aspirations in our lives really matter? What was the difference between a life-long goal becoming reality and becoming a shadow of your former self left in the past? I shouldn’t be so pessimistic on my viewpoints in life, I remember my therapist telling me that several times. But what they didn’t know or didn’t understand, is that my very existence has been reinforced time and time again that I’m better off this way. Not by my therapist, but by my parents who failed at their one job of raising a child with even a shred of interest in doing so. You only have to be told something a few dozen times before it starts becoming a belief of yours, and then your reality.

As I get out of bed to head for the bathroom and prepare for the day, the thoughts of that dream start to drift away out of my consciousness. To be fair to my parents, they didn’t always treat me like this. Memories of my early childhood start flooding back to me, back to a time that seems so distant now for years. In early grade school, my parents gave me 110% of their time and attention as you would expect any common set of parents to do for their only child. They wanted to raise me to be just like them, and who could blame them? They weren’t perfect, but they shifted around their busy schedules of constant work and being away from home to give me as much as their time and attention as they possibly could.

It wasn’t until middle school when their love and devotion as parents completely dropped off the face of the Earth. Once it was clear that I wasn’t naturally gifted in athleticism as they both were, it's as if my existence was second focus to them. At least for a while. If it wasn’t work, then it was their smartphones that ate up all their attention. If it wasn’t their phones, then it was constantly being out of the house even after work was finished. Leaving me with a babysitter who didn’t care what happened to me after their hours were done, or completely leaving me alone to my thoughts and an empty house with no loving comfort or warmth inside of it.

‘I really need to stop beating myself up all the time’ I give a pathetic attempt to persuade myself to stop thinking these negative narratives of my life, from the moment I wake up to the moment I go to sleep. It wasn’t good for my mental or emotional health. But children are often convinced of the beliefs and lessons their parents teach them at a young age, and carry it well into their adult years. Maybe as I get older, graduate college and get a job out in the real world, will my mentality change. I clearly have PTSD from back then, I didn’t need a therapist to read a book and put the fragmented pieces back together to figure that one out for myself. But after dreading going through what the day awaited me, every single day, it was hard to even think about the future. After all, it’s not like I or even my entire generation have much to look forward to with the looming threats over us in the coming years.

You name it, we got it. Global Warming, constant civil unrest, financial situations so bleak that most of us go back to living with our parents sooner rather than later. The list goes on and on, but it’s not all bad. At least we have memes to laugh at all day and can relive our childhoods time and time again as they keep remaking old movies and giving a graphics update to video game titles decades old. At least we have that. They say cats rule the internet, but it’s only because their rule was established through memes and sarcasm.

The rest of my morning is uneventful as always. I enact in standard rituals of personal hygiene and head downstairs to a completely silent home. I could crack a joke about who died for such a quiet and bleak atmosphere, but a joke isn’t really funny if it’s always the same punchline. It’s always the same way. Nobody around to talk with, or to check up to see if I was even still alive. I walk down the stairs, the warmth of my body being challenged by the cold hardwood floors that hasn’t had any heat blowing through the entire first floor for who knows how long. I know the heating bill was paid as it always is, it’s just never used to heat up this frigid home without any care.

My stomach is crying out in hunger pains for something to make it feel full, but I know I’ve been gaining too much weight lately. It’s not normal for a young teen to be pushing nearly 300 pounds before graduating high school, especially if you aren’t an athlete like me. However when you’ve got no other comfort in your life, chips and queso as well as Chinese lo-mein often makes the feeling go away for about an hour. My hand grudgingly reaches for a protein shake that has complete nutritional value at a fraction of the calories. No calories and no feeling of fulfillment, what fun.

As I check my phone for the time stating it’s now 7:45AM, a little bit of a rush starts to fuel my routine. After all the best 10 to 15 minutes of my day, everyday, happens before I get to school. Part of me always liked my private academy uniform, it’s solid black attire with gold-trimmed thread on the wrists and shoulder fabric gave it a militaristic type of look. Like an important officer in the armed forces, someone who had actual value in the real world. I’ve thought about joining the armed services a few times throughout the years, like my grandfather and other family members before me. At worst, I might die giving my current bleak existence a purpose by helping someone else. And at best, maybe it’ll help me drop some weight. As I picture myself in this uniform, I can’t help but experience thoughts that maybe I would look handsome on this attire. However it’s pictures of me about 150 pounds lighter than I currently am as well.

I try not to think about myself like this too often, it’s fantasy-like belief might suck me into a false mentality of what my life really is like. My therapist has described me as cynical and pessimistic. People have stated that they believe me to be a nihilist as well. But if nothing else, I would consider myself a realist. Part of me knows that there are many other people out there who have it worse than myself. I really shouldn’t be complaining all the time, but just because someone has had it worse, doesn’t mean it just automatically invalidates what I’ve experienced myself. My therapist assigned a big word to describe this character trait of mine, Alexithymia. Basically, a big word that says I have a hard time describing what I or someone else is really feeling. I may come off as timid and shy, but I sure as hell don’t think that way.

I thought it was strange as I got older, I could easily tell the existential bleak my parents felt every time they laid their cold, emotionless eyes on me. A disappointment who inherited all of their worse genes. I could identify emotional awareness, social and interpersonal relating to others, just that none of it was spared for me. Maybe I was just misdiagnosed because I try to hide all my real feelings behind dark humour, video games, and fantasy japanese shows. How could I appreciate the emotional feeling of others when mine were never appreciated to begin with? Let alone acknowledged by those who are supposed to give you those via obligation as parents. That’s the part I didn’t really understand.

“Holy hell I need to get off of this already.” I let out with a sarcastic tone that nobody heard. As I lock the door to this empty space of a dollhouse with one hand, the other hand instinctively knows where to go. My fingers brush up against the small fine pieces of hair, going down the line until it reaches the expected empty spot.

‘Jeez I’ve made it worse again.’ The bald spot in my right eyebrow has grown considerably during this stressful time of final standardized tests. Trichotillomania, a hair-pulling disorder I’ve developed over the years in place of a nervous twitch, or other bad habits other people my age develop due to the glory of the internet of today. Didn’t need a psychiatrist to tell me that one, afterall, ‘Google knows all’.

You would think the thought of embarrassment and harassment I receive due to the bald spot on my eyebrow would be convincing enough to get me to stop, but part of me actually thinks it’s cool. It gave me a distinguished look whenever people made eye contact with me and hopefully distracted them from how pudgy my face was. Sure most of the time it wasn’t positive attention, but at least it wasn’t a look of disgust or ridicule for my weight either.

This walk toward school was the highest highlight of my day. A time when I actually got to converse with another human who didn’t have as much dislike for me as my parents and own peers held. I even got the chance to converse with an actual girl whose voice I didn’t only hear online. One who completely and blatantly used me for her own personal gains in school. But I used her and she used me for different reasons that fulfilled our desires and needs, it was a give-and-take relationship, one I was content in keeping friendly relations with.

This was also the time my mind would start to drift towards a life amongst somewhere new for the first time in the day. Given that 97% of young adult men regularly played video games, and another 40% to 60% of young adults watched anime. It was only natural that my mind would oftentimes wander and drift to a reality that wasn't my own right? The rules of this reality weren’t fair for many of those who lived here, but in the world of a game or a show where the rules are always written for the main character. It’s an easy escape to indulge in for a few moments of my day. I often wish I could be the main character in a game world, one where I could exploit and take advantage of the rules of the world to get as far ahead toward the top of the ladder than anyone else. Instead of being looked down on by literally everyone around me, I would peer into the abyss that swallowed up everyone who couldn’t make it in that new world. I alone would stand at the top, the one belittling others instead of the one being ridiculed.

‘Wow...that’s pathetic.’ The thought came across my mind. I couldn’t talk a big game, let alone walk it either. All I could do was have thoughts of the big game, that’s how big the disparity was of the realities of my real life and the thoughts that pour out of my skull. It's clear online through memes and discussion sites that my generation has this strange obsession with dying. That’s not me though, it’s not that I want to die. It’s just that I want to exist somewhere else entirely. Just *isekai* me away like the authors of fantasy shows always do, and I’ll be a dependable badass that’s well liked by everybody just like all that fantasy novel crap.

Suddenly I feel an ominous yet overwhelming presence behind me as I turn quickly to see nothing in plain sight. ‘What the hell was that?’ I could feel my heart rate rapidly shoot up and the hair on the back of my neck standing up as I couldn’t help but feel as if someone was very intently staring directly at my backside. The entire soul of my being was screaming at me that someone with hostile intentions was glaring directly at me, but what could be giving me such a strong feeling of fear and panic? I wanted to run, to turn around and show my back to whoever the culprit was once again, but I was too frozen in fear to even move an inch.

‘Calm down...don’t want to end up like grandma Soh’. I try to be rational and logical to explain what would invite such a strong feeling of despair in my mind. Grandma has schizophrenia, and strong feelings of stress could bring it on me if I’m not careful, however slim the 5% chance was that I would develop it sometime in my young adult years. The only thing that comes to mind is that strange dream I had that’s been tucked in the back of my mind. Maybe by thinking about wanting to go to another world, I subconsciously thought about the one from my dream. It didn’t look epic or amazing at all to be in a hellhole like that. It just looked scary and brought on feelings of despondency. Maybe it was the feeling of realism that dream gave off, who the hell knows. At least that’s all I was willing to admit to myself. I dare not admit that I believe I very briefly caught sight of what appeared to be a pair of magenta eyes in my peripherals before fully turning around to empty air. I can’t do it, I might go crazy if I do.

“Holy hell Rentaru, why do you always look so defeated? If I was as young as you I would be living the good life not giving a damn about anything.” I was suddenly snapped out of my horrific trance by a middle-aged man and brought back to reality. As I locked eyes with him he gave me a peculiar look of dislike that he usually did, but a little more harsh today. It took me another half a second to realize that my feet were completely planted, as my chest heaved up-and-down heavily trying to catch a breath and my pupils dilated from the pure fear. First the dream from earlier this morning, and now this. What the hell was wrong with me?

“I don’t know...I just had the strangest feeling I was being watched.”

“Who the hell would want to stare at an ugly eyesore such as yourself?” His sharp tongue has never changed in all the time I’ve known this man, ‘Mr. Smith’ as he calls himself around me. I’m pretty certain that isn’t his real last name, but he’s never told me otherwise. If I had to guess, he probably felt like a ‘Mr. Smith’ or a ‘John Doe’ because like me, he felt as though his existence had no purpose in this life. As soon as he died, he would be forgotten. Just like a John Doe. “You’re literally the ugliest bastard I’ve ever laid eyes on with your fat neck and half missing eyebrow...next to me of course. But I’ve got 50 years on you kid who knows what the hell you’ll look like by the time you reach my age.”

“You mean *if* I reach your age. Who knows maybe the world will end by then.” I trade mocking remarks with this old fossil. It’s probably strange that my best friend, or really only friend is this sarcastic, sad old man who has the same facetious attitude and sharp tongue as my own. But at least I wasn’t pathetic enough to try and pretend that wasn’t the case.

“Yeah I guess that’s true. Your generation is all sorts of screwed up after what mine did to you. Sure as hell glad I’m gonna die before I reap the rewards of what that’s going to look like for you.” He gave the statement of his certain death in a smug tone, a facade that was only weakened by his saddened eyes.

“Yea, thanks for screwing up the planet for us. Sure hope it was worth it.” I finally start to calm down as I return to a normal posture. Placing one hand in my pocket, and the other on my book bag.

“Well I won’t be here cleaning up the messes, that’s for you guys to take care of.”

“So what’s new? Any kind of update?”

“Yeah.” He let out through a wincing gasp, the wrinkles in his face deeply carved in by the hard life of youth now feeling the effects in old age, dressed in brown pants and a nice button-up grey long-sleeve. “Nothing more the doctors can do. Family still isn’t talking to me, let alone paying any kind of notice to my existence. They probably think I’ve gone all senile because I don’t bother looking at their ugly mugs either. Waiting for me to die so they can toss me in a dumpster and finally be done with my ass.”

