

0. INTRODUCTION

If you were to ask me about my personal beliefs, I would say that I don't really believe in fate, mostly because my colleagues have proven time and again that every piece of this rotten world can be written and rewritten until it forms the perfect string of events. Bad ends thrown away like crumpled paper, drafts of "what could have been" lost among thousands of rewrites of the same scene until the paragraphs form perfection. Kind of like a book. Exactly like a book, really. I would know; after all, I wrote this one.

Except that's not the whole truth, is it? Most people in this world aren't authors, but readers. They move forward on the sentences that somebody else has written for them; whether they live or die, somebody has already decided that such an ending would service the plot the best. Sometimes, readers think they're authors. Sometimes, authors don't quite know *what* they are. Regardless, the power to change the future is immutable. If you have it, it exists. If you don't, however...chasing that star across the sky is the equivalent of chasing death itself.

I guess that's all to say that I still don't believe in immovable destiny, but I also don't believe that we - you and I, the ones who walk through the city and play doll for those we call Heads - have the power to sway the writing of this world. Instead, we can only continue to be characters on a page with one choice: to live in ignorance, or die knowing what could have been. And this may be hypocritical, but in my honest opinion, the veil the City puts over your eyes is probably safer - and more sane - than digging into realities that will torment you to madness simply for not existing. That doesn't mean, however, that there isn't merit in being able to read the book. After all, even if one can't change the words already published, they're more than capable of tearing the pages themselves.

But that's that, and this is this. And this, reader, is a book based on no true events at all.

Please enjoy.

-R.

I. NINE MONTHS, ONE LIBRARIAN, AND FOUR LOST LIMBS

As anyone in this damned city can tell you, everything needs to make its name for itself. Not everyone, *everything*. Whether you're a Fixer, a musician (or a Musician), or the entire concept of life and death itself manifested as an amorphous blob of eyes, nothing matters until you have some sort of designation to your name.

Unfortunately, he doesn't have a designation beyond "Grade 9 Fixer", and needless to say that isn't a title worth any salt in the City. He also has a name, but that's worth even less when you're not important enough for people to remember it. Still, Roland is proud of his name; perhaps he had hated it at some point, but somebody he had loved a long time ago had worn it into his head like a well-fitted suit and the warmth of booze in the pit of his stomach.

In his defense, that place when he first visits it also doesn't have a designation. Or it does, but "Canard" means about as much as the word it's derived from. In short, absolutely nothing. The difference is that it doesn't have a name; it never particularly earns one either, only ever referred to as "The Library". At that point in time, though, it's even less than a Library with a capital L. It's a daydream of a thought of a sparkle in somebody's eye, and Roland is the first schmuck stepped on in order to make that daydream a reality.

"Tell me who you are, how you got here, and why."

He's barely taken a step across the threshold when a woman points at him threateningly; he assumes that she's the owner of the library, but that hardly comforts him when he knows from experience how unstable Distortions can be. That is, if this is even a Distortion to begin with. "Woah, lady, relax," he says on instinct, holding his hands up in surrender-

-one of which is separated cleanly from his body before he can get another word out. As it is, what comes out of his mouth is more of a strangled scream as his nerve endings register the pain seconds too late. He doesn't have time to process the action, much less how *exactly* she had done so without a sword, or a weapon in general. "I hate wordy nonsense, so I'll repeat myself only once: tell me *who* you are, *how* you got here, and *why*."

Roland is a Fixer, and unfortunately being a Fixer means being familiar with pain, which is the only reason why her words register through his sudden lack of a limb. "I-I'm Roland," he says immediately, much preferring his other hand to remain perfectly intact. "Just a low-rank Fixer. I don't know how I got here, though. One minute I was minding my own business, thinking, y'know, maybe I could grab lunch at that new place that popped up across the street, and-

It's not a hand that goes missing this time, but a leg, and he stumbles backward, landing ass-first on the cold tile beneath him. "Fuck! Come on! I'm being honest here!"

"I *said*," she repeats coldly with a spectacular disregard for both his quickly waning life energy and the thick blood pooling on the formerly pristine floor, "that I hate wordy nonsense." She cuts clean through his last two remaining limbs, and before he can process the risk that his head - and, by extension, life - is currently in, darkness overtakes him.

She introduces herself as Angela soon after he awakens, more specifically the director of the library, but whether that's who she *is* or not, he's not sure. All Roland knows at the moment is that he's only alive at her mercy, and that she's the coldest person he's ever met- an achievement in its own regard.

The "person" part is an assumption, and a pretty logical assumption if he's to be honest. The first reason is that the Head has blatant disdain for those who mimic humanity a little too well, and a penchant for getting rid of anybody they have 'disdain' for. It wouldn't make sense for Angela, or the Library itself, to survive so long under their homicidally watchful gaze if she were breaking the AI Ethics Amendment.

The second reason is because, if she's really an AI, it'll be pretty damn embarrassing for Roland when his old coworkers find out that he was taken out so easily by a bucket of bolts. Unfortunately, the truth doesn't particularly care about his feelings; fortunately, he's a little too preoccupied with his life-and-death limbo to register the mortification at that particular point in time.

"My apologies for trying to kill you," she begins their conversation in the most unapologetic voice anybody can possibly muster, "but you trespassed upon private property, so I do believe it's fair."

"You didn't *try*," Roland grumbles back. "You damn well succeeded. Why the hell am I alive?" As advanced as technology is in the City, wholesale revival is something that most only dream of, a power that must belong to a Singularity if anything at all. That being said, it's not the power itself that's a concern- it's the fact that nobody spares an enemy without good reason, and the reason is usually not so good for the victim themselves.

"Because I want you to be," Angela says simply, as if that explains anything. To be fair, it does, especially if the Library is her Distortion- but Roland isn't satisfied by that much, and she seems to understand as much as she sighs and continues. "You've somehow been granted access to the library without my permission; I consider that worth investigating, especially if it helps me reach my end goal."

Roland feels like he doesn't have to ask, considering he's now become complicit in whatever Angela has planned, but he does so anyway out of courtesy. "And your end goal is...?"

"A book." The response is unsurprising yet underwhelming; of *course* a library director would be interested in a book. "By collecting books related to the City, I may be able to find the most important one that I'm looking for. To that end, I'd like you to help me by creating books."

Roland raises an eyebrow. "I'm not exactly an *author*, lady. What do you expect me to do?"

"I expect you to greet guests, in a similar fashion to how I greeted you today." She snaps her fingers, and a book appears on the desk next to her. It doesn't fly, or float, or otherwise transport itself to her- it *appears*, in a way that would undoubtedly put W Corp itself to shame. "You'll send out books, to entice potential guests into accepting my invitation. I will greet them, and they will be confronted by an Ordeal: pitting their very lives for the books they so desire." She taps the book twice. "You will fight them. They will lose. You will turn them *into* a book full of information that other guests may want, and we will repeat this ad nauseam until I collect the book I need."

His first thought is that she's expecting far too much of him; he's a Grade 9 Fixer, not a damned miracle worker. "You killed me easily enough," he retorts. "Do you really think I can stand a better chance against these 'guests'?"

"The good news is that you have an eternity to practice," she says without missing a beat. "As you said, I killed you, yet you're alive now. So long as you work for me, I can keep you that way." It would sound almost fantastical if Roland hadn't experienced it firsthand barely ten minutes ago; as it is, he has no reason to doubt her outlandish claims. "You won't be able to die, at least not permanently- that being said, I won't give you the luxury of remembering that during a fight. It's not an Ordeal if both parties aren't fighting 'to the death', after all."

"And again, why don't you do it yourself?" His next grievance is aired before he can stop himself, and immediately regrets it; if she can so easily revive him as she claims, she equally holds the power to *keep* him dead.

Fortunately, it seems as though she needs him more than she lets on, as she lets the transgression go with little more than a verbal lashing. "I'd be more than happy to turn you into a walking popcorn machine if you would prefer. However, I believe this is a much better arrangement for us both."

Roland is in no position to refuse and they both know it, but still can't help but worry how, for lack of a better word, *fucked* his life has just become.

Well. He supposes it doesn't particularly matter at this point.

"Fine, I'm in. Now how do I do this?"