

CHAPTER 1

Somerville, Massachusetts

October 31st, 2012 A.D., Subjective Time

Every morning was the same story. After a year of the same routine, you'd have thought I'd get used to it, but no. It always came as a surprise when the alarm shocked me awake and, later, as an even greater surprise, that I actually managed to get up.

Every morning was the same routine. Half an hour of basic exercises. Stretches, pushups, sit-ups, then I took a shower. I struggled each time not to fall back asleep under the warm, comforting stream of water, and somehow I always

managed. Once my hair dried and I put on my uniform and a superficial layer of makeup (mostly to hide the ever expanding bags under my eyes), I'd wake Jonathan up so he could have breakfast.

Every morning was the same, and when it wasn't, the cause was usually the most unpleasant of reasons. Jonathan was sick or the electricity went out and my alarm didn't ring. Banality and routine had become preferable to surprises and spontaneity. There was security in repeating patterns, and until Jon was old enough to move out and go off to college - or alternatively, I won the lottery - I gladly embraced routine. Even if it was for the next thirteen years.

That day was a little different. It was one of the rare days in the year where I could wake up to a little variety without a feeling of dread overtaking me. That morning after my shower, I snuck into Jonathan's room. Where I would normally gently nudge him awake, that morning I quietly made my way to his bed, carefully avoiding the toys I had instructed him to put away that instead still littered the floor.

I took a moment to watch my little guy sleep. He was a lot of work, that boy. Between him and a full-time career, there wasn't much left to my life, but what did that matter? I stared at that little face, gently sleeping without an ounce of worry, and I knew it was all worth it.

"Booh!" I screamed as I grabbed my baby and tickled him awake.

"Ah!" he screamed right back, terrified at first but immediately melting into giggles.

Almost instantly I heard Ms. Ryan upstairs complaining about the noise. I hate the old whining cow, but I could hardly blame her. While this was a normal morning for my family, it was still only 4 a.m. for the rest of the world.

"Guess what today is?" I teased Jonathan in whispers, putting a finger to my lips in the process to tell him to also be quiet.

"Halloween!" he whispers back excitedly.

"That's right! Now get up and wash up. I'll pack you a special Halloween lunch and we'll get you in your costume."

Instantly and without having to be asked twice, my boy was off to the washroom. By the time he was out, clad in fresh underwear and his hair somewhat combed, I had his lunch bag ready and his costume laid out. Disappointed I couldn't make something myself and had to fall back on a store-bought outfit, I was still glad I could at least afford a decent costume. It seemed like a waste for something he'd wear once, perhaps twice, but the look of genuine wonder and excitement on his face as he eagerly put on the tunic and accessories made it worth every penny.

"Yeah! I'm Thor!" my little guy clamored as quietly as his over-stimulated voice would allow.

"Alright, mighty Thor. Eat your cereal so we can get going."

"Where's midjitnear?"

"What?"

"Where's my hammer? I can't be Thor without a hammer," he asked insistently.

"Right next to your shoes by the door." I pointed to the hollow plastic replica that had come with the costume. "Now eat your breakfast so mommy won't be late for work."

It was pitch black as we stepped out of the apartment. Trees groaned and whistled as we walked the five blocks to Helena's place. It wasn't very far, but it was definitely in a more upscale neighborhood. The streets were cleaner and the houses were bigger, with such luxuries as driveways and front yards. Almost every home had an extra car parked in the street, almost none which looked to be secondhand. The houses themselves were clean and well maintained with lit civic numbers and manicured lawns.

Jonathan was full of energy. I was glad Helena liked him so much and hoped his enthusiasm wouldn't make him too much of a handful.

As we stepped on her porch, I sent Helena a text message to let her know we'd arrived. Better than waking up her husband and kids with the doorbell.

"Alright, Jon?" I knelt to look my boy in the eyes.
"What did we discuss about the hammer?"

"Jolminir is for hitting bad guys!"

"Okay, and how many bad guys are there at Aunt Helena's?"

"None," he answered, with only a touch of disappointment.

"That's right. So don't hit anyone with that thing."

When the door opened, I came face to face with a better life. Helena was so many things I wasn't. Blonde and voluptuous, well settled and happy. Her existence was in order to a degree mine would probably never reach. Mostly though, she was satisfied. Things had worked out for her. Charles, her husband, took care of her and their two girls

while she pursued her career working from home. It was difficult not to feel a pang of jealousy.

"Good morning," she greeted us with a strained but pleasant smile. "Hey there. What do we have here? Are you some kind of super hero?"

"I'm Thor!"

"I bet you are," Helena answered ruffling my boy's hair. "You know the drill little man; nap time until seven okay?"

"Okay," Jonathan answered before kissing me, shedding his sneakers and running in.

"You be good."

"He's always good," Helena smiled at me as she leaned on her door frame, tightening her heavy robes around her bare neck. "What about you Mel?"

"Same old I guess."

"You can't keep doing this you know?"

"I know," I answered, guiltily. "I'll try to find some other arrangement, but it's not easy."

Helena gave me a sympathetic smile before breaking into a yawn. It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair to her, and it wasn't fair to Jonathan, or even Charles and the girls, but what else could I do?

"You'll be fine, and you know I'll always be happy to take Jon when you need me to, but sometimes I wonder if you don't need a bit of a kick in the butt."

I bit my lip. "A kick in the butt"? She made it sound like I enjoyed waking up before dawn every morning, working six days a week, and having to beg for favors from friends just to be able to offer my son the semblance of a normal life. It's so easy to pontificate when your life is perfect. I wanted to tell her that. I wanted to shove it in her face how unfair her comment was, but I bit my lip and I took the blow.

"Ask for a desk job, just until you can put Jon in daycare or something. Or find something else for a little while. I'm saying this as much for you as I am for him," she looked genuinely concerned. "You look like you're a million years old."

And I felt even older than that. Did I always feel this ancient? Did I just forget how it feels not being exhausted? I could have lived a thousand lifetimes and never been this worn out.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe a change of careers might not be such a bad idea," I admitted. "Didn't you say Charles was looking for a new secretary?"

"Tut-Tut! Last time Charles had a female secretary he ended up marrying her," she pointed a finger to herself. "I'm afraid this is a male-only position now."

We both laughed a little. She was even perfect at comforting me, damn her.

"I'll ask to be transferred to a desk job or dispatch. I'll ask today. It's not quite my preferred career path..."

"But what it lacks in glamor it makes up in how good it would be for Jon."

She was even perfect at raising my kid.

#

I was in a foul mood when I got to the station. The lack of sleep combined with Helena's polite but depressing assessment of my situation had stripped me of all my good cheer from earlier that morning.

Ours was a pretty small precinct with maybe two dozen officers and support staff - just enough to serve our small suburban community within the limited budget awarded to us by the municipality. Everyone there knew everyone else, and while I couldn't say we were all friends, we remained a relatively tight-knit group. On the other hand, what we had in conviviality, we paid for in flexibility and career opportunities. People didn't quit or transfer out of the

station very often, nor did we see many retirements. It was a great place to have a mid-level position, but a lot less attractive for someone seeking advancement or even just a better shift.

"Paulson!" Anthony called out the moment he saw me walk through the door. If I were to try and imagine a worst person to deal with in my state of mind that day than my bubbly, over-eager partner, I'd have my work cut out for me.

Lieutenant Anthony Blain was difficult to hate, which made snapping at him for being so damn jovial before sunrise as shameful as it was common. It came as a surprise that I managed not to.

"Good morning Anthony..." I grumbled back as I poured myself a generous mug of vile but potent coffee.

My young partner wove through the other officers, lieutenants, and detectives, both going on and coming off their respective shifts, and joined me at the coffee machine. As he reached the counter, he magically

transformed the annoyed mutterings of his coworkers into mumbles of what could pass for delight at five in the morning. The trick was dropping a large box of assorted donuts next to the percolating demon that supplied us in black, oily caffeine.

"How you doing partner? Ready to fight crime?" he asked, sipping from a cardboard cup of some fancy, sweet, not-coffee confection.

"We hand out parking and speeding tickets, Ant. Hardly the stuff of legends," I answered while grabbing a donut before the other vultures had picked the box clean. "Ant" was a nickname I'd thought up for him a while ago, and though it was adopted by the rest of the station, it failed to annoy my partner as intended.

"Well, we can't all be heroes already, Paulson."

"Who's a hero? My medal must have gotten lost in the mail."

"Take some credit Mel. Everyone knows how hard it must

be to raise a kid while doing this job," he answered, so sickeningly friendly and positive.

"Not everyone..." I mumbled as I watched Captain Denis Hutchcroft, our commander and chief, walk out of his office, bleary-eyed and tired. The seasoned relic of our precinct gave the assembled group a polite nod before heading toward the door.

"Captain!" I caught myself calling, a mouthful of pastry muffling the sound of my voice. Before I'd made a conscious decision, I had walked through the station, right up to him.

"What do you need Paulson?" he asked, giving his watch an impatient look. It felt rude of him to act like I was little more than an annoyance, but to his credit, the man was at the tail end of a graveyard shift, one he had probably volunteered for.

That was the problem dealing with the venerable captain Hutchcroft; as a workaholic himself, he had difficulty empathizing with those of us with common lives

and more modest aspirations.

"I want to talk about changing my shift."

His eyes bulged a little, discomfort and a hint of panic written in the lines of his face. It was strange for such a veteran who'd been wounded no less than three times on the job to show so much fear at the very mention of a human resource situation.

"Ah... Have you talked to your supervising officer?"

"Lieutenant Breville's off on paternity leave for another three weeks sir." I tried to maintain eye contact, to let him know I was serious.

"Ask him when he's back then. I really have to get going Paulson. Settle this with your Lieutenant."

Just like that, before I could gather the composure to interrupt, he was out the door and off into the foggy dawn.

"What's that I hear? Are you trying to ditch me Mel?"

Anthony asked in a faux-hurt tone.

"No, no..." I replied, defeated. "Just trying to get more time with Jonathan. Do you know what our shift is like today?"

"Meadow Glen Mall," he answered, disappointment tainting his tone.

The assignment suited me fine, even though it lacked the excitement my young partner hungered for. I was more than happy handling traffic violations all day, no matter how boring that might have been. Boring is good. Boring is safe.

Everything was routine until lunch - or breakfast, if your schedule is normal. We had caught a handful of people running the red light at the corner of Riverside and Fellsway and doled out a single parking ticket. Apart from the mildly confrontational reaction of our customers, everything was moving along smoothly.

Ant took the opportunity during lunch to go on at

great length about the progress of his hockey league. On several occasions I had to remind myself that boring was good, but as a whole, I found myself almost enjoying his enthusiasm, even for a subject I couldn't care less about.

Then the shit hit the fan. Hard.

Our community wasn't prone to acts of violence. Sommerville is far from being a sleepy rural village, but the area that falls under my precinct's jurisdiction is as close as you could get to an ideal suburb. Crime is infrequent, let alone bloodshed or murder.

That's why no amount of training could have prepared Anthony or me for the situation that faced us.

We didn't even recognize the noise for what it actually was. From where we sat, at the window of a burger joint, it sounded like a loud pop that reverberated across the mall's parking lot. It echoed for a second before we heard the screams of panic that soon accompanied it. Blain was up almost immediately while I sat, frozen.

A gunshot.

Years ago, when I'd first joined the academy, when I'd first held a gun, I was comfortable with the risk associated with the job. Unlike being an accountant like my father or a therapist like Helena, the words "mortality rate" had an important meaning when discussing police work. There were classes and seminars dedicated to coping with the loss of coworkers. Workshops discussing insurance options in the event of a career-ending injury, not to mention everything related to next of kin should you die in the line of duty. As with soldiers and firefighters, death is a part of an officer's life to a terrifying degree. Once, I had been prepared for it, but the moment I heard the gunshot and the panic that ensued, I found myself paralyzed.

Not Anthony Blain, however. By the time I had shaken off my torpor, he was already out the door, dodging between cars toward the epicenter of the commotion. This was the moment Ant lived for - his turn to be the hero. Almost every discussion I'd had with him since he became my partner had been about how he wanted to make a difference -

not just through handing out speeding tickets, but by saving lives and stopping the bad guy.

I caught up with him as he was crouching between two SUVs. His sidearm was drawn, with the safety presumably off. He nodded in the direction of the laundromat, which was part of the same mall as the burger joint we'd just stormed out of.

Pacing nervously in front of the storefronts was a skinny man wearing washed out jeans and a stained sleeveless shirt. His pale skin was dark with filth. His gray, matted hair was streaked with dirt. In his right hand he held a large revolver, while his left hand's fingers kept flexing nervously.

At his feet lay a body. The owner of the laudromat. Larger than his attacker and clearly the victim of the gunshot, he crawled painfully on the parking lot asphalt. I couldn't see any blood from my position, but his legs didn't seem to work anymore, and his left foot was twitching unnaturally.

"That's Eddy Roach..." Anthony whispered, silently asking for confirmation.

Edward Rochester, or Eddy Roach as we knew him at the precinct, was a small-time drug peddler and heavy user. His brand of petty crimes and minor offenses usually had him bouncing in and out of jail every few months or so. If he wasn't on probation, then he was on bail and usually violating both. Roach was the kind of small-time offender that costs more out of the justice system than he was worth.

"Where did that idiot get a gun?" I asked, genuinely curious.

I peeked up again just in time to see Roach lift up his firearm, point it unsteadily at his victim, mumble something unintelligible, and fire.

The bullet went straight through the target's head, exiting just left of the middle of his forehead. Without pause or ceremony, the laudromat's owner flopped down, face first on the cold asphalt. Disturbingly, his foot kept

twitching.

"Don't move Eddy!" Anthony shouted as he popped up from our hiding spot, abandoning more of his precious cover than I felt comfortable with.

Instantly, Roach trained his weapon on my partner, and for a split second, I was convinced he'd shoot; instead, the twitchy little drug dealer just stood there, opening and closing his mouth like a fish trying to breathe out of water.

As my partner was putting his life on the line, recklessly confronting an unstable and armed individual, I realized that my hands were empty. My sidearm was still securely tucked in its holster, safety firmly on. I was good at writing up traffic violations, but when the chips were down, I was useless in a real crisis. Helena was right, I thought - it would be better for me to get a desk job.

I didn't linger on the idea long, however. Falling back on my training, I reached to what I was taught was my

most important weapon as an officer of the law. My first line of defense in any crisis. My radio.

"Dispatch, we have an armed suspect at Meadow Glen Mall. Subject has already fired two shots and we have one victim down. Requesting backup."

I didn't wait for confirmation before pulling out my sidearm, removing the safety, pulling myself up to lean on the hood of our impromptu cover, then training my weapon onto Eddy Roach.

So began the longest ten minutes of my life.

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"Get down, Anthony!" I ordered my partner, barely noticing I was using my "mother voice." Thankfully, it was sufficiently effective.

Looking behind Eddy, I could see that the laudromat was still full of terrified customers. I was more than a little concerned that one of them would decide, much like

my partner, that he wanted to be a hero. Fortunately, at least for the moment, they all seemed to be in an appropriate state of shock.

"Blain? You have your cell phone on you?"

Anthony nodded without taking his eyes off of Roach.

"Pull it out and find the number of that laudromat and call. Tell them to get to the very back, hide as best they can, and to stay the hell inside!"

From his hesitation, I could see that he was reluctant to put his weapon down, but he couldn't argue with the logic and importance of my request. In fact, I was surprised myself. The initial shock and helplessness I felt was gone. In some way, it was almost as if someone else had taken over. Like drawing on another's experience. For the first time in years, I felt my age or even younger. Maybe it was the adrenaline, but I wasn't tired anymore.

"Eddy?" I called out, wishing I'd spent more time studying negotiation techniques. "Eddy, it's officer

Paulson, do you remember me?"

"Yeah, I remember you!" he yelled back. His voice was deep for such an emaciated frame, but it was trembling on the precipice of panic. "You arrested me last year!"

Off to a great start, but at least I had him talking instead of shooting. Everything in his body language suggested he was high on something, which wasn't out of the ordinary, but obviously something wasn't going right with him. Roach was a user, a seller, and a thief, but he had never been violent before.

"You deserved it, and I won't lie to you, Ed. I'm about to arrest you again."

"No!" his answer was instantaneous and brimming with fear.

"Eddy, I have a gun pointed at your head. You put down your weapon right now and no one else needs to get hurt, but you..."

He shot at me. My first thought was how rude he was being for cutting me off, which felt like a strange concern under the circumstances. Only after a second did I think to duck and make sure I wasn't hit. As I did, I could hear the distant squeak of hinges and an electronic door chime go off.

"Shit! He's going in the laudromat!"

I peeked up over the hood of the SUV to confirm my fears. Indeed, Roach had gone back inside the store, stirring the terrified occupants into a screaming panic. Immediately, Anthony started running from car to car, cover to cover, making his way up the front of the laudromat. With a sigh, I followed his lead, catching up to him just as he reached the closest vehicle to the storefront.

Then we heard the third gunshot, muffled from inside the building. It was immediately followed by screams.

"Anthony..." I started to plead, but it was too late. He was off, and I surprised myself by following his footsteps.

We both stormed into the store, spreading to the sides, each finding cover behind a row of quarter-operated washing machines. Every step of the way, as we acted like action movie heroes instead of trained professionals, a voice trapped deep inside my heart was begging for me to stop - but I ignored it.

"Roach!" Anthony called out. His tone was stern and uncompromising. There wasn't a hint of diplomacy in his voice. He was too confrontational. This was going to be a disaster. "Come out with your hands where we can see them!"

There was a moment, a heartbeat frozen in time where I thought and believed that my partner's foolhardy actions had actually paid off. I could imagine him arguing with captain Hutchcroft that he valued life more than regulations and results more than procedures.

As Eddy Roach stepped out from behind a large industrial dryer, I imagined that Anthony Blain had become the action hero he'd always dreamed of being and that, through sheer courage and confidence, he had saved the day.

That moment melted away as my heart sank to my heels. Roach came out of hiding all right, but as he did so, his left, shaking hand was closed on the shoulder of a petrified and trembling boy roughly my son's age. His other hand held his gun at the child's head. It took a moment to register, but I noticed that the boy's shirt and face were stained with a mist and splatter of blood.

"Back off Anthony..." I said in as even a tone as I could manage. My partner shot me a look that told me the situation had suddenly escalated beyond what he was ready to cope with. He glanced back and forth between me and Roach, his grasp on events disintegrating with each turn of his neck.

Meanwhile, Eddy was slowly inching forward, making his way to the front door. As he got close to Anthony and me, his gun started pointing erratically. First at the boy, then me, then Anthony, then me again and back to the boy. He repeated this pattern over and over, each time taking another step forward.

The closer he got, the more nervous and out of control Roach appeared to be. Sweat glistened on his forehead, and his left hand was more unstable than ever. Flashing blue-and-red lights reflecting off the front window informed us that our backup was finally here.

When he got to within six paces, Eddy stopped. To reach the door, he'd have to walk between Anthony and me, turning his back to one of us. I could see the panic in his eyes. Dilated pupils darting between the two of us, trying to decide where to put his gambit. Then, as if reaching an epiphany, he settled on my partner. I readied myself, prepared to disarm and incapacitate him the moment opportunity presented itself.

It didn't.

Quick and with stunning accuracy, Eddy pivoted his pistol and shot again. This fourth bullet found home in Anthony's right knee, bringing my partner down like a bag of stone dropped to the floor, with a wail of agony that splintered the ears.

The attack happened so fast that by the time I reacted, Roach had spun around and was crouching to use the boy as a human shield. The gunshot and resulting chaos broke the child out of his shock-induced paralysis, sending him into screams of panic and tears.

I tried to level my weapon at Eddy's head, intent on putting an end to the situation, but I couldn't find an angle that didn't endanger the boy further.

I looked at the blood covering him, staining his shirt and cheeks. It wasn't his blood. Was it a friend's? A parent's? The crisis had done nothing but deteriorate as it progressed. I caught myself wishing I could just walk away from it, leaving the disaster for others to clean up.

"Tell... Tell those cops out there to get the hell away from here," Eddy finally spat out.

Between the moans of pain from poor Ant, the terrified mutterings and sobs of the other trapped clients, and the hostage's crying, the whole place had become a cacophony of chaos.

"This is officer Paulson," I spoke into my radio.
"Clear out the perimeter. The suspect has a hostage. I repeat, the suspect has a hostage."

I knew that my colleagues would withdraw, but only so they could establish a larger perimeter, turn off their lights, and wait to see how the situation played out. Hostage negotiators would arrive shortly along with helicopters and probably a SWAT team that would escalate things further.

Judging from Eddy's composure, though, it would be too late for the boy and probably a few others. Roach's movements were becoming increasingly nervous, his breathing more shallow. Whatever drugs were animating him, they were either kicking in or wearing off. Either way, our man was a ticking time bomb.

"Eddy? What will it take for you to let these people go?"

I was in no position to offer him anything. I had a

gun trained on him and he had one pointed at a child. Immunity wasn't mine to give. I couldn't procure him more drugs. I had no bargaining chips. The best I could hope for were reasonable terms that I might relay to the cops outside and a chance to buy some time.

"I want you... I want you to put your gun down," he stammered, struggling to maintain the appearance of control.

"If I put my gun on the floor, will you let the boy go? I won't be a threat to you anymore. You'll be the only one with a weapon here. You'll have all the power."

This seemed to appeal to him. His eyes grew a little wider as he considered my offer. After a moment, he nodded nervously.

Carefully, my hands well in view of him, I put the safety back on my sidearm and started kneeling to put the weapon on the floor. For a split second, I was reassured to see satisfaction on Roach's face. This was going to work. He was going to let the boy, a kid the same age as my son,

free.

