

Day 46 — 5:15am

All he could hear that morning was a repetitious pounding against his temples. He turned over and rested on the pillow. He outstretched his right arm and felt the cold, idle pillow next to his — and was rewarded for his efforts as a corner of his memory came into focus and pieces of the blurry mystery of his life floated into view. The images from his night's imaginings faded away. Images of his past, his reality, his pain began to overtake the dreams he had enjoyed throughout the night.

Aside from the recognition that the pounding was actually someone knocking at the door — which he ignored — the first thing he noticed was the solitary palm tree pictured on the ceiling. The way its branches took off in their own directions, each taking a downward spiral until it reached its end in midair. The plastic-textured leaves were frozen against the night sky. The tree's ridged, cylindrical base had a slight curve that made its shadow stand out like a serpent against the blue-hued sand of the evening beach. In the background, the seafoam blue ocean was set in stark contrast against the orange-purple horizon which illuminated the leaves of the lone palm tree to such a point that, in the man's morning confusion, made it seem as if the tree was burning amidst the serenity of the tropical scene. As his eyes adapted to the brightness of the light he had left on in the kitchen, he was able to recognize a word in strong text written above the sand in the lower quarter of the tropical paradise: "RELAX." He sighed and thought, gone were the days when he would have never had a need for such a reminder.

The man sat up from his bed and brushed aside the half of his blanket that he was covered in down to the floor. His bare feet met the soft floor which was mixed with white and grey particles of cat litter strewn throughout the light blue strands of the carpet. He stood up and stumbled around to look at the litter box placed near the foot of his bed and noticed that the litter inside it was only half of what it had been when he refilled it the night before.

As he stared at the mess of litter a vibrating mass of fur brushed against his leg and a loud purr was audible even as the man stood towering over the tiny kitten. He looked down at the kitten and saw that she had a gold chain dangling from her tiny mouth, and a cross being dragged along the ground below. He bent over and gently pried the chain out of her mouth. He repositioned the cross's place on the chain and held the

slim gold symbol in his hand. His eyes looked over the three diamonds placed at the top, center, left, and right positions on the cross for a moment before threw it across the room. He heard a soft *thud* as the cross collided with the bare wall opposite him.

He heard another barrage of knocking at the front door and moved toward the door as he listened to the faint pitter-patter of the kitten's feet as she followed in frenzied pursuit of the gold chain which fell into a sparkling pile at the other end of the room. The man undid the chain on the door, unlocked it, and twisted the handle to pull the door open. He scanned over the person who stood before him in the bare, grey concrete entryway and knew who it was along with what he could expect as soon as he saw the bushy, red hair of the figure in front of him.

"What?"

"Mornin', Adam!"

Adam stared intently into the large brown eyes of the red-haired kid. The young man's hair was bouncing up and down with every frantic movement the boy made to try and see the contents of the room behind Adam's tall frame. Adam walked out into the entryway and pushed the young man back a few feet into the unnecessarily large room and closed the door behind him.

"Sure... What do you want?" He asked, still focused on the young man's eyes.

"Oh. Well, see, there's kinda a problem—"

"Then get Kain, kid. He can handle whatever the hell it is. "

"Well, uh." The kid's red hair now filled Adam's view as his eyes fell to get a look at the granite slab of ground he was standing on. "That's kinda the problem. We can't find him... anywhere. I called his office. I checked his office. I called his house. Hell, I *ran* over to his house and banged on the goddamn door for, like, a fuckin' *hour*. Nothing."

Adam looked around for a moment and let out an exaggerated sigh. "Christ, Seth," he said, looking at the average-built teenager in front of him. Seth's eyes still stared down the cement in front of his shoes. "Alright, fine. Give me a few minutes," Adam said, as he turned around to open the door. He looked back for a moment at Seth, whose gaze was still centered solely on his shoes. "C'mon, get in here and give Rae—" he paused, "Give Rachel some attention. Seems she needs more and more attention every day."

He watched as the hunched shoulders of the red-haired kid straightened, almost instantly, at the suggestion. "Typical woman, yeh?" Seth remarked as he ran into the house.

Adam followed Seth's gaze, which appeared to scan the contents of the house as if he had never seen one before in his life (even despite having been invited in by Adam on more than one occurrence in the past month). There were the rows of books kept in one of Adam's three bookshelves, two in front of the wall directly to the right of the entryway and the other to his left. And, of course, there were the standard white-speckled black kitchen countertops, the dresser, