

PULP

BY: JOVE

THANKS

Jake: For reading every version. For every minor change, to new chunk. You get an award for reading this more than anybody else.

Savannah: Thank you for the concept art of Amy. I still have it in my room, and I find more about her from looking at it.

Cynthia: Thank you for concept art of SLAM. I never got a physical copy, but to know someone cared enough to draw it for me when it was a small project, I can't thank you enough.

KC: Like Jake, you've read through so many drafts of Amy and SLAM that it wouldn't be nearly as good if I hadn't had you there to read through it. You're cute.

Jayde: Like Jake and KC, you've read through Amy and SLAM and given me some great edits, and boost my self-esteem about my stories. I'm sorry I never got back to you about Cornelia. One day, I'll finish my edits for it and send it to you.

AJ: Thank you like the many, many before you for reading this. I'm glad that my writing could inspire writing in you, and I can't wait to read from another writer I look up to.

And, a big thanks to everyone who I've met along my life's journey who have broken my heart romantically, hurt me for personal gain, or the countless bullies just looking to bully, and everything in between them. You're the people who got me to write because I felt like I couldn't speak anymore or could express myself in any other way than disliking myself. So, even though you may have ruined a portion of my life, it helped create this new chapter, and out of every chapter I have ever written, this is the one I'm most proud of.

“A good writer should be able to write comedic work that made you laugh, and scary stuff that made you scared, and fantasy or science fiction that imbued you with a sense of wonder, and mainstream journalism that gave you clear and concise information in a way that you wanted it.”

- Neil Gaiman

For myself, because I need this more than anyone else.

UNIVERSAL INTRODUCTION

As we begin this cosmic feat,

I must bring your attention to what you're about to read.

Three stories, three universally separate times.

Three outlandishly separate people.

Amy, SLAM, and Jak

Remember them well because you'll see them often.

Without one, the others' story couldn't exist.

Strange as it may seem,

But there's a god in the machine.

Life generates from blank page,

It would be selfish if only three got to share the limelight of the Universe.

For the Universe is big,

And these characters are big,

So we must find the big in the small.

There's something more in the meaningless

So while the Fate of the three intertwine,

We shall look into the lives of those or thrive.

We shall look into the lives of those who survive in this catastrophic Universe.

AMY

PART ZERO | LOST TAPE

“Every judgment of conscience, be it right or wrong, be it about things evil in themselves or morally indifferent, is obligatory, in such wise that he who acts against his conscience always sins.”

-Thomas Aquinas

Amy stood firmly on a flat plain. Behind her was a mountain that had an odd formation. Instead of being rough around the edges, it was smooth. Much like the moon, or planet, that hovered in the sky like a great silhouette. When she had appeared here, the color had been drained from the landscape, leaving behind dark, contrasting shadows and bright whites. Faintly, she could swear there was something else here, some other color or object on the periphery of reality. It seemed very familiar but the landscape was vacant other than a few boulders and unnaturally shaped rocks. The only other color was her outfit, which was indescribable and completely unfamiliar to her, but it was red. A red that appeared freshly dipped in a crimson liquid. Amy scraped her feet on the ground, spitting up some dirt that looked like a white mist before slowly falling back to place. There wasn't a single breath of wind here. Her obsidian hair didn't flow nor did the dress that she mysteriously ended up in. By habit, Amy pulled her hair back and around her shoulder. It was then she noticed how long her hands looked. Her digits extended longer than she thought was human. She examined them closely and curiously. They were as pale as they'd always been, but longer and on the nails was a red polish she didn't remember putting on. It resembled her dress heavily.

Amy couldn't quite comprehend what was happening. She looked up to the sky for answers. It was gray and dull, not a single dot of light other than the ominous circle

hovering above. When she looked down, she was startled and stepped back. There was a perfect reflection of her and the mountain behind her. Amy moved a hand, so did her reflection. It was like staring into a mirror. Amy smiled and the reflection followed suit. It was laughable that she would be startled by this. Amy started to walk closer to the reflection, or to wherever the mirror began. When she stepped closer, more details of her mirror-self came into place. It was identical to her in the current state. Long dress, black hair around the side of her neck, and the long fingers. Amused and thankful for some sort of relief from her perplexing situation, she moved her body around sporadically, provoking movement from the reflection of her. More dust rose up from the blank ground and slowly floated upward. Amy took the ends of her dress curtsied for the opposite and they both started to slowly step in place. Amy could feel herself dancing, though she wasn't sure what or where she learned the moves as she'd never taken a single dance class in her life, and wouldn't ever dare. Despite the confusion, it felt right in the moment and a large grin creased across her face as she moved fluently like a stream of water.

Though as soon as her joy came, it was wiped away. The stream she had become dried out. Something around her reflection started to peek into existence. Fragments of something behind a wall she couldn't see. It looked like someone had brought a brush and started to paint something behind her and into reality. Amy and the reflection looked stunned and brought their elegant movement to a stop as they stared fixated on the occurrence in the mirror. Watching with fright as something seeped into the world. Through the mirror, Amy saw a figure coming into. The thing was in casual business attire. A white button up, red slacks, and a piercing red tie. The style of

dress did not startle Amy, what startled her was its disproportionate features. Its legs were too big for each other, its torso twisted at an angle with arms that dangled on its side like noodles. Its eyes were black, and it had a toothy smile too large for its face; it literally came off the pallet.

Amy spun around breaking her shocked trance. Expecting to defend herself she put up her arms to block her face, but through the gaps in her defense, she didn't see the figure. Lowering her arms slightly, she looked back to the mirror. In the reflection she could see herself and the frightening demon standing idly. Amy looked back to where the figure should stand. Nothing. There wasn't anything there. Amy turned back to the reflection and watched as the monster started to turn around on its lopsided body. In horror Amy watched it look at her in the reflection. The neck of the figure suddenly popped outward like a jack-in-the-box carrying its head off to the side. The quick action surprised Amy enough to fall backwards to the ground and unfortunately landed on a rock with her right shoulder. The pain was quick and not gentle, but Amy dexterously rolled over ignoring her fall and getting up to her side. In the reflection, she saw the abomination starting to move over to her reflection-self.

Amy stood up looking around the blank space frantically. Her breath was sharp and sporadic as she started walking backwards away from where the figure presumably was. Grasping her shoulder she turned around and started running closer to the reflection. Her other-self followed and so did the monster. As Amy ran closer to the mirror, she became only a few feet away from her mirror-self before she felt her bruised shoulder brush up against a soft surface. It was most likely the mirror that inexplicably existed. Amy kept running only taking a few glances to see if the figure

was following behind. The beast, though horribly disfigured, it moved faster than Amy could run. It was gaining headway on her and her legs just couldn't move fast enough no matter how much she demanded them to in her mind.

Something flickered around Amy whose focus was on running forward. She turned her head and noticed that herself in the mirror was gone. Amy stopped abruptly sliding across the loose dirt on the ground. She could see herself back where they'd run from. She had fallen to the ground. Amy was confused. Wasn't that her reflection? Amy hadn't tripped. The monster was almost upon her reflection, and Amy ran as close as she could to her opposite. Before kneeling to the ground next to the other Amy, she looked around and saw that there was still no monster after her. Amy's reflection turned a head up to her and they mouthed something though Amy couldn't understand. Amy tried to say something back, but found that she had no voice. The reflection's eyes grew wide and it sat up and pointed to Amy, or was it behind Amy? In desperation, the reflection started to slam its hand on the space in between them appearing to scream something to Amy and pointing. Amy turned around but couldn't see anything. Amy hadn't noticed the monster coming up on her reflection and in a swift action she was grabbed and swept up off the ground by the lanky arms of the monster. Amy's reflection kicked around furiously squirming around with complete confusion. It seemed like her reflection wasn't sure what was attacking her.

Then, Amy felt something grab her thigh. In bewilderment, she hadn't felt the tickle on her leg but when she realized it, it was far too late. Something wrapped around her leg crawling up her thigh, and then felt whatever grabbed her leg clamp down bringing a brutish pain on her limb. Without warning or time to pry the unseen force

away, she was swiftly lifted upward, and in a moment of panic, Amy tried grabbing at the ground or anything to keep her down, but nothing was able to save her. She was lifted upside down, blood rushing to her face as she stared at her reflection. In the mirror, she saw herself floating up in the air, though couldn't see anything there. The reflection of herself, however, she could see them being tossed and thrown about by the monster that had appeared in the world. In her last moments, Amy watched as the mirror-self was thrown with extreme propulsion to a large boulder. Her reflection struck the rock with such force that the front half of it shot bits of rock and shrapnel around. The reflection of her fell to the ground motionless. Amy shook with terror, all resistance she had put up was gone. Her body began to sway slowly to the left, then the right with more and more speed until she was spinning around in a circle. The momentum was intense, enough to make her stomach turn and feel as though her insides were being rearranged by the force of it. Amy's vision became so blurred and painful to see, she had to close her eyes shut to prevent her eyeballs from popping out. Then, the force gripping her leg let go and she could feel herself get butterflies as she sailed through the air. She peeked her eyes open just in time to watch herself smack into the ground and everything going black.

Amy, despite the horribly dream she just endured, did not wake up with a sudden jolt or a spasm of movement. Instead her eyes opened slowly as if she'd just been nudged awake by a prince or a unicorn in a magical forest. Slowly she sat up against her pillow and looked around her room. The only light was beaming from the TV in the dark room. The TV flickered between the static snow and the local news station, Winstom Daily Broadcast. The anchors were still raging about the terrorist

attack on the World Trade Center, a truck bombing and a failed one at that. With only six people killed and the towers still standing, her groggy mind wondered why the News was still going at it after four months. She then supposed that was possibly an insensitive thought. Amy rubbed the sleepiness and was glad to see her fingers were their normal size--she'd already forgotten about it--and that she wasn't wearing the red nail polish or dress. She was more or less relieved and judging from the time on her clock, 6:37 AM, it would be wise to get ready before she was too late for work.

S.L.A.M. B.B.

PART ZERO | LOST EPISODE

"Science Fiction is any idea that occurs in the head and doesn't exist yet, but soon it will, and will change everything and everybody. [Writing science fiction] is always the art of the possible, never the impossible."

- Ray Bradbury

"SLAM, I told you already, I'm calling this off!" Markus yelled

through SLAM's ArmGear as she soared over the bright flashing streets narrowly avoiding neon lights and large, digital ads in the air. It became such a drag to reply to Markus when she was flying freely.

"Oh please, Markus. It's only a DRILL, remember? I've fought more of them than there are circuits in my head." SLAM sped through the air and plugged the destination into her digital Dashboard.

"SLAM I know you can fight anything we've programmed you to, but this is not a DRILL! Are you listening to me?"

"I'm a Super Level Atomic Machine. I have this in the bag even if it's a *VARIABLE*. I'm 1.9 trillion dollars of rogue AI butt-kicking." She gloated, but rightfully so with her impeccable DRILL removal record.

"You've only fought one Variable in the past, and that one was a defective one at best." Markus sighed over the rustling paper.

"You're more illogical human than a calculated robot, I swear."

"Tell that to your men who programmed me." SLAM laughed as she looped up and over an oncoming semi. Markus sighed and grumbled about something. "Why are you so worried? You're acting like my biological father who won't let me go to the dance. I thought only lab assistants got this attached to their creations."

"SLAM, you can't afford a single scratch or my head will be on the chopping block!" She rolled her synthetic eyes and glanced at the bustling streets below. People watched in awe as she soared overhead.

Moments like that made her feel like a real hero in the eyes of the citizens.

"Markus, don't bust a bolt. The only head on the chopping block is the DRILL's. I'm capable of adaptation. I've already learned how to fly Boords! I know how to speak every language from English to Binary. And I know how to *SLAM!*" Her zeal was almost enough to throw her off the pink Boord as she surfed along the crowded digital highway. "Anyways, I've got to fly. You know it's not safe to use ArmGear and operate a Boord."

"W-wait!" The android closed the voice program and continued to glide above the color drenched city. The Digital Dashboard in her helmet flashed her target on the 3D map of Uninet.

Flicking through the city landscape on her Dash, SLAM got an exact pinpoint on the DRILL. It was on the top of the Bux Billions super-mall, which was thousands of feet up in the air. "That's a strange place for a DRILL to lurk... I don't suppose there's a lot of valuable data to steal there." SLAM said as she shifted the Boords propulsion upwards. Gaining height over a cluster retro buildings, she could see Bux Billions towering over Uninet like a monolith. Vehicles circled around the large edifice like bees unaware of the danger high above. SLAM looked to the top of the tower and activated her Eagle Eye program to lock on her target. As she zoomed in she saw the silhouette of something facing the setting sun. "Run scans and

diagnostics." SLAM's blue screen morphed into a new format around the haunting figure. On the side of her vision appeared various observations and a few vague notes and eye witness accounts. However, one area remained blank. *Cyber-Type: (ERROR IN SYSTEM. UNABLE TO IDENTIFY INTELLIGENCE. PLEASE CONFIRM DASHBOARD AUTHENTICITY).*

"Hmph. Maybe Markus was right. Dashboard, run Foe Obliteration Chance." A new window popped up. Algebra ran on the screen, graphs started to appear from along the sides of her vision, and an overall estimate calculation showed up on the screen in a dangerous orange color.

"37% chance to obliterate target." The screen spoke back in a cockney accent. SLAM still hadn't taken it off default voice. Partly because she thought it was riot.

"Real funny, Dash. Now run the Diagnostics again, but cut it with the hyperbole." SLAM slapped the side of her helmet and ran the program.

"27% chance to obliterate target." SLAM paused, putting her hands on her hips with a grin and a dangerous, unamused look in her eyes.

"Yeah, we'll see about that." She fastened the helmet onto her head and gunned it for the tower pushing 140MPH within seconds avoiding lines of traffic with ease. At SLAM's speed it didn't take long for the figure to enter auto-targeting range and her sensors

already had a cross-hair around the Intelligence. It stood strongly facing the sun as its serpentine shadow moved around the roof.

"Hey!" SLAM yelled at the motionless target. "Did you know there's no loitering here?" She pulled out the pink BBlasters from her side and wielded them in her metallic hands. Her dashboard auto-aimed as she continued to speed through the air at the motionless figure. "I'm afraid your fine is: OBLITERATION!" She flew up over the figure and let fire. Her guns sent small, compact explosives one after another as she soared overhead. Each shot exploded in a cloud of pink and shrapnel flew from the fog leaving behind trails of smoke. SLAM yelled as more and more pellets came down on the tower like an air strike. She relinquished her onslaught when the BBlasters abruptly ran out of ammo, but a smile ran across her face as she stared at the hazy, pink destruction. Slowly, SLAM lowered her Boord until she was level with the tower.

"Dash, run System Diag-" A red alert flashed on her screen right before a red beam shot out from the cloud at SLAM. She quickly turned over on her Boord and dodged the shot, but another came for her like a guided missile. SLAM pulled up her board vertically and blocked the attack. The projection hit and which was followed by a pause. Then, she felt herself begin to fall. "W-what?!" Her Boord started to change color as she began a high free-fall. The engine in the back was spitting out flames as she descended, the pink tints

slowly turning red. Everything happened so fast as she lost balance and started to do somersaults in the air. Panicking as she began to plummet hundreds of feet, instinct kicked in. "Short Burst Launch Go!" She shouted and kicked off of her Boord as the mini rockets in her boots engaged and propelled her forward. Her perfect timing pushed her like an arrow and right through a window of the mega mall.

Glass shattered around her as she flew into the building. SLAM couldn't slow down before impact and she accelerated right into a clothing rack before slamming into a large magazine shelf. She flopped over onto the ground and groaned while her Dashboard pulled up a health diagnostic.

"Warning, Armor Threshold at 72% capacity. Please seek cover to replenish fields." SLAM hit the side of her helmet and the voice shut down.

People began screaming from inside the shop she had abruptly crashed into and she could see people desperately pouring out of the automatic doors to the sound of jazzy shopping music. SLAM started to pull herself up using what was left of the rack to get on her feet. Before she could address the damage, she saw something fly right past the window.

"Hey! Get back here! If you think I'm done with you, you're-" She limped over and through the broken glass, she saw the foe pulling itself up on the ledge. The enemy's hands pulled with enough power to

dent the metal ledge, and an ominous red aura floating around its body helped to facilitate such strength. It was enough to make SLAM quit her hero yammering. SLAM pushed past the clothing and tried to get to the windowsill in time to catch the target off guard, but the aura lashed out at her nearly striking her helmet. SLAM swiftly maneuvered around the lashes rolling under the rack she crashed into and seamlessly pulled out a bar ripped from the frame to combat against the onslaught. The aura tried for every angle but SLAM's autolocking was too robust to fail, and every attack she deflected with the bar. Digital code ripped from the line dissipating in the air into oblivion.

The enemy was too quick for SLAM and took this time while she was distracted with its tools. There was a thick and hardy chortle coming from beyond the window pane that crackled like static on a TV. The target slowly raised itself from the ledge and stepped through the shattered window pane. "H3LL0, SL4M." Its voice was sonorous and the ring of dial tones underlined its voice. SLAM felt the being displace her calculated senses.

"What are you? You're no DRILL I've ever seen. Of course that doesn't mean I'm going to kick your ass any less." SLAM stared fearlessly at the form which she hadn't ever seen before. The serial code on its shoulder, AI2337, suggested that it was an Intelligence created ages ago. The slick black armor had circuits that ran up and

down the suit, much like SLAM's. They pulsed the same color as the red code floating around the daunting figure. Even in the light, its face remained featureless under the shadow of its helmet and the black Digital Dashboard. Except for the eyes, which glowed crimson with power.

"I 4M TH3 VIRU5 H3R3 2 INF3C7 Y0U. 7H47 I5 MY J0B." The code around the VIRUS began to slither across the ground.

"Well," SLAM slowly felt for her U-BELT and slipped out her LIPstick without the VIRUS' sensors picking it up. "At least let a lady reapply first." She flicked her LIPstick and dodged to the side. The code hissed and flew at her untangling from its source. The VIRUS unknowingly ignored the LIPstick but as it slammed into its suit, it was engulfed in electricity. A magnetic pulse surged through the room and the electronics around exploded as the VIRUS was blown from the window. SLAM watched the VIRUS fall to the street, broken and defeated. She grinned victoriously. "Obliterated."

Sirens wailed, and SLAM could see air traffic swerving to make way for the emergency vehicles. "Just in time! I'm always in need of a clean up crew." She looked around at the destruction, and her processes confirmed that staying for the police to arrive would land her in a bit of scolding despite her position. SLAM tapped her Air-Gear and the florescent-blue screen blew up along her wrist. She had three missed calls, all from Markus with small footnotes below

his caller-ID. *SLAM, how is it going? SLAM, did you have any troubles? SLAM, do I need to quit my job before I get fired?* SLAM rolled her synthetic eyes and clicked redial. SLAM tuned out to Markus' ring tone with her back to the window. Markus eventually picked up.

"SLAM! Are you okay? I'm assuming you survived the encounter..."

"Yes, Markus, I survived. However I did lose my right arm, and I'm afraid that's coming out of your paycheck." SLAM winced and feigned a strained voice.

"That's very funny, SLAM, but I know your Air-Gear is ON your right arm." Markus, unamused and not slightly fooled, took a sip of his Beta-Lab Booster drink.

"Wow, nothing gets past you." SLAM paced around the debris kicking bars and clothing aside. Something slithered in the room. It's noise masked by the chattering debris.

"I'm not quick to pass muster."

"But you passed me, and look what I've done! I've defeated a VIRUS!" SLAM threw her arms in the air as audienceapplause.sfw played on her Digital Dash.

"Yes, you're quite the success..." Markus fell silent. "A VIRUS? That's what you fought? Not a VARIABLE?" Markus's voice raised considerably, an unnerving sign.

"That's what it told me. What's new though, DRILL, VIRUS,

VARIABLE, all the same thing really. Just bad AI." SLAM pulled a copy of Chique-Chiq, the most popular bionic-fashion magazine in all of Uninet. SLAM was not very impressed by the wired-hair phase going around, and she directed that thought at the young, female model on the cover. She thought it looked ugly having hair that was nothing but wires.

"Not precisely, but that doesn't matter now. What happened, did you Obliterate it?"

"Yeah, it's a crumpled heap on the street right now. It was a very tricky adversary." Her fingers flipped through the pages. Something wiggled in a clump of clothing behind her and she tilted her head to inspect, but saw nothing and turned back to her magazine.

"Did you Exorcise it? Or just Obliterate?"

"Exercise? What the hell do you think I did with it, buy it a gym member ship?" SLAM put the magazine back on the shelf.

"No, SLAM, Exorcise! Remember your training video? On VIRUS'S you're supposed to Exorcise them lest their code infect something else!"

"I haven't had to use that once and I've been working how long now? Four years? Do you think I watch that video for fun on the weekends? I don't know how to do that!" SLAM ran over to the window and peeked over the ledge. The VIRUS was still smoking down there in an static heap. The clump of clothes edged closer to SLAM.

"SLAM, you've got to get out of there right now! Where's your Boord?"

"Infected, I guess. It got hit with some bad code." SLAM stepped back. She thought if she ran, she might be able to Exorcise the VIRUS before something else could become infected. The pile of clothes illuminated red, and from the collar of a pink jumpsuit, a line of code from the virus scudded along the floor to SLAM.

"Okay, get to a safe area I'm calling someone to get you."

"Excellent. I love being a trillion dollar android who needs a chauffeur." The code rode up along the wall until it hung from the ceiling over SLAM who was unbeknownst to the noxious assailant.

"Okay, what is your current—" The code dropped from the ceiling right onto SLAM's helmet, and it phased into the system.

"Ah! Oh, oh god!" SLAM gripped at her head. Her screen was flashing red as system status alerts filled her screen.

"WARNING: Un4uthorized code in system."

"WANRING: Beglnning DeTox sequence. Pl3ase remain active."

"SLAM! What's happening!"

SLAM's body flailed uncontrollably, her legs moved forward through the broken glass, and by some miracle, her defective arms, now removed from her head, grabbed onto the sturdy window frame. Her body spun around the frame and over the ledge in loops as more things popped up on her screen.

"BUY TURBOFLEX NOW! SEE RESULTS TODAY!"

"YOU WON A FREE AIR-GEAR DELUXE! PLEASE INSERT YOUR EMAIL
BELOW!"

"HOW TO PICK UP ROBOBABES IN 3 STEPS!!!! PEOPLE WHO DON'T KNOW
THE SECRET HATE THE PEOPLE WHO DO! CLICK HERE!"

"HELLO slam! WERE GLAD TO INFORM YOU THAT A RELATIVE HAS PASSED
AWAY AND YOU GET TO SEIZE THE ASSETS! PLEASE USE YOUR SOCIAL SECURITY
NUMBER TO CONFIRM YOUR IDENTITY."

"Oh *GOD* the adwaaaaaaare!" SLAM screamed as her hands let go and
inertia sent her spinning back into the store. Her head rang with the
unending sound of clicking and digital voices offering horrible
deals.

"ERROR 505: D3TOx c0uld n0t be compl3te. 5Y573M5 4R3 N0RM4L.
R3B0071NG....."

"SLAM! Are you there?" Markus yelled through the Air-Gear as
SLAM ran through the sliding glass doors and crashed onto the mall
concrete as glass danced around her. The flashing lights began to
fade along with her vision.

"SLAM answer me! Help is on the way! Please stay with-"

Then everything went cold and the fans in her head shut off.

JAK

PART ZERO | LOST SCRIPT

“We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality.”
- Iris Murdoch

The graveyard was full of stone flowers that protruded from the decaying earth in forgotten isles organized by unclear columns. They were wilting and worn, near the point of disappearing and melting into the earth like the foliage from long ago. All that was left in the graveyard were the rigid, stone flowers and gnarled trees whose branches were deformed and limp like tendrils as they hung

motionless in the still air of the early, purple dawn.

The clouds formed and festered above in their purple-colored hate and only did the sun shine through breaks in the ominous haze. One light shining through hit the the earth before a stone flower like a spotlight, and standing in the silver light was the figure of a man, the actor and the player, shrouded in black leather and rags that stretched down his costume. The only visible part of his body were the green eyes that stared attentively at the dirt. He gripped tightly to an object that was stubby, short, and had the figure of a small garden trowel which he pulled from the holster on his leather satchel that hung high from his side.

With a flick of the wrist, this small trowel extended in length and size, and was transformed to a long, metal shovel with dangerous ridges along the silvery scoop. From distance the shine of the metal head could be seen like a lost beacon with no one to answer the call. The shovel twirled in the dexterous hands and in the motion, the player plunged the tip into the ground and started to dig. The light from the melancholy sky slowly faded away until the only light was the noticeable white glow of the shovel digging into the damp, purple earth.

CHIK-SLK

Every mound of dirt lead Jak closer to the goal.

CHIK-SLK

The pile began to swell to the right of the hole. The clouds festered overhead, plotting and whispering with enough energy to send a mild breeze to the ground level. Leaves danced around Jak's abdomen that lowered into the ground with every flick of dirt.

CHIK-KLUNK

CHIK-KLUNK

CHIK-KLUNK

Bulls-eye. Sometimes the headstone would be just a little off from where the coffin would be. Habit of the old-world. Time was money and precision took time. Perhaps that was the downfall and not the overuse of precious, magic materials. Jak raised the shovel upward like a sword about to stab into its defenseless enemy.

Time was still money.

WHHF-KEH

Even now. It always has been.

WHHF-KEH

But precision was always worth it.

WHHF-BFCHUSH

The coffin's weak wood shattered open, though no light passed through into the dark hole. Jak lowered to his guarded knee and warily poked his head in. Nothing. He couldn't feel his breath bounce off of a body, nor could he inhale the bitter decay of a corpse or the smell the metallic iron and silver of prized possessions. Jak pulled out his head. Water began to hit the earth and his cloaked body. Within the satchel at his side, he pulled from it a small ball the size of an eye which he rolled around in the palm of his hand. The crystal began to glow and burn from the inside an intense white. The rain continued it's assault from the pugnacious clouds. They lacked compassion. Jak hovered the ball over the hole but being careful for his eyes; the Lumis-Ball was very popular in light and blinding people. Over the hole, he dropped it and quickly covered the gap with his face. He watched as it fell following it down the dark path down. Deep into hell. The light was swallowed whole with no cry to follow it.

“That's not worth it. Certainly not worth it.” Jak shook his head and carefully stood up onto dirt. Possibly an old well patched up. Something to that effect, but not something he would waste his time on any further. Not without the proper equipment, anyways. The shovel shortened and Jak turned

around with his mind set to returning to the hovel. It was a heavy disappointment to find nothing in the grave. The project needed materials and he wasn't finding any of the right ones. Codus was going to be very displeased.

Jak's face met with hard metal. His nose pressed against steel, his eyes glaring at his own shrouded reflection, and he felt a heavy wind on the back of his neck. Hot. Puffing.

“Wull nuw, I duddn't expuct thur tuh bee mure Grobbers 'ere.” The voice, as thick and rounded as the vessel it emerged from, came down as Jak was pulled up and up by the back-collar of his costume. Jak winced from behind his coverings. Peering through the slit and at the barbarian pulling him to greet his scarred, charred, burned, and utterly mangled face. It's long black hair like tendrils draped over his face in sloppy strands which reached all the way down to his unpleasant, gaped smile. Had Jak been so conspicuous as to be noticed out here? Like any smart Grobber he had done reconnaissance on this area for days now to avoid both Grobbers and the corrupted...

Its nose wrinkled, and it waited with baited breath for a response from Jak.

Both waited. Jak remained in the air, his arms dangled, feet yearned to touch ground, and his fingers rubbed the edge of his shovel. Jak's size compared to the brusquely-put-together Grobber before him was a dramatic shift. The Grobber held Jak like a cat to a mouse, and the Grobber felt that way. Jak hadn't the inkling of that simile.

“Yuh knuw, it's awfully rude nut tuh ruply to uh question.” Putrid. Voice, breath, the ghastly pale eyes, all of it. The Grobber's cesspool face evoked more disgust than fear.

“Where's your tool?” Jak finally said, and though he spoke from behind his shrouds and coverings, his tone was crystal clear.

“Wut?” The face contorted into a look of confusion.

“You're new to this. Definitely new.” The rain was gaining momentum. The clouds above were

tormenting and festering. They were enjoying the debacle. They were enjoying themselves.

“Nuh uh!” Jak could feel the grip tighten on the back of his collar.

“Yes. I'm positive. Definitely positive.” Jak spoke gingerly and over the relentless rain he was heard fine by the Grobber.

“Yuh stup it!” The Grobber shook Jak. He gripped tightly to the handle of his shovel. The light dimmed from the steel head.

“If you want a tip. Or two. I'd get yourself an implement. A shovel, because those work well. You know you can't dig up this soil with your bare-hands. You can, but you know what happens. We've seen it. Enchant the shovel so it won't rust in the dirt around graves, because the corruption is much stronger. Very strong.” Jak spoke calmly as the Grobber started to use his other hand to unhook Jak's satchel that dangled from his shoulder. “If you're looking for anything, you won't find it. No you won't. This yard is empty. I've searched.” A half-lie. He really didn't have anything, but he had only finished one grave. Jak was a horrible liar. You didn't have to look into his face to tell he was bluffing; you could hear it in his intonation. That and there was only one dug up grave in the area. The satchel unhooked and fell to a ripe puddle with an unnerving splash. Jak watched and then looked back to the Grobber. His gray eyes unamused with how light the satchel landed.

“Wut, yuh tink yuh's so smurt, but yuh ain't gut nuthing!” The Grobber stared into Jak's eyes with disdain. “Yuhs ain't nuthing! Yuhs nuthing! Nuthing!” The hand wrapped and clinging tightly to Jak pulled him around and tossed him into the air with ease. Jak took flight. “Buck tuh tah hule whure yuh came frum!” The Grobber chortled as Jak, who was flailing through the air after being tossed some thirteen-feet skyward crashed right into the hole and onto the unstable wood with a satisfying smash.

There was the sound of creaking wood. Jak landed right on top of the wood structure, and his head slammed into a particularly bad patch of soil riddled with rocks. His hand twitched, and through

his blurred vision, he saw his hand had been penetrated by a thick bit of the wood he had just landed on. He turned his palm. A jagged bit poked from skin; blood ran down the edges. He looked to the sky. The clouds were unloading their tears and the wind whistled through the dead tree hovering over the hole. They were having quite a good laugh. As they unloaded on Jak and over the wind he could hear the Grobber's laugh approaching the ridge of the hole.

“Awh, luk ut um nuw!” The Grobber's figure stood over the hole. Lighting flashed, thunder boomed, and the menacing barbarian grinned. His white eyes glowed. Jak reached for the edge of the hole with his good hand, but could get no grip with the slick dirt that was quickly turning into mud. “Say, dun't yuhs thunk if yuhs gunna dig yuhs gunna need thus?” The Grobber, now in control, held up Jak's shovel. It glowed as it held it up to the sky. It looked like a toothpick in its hand. “Yuhs nut much uf uh treasuh, but i'll burreh yuhs anywuhs.”

With every sound of metal to dirt, the feeling of being smothered by more dirt came over Jak. He couldn't see, and his senses were giving into darkness, but he knew he was being buried alive. Rhythm. There was rhythm to the Grobber burying him. A white flash that penetrated the covers of his eye lids, a wracking thunder crack, rain solo, and then the slick of a shovel tossing dirt, and then more pressure on his body. A orchestra to his funeral. A personal taps.

Worst of all, the soil. He could feel it. It lived around him. He would be lucky if his clothing would keep him protected from the corruption. Should he live, he would be a walking corpse. His exposed hand already felt infected and it burned in the breathing, beating soil. Death would accompany him, so he accepted his fate and kept his eyes closed.

In between his haze, something sloshed or slipped, he couldn't tell with his eyes closed behind his coverings, someone yelled, most likely the Grobber, and then something feel on Jak that was strong enough to knock out what left he had of air. There was the distinct sound of cracking wood, and

suddenly the earth gave way beneath him.

UNIVERSAL INTERLUDE

I'm beginning to think,

Perhaps you are as well.

Stranger and stranger as more is found.

The heroes and heroines are nothing alike.

As of now, they live their own lives,

They're cut off from each other by barriers of Logic,

Reason,

And

Normality.

I say there's only one thing stronger than those walls,

That being Fate.

Which is what this story is in need of.

A little bit of Fate to grease the gears,

To get the story in motion.

**AN OUTSTANDING GLIMPSE INTO THE
FANTASTICAL AND WHIMSICAL LIVES OF THE
RIGHTFULLY HAPPY PEOPLE OF BURDIN VALLEY,
UTAH**

In a cramped, bucolic nook far south of Utah, there is a long stretch of highway leading out

of state that is kept between multiple large mountain ranges mottled with clumps of juniper trees. Those focused on their quick passage through the valley would never guess that beyond the largest stretch of mountain, there is a small town cradled in the shadows of the behemoth. Only a few roads, unused and unkempt; decayed by weather and storm lead into the small close knit group of people. The abodes of the residences are small and fairly beaten up as not many practice practical jobs, the most complex out this far being farming on the ranches with houses that could surpass as more than a hovel. The occupation of the happy community is usually shrouded in mystery and while at the small one-story church in the pitifully small town square, it makes for fun speculation and gossip between the adults.

The houses of the natives with curious jobs are generally far and in between. The beaten up road passes through the square that is shared by the church, the lackluster market, and the long standing sheriff's station with a few antique cells. Some houses are spread out around this area with long lines of dirt leading to driveways but farther down the one-way road a house could be passed with its windows gazing back at you every few minutes or so. A few miles down the track, there's a community of houses along both sides of the road. Their lawns: yellow and patchy with their fading white fences and gates that promote a most unwelcoming atmosphere as you reach a fork in the road. To the left leads up higher to the mountain with less and less houses as you reach the plateau and then the right road leads farther down the valley to a river kept busy with fishers from the town and from elsewhere. The road bridges over the river and continues along a stretch shrouded by heavy foliage and dense woods. If you were to look down that way from the plateau of the mountain, you'd only see the bright green of the plentiful life and growth. From the top, however, you wouldn't see the houses long abandoned hidden in the vines and reclaim by nature. The houses that are purposefully forgotten and guarded by a sturdy fence

covered with barbed wire. Beyond the fence and in those houses, people lived there with their curious little lives with their peculiar little families. Then, one family, one day, went in for the night after a long Sunday filled with prayers and playing by the river, orange peels and jogging along the shaded roads, friends and laughter. They went home and they never came back out.

Curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back.

Someone concerned, a mailman, entered the building. The town didn't receive their mail for weeks thereafter, and the vehicle is still rusting and corroding away in front of the small abode. It was a strange loss but not one to be pondered long by the folks of Burdin, so, they built a fence and condemned the place. There was a funeral out back of the church, though it lacked bodies, coffins, and mourning.

Lighting does strike twice in Burdin and sure enough it happened again a few months after. The key was to build another fence, condemn, and have a funeral. Again. And again. Repeat on repeat until nearly seventeen houses had been condemned and twenty-nine more gravestones were planted in the back of the church.

Every year the gated fence moved closer and closer to the bridge. Each house on a list leading up from the valley and many had stayed despite the clues. And then they were gone. Neighbors and other houses so far away couldn't attest to knowing of the strange disappearance. No sounds, nothing extraordinary. One day here, one day gone, and it had become regulation to never enter a house that had been condemned or pass the gate which was heavily enforced by Sheriff Keaton.

This did not stop people from living happily in the forgotten and often mistaken town of Burdin. It was easy to be ignorant, as long as you stayed away from the gate and never crossed the river to the other side other than by bridge. Across the lazy stream, houses were forgotten and

you were never supposed to speak or speculate about what you heard or saw longer down the stretch of river covered by a roof of leaves that didn't die, lose their green color, or dissipate with the seasons. And you were never, ever, supposed to talk about smelling oranges while walking the trails alone at night.

That was the life. The fantastical and whimsical lives of the rightfully happy people of Burdin Valley, Utah.

AMY

PART ONE | WORK SPACE

Amy abhorred her work. It was repetitive, exhausting, and frankly, completely pointless to such a degree that she questioned herself constantly why she insisted on continuing the line of work that she did. Amy worked at Vincent Corp as the Executive File Chute Manager. It was a very fancy title that earned her a small, golden badge to attach to her bland formal attire. The job was in no way luxurious and while the name

was long, it didn't make the digits on her check any longer. Amy would sit in her cramped office for about eight hours constantly receiving a stream of letters each identical to each other, and the method of redistributing them even more resembling of the millions of other times she'd done it.

There were two outcomes upon receiving a letter in the designated bin which read "IN". Amy would read the inscriptions and information on the front. If the letter was directed to anyone in the building other than the CEO, it was to be opened by her trusty letter-opener and scanned for any information that could imply or lead to espionage within the corporation. That letter, if it were to contain that material, would be sent straight to the Head Of Staff via the "OUT: HoF" tube that hovered right above her block of a computer. If the letter contained nothing harmful to the company, it would be sent into the "OUT" pipe which was to the left of the HoF tube. From there the letter would be sent to someone else to distribute to the rightful worker. If the letter was for the CEO, the envelope is to be opened, but only to be scrutinized for toxic chemicals, bombs, and other ridiculous things you could fit into a letter. The contents were never ever to be read, but sniffed lightly and patted on the side. If nothing came up, it was to be sent to the CEO through the "OUT: CEO" chute to the right of "OUT: HoF". The previous manager taught Amy everything he knew about managing all the work and what to look for, but they never did specify what to do with a CEO letter if it did contain noxious material. Then again, if Amy got a snout full of Anthrax, the next step was self explanatory.

Today was day 789, as marked by her bulky computer. That was the only feature that the computer did. It could tell the date and the current time but other than that it

did nothing but sit on a nearly blank screen with some lime-green text. Staring at it made Amy's eyes numb, so to avoid the thing all together, she began taping scraps of letters together and plastering them over the screen only removing the layer when she needed to know the time and was too lazy to work it out on her analog clock.

The time was 2:35.48 seconds in the afternoon. Her shift started at six in the morning and ended at three in the late afternoon. Even though she was late that morning, no one really noticed. No one ever noticed when she wasn't there. There were days that she would miss most of her hours and show up to find her room hadn't even been cleaned or entered since the last time she left. She could tell if someone came in. That morning, however, Amy's mind was badgered by the startling dream she had that night. It was foggy when she woke up and hazy by the time she was on the floor of her office, but the terror of it was extremely real in her mind still. This feeling was amplified as she began to forget more and more details of what the dream had entailed, and she was stuck on what she was missing as more details left her. Throughout her work the dream was the only thing on her mind. Sometimes she'd slip up and cut the letters too wide, or nearly put the wrong letters in the wrong chutes. The dream was gnawing at her every second her watched ticked and she'd never felt that before.

As the final letters of the day were slipping into the "IN" box, she pulled out another letter from the queue of letters. This one was definitely different than the other ones, as on the front Amy's name was printed on the white sheet in a thick, black sharpie. Perplexed and slightly concerned, she took her letter opener and cut across the top and pulled out a small slip of paper. It was typed in a neat, crisp font and it was

obviously directed to her. It read as such:

AMY,

AS YOU KNOW IT IS THAT TIME AGAIN FOR WORK INSPECTION RAN BY YOURS TRULY, THE HOF. I HAVE FAITH IN YOUR WORK ETHIC, SO I POSE A SIMPLE QUESTION FOR YOU: HAS ANYONE BEEN IN YOUR ROOM? IF YOU WATCHED THE MANDATORY VIDEO 'ESPIONAGE AND YOU', YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER THIS QUESTION THROUGH YOUR SECRETIVE METHOD OF DEDUCTION. IF THE ANSWER IS YES, SEND THIS LETTER DIRECTLY TO ME, THE HOF. IF THE ANSWER IS NO, SEND THIS LETTER THROUGH THE OUT TUBE.

Amy dropped the paper on her desk and thought for a moment. She did have a method, but... Did she check? Amy turned around in her smooth swivel chair and stood up. A step away was the door and she kneeled to the ground in search of the staple. She'd slip a small staple into the cracks of the door which would only fall out if it was opened after she had exit. Amy's job, though it seemed useless to her, was important enough that she had to take lessons on guarding the 'secrets' of her room. To paraphrase the hour-long VHS tape she was forced to watch, her job was to be kept safe behind the door and if anyone tampered with or got close to the contents within, they were to be reported. If things went missing, or in her case, the staple was misplaced when she got back, she was to call Security to have the matter solved. However, she didn't know that they would drop this on her. Last time there was a warning so she could prepare herself and always double check.

The staple tucked away in the door was on the ground. Which would imply someone had entered but that could've been Amy. She couldn't remember checking but checking the staple before she came in was just as rudimentary and robotic as everything else she did. Amy couldn't say for sure if she did or didn't. Her gut instinct screamed that she did and that if it wasn't there and someone had entered she would've remembered. It would've been memorable. Why would her brain waste space remembering the usual?

Feeling confident in her conclusion, Amy picked up the staple and placed it on her desk as she moved back into the chair. She grabbed the note and stared at the two tubes she was to send it through. She raised her hands to set her fate in stone and say that it wasn't moved, but she hesitated for a moment. The dream came back to her in a wave. A sudden deluge of memory came back to her of what the dream was about. A visceral image of her being picked up and watching her other-self being tossed around made her heart drop. Amy snapped out of it briefly and shoved the note into the OUT chute. The paper shot up the tube like a bullet and as it sailed away within an instant, Amy could feel knots in her stomach.

Amy lifted up the paper blocking the time. It was five minutes til she'd be allowed to leave and she hoped that it would stay that way.

Feeling too anxious to do anymore work, Amy sat there in silence fidgeting with her black skirt. Her palms began to sweat and every moment leading to the climax.

A letter slipped through the box. Amy could feel that this one was for her and she swiftly pulled it out. This note came without a letter, and it read as so:

AMY, PLEASE SEE THE CEO.

S.L.A.M. B.B.

PART ONE | R3B007

SLAM's hull hummed as voices talked somewhere outside of her full consciousness.

"What's the assessment? It has been two weeks and no one is telling me anything!"

Markus.

"I've been ordered to keep all that information confidential, even to you, the creator."

"By who!? I want names and I want positions! I don't care who

they think they are, they don't have control over my property!"

"They knew you would say that, and to which I am supposed to reply that, 'You signed their contract'. SLAM isn't yours and since you're not capable of keeping her under control, we're taking her into our hands now."

"That's impossible! I want to see the records!"

"Sir, if you don't leave now, we will have to use force."

Markus! What was happening? SLAM couldn't sense or feel anything. She dimly lived.

"What are you going to do to her?"

"Her programs are corrupted. We're going to have to uninstall and wipe everything in her database." Something slammed. Hands on a table?

"What! Do you know how much information is stored in her head? All the hours of training on site? The power we derived from IT? All that gone? Down into digital oblivion? That's idiotic! Laughable! No one in their right mind would wipe a perfectly good system."

"She's infected and a danger to everyone! We're not even sure if our systems are safe while she's here."

"SLAM is more than capable of fighting this VIRUS off. She's trillions of dollars of hardware! Do you think I'd give her anything less than the BEST anti-VIRUS software? Please, you've got to give her a chance!"

"Beta-Lab can't take anymore chances. She has had more than her fill and so have you. I'd suggest you leave now before I forcefully get you removed from the premise and then file a request to Mr. Shultz about removing you from the lab."

"Kile, please. I'm begging you. You're my friend and an outstanding co-worker. Just let me turn her on and check her systems. I can confirm right now that SLAM is fine and fully operating. This is just a minor bump and if you think of me highly in any regard, you'll let me flip the switch."

Silence. Dead silence.

"It's funny, Markus. You think we're friends and you think of me as an 'outstanding co-worker', but the only part of that which is true is the latter. Guards, please remove Professor Markus."

"You bastard! You LIAR! Hey, let go of me!" Faint sounds of dragging feet and the friction of a body trying to escape the arms of guards. "Don't you dare touch her, Kile! Don't you dare! I swear to God I won't let you do this! All this is possible because of me! All this AI! Everything we've gotten is thanks to ME! You've ripped all this power from me and now you're calling it your own? Because of a contract? Do I not own all of this? Is none of this my doing!? Hah! AI! Digital intelligence! You stole that power from me and slapped a new name on it! You stole it all from my--"

A door slammed and locked. A man, restless, Kile, sighed and

tapped his fingers on a metallic surface.

"Oh Markus. You're such a fool for letting such potential go to waste." Something moved along SLAM's face. Sharp, surgical. "It really is heartbreaking. I hate having to do this, you know, SLAM. But sometimes, a creators got to do what a VIRUS cant finish. Now, let's dissect those circuits."

JAK

PART ONE | HARD FALL

"Perhaps we should wake him up."

"Or perhaps not."

"I suppose you can't help a caterpillar from its cocoon."

"Nor can you help a chicken from its egg."

"Do you think we underestimate him?"

"I think you overestimate him."

"It's called optimism."

“It's called unrealistic.”

“You know what else is unrealistic? This whole thing but is that stopping anyone?”

“Good point but how did we get to this topic of discussion from chickens and eggs?”

“Well the better question is which came first.”

“He could answer it, if only he'd wake up.”

“A bit of a mess, he is. But people like that about their heroes.”

“It gives them something to work on. As if they have any connection.”

“People need to learn to let go.”

“Lest they become like us.”

“Perhaps we should leave now. Before he wakes up.”

“Or perhaps not.”

“Oh shut up.”

“Who said that?”

“God, will you both shut up already!”

“Oh, he's awake now.”

“Yes, I'm awake, and I'm about to kick the graph out of both of you if you don't...” Jak opened his eyes at long last. He could feel his lower body submerged in water while his arms lay out on the cool ground. His eyes turned upward slowly adjusting to the new atmosphere. A dank, dim lit cave. The voices he had heard were now gone and no image or silhouette confirmed that they had ever existed. Faint torches lit up a cavern and the small pool that Jak found himself in.

His hand, which before he... fell, he didn't know what exactly happened after he was buried, it was impaled by a nasty piece of wood, but as fate would have it, he held it to the flickering light of torches and it had been removed. However the painful wound still ached and the area around it had

began turning purple.

“Damn.” Jak cursed as he pulled himself from the cool waters and onto the dirty land. His clothing had been liberally soaked and he felt wet to the core. In his boots, he could feel his pruned feet rubbing in an neck-chilling way against the rubber insides. He paused to look around and assess his location. He was in a cave, sure. Where? Down the hole. Down the well he had found. Probably anyways.

A small draft blew by chilling the wet figure. Jak pulled his hood back from over his face and brushed strands of hair stuck to his skin away from his eyes. His finger brushed over the nasty scar he accumulated above his thin brow.

Jak's heart dropped. He felt at his side frantically searching. His pouches were still there but his shovel was missing. Like a panicked child he scrambled across the soaked earth back to the edge of the pool. Frantically he looked into the depths for a glow. A shimmer of his trusty possession. The unsettled water moved and waked generating frustration in the flustered and worried Jak who felt like he lost a best friend below the dark water.

“Come on! Come on!” He cried out as he smashed his hands into the water. Water splashed back at him masking his dampening eyes. In the fray, a glimmer caught his eye from the other side of the pool. His unstable, angry breathing focused as he saw his shovel glowing next to a large heap.

Before the water could settle in the pool he was already running along the edges to his desire. One goal in mind. One mission. Get his shovel and get out. That simple. He'd find a way. He'd dig out. He just needed the shovel. As he approached the heap which settled in an uncomfortable dark spot away from torches, he identified the large body. The Grobber. Of course he fell down with him. In its paw-sized hands was the shovel and Jak ripped the handle from his hands with the ferocity of a tantruming child. But as he pulled the shovel up and held it close, his breathing calmed. He felt himself

reaching peace as the shovel glowed and the water lapped around the pool.

“Let's not do that ever again.” Jak looked down to the Grobber. His chest was still. His fingers didn't move. Definitely dead. Jak wasn't about to dig him a grave, however. Jak was going to find the closest way out of here and it just so happened that a dim pathway in the corner of the room began to glow before his eyes. Where it headed, he didn't know.

Still soaking from his prolonged bath, he walked along the ground. Exhausted and in pain, but he walked none the less around the twists and bends. Senseless walking.

The Grobber's hand back at the pool twitched and water spouted from his mouth in a violent cough.

UNIVERSAL INTERLUDE

If Fate is the gear,

Then what is the machine?

What is the purpose?

And where are the blueprints?

Fate is the gears to the machine of Destiny.

They open the doors to possibility.

Will The Three chose these doors?

Of course, because it is their Fate to do so.

Where Fate lives, Destiny follows.

With the two in close proximity, destruction ensues.

A machine is never perfect.

That's why a few guinea pigs must run through it.

**AN OUTSTANDING GLIMPSE INTO THE
FANTASTICAL AND WHIMSICAL LIVES OF THE
RIGHTFULLY HAPPY PEOPLE OF BURDIN VALLEY,
UTAH**

Davie Stromboro was a young college man by the age of 26. He wasn't strongly built, sports were never his thing, but he was rather tall and lanky, a bit of a gangly fellow who wouldn't pass for much other than a future dentist or professor. With his short brown hair, glasses two

inches thick, and the clothing aesthetic of Sherlock Holmes, it could already be assumed he was one.

Davie liked the feeling of rattling change in his pocket, the sensation of feathers tickling his nose, the sound of rain hitting the roof of a tent, the look of a campfire after dousing it with a bottle of water, overhearing conversations while in line to pay for groceries, the glare of flashlights during the day, and shows or movies about Bigfoot. The latter being the most integral to his character.

It all started one weekend at the age of ten with his childhood friend, Mitchell and Sarah. It was the classic, "parents aren't home, so we can watch any movie we want!" kind of night. Of course the first thing they go to is a horror movie. "Snowbeast" was their movie of choice and despite being an older film from the seventies and carrying that cheesy horror vibe, it was enough to scare Mitchell and Sarah into watching Care Bears before they went to bed. Davie was not scared, however. He was intrigued.

Life moved on, and Davie grew up to major in the field of zoology and pseudoscience but for the mere matter of having a profession in cryptozoology. Davie was obsessed with hunting the unknown. His life revolved around shows hunting ghosts, the Lochness monster, and most importantly, Bigfoot. So much so, he decided to make a career out of it. So, unprofessionally, he picked up on his own suspicions and dug into the funds he'd been saving after working fast-food for the last eight years of his life and began to hunt the mystery with none other than Sarah, who he had kept in close touch with and held a crush on her for a long time.

Now Sarah did not feel the same about Davie. At all. Not one bit. The only reason she agreed to go, which she would never in normal circumstances, is because she needed an escape from the abusive relationship with her roommate. Davie was the perfect get-away vacation. She

just had to pretend to care about Sasquatch, or Bigfoot, it didn't matter, and care about Davie's ramblings, and she got a free paid vacation. Sure, most nights it was simply camping out in Davie's beat up van or in a cramped tent avoiding any body contact with Davie, but at least she was away and considerably happier than she was before. Davie was too.

Sarah, like in her youth, had a gummy smile with a nose that was low enough to block the gap in between her teeth. She was a beauty to those with an acquired taste for bulbous and close together sinhalite eyes and curly, brown hair to match her fashion sense which was best left at 'I'm a winter, but I only wear mismatched pink articles of clothing.'

Sarah liked the burn of mouth wash in the morning, the sensation of staring at light bulbs and then watching the ingrained patterns on her pupils move around while she blinked, the smell of cherry trees in bloom, watching spiders crawl around on her ceiling, creating harmless gossip about fictional book characters, listening to white noise before taking twenty-minute naps, and the taste of biting into an orange peel which reminded her of sandboxes and the third grade.

They had gone a whole week with no findings in the woods of Orange County but after a rumored sighting down south of Utah, Davie had taken the fast-way from northern California. They were almost there in a little over a day.

The trails behind the mountains of southern Utah were not pleasant. While Sarah was fast asleep snoring with her head pressed against the glass, Davie kept vigilant watch for potholes and small desert animals which he swerved to avoid. Sarah's face got acquainted with the window quite well.

Unbeknownst to the two, Davie had been riding along an old trail leading to the river outskirts of Burdin which was no less than four miles away. It was an adventurous hiking trail for the families in the nearby homes until they had gone vacant without a trace of the inhabitants.

Davie glanced at the map resting in his lap and pulled sharply to the side of the road. The van hummed as he unbuckled his seat belt and stared at the lit ground outside. His eyes ached from staring ahead for so long and his neck developed a painful knot. He rubbed the soft tissue under his eyes trying to wipe away the twenty-five hour speed drive, which felt like nothing compared to some of his other drives.