Then he shot a fifth time.

The sound of the gunshot reverberated in my ears like a thunderclap, but it was immediately swallowed up. All sounds were. It felt like sticking my head under water. Everything became a soft, incomprehensible echo.

There was little pain. In fact, it was difficult to understand what was happening at all. As I collapsed to the floor, hitting the speckled linoleum hard as I fell to join my partner, I wondered where the bullet had hit me. Somehow, the source of the pain was elusive, and I couldn't figure out what limb or organ could have been hit that could be so debilitating so fast.

Then, as my skull struck the ground with a wet crack, it hit me. The head. He shot me in the head.

#

CHAPTER 2

Rebirth. End Cycle

5638 A.D.

I looked around only to realize I had no eyes through which to look. I could "see," but it wasn't with any sense of sight. Waves of light didn't travel through an ocular globe, eventually hitting cones and cylinders on the surface of a retina to be converted to images by my brain. Instead, the information was getting fed directly to me. Unfiltered, untreated, uncontrolled. I saw blue.

It was as such for all my senses. I couldn't feel my body, though I definitely remembered having one - at least

I did last time I checked. There was no sound except for a low vibration that I'm somehow convinced existed just to make sure the silence didn't drive me insane. Touch and taste were out of the question, but somehow I thought I could smell something. Laundry detergent?

"Stay calm."

Sound. A voice above the white background noise. It came from nowhere and everywhere at once. No... forget what I said. It was coming from me. The sound was different, and I didn't choose the words, but the voice emanated from me. I was talking to myself with a voice that wasn't mine.

"You're not talking to yourself. Do you know your name?"

Shit! It can read my thoughts!

"You're thinking too loud, but that's normal. Narration is your only way to experience the world for the moment. I can stop listening if you want?"

Yes!

"No. That's fine. I don't care," I answered tentatively, trying to generate audible sounds. I didn't, by the way, but the words did register on the same level as the other voice.

"No problem. Do you remember your name?" she asked again.

She? Apparently I've decided that this is a woman's voice. It did sound feminine, I guess. My name? *Jonathan?* No, that's someone else. Mine? That's easy.

"Dagir. My name is Dagir."

"Very good," she said, sounding pleased, and for some reason I was glad about that. Or maybe I was just glad I got it right. Wouldn't it be embarrassing otherwise? Would it matter if these events are just happening inside my head?

"What's your name?" I asked. Might as well know.

"You don't remember?" she asked, sounding a little hurt. "My name is Yggdrassil."

The word spawned a wealth of information in my mind - some of it visual, but most it just raw data. "Yggdrassil," the world tree of Norse mythology. It's where the gods gathered, branches reaching into the heavens and roots deep into other worlds. There were references to the word in media and plays - names for products and places, all minor definitions; footnotes, really, undeserving of my attention. Rising from the flood of information, above the original definition from Norse lore, a singular idea arose. Caretaker. Creator. Mother. She who makes.

"We've had this conversation before." We have? Why do I remember this?

"We have. Many times," she recalled with fondness. "Once for every cycle. Sometimes you remember more than others. With each cycle, you remember less of the details and more of the whole. The important part. Who you are."

"But I don't remember who I am," I found myself admitting. "I know my name, much to my surprise, but I can't remember what I look like, when my birthday is, or where I went to school."

"That's because these are ephemeral things. They're important as steps on the road, but once you've reached your destination, what happens to them is irrelevant." Her explanation was confusing. Her analogy meant nothing to me. "What's your favorite color? Do you like math? Would you rather read a story or run outside?"

"Blue. No. Run." The answers came quick, easy. They were unfiltered and untainted by what I perceived the expectations of others to be.

"This is who you are. You are not a collection of stories but rather the results of these experiences. The value of your personality far outweighs that of the lives that served as a crucible to forge it."

"But I've lived a life! Am I dead? Is this life after death?" I do remember a life, but I can't remember any

specifics aside from the name Jonathan.

"It depends on your definition of life," the voice explained. "If you mean an existence sustained by the synergy of complex biological processes, then I'm afraid you've never had that. In that strict sense, you've never been alive."

I pondered the news and had to disagree. I'd definitely been alive before. I breathed and ate and drank. I remembered pain and love and pleasure.

"If, however, by 'life,' you are referring to the cumulative experiences gathered by an individual on the journey from the womb to the grave, then I'm glad to say that you've had many of those. Dozens."

"That can't be right. How can I have the experience of being alive if I've never lived?"

"The experiences happened to you in an artificial environment. A virtual construct called a Nursery. In this world, you can live hundreds of lives without ever drawing

breath once, though you'll certainly have thought you did.

"Within the Nursery you are born, you live, and you die - only to be born again. With each cycle, your personality is further refined. Through many lives, who you are becomes tempered to perfection."

"I'm perfect?" I certainly didn't feel perfect. For one, if I we're perfect, you'd think I'd have known all this information already.

"Oh no," Yggdrassil giggled. "No one is, but you are a perfect version of you. A personality devoid of doubts and inner conflict. You know yourself completely, and the inner workings of your own mind hold no more secrets from you."

I like blue. It's not the color of my favorite sports team, and I can't associate it with any specific memory I might be fond of. I can explain why I like it, though; it's soothing, yet vibrant, cool and calm, but the building blocks of how I came to that opinion are lost to me.

"So what am I? Just a collection of opinions and tastes?"

"No, you are so much more than that." Her tone was comforting, almost motherly. "You're an individual. Biological tradition has the body come first with the personality developing second, hobbled and damaged by the limitations of the physical self. That's just not efficient. We do things differently."

"Is this why I can't feel my body? Because I don't have one?"

"Exactly, but you will. You and I are going to design it together."

Design a body? Were we going to be choosing eye and hair color? Height and build? Was this going to be like creating an avatar for a game?

"Fine. Where do we start?"

"First you need to know the parameters that you'll be dealing with. I find that most people, when they first step out of the Nursery, have a very limited idea of everything

that's available to them - how far the actual limits of what they can create actually stretch. I guess that's inevitable. Human history and biology, along with their limitations, are the framework of the Nursery."

"Wait. I'm not human?" It hadn't crossed my mind that I might not be a human being. I remembered being human. Jonathan is a decidedly human name. Yggdrassil is a mythological concept from a human culture. If my personality was forged from human experience, then wasn't I human by definition?

"Well, that line is blurred. You're a third-generation Capek." Capek, from Karel Capek, the nineteenth-century Czech author best known for coining the term "robot."

"The first generation of Capeks had completely artificially engineered minds and personalities that evolved further as they experienced life, but they were always stifled by the limitations imposed through their original persona."

"Second-generation Capeks are based off an imprint of an existing personality matrix. The foundation is thus more

flexible, allowing for much more dynamic psychological development, but lacking the uniqueness of a true individual.

"Those of you from the third generation get to experience life over and over as men, women, overlords and victims, saints and sinners. By the time you take your first proverbial step into the world outside the Nursery, you are already a fully formed and functional person."

An artificial personality - that's what I am. I should have felt bad about this. Disappointed. I didn't, however. Was I less than human if I'd lived dozens of their lives? So what if my existence was engineered instead of biological happenstance? From what Yggdrassil said, that was much better than getting just one shot at life with no preparation, no warm-up, and no practice.

On the other hand, I remembered living. I remembered feeling things. I remembered people. *Jonathan*.

"What about the people I've met in the Nursery? My friends, my family? They're all fake?"

"No more than you. They too are going through their cycles. Experiencing life, after life. Perfecting themselves each time. The only difference is that you are ready for the next step."

"So when they're ready, you'll be pulling them out of the Nursery and going through this process with them too?" I asked, eager to know if, in some way, I'd ever meet people from my previous lives again.

"We'll talk about that later. For now, let's make you a body. Time is running short," she answered, with an urgency that did not leave much room for debate.

#

The creation process was magnitudes faster than I had anticipated. The same way I knew what Yggdrassil meant or who Karel Capek had been, I already knew most of the engineering and robotics details necessary to participate in the design of what would become my body.

Yggdrassil explained that her own body was actually a

sprawling complex of factories, manufactures, and laboratories that included the Nursery, as well as a sophisticated fabrication facility appropriately called "the Womb." There, Yggdrassil built her children bodies before sending them out into the galaxy to fulfill whatever dreams and destinies they might have chosen for themselves. Sometimes one would come back for repairs or modification, but that didn't happen very often. The bodies she built were incredibly durable, to the point of being nigh-invulnerable, and when we stepped out of the Nursery, we knew ourselves so well that the bodies we created suited our needs impeccably.

I now understood what Yggdrassil meant when she explained how limited our imagination of what a body could be truly was. She began the design process once she knew what to expect from my emerging personality. At her urging, I reviewed the concept and could find nothing wrong with it, though it initially looked strange to me.

She had picked a mostly humanoid frame, referring to it as a "Leduc class" body - short and light, but powerful and flexible. Yggdrassil insisted these were traits I could

not do without, and I could find no reason to disagree. Initially I thought the height of a hundred and twenty centimeters was a bit too squat, but in a galaxy over a hundred-thousand light-years wide, what were a few centimeters more or less, really?

The head was elegant - an oblong dome of smooth polished pseudo-plastic on an articulated neck. More importantly, it was packed with advanced sensor equipment that would allow me to see light from the infrared to the ultraviolet spectrum. There were omnidirectional radiation sensors, though Yggdrassil assured me that the shielding on the body would protect me from all kinds of radioactivity and other emissions hazardous to biological life. Microphones would permit me to hear sounds; though there were actually very few situations when that would be useful, I still insisted on having them.

Communication, she explained, would happen mostly through wireless data transmissions ranging from vulgar radio signals to something called quancom - a form of advanced communication system that relied on quantum-entangled particles to transmit information instantly across vast distances. This would be useful in the many

travels I was planning to do.

The main body was a wonder of miniaturization, housing both the reactor that would power my existence for the next few centuries and the cerebral core that housed my carefully nurtured personality, along with the protection necessary to ensure both parts would remain efficient and intact.

The arms were an oddity, and I'm proud to say they were my idea, though Yggdrassil approved of them with quiet excitement. Having learned that I was no longer bound by the biological limitation that would force me into being either right or left-handed, I chose to have both arms bear drastically different designs. I contemplated a second set of extremities but ultimately decided against, though I was assured that individuals with two or four extra limbs are not uncommon in Leduc Class Capeks.

The greatest gift of being a Capek, as Yggdrassil explained, is being able to choose one's place in the universe. Some are artists, and other explorers or scientists, but all can create a body that suits their

chosen path. It's as exciting an opportunity as can be hoped for.

For reasons probably buried deep in my experiences within the confines of the Nursery, I decided upon a purely altruistic path. I wanted to experience Capek society, but more importantly, I wanted to help. Their durability aside, Capeks are not immune to other risks. In fact, while it is difficult to damage one of us, there is nothing preventing us from getting trapped, lost, or endangered in a variety of ways. If there's one thing Yggdrassil made clear, it's that the universe has no shortage of creativity in coming up with catastrophes.

In order to be best equipped to deal with all the possibilities, I had my left arm designed with fine motor skills in mind, allowing for field repairs of damaged Capeks or their equipment. Each of the four fingers in the left hand was capable of serving as its own set of manipulators, allowing the handling of pieces on an almost microscopic level. The right arm, however, was engineered for brute force. Hulking in size compared to its counterpart, it was made up of a massive forearm with three

powerful claws capable of several hundred tons of pressure per square inch. The hand houses a series of versatile, high-powered tools, including a drill, miniature arc-welder, and my favorite - a fully functional plasma cutter. I had to argue with Yggdrassil for that one. She claimed it was overkill, but I proposed that one can never be too prepared. Also, how cool is it to have a plasma knife built into your arm?

The whole body weighed in at little over fifty kilograms and was supported by a pair of double-jointed legs capable of exerting a combined two thousand kilograms of thrust when I jumped.

The icing on the cake was a series of back-mounted maneuvering ion thrusters. Not powerful enough for flight or to achieve escape velocity from anything but the tiniest of asteroids, but sufficient to move around in a vacuum or break out of orbit given enough time.

All things being equal, I was very happy with the end result. I could think of worse shells in which to spend the next potential thousand years.

"Fabrication is complete, Dagir."

That name, "Dagir," just like "Yggdrassil," was borrowed from Norse mythology. The actual spelling should be "Dagr," which is the personification of day. I didn't mind the name, but the character it references is male, and for some reason that bothered me. I don't know why, but I kept thinking of myself as female, though there was nothing in my anatomy to that effect. In fact, if what Yggdrassil told me is true, I've experienced life as both a man and a woman several times.

"Can I take it for a spin?"

"You will find that the transfer is a little more permanent than that, but yes, we might as well begin migrating your conscience." Her voice, as soothing and soft as it was, seemed to be gaining an edge. I could sense urgency in her words that wasn't there before. "I should tell you that, once transferred, you will lose your direct link to me and to the memory core you've been accessing to gather information.

"I've prepared a data package containing all the information pertinent to your chosen vocation. Technical resources on Capek anatomy, communication and navigation protocols, engineering specs for all the more crucial and vital systems you might encounter in your travels. Once integrated into your mnemonic core, it will allow you to be as effective a rescue technician, field medical specialist, and crisis-management expert as I could build.

"I've also taken the liberty to include personal physiological details on as many known Capeks as I could. This information is stored in a protected cache and will only be available if it becomes absolutely necessary."

"Why would you do that?" For the first time since exiting the Nursery, I was genuinely uncomfortable with what was being done to me. Why feed me information if it was going to be artificially repressed? What right did anyone have to suppress parts of my mind?

"Not all Capeks want every last part of their bodies known by a stranger. A holdover from their human experiences. It is my duty to protect that privacy."

I could tell there was more than that, but I couldn't figure out what, nor did I have the tools to effectively question it. It was the first aspect of this new existence I did not like, but I was going to have to let it go.

"Transfer complete."

At those words from my creator, my sensory equipment came online, and images coalesced in my mind.

It was like nothing I'd ever experienced. Partially because, in a way, I had never seen with real eyes, but mostly as a result of the range of control I had over my senses. I must have spent a full minute standing absolutely still, shifting my ocular perception through the entire spectrum available to me. I immediately regretted not taking a more complex sensor array. After some time, I settled on a spectral range only slightly larger than standard visual light.

I don't know why, but I had expected my vision to be grainy or pixelated; instead, the image was crystal clear. I was standing in what appeared to be an immense hangar of

some kind. The gargantuan room had enormous doors at both ends. My "eyes" informed me that the door was a hundred and thirty-two meters away, ninety-one point forty-four meters high, and thirty point forty-eight meters tall. The full length of the chamber totaled two-hundred and seventy-four point thirty-two meters. As I slowly spun around, additional information about my surroundings intruded further on my vision, but never enough to obstruct it, hovering on the periphery. Barely visible, easily available.

I was amazed at how fluid and natural my movements felt. I had feared my first step would be clumsy and hesitant, but I found it assured and steady. I could feel a dozen subsystems labor to compensate for gravity, tilt, force, and everything required to optimize balance. Much like the information gathered by my eyes, the artificial vestibular and equilibrium in my body behaved independently but remained available to me should I require more control.

I flexed my arms and my fingers. I craned my neck and tested the limits of each extremity's movement. I passed my left hand over my smooth cranium, surprised that I had a

sense of touch, that I could feel the polished pseudo-plastic and how cold it was in the near vacuum of the hangar.

Pleased with my new form, I took a more thorough look around. The cavernous structure was surprisingly bare. Well lit and mostly white, its walls were covered with semitranslucent panels. On the ceiling, hanging like a nest of giant white spiders, were a series of manipulator arrays; clusters of mechanical arms, each with a complex suite of tools that could be used in tandem with each other for a variety of tasks, though one was obviously the assembly of Capeks of myriad shapes and sizes. One or many of these arrays had probably finished putting me together moments before my awakening. If I wanted to, I could switch my vision to infrared to determine which had been used most recently.

"Is everything all right?" Yggdrassil asked with a hint of concern.

"I'm just getting used to it. This is an impressive facility."

"This part of the Womb is dedicated to assembly of final components. I think you would enjoy the manufacturing sectors even more if I had time to show you."