“If it was a dumpster fire I think it would be a little more fitting don’t ya think?” I give him a smirk on my face as he cracks a loud ‘hah!’ to my smartass words. “You know how much longer it’s going to be?”

“Couple of months at most.” Mr. Smith paused as he fixed his sitting position, trying to stretch his wrists to avoid a carpal tunnel flare up. “I’m always in pain, they’ve essentially sent me home to die. Point of hospice though is that there’s usually supposed to be someone there to take care of me. When that hot nurse isn’t around, I gotta get up to do anything myself.”

“You should smack some of your kids’ heads around, give them the backhand like you did back in the day.”

“I don’t have enough strength to do that, hell I barely have the strength to tolerate your pathetic ass anymore. I’d rather be out playing the slots or really anything else than talk to your sorry excuse for a teenager.” We both exchange a nervous laugh as we continue our conversation. It felt strange, talking to this old man who was my only friend about his impending death. I should have felt more for him, saddened that this senior was being ignored by his family at a time when he needed them most. Part of that unnecessary burden was lightened however since he made fun of his own passing as well. Instead those feelings of sadness were utilized somewhere else. I didn’t feel sad that he was soon going to die, I felt sad because I would soon have nobody to talk to again.

“Rentaru!” I turn around trying to hide that small sense of happiness and fulfillment I experience whenever we talk for those few fleeting moments. She ran up to me quickly, one of the fastest girls in our private academy as she stopped for only half a second. Already trying to cut the conversation short by walking around me in a half-circle so she could continue on ahead. “Hey, did you get my homework done?”

“Of course, don’t I always?” I had already reached into my book bag, grabbing the few notebooks of fully completed worksheets that weren’t my own. I did the work, and tried to copy her handwriting as best as I could to make it look less inconspicuous, but it’s not my name at the top of the paper. “Here Ana.”

“Thanks again like always!” She was genuinely happy that I had cheated doing the work for her while she received all the credit, and was able to pass her classes and stay active in volleyball and cross-country because of it. The moment we shared together was always brief, but it always brought me a slight sense of joy as well that I tried to not make so obvious. We looked at each other only a few feet apart, the closest I’ll probably ever get to a woman who didn’t look at me with that look of disgust.

She was tall and fit, but a curvaceous girl with a modest bust. Already looking more like a woman than a young teenage girl. All the damn growth hormones that’s in the meat is probably to blame. She was tall for a woman, only a few inches shorter than myself standing at 6’ 1”. She looked at me with a genuine expression and a small smile. My brown eyes locked together with her baby blues as I caught her looking at my right eyebrow out of curiosity below my dark brown straight hair, and just like that the moment was over. She was dressed in the standard academy woman’s uniform, a stark white, modest-length skirt with a matching button-up blouse. Contrasting well with my jet black uniform.

“Sorry to cut it short but I have to get something done before school starts. I’ll see you again tomorrow!” She waved toward me without even looking my way before darting off toward the direction of the academy. My interactions with Ana are always like this, but it was honestly a welcoming feeling to have and to hold onto for those few blissful seconds. Ana wasn’t my friend, and I’m sure she would never admit that I was her friend either. But I didn’t hate this feeling of simply using each other to fulfill a need, and so I can tolerate it.

Her full name is Anastasia, Ana for short. Can’t remember her last name, some super long Russian name that’s confusing as hell to pronounce. Cute as can be, popular at school between her athletics, looks, and sweet personality. Probably hates all the things I’m interested in, I don’t really know anything about her besides that.

“Wipe that smirk off of your face.” I did just that as I turned toward Mr. Smith not even attempting to hide the laughs that were currently caught in his throat, trying to force the words to the surface. “What the hell do you think an ugly bastard like you could ever do with someone like her?”

“Nothing of course.” He only seemed a little surprised to my answer. “I do her homework, she talks to and tolerates me for a few minutes, well normally at least. She passes all her classes at school with zero effort, I get someone who isn’t you to talk to a few minutes a day. It’s an even trade.”