Sarah grumbled and slapped Davie's hand away as he tried to shake her up. He was persistent until Sarah's grumbles threatened to punch him in the face. Davie chuckled. She was such a wild card. Sarah wasn't asleep. She was merely pretending to avoid conversation.

Crickets chirped as Davie exited the vehicle and was pleased with the cool Fall air. He stood in the high beams of the van and took it all in. Out in rural areas like this was where he found the most peace. However, the drive was not over yet. They still had a ways to go before they got to the desired location. The hood of the van creaked as Davie leaned on it with the map spread out across the hood. He read the ridges and creases intensely.

Sarah, being the lovable joker she was, saw from the gap in her shut eyes Davie focusing on the map. Being that close to the steering wheel, she couldn't help but slowly reach for the keys in the ignition. She turned them. The van went off. Quickly she pulled her hand back snickering.

Davie's surprise was delayed by a few seconds but he did yelp upon the realization. He rounded the car and knocked on the window where Sarah's head rested. Sarah had to contain her laughter. It was painfully funny—Davie's frantic knocks. Davie didn't get any reaction out of Sarah. She was utterly passed out. Or so he thought. Had to be. There wasn't any way she could ignore him for this long. He started walking around the back of the van to his door and when he rounded the corner he noticed lights off in the distance. Not far either. Just down the bend. It was strange, he thought. It looked like a lit house.

The van door opened and Sarah bit down on her tongue and tried not to smile. Davie turned the van back on, relieved it didn't die on him. Another look at the map confirmed that there weren't any buildings or towns nearby. It could've been an unmarked cabin or a simple campsite. The van took motion and continued on in the night heading for the lights.

AMY

PART TWO | THE CEO

Amy's heart screeched to a halt followed by a sickening welt in her throat. This tiny piece of paper could mean so much for her future. Well, whatever future she had working for Vincent Corp anyways. Amy didn't have to move far to reach the handle of the door. Gripping tightly to the life-changing note, she opened her door and walked out. She was greeted by the fresh breeze of the conditioner, and by the blank, deer-in-headlight stares of her co-workers who stood staring at Amy from their small cubicles. All looked like they wanted to say something to Amy as she started to walk

anxiously down the hall to the elevator, but no one moved and the only sound in the room was the sound of Amy's Resignation forms printing away. The plain gray carpet leading to the daunting elevator felt like an agonizing forever to cross. Her vision grew fuzzy under the florescent lights as blood began to pump to her face.

The elevator opened as she stepped nearer with a harbinger 'ding' of imminent doom and despair. Amy had to shove herself into the elevator her body felt that uncooperative. The buttons lined on the side were mixed and jumbled in her vision and it took a moment of focus and clarity before she could determine the right button, button sixty, to the CEO's office. Amy gently pressed the button and the number lit up with a vibrant white. Then, the elevator began to take motion. Just like every other elevator, this elevator also played the classic jazz music that you could find in any movie or TV show featuring an elevator for a scene or two. The smooth bass and balmy clarinet helped mildly with Amy's panic attack. She felt like she was teetering on the border of anxiety attack and mental break down. A short tick rang from the speakers every time they passed up a floor, and it was almost rhythmic to the music as she ascended higher and higher until right at the crescendo of the saxophone that finally ended her journey. The elevator came to a halt and it shook slightly as the door slid up revealing a large, eloquent hall. Amy, feeling enamored by the decor within, stepped inside nearly forgetting about her fear. The hall was lined with gorgeous paintings hanging over delicate, flowery wallpapers whose red color mixed seamlessly with the cold linings of the various furniture and decorations lying about. Amy admired the paintings and buffs of famous names she'd never heard of before as she approached closer to the large set of doors at the very end of the hall. One painting in particular

caught her eye. “The Actor” was labeled below the large portrait which depict a visceral, highly detailed scene of a shadowy figure standing in front of a grave. The purple clouds opened up above him and a white ray of light shined over the person. Amy could feel there was a strong metaphor being displayed, but it was hardly the time to contemplate or elaborate on the matter. The color and vibrancy of the upper floors put the office space to shame. The lower floors were nothing but grays, blacks, and whites. Clothing was also like that, and it put a damper on the mood of everything. Just being in this space for a short time already began to lift her spirits.

Amy followed along the red carpet leading to the foreboding entrance. Her pace was set at a modest speed and she kept it firm as she continued to walk with a felt like determination, not to be confused with confidence but she was ready to receive her sentence whatever it may be. Upon reaching the door Amy brushed herself up; she put her hair back into place and straightened her business dress along with her black blazer. She fanned herself to get any red out of her face and hide her nervous sweating. Feeling reassured, Amy pushed the doors open.

If the hall was impressive, the CEO's office was even more grandiose. A giant window peered out into the sky over Winston, the architecture and peeking points of the towers strongly reminded her of towers in New York only a few hundred miles away; the clouds hovering over the skyscrapers seemed close enough to touch. The large room began to intimidate Amy with its proper and formal feel even though it was almost identical to the aesthetic of the hallway she just walked through. The paintings on the walls leered at her making Amy squirm in her own skin. Ahead of her was a large desk with a chair sitting in the nook of it. The chair was faced away from

Amy, and the occupant was staring out at the skyline. Amy stood in silence for a moment and was unsure if she should grab a chair or wait to be told to grab one. During her internal debate, a voice echoed through the room.

“Ah, Amy. So glad you could come. Please, have a seat.” The voice was heavy with melancholy. Amy could feel the words hit the floor before they bounced off her fragile emotions. Suddenly saddened and nervous once more, she walked over to the desk and took a seat. She got as comfortable as anyone in the situation could and fidgeted with her skirt.

“Oh, Amy.” The man behind the leather seat said as he slowly started to spin the chair around. Amy watched as the CEO, who she’d never seen before, finally revealed himself. The large chair was much, much bigger than the man sitting in it. His brown hair was slicked back so tight it stretched his forehead and pulled up his eyebrows. He wore a neat, crimson vest over a black button up. On his shirt was the twinkle of his badge which read: VINCENT NORTHBROOKE, CEO. Amy refocused herself and kept eye contact.

“Yes, sir?” Amy broke her silence, which she kept most of the day. Her voice was firm despite feeling scared for her life on the inside.

“Amy, I’ve got news.” Vincent said as he started to play with the bobble head of himself on the desk. His short arms almost not long enough to reach the figurine. “It’s half full, half empty kind of news.” Vincent settled back into the chair and looked to Amy. Bags settled under his weary eyelids, and his blue eyes conveyed an unsettling sadness.

“I’m half full.” Amy blurted out without really thinking about it. Regret set in

within and instant, but Vincent didn't show reaction to the comment.

“Amy, you're fired. You need to pack the junk from your room and-”

“Wait, excuse me?” Amy said leaning into her chair. She stared at Vincent with a feeling of anger boiling in her.

“Excuse me,” Vincent cleared his throat and mimicking Amy, he also sat forward in his chair and stared Amy down. “You're. Fired. Pack up your junk and leave. I'll have everything delivered to your residence.” Amy's feeling of anger and concern dissipated. In a sudden torrent of emotion, she felt more crushed and devastated than anything. Tears began to well in her eyes as she slumped back into her chair. She breathed heavily through her open mouth.

“How-how is that in anyway 'half full' news?” Amy said through a noticeable voice crack. A single tear slipped from her eyes and rolled down her pale cheek. Vincent looked at Amy and sighed.

“Because you passed the test! No one entered your room.” He said to the sound of a drawer sliding open. “So see? It's not so bad.”

“Then why are you firing me? Why are you doing this?” Amy raised her voice as more tears slid down her face. Amy grabbed a tissue from the box on the table. It was strategically placed for her to reach with ease. She dabbed at her face as Vincent pulled a bottle from the desk, it was beverage of some sort. Alcohol, no doubt. Amy looked at the tissue. Black smudges appeared in the dampness, signaling that her mascara was running. She felt pathetic and weak while looking at the smears.

“Amy, Amy, please don't cry. It's really unbecoming of you. Do you drink?”

Vincent said as he pulled out two glasses. Amy shook her head and went back to softly

sobbing and dabbing at the corners of her eyes. Vincent shrugged and poured himself a drink, and before Amy could reach for another tissue, he slammed the drink and placed it back on the table. “Amy, how do I explain this...? The economy isn’t what it use to be. I’ve got to cut some people off the team.” Vincent was laconic and blunt about it. Each word he said was another blow to Amy that caused her to gasp and sob harder.

“W-why me though? I’m.. I’m...” Amy came to a loss of words and crammed more crying in between her pleads. “I’m a hard worker! I don’t take up that much time!” Amy continued to bargain with Vincent, but everything she said was muddied up by her sobs and uneven breathing. Her gut wrenched as she thought of losing her job.

Vincent rubbed his eyes and stood up out of his chair. It swiveled slowly to the left as he walked over to the window. He was even shorter than when he was in the chair. He put a hand to the window and stared out as Amy’s crying softened by a few decibels.

“Amy, a very wise man once told me: ‘everything happens for a reason, even if the reason is unclear at the moment, everything comes to alignment and answers will be solved.’ That man was my father, and he was right. Everything does happen for a reason.” He started to pace across the window, and as he did so he used his hands to help emphasis his point. “Now, you’re being fired for a reason. The same reason I’m where I’m at now! Sure, I wasn’t ever ‘fired’, but that only means that it wasn’t meant to happen for me. Now look where I’m at! If you’d let yourself just accept what happens and move onward, maybe you wouldn’t have so many problems.”

Amy’s face cringed grotesquely as more tears came. She stuffed her face in her

hands and shook her head.

“Amy, I don’t think you’re listening to me. I promise you that everything happens for a reason, and you being fired right now, that’s what is meant to be! I can feel it! Can’t you?” Amy didn’t reply. She just crumpled into the chair sobbing into her blazer. “Okay, you know what, forget it. Just get out, come on you’re going to get snot all over my chair.” Vincent walked around the chair Amy was sitting in and started to pull it out on its wheels. Amy sniveled harder as she felt herself losing this battle, but she didn’t know what to do other than cry and pity herself. Vincent pushed her out of the room and into the hall. “Here’s your last pay check. I added something a little extra to it to help you get through. Amy, please get your life together.” With that, Vincent closed the door leaving Amy alone in the hall crying and confused.

She didn’t understand why she had to get her life together. Wasn’t it together before this moment? She couldn’t understand the reality of what had just happen, and she could feel that things were not going to get any better.

S.L.A.M. B.B.

PART TWO | F457F0RW4RD

The overhead timer ticked down from twenty.

Twenty

SLAM glared at the screen. The red lights counted down. Her hands were placed firmly on her red Bblasters.

Fifteen.

The sphere surrounding here was beginning to flower open. Thick florescent lighting beamed down on her. She rolled her neck and popped her red, glowing circuits.

Ten

The curve of the sphere lowered below her head.

Nine

She could see her opponents and terrain clearly now. A large and

square room. Completely white except for her lingering opponents whose black coloring mottled the room.

Eight

Her visor scanned the group 360 degrees around her.

Seven

Fifteen targets. Ten unarmed DRILLS. Easy pickings. Five were VARIABLES. "Dash. Run Variable Detection." SLAM said straight faced and without breaking her concentration.

"VARIABILITY: ELECTRONIC MANIPULATION - THE CAPACITY TO EFFECT THE ELECTRIC FLOW OF SYSTEMS OUTSIDE OF A DRILL'S OWN SYSTEM SO LONG AS THE VARIABLE IS AS STRONG OR STRONGER THAN THE SYSTEM IT WISHES TO CONTROL." A harsh, female voice spoke.

Four

Simple enough.

Three

SLAM had hoped for a greater challenge.

Two

The glass surrounding her dissipated

One

Immediately SLAM was rushed by the group of DRILLS. They came in from all directions resembling an enclosing wave of black and decay. Wires and sparks shocked the air around their humanoid bodies. The VARIABLES stayed in the back keeping firm and stoic. SLAM's Dash

displayed statistics and all of the VARIABLES were channeling their electric charge. Seeing the ploy, SLAM ran at the wave and flipped forward hands over heels over the DRILLS right as they leaped for her in vain. The momentum carried SLAM into the air and all the DRILLS crashed into each other as she rolled along the ground. All at once the air filled with static and the group of DRILLS were engulfed in electricity. Lightning crackled in the immediate area and SLAM watched their bodies smoke fried CPUs.

"*ENEMY VARIABLES RECHARGING - APPROX 12%*" SLAM's dash announced as she stared at the remaining targets. Like statues they broke from their stance and started to move. The VARIABLES were all cookie-cutter to each other with thick plated armor and far bigger than the rest. The closest one broke out in a sprint towards her, his hands pulsed electricity. SLAM pulled a Bblaster from her side and aimed right between the red eyes and pulled the trigger.

Click

SLAM's systems panicked. An empty gun. Then SLAM went down as the VARIABLE tackled her in her stunned state. The gun was launched from her hand and pushed away from the conflict. The two skid across the ground and SLAM could already feel the pressure on her systems as the VARIABLE wrapped its arms around her and began to squeeze. Sparks from the VARIABLE were tickling her sensors. The Dash flashed red alerts as they rolled on the ground, SLAM trying to undo the tight

grasp.

"*ENEMY VARIABLES RECHARGING - APPROX 67%*" No doubt the VARIABLE would sacrifice itself to kill SLAM once the charge was up.

"Activate Thick-Skull!" SLAM yelled as she rolled on top of the foe. The Dash dissipated and was replaced by a red digital shield around her head that was meant for protection. But in this case, SLAM brought her head down on the VARIABLE. Time slowed and she stared into its red eyes up until impact when the skull exploded into electric scrap. The arms released her and she quickly got up right as the Dash reappeared around her helmet.

"*ENEMY VARIABLES RECHARGED.*"

Four VARIABLES remained. They stood in a diamond facing SLAM. Their whole bodies shook with energy flowing through their circuits and SLAM's Dash could pick up the power. SLAM fearlessly faced them. Her hand gripped her remaining Bblaster tightly though it was empty. The other gun was directly ahead of her. The stand off went on for some time as SLAM's programs formulated a plan.

SLAM started to change as she stood there. A voice like static spoke in her synthetic mind.

3X3CU73

The circuits running up the edges and curves of armor on SLAM's body turned crimson. It started from her chest and spread like disease across her body until she glowed with power. She ran forward

like a bullet and the VARIABLE at point of the pyramid channeled the power of the other VARIABLES and shot an electric blast the size of a train. The room glowed yellow and red. The yellow beam started to turn red from the farthest end until it reached the source, and out from the blast SLAM broke free. A red code surrounded her body and she appeared unphased and as determined as ever. SLAM appeared as a red blur as she came to the VARIABLE at the point and round house kicked it square in the face. Its head ripped from the body and went flying, striking the rest of the VARIABLES like a pinball knocking them down. The headless VARIABLE convulsed and fell to the ground, but SLAM wasn't finished yet. She stepped over the dead VARIABLE making a b-line (beeline? But then again everything for her is stylized with a 'b' before hand) for the VARIABLE in the back of the diamond. SLAM held up her empty guns and as she passed the VARIABLES on the side, she threw them striking both of the robots right in the head. The handles of the gun stuck out of the hardware like a sword in stone. The last VARIABLE, though unable to feel emotion, cowered in fear. It had been pushed up against the wall crouched facing SLAM. SLAM knelt down and stared at the robot. She stared for some time. Her hand wrapped around the VARIABLE'S throat and she lifted it into the air keeping it pinned against the wall. The metallic hand squeezed against the VARIABLE'S neck. The metal creaked and more static shot out from its faulty body.

"WARNING: TWO LIFE FORMS DETECTED."

SLAM's hand loosened. Her heightened Dash could only pick up the readings now. Holding the VARIABLE she turned around. At the other end of the room, she could now detect a wall. A fake wall.

"Does she know we're here?" A nervous intern shifted in his seat.

"In that current state... Probably. Her synthetic sense are magnified by an intense margin. I'm surprised her Dash didn't pick us up sooner." The man facing the one sided glass ran a hand through his balding head of hair. He did not look old nor did he sound old. His hair wasn't grizzled. It was still a lush brown. The light from the testing room into the darker, hidden room made the aged lines on his face appear like scars. Ravines from decades of watching and living.

"Are you going to shut her down? I-it's not my place... but I think we've seen enough of what she can do." The interns shaky hands felt for the button on the table, but the man snatched it with his own hand before the intern could get close.

The man stared at the intern with intense, white eyes.

"Why don't we see what happens?" The intern pulled his hand away and stared back out. He looked again at the man who was staring at SLAM with a smile on his face, and then turned back to watching the

action.

SLAM stood about ten feet from the wall. Her Dash could clearly detect the body, the shape, and the details of the men behind the wall. She was being watched. With the VARIABLE in her grasp, she pulled her shoulder back and threw the VARIABLE. It sailed through the air and struck the wall hard enough to shatter the one sided glass. A shimmering waterfall (of broken glass?) fell down around her. Through the new hole she could see a man staring at her with white eyes, and another man rising up from a cowering state behind a now broken desk with a VARIABLE hanging off the side of it. SLAM crouched and leaped upward and with just enough strength to reach the edge.

The intern yelled and fell backward in his chair while the man watched with a smile on his face and wide eyes.

"Ah. You cease to disappoint me, SLAM." He watched in amazement as SLAM pulled herself up and faced the two. The room glowed as she stepped forward to the man. The intern scrambled from his spot and climbed up the wall from the ground. He backed up and reached for the emergency button on the wall.

"You'd be wise to stop right there or I'll make sure your work here is terminated, Dayvie." The man pointed at the intern.

"Sir!-" Dayvie's hand was grasping the glass around the button.

"Quiet!" The man shouted then pulled his hand back and faced SLAM. The intern gulped and watched quietly. "Ah, SLAM. Excellent work out there. Have you come to give me hug?" SLAM picked up the table with the VARIABLE and threw it to the side narrowly missing Dayvie. The VARIABLE exploded in sparks as it was crushed under the desk. Papers on the ground caught flame. "Now that was a little bit much, don't you think?" The man said playfully as SLAM met face to face with him. He could feel the heat radiating off her body and he could hear the fans in her body overworking. "Take note, Dayvie. We're going to have to modify the fans in her if she's going to be able to Overclock for this long without possible damages. Now, SLAM, if you'll be a doll and-Gah!" SLAM grabbed the man by the neck and pushed him against the wall like she did to the VARIABLE. The heat from her hands began to burn the man's expensive button-up collar. "Now now SLAM!" The man said with a strained voice. "That's no way to treat the hand that charges your batteries." SLAM's hand tightened and the man reached into his pocket. He pulled out an object and held it between his face and SLAM's. Their noses touched the metal. "LIPstick is essential to beauty." The man pressed the button and the two were surrounded in an electric pulse. SLAM let go of her grasp as she fell over and convulsed on the ground. The man gasped and breathed heavily as he slid down the wall. SLAM shook at his feet. The dark crimson color escaped the circuits and went back to her

chest. The wires and lines returned to their light red color. The glow in the room faded.

"Sir..." Dayvie's hairs were on end. The man stood up and looked at his recreation. His revamp. His redo. Then he turned his attention to the paper on fire next to the desk. He walked over and stomped on the flame.

"You know, Dayvie. We're good friends. You can call me Kile." The testing room lights went out and everything was dark except for the intense, white eyes.

JAK

PART TWO | FAST FORWARD

Codus had waited patiently for Jak that night and plenty of nights after it. He was an old and frail man with snow white facial hair, bald head, and slender frame. In his cramped hovel made of wood and built into the side of a hill. A single room though rather large. Enough to fit two people comfortably with beds for Codus and Jak. Decorated on the walls were pictures of bright places and fantastic machines. Most of the machines on the walls were in the very room the two stayed in lingering around the walls. Among his creations, he waited, and waited, and waited. Time was lost after the world became corrupted to the core, so Codus had no clue how long he had waited, but he was definitely waiting a long time for Jak. Based on the tallies on how many sun rises, it had been about a month or close to it. He stood awake late each night until his weary eyes couldn't take it any longer and he slept.

One morning he had woken up and he had hoped desperately Jak would've come back during his slumber. Codus had vision of Jak's bed from his. It was empty. Just like every other morning. He ran a hand through his gray hair and stood up on weary bones.

“Well. I guess he really did it this time...” Codus sniffled and walked to the door. “I guess he really did die on me.” The handle needed a bit of force and jiggling before it finally turned and the door screeched open. The sun in the purple sky beamed down along the landscape. Dead trees cast their shadows along the dark, indigo ground and everything smelled of mold. It was another day. The landscape stretched for miles without anything remarkable insight. The nearest village built on top of the old one was a days distance away and was very dangerous for someone like Codus. Now it looked like he was on his own. Jak was never gone for so long.

After taking in the landscape for long enough, Codus closed the door and moved over to his desk. He sighed and stared at the notes on his desk. On the page, Codus could see a memory play like a movie.

Jak was pacing around the room excitedly. He felt giddy, joyous, and a little light heady. He tightly gripped papers in his hands swinging it around.

“Codus! You're not going to believe this!” Jak exclaimed, then revised. “No... no...” He cleared his throat. “Codus! You're going to believe this!” Jak yelled smiling acting as though he just gave the big news. Then his smile dropped. “Too optimistic.” Jak stopped and thought for a moment. “Okay... Codus, I've got good news.” Jak said simply at the wood wall with a tinge of excitement but a strong base of seriousness.

“Well... are you going to tell it to me? Or are you just going to stand there reciting lines?” Jak's face turned red and he slowly turned around. He opened his arms wide and smiled.

“Codus! You really know how to walk in without knocking.” Jak walked over and gave the old man a hug lifting him up into the air. Codus's back popped and he tapped on Jak to let him down.

“Now now, Jak! It's quite easy when there is only one room.” Codus coughed as Jak let him down and Codus used Jak as a crutch to his chair by the desk. He settled in and relaxed. “Now, what has you so excited?”

“First, how was your walk? Enjoying the wonderful apocalypse outside?” Jak set the roll of papers in his hand down on the table.

“Quite. I may be old and the area may not be hospitable, but I still need to get out while I can. Can't let these bones stop working on me.” Codus patted his knee and smiled. His white beard rose up with his cheeks. He turned around in the chair and faced the papers. “Is this what's got you riled up?”

“Yes! Look for yourself!” Jak pointed to the scrolls and Codus curiously picked them up and opened them. “Now, what am I looking at?” The papers unraveled to reveal blueprints. Sketches of what appeared to be a pond and plenty of writing. Three scrolls in total all very hectically written and scattered on tattered page.

“Okay okay, so...” Jak took a step back and Codus watched from his seat as Jak spoke very animatedly. “Let me first say I know you hate anything to do with magic, and I get it because it hasn't really done much for our world other than destroy it, but this is kind of a spell.” Jak could see he was already losing Codus who was scrutinizing Jak from his chair. “But, I can do the spell stuff. You don't have to worry about any of that. But here's the best part, it's also part mechanical! You love the stuff right! I mean look around.” Jak pointed to all the contraptions around. “And I know not everything you've made is a success, but this is a piece of cake for you because you have blueprints! You never have those!”

“Jak, I don't want to bring you down or anything, but what exactly is this thing going to make?”

Codus looked down at the paper.

“Remember how I said the machine being part mechanical was the best part? Well, that wasn't the best part.” Jak came close and pointed to the page, right at the device that looked like a small pool. “That, that right there? It's called a Dip. It uses the Dip spell which was speculated to open up other realms. Other places! Elsewhere! Not here!” Codus looked up at Jak. His smile faded. Jak could catch the hint. “We could get out of here. This world? This bites. We could somewhere else. An entirely new place just a little different from here. Maybe a place where Corruption didn't happen.”

“Jak...” Codus put the papers on the table. “You shouldn't get into things like this. You're going to be very disappointed.”

“Oh, Codus! Come on! It's worth the shot.” Codus got up and walked over to the wall without another word or looking at Jak. Jak looked at him from behind the chair. “Codus... What if? I just have to get a few things for the spell. I'm sure I could find it digging graves. It's all pre-corruption stuff. And you, well, you could build the machine in your sleep! Have hope!”

“Hope! Hah! That's it isn't it!” Codus threw his hands into the air in violent exclamation. “I just need hope huh? As if I hadn't used it all up already. You're so young and full of it. Aren't you sick of it yet?”

“Aren't you sick of not having any? This is it Codus! You've even said it yourself! You want to escape all this as much as me!”

“You're right, Jak, and as much as I want to do that, I have the capability to determine possibility from fiction!” Codus coughed at the end of the sentence but carried on hastily. “Now's the time to group up and realize we are stuck here. Let's just be happy with the living we make.”

“Oh what? Me going around and digging in graves? Competing with other people who want to kill me? All so we can make machines that make living in this world just a little bit easier for people

for money? What are we going to do when there is no more stuff? Or when I die? Or you!”

“That's enough Jak! I don't want to talk about this anymore.” Codus looked away and walked for the door. Jak grabbed his shoulder.

“But you do! I know you do! I know you don't want to admit it but I know you have hope we can get away from all this. Think about it.” Codus stared. Jak stared back. The two were silent. After all this time together, years and years, they didn't have to speak to communicate. Through the glare they continued to fight until Codus cracked.

“Fine.” He shook his head and let go of the door handle. “It doesn't matter anyways.” Jak let go of Codus's shoulder.

“Thank you Codus. You're not going to regret it. Because it's going to work.”

Codus snapped out of his day dream and stood up. He walked over to the corner of the room. A brown tarp was draped over a long frame, and Codus pulled away the cloth. From the blueprints, the pool about the size of a person was built perfectly and with fine craftsmanship. His heart ached looking at it.

“Perhaps I started to believe it was possible too.” Codus choked back tears.

Someone knocked at the door. Codus's head perked up and he looked to the door. Was he hearing things? Again, three knocks on the door. Quickly Codus covered the machine and he walked to the door. He almost turned the knob but remembered how dangerous the world was out there. So before anything, he grabbed a wrench from the workstation.

“Who is it?”

“Uh frend!” A bulky voice called back.

“Whose friend?”

“Jak's!” Codus opened the door. A big brute stood at the door, he was too large to even fit through the doorway. In his hands, he held the limp and seemingly lifeless Jak. His hand and upper arm were a deep purple, but in his grasp was his shovel. The silvery glow was weak. “Wev' gut uh prublum...”

UNIVERSAL INTERLUDE

Pulp from an orange

The juicy guts of a fruit

Finally turned ripe

After seasons of wait

The whole of what has been created

Mashed, crushed, pulped

And poured into a cup for your enjoyment

An orange ripens as a whole

Not by neat slice by neat slice of fruity meat

Development comes in stages

But reaches the same end at the same time

Part by part

Ready to be plucked from your tree

What a wonderful blossoming

That you're witnessing

AMY

PART THREE | INFECTIOUS

Amy stared out the window and watched the moving clouds high above the city. Her mind was numb and blank despite being fired almost an hour ago, she felt strangely at peace with herself as she felt the tears drying away. Molly, her life long friend, sat patiently across from her. She'd been informed of the situation after receiving a call from the bubbling Amy and promptly set up a lunch date so that they could talk about it. Upon arriving, Amy waved to her beloved friend and then turned her head back to the window.

The two friends had been sitting a thick silence for some time only separated by the thick, rich smell of brewed coffee and sugary pastries.. Neither knew how to start the conversation. Thankfully the waiter dressed neatly for his job approached the table and whipped out a small notepad.

“What can I start you two off with?” He glanced at Amy, but then turned his head to Molly who seemed focused and paying attention.

“Water is fine.” Molly said with a smile. She looked over to Amy who was staring out peacefully through the window. She seemed very bemused, yet attentive in whatever she was staring at. “Amy, are you getting something to drink?”

Amy slipped into a daydream and instantly she was transported somewhere else. Somewhere unfamiliar and strange like her dream, which she could feel herself remembering every second she lay in this daydream.

Amy felt cold, hard concrete below her. The sickening chill prickled her fingertip's and gnawed at her back. Slowly, she rose herself up from the ground lazily and peered at her surroundings. Everything was black and white, just like the dream she experienced. Then, Amy realized that she was once again wearing that red dress. Indescribable beauty, it was. Below her was white concrete, leading down to a ledge lined with black. Beyond that, she could see the crystal glimmer of a murky pool. Amy was transfixed by the sight and sat up to get a better look. It was a small rectangular pond and all around it were towering pine trees the soared up into the air. The pond reflected this image on it's gray, murky water. Amy rose up from where she had woken up, and she stared at the strange pool of water with interest. She walked over to the ledge and stepped down getting her closer to the ominous water. As Amy stared closer now, she could see something tumbling below the surface. White and rounded, something twirled like a cloud beneath the surface of the water. It reminded her of shuffling dirt under the water. She noticed that this was happening all around her and

the pond and after a moment of watching, the white oddity in the water slowed down until it came to a stop. Slowly the white beneath the water surface formed into flaky clouds, or at least that was what it looked like to Amy as the dust settled and dimensions formed.

The pond then transformed into a beautiful sky, and in the center she could see a glowing light bursting past the cloudy forms shining a bright light. Amy looked up to the sky, there wasn't a single cloud or a moon. The sky was a plain, monotone gray with no discernible features. But this pond held glory and an insane amount of beauty that had Amy enamored. The cloud around the white light eventually moved revealing a stunning moon in the center of the pool. It was big enough to nearly touch the sides of the large square, but not so close as that Amy could reach for it, which she felt so inclined.

Smiling like a child, Amy looked back down into to the watered and watched the clouds move peacefully as if they were hanging in the sky. She leaned over the edge and peered deep into the waters. Her hair slipped from over her shoulder and sunk into the water, though Amy didn't care as she was too busy enjoying the pleasing sight. The memory of the dream lost, the reality of what her life was out side of the beautiful daydream was gone, and she felt at peace with herself.

There was a light tug on her hair that Amy hardly felt. Then there was another tug, this one stronger than the last and it startled her. Amy pushed up against the ledge to pull her self up, but was abruptly pulled back down when she met resistance as she tried to pull away. Scared, Amy panicked and tried tugging on her hair, though it felt like it was glued to pool some how. She clenched her teeth and groaned as she tried

to rip it out, though with no progress made and only harm to herself, she stopped. Something bubbled beneath the surface of the pool. Water bubbled upward. Amy could feel in her that something was wrong. She tried to look away but with her hair caught as it was, there was no way she could pull her gaze away. Anxiously and with her heart pounding, she awaited whatever lurked in the depths that was coming for her. Slowly, she saw something blow right through a cloud deep in the water ripping it apart and sending a wave of destruction to other formations. In the wake of the destruction, a black orb like ink quickly rose from the unknown and right for Amy. She watched for a moment, and then closed her eyes tight when she felt it coming. There was large burst of water as something blew through the surface. Amy could feel her face get splashed with water. Whimpering and scared, Amy kept her eyes closed and listened to the water dripping from her face. At first it was fast, then it was slow drips, and then silence. Amy could feel her eyes peeling open despite her desperate need to keep them closed, and as she was able to peek through her eye lids, she could see a face in the water surrounded by the black ink that followed. Its eyes slowly opened as Amy did. Its eyes were gray, like her own. The longer she looked, the more she thought she was just staring at herself. Both eyes were fully open now, and Amy watched the face poking out of the water. She couldn't see a body, or arms, or any other appendages. Only the face poked through the black water.

There was a quick tug on her hair, and then a strong pool and Amy felt herself slide right into the pool. It was so cold that in the few seconds she was in there, she felt her whole body freeze, and that feeling carried over as she slipped into the darkness and back into reality.

END OF MANUSCRIPT