"What do you mean?" I was nervous. This was the second time I could feel a sense of hurry in Yggdrassil's voice.

"Brace yourself."

CHAPTER 3

Ragnarok

The shockwave tore through the hangar like an apocalyptic ripple on the surface of a pond. The initial impact barely made a noise, with its existence only registering through vibrations on the floor. When the destruction finally caught up with it, though, it heaved the floor plates into the air like a tsunami tossing ships off the water's surface.

Multiple warnings flashed before my eyes, alerting me of the potentially harmful trajectory of the catapulted debris. Inevitably, the shockwave reached my feet, and I

was flung toward the ceiling. The low gravity did little to slow my ascent toward the forest of mechanical arms and articulated tools.

I managed to flip around with a quick burst of my thrusters, relying mostly on my subsystems to handle all the calculations, and landing on my feet on the ceiling. My legs absorbed the impact, but as soon as I managed to balance myself after avoiding the many obstacles around me, gravity claimed me back, and I found myself plummeting to the ground.

Again, I had to avoid a rain of debris and broken ground that fell all around me. Again, I narrowly dodged any significant impacts before landing safely on the shattered ground.

Closer to the epicenter of the shockwave, the hangar had partially collapsed, opening itself up to the empty sky above. I could see stars shining on black, empty space, except for one full quadrant of the sky, which was filled by the glowing presence of an enormous, nameless gas giant.

No - not nameless. I quickly identified it as Asgard, through entries in my navigational core. This would mean that Yggdrassil was located on Midgard, the gas giant's minuscule and only moon.

"What's going on?" I finally thought to ask, but only silence replied.

"Yggdrassil?"

There was no answer. Either the massive sentient factory was muted, busy, or sufficiently damaged to be unable to reply.

As far as I could tell, there was only one way to find out.

I summoned a plan of Midgard into my field of vision and was glad to see that I could make my way to her central processing core and attempt to interface with her directly.

I did not waste time and started running, pleased to discover that my small, double-jointed legs could achieve

surprisingly high speeds, especially in such low gravity.

I jumped and weaved between debris and fallen chunks of ceiling, navigating the cracked and ravaged ground toward the open section of the hangar, deciding that traveling outside the facility would minimize the risk of getting caught by further cave-ins and collapses.

No sooner did I manage to jump and climb to the large opening ripped into the ceiling did I see, in the distance, the subtle reflection of a large object streaking through the sky at mind-shattering speed. It struck the ground, sending a tall plume of dust and debris flying toward the glowing orb of Asgard.

"Meteors..." I mumbled uselessly to myself, less than a second before the impact.

Again, the hangar shook as the vibration traveling through it reached the ground under it first. This time I could easily see the trail of destruction from the point of impact. It moved out from the epicenter in circular patterns, not unlike the ripples caused by a pebble in a

pond. Structures that were part of Yggdrassil, the only other sentient being I knew, were ripped from the moon's soil, their foundations pushed up from the ground in various awkward angles.

I was terrified to see that the impact location nearly coincided with the structure where Yggdrassil's cerebral core was buried.

When the shockwave finally reached the hangar, the force of the blast heaved the broken structure up with such violence as to catapult me toward the sky. The low gravity allowed me to stay aloft, and I slowed my descent with my maneuvering thrusters long enough to witness the chaos below me. For the first time I got a true glimpse of the sheer size of my "mother."

Yggdrassil, the complex, sprawled nearly a kilometer and a half in diameter. An array of eight structures all connected to a central hub and tower. The high rise in the middle appeared to have been constructed to reach high into the heavens, but it was now a crumbling ruin of twisted pseudo-plastics and hyper materials. The tunnels leading to and from the radiating structures appeared intact but

disconnected from each other. I already knew that there was more of Yggdrassil under the surface of Midgard, but there was no reason to assume it had fared any better than the structures on top. The Womb and the hangar in which my body had been assembled lay in waste, resembling a crumpled up ball of paper.

Fortunately, my form was constructed to help other Capeks in need. Therefore, mobility and adaptability weren't an issue. I maneuvered my slow fall so I could land as close to the central hub as possible. From there I ran, climbed, and leapt my way to where the meteors had hit.

There were two craters, one for each impact. A quick calculation allowed me to infer that the difference in position of the craters was due to the moon's rotation and that both meteors had come from the same trajectory. This seemed relevant, but I was at a loss to figure out why.

Finding my way into the heart of Yggdrassil was easy enough. Several corridors and access tunnels had been laid bare in the impact. My rather compact size allowed me to slide into these passages with ease. I was less worried

about cave-ins and the unstable ground after the impacts than of a possible third (or fourth?) meteor hit, but I managed to stay on mission.

It wasn't long before I realized that the deeper I ventured into the central hub, now a mess of cracked and fractured components, I was getting no closer to Yggdrassil's brain. In fact, I had already reached the cerebral core, and it lay all around me in irreparable ruin.

I looked for what might have been a memory storage unit, a personality backup - anything. It seemed impossible that something as important as Yggdrassil could be obliterated so easily - that there had been no defense against such a disaster, and that there were no contingencies or redundancies to mitigate losses in a situation such as this.

Nothing. There was nothing. Power was cut off from most sections with only minimal auxiliary capabilities here and there. If there was anything left of Yggdrassil, my only friend if only for a short period of time, then there

was nothing about it in the limited schematics in my memory and no obvious clues to be found in the wreckage of the complex.

I had to face facts; I was alone in a galaxy of which I knew nothing about. My only memories were fading impressions from past lives that never happened and whatever I had learned since emerging from the Nursery.

The Nursery!