“Wow. I don’t what’s more sorry for a pathetic excuse of a man. The fact that you acknowledge that girl is blatantly using you for personal gain, or the fact that you proudly admit it without a shred of decency for yourself.” We both share a small laugh as I focus my gaze toward the ground and lower my sights, a small smile still across my bleak expression.

“It’s not like I don’t already know that. Everybody uses everyone else for their own selfish gain. What I’m doing to her is no different than what she’s doing to me. I can’t talk to her at school, my meek and pathetic side wouldn’t have the gall to get any words out.” I look up to meet his hysteric face as he laughs at my tormented, annoyed face. At least I’ll have the last laugh when this old fossil goes back with the other dinosaurs. “At least my company is partially tolerated by someone I would never talk to in any other instance. Unlike your presence.”

“Holy hell kid. I’ve lived in the Willamette Valley my entire life, and I’ve never met a sorry soul more pathetic than you.”

“Yea well at least I can admit it out loud. Not like those pathetic fools who go about their lives dreaming for something they know deep down they can’t have.” I give him attitude as I start to walk away, having to pick up the pace a bit so I won’t be tardy. “Same time tomorrow old man?”

“Yea if I ain't dead by then who knows.”

“Go ahead, make my day.” We wave eachother off without locking eyes as I continue onward to the academy. And so ends the best moment of my day after it’s hardly even begun. The rest of the day is usually all downhill from here. Go to school, don’t talk to a single soul, be looked down on and mocked behind my back. Or to the face, depending on the mood of the bully at the time. Sit in boring classes, and endlessly think of a world far away from this one where it could all be different. Then go home to an almost always empty house, make dinner for one and quietly excuse my presence for the day and dreading going through it all again tomorrow.

***“What a pathetic attempt for a meager existence. You want to change the reality of the world you reside in with your meaningless existence so badly? Fine, prove yourself right with that condescending attitude. You are hereby marked as a ‘Chosen’”.***

I let out a loud gasp as those words rang in my ears as clear as day, as if the person saying them was right next to me. An invisible force pushes me to the ground, my knees easily buckling due to my heavy weight as I feel like I’m being crushed from gravity. My eyes go wide and my heart rate increases as I struggle in vain against whatever has grasp of my body. I start to panic as this strange runic circle is drawn from nothingness on the ground beneath me, glowing red and sparking electrical currents violently in the air around my person.

“What the hell!?” I was able to choke out as I felt the air in my chest being forcibly expunged by the increasing pressure. I’m able to ever so slightly tilt my head upwards as I look up toward the sky, unable to believe what I’m seeing firsthand with my own eyes. It seemed as though the entire world around me was frozen in time and space. “Mr. Smith!” I call out to him, a desperate and fearful tone in my voice but to no avail. Afterall, Mr. Smith wasn’t even moving to get off of his ass and give me a hand, as if he didn’t even notice what was happening to me. But the actually surprising bit was the fact that the sky had suddenly and drastically changed from its clear blue skies to a violent red atmosphere up in the heavens.

In the now blood-red skies above sat an entire, vast landscape floating above the city below me. The endless fields of wheat as well as the glowing rays of Sol up in the heavens where I could never reach was shaking violently, as was everything around me. As I tried to keep myself under control, thinking this must all be some crazy realistic dream again and hopefully me not going insane, that same voice rang again in my ears once more.

***“Rejoice mortal! Your mark as a ‘Chosen’ will provide you with a chance to prove the worth of your meaningless existence! The Cataclysm of the Void is upon us once more!”***

I let out a loud, eye piercing scream as my hands started to disintegrate and disappear before my eyes! It’s not long before it quickly spreads to my arms, then legs, and then soon the rest of me is disappearing without a trace from this world. What the hell is happening to me!? Was this all some crazy, realistic feeling dream? Or was I really going to die and be forever forgotten in this world that I didn’t appreciate nor did it appreciate me for my entire life? Everything around me quickly went dark, as if all my senses and my very life was snuffed out like a flickering flame. Without a trace of it ever existing except the faint, fleeting feeling of the heat within the air. Only to turn cold once more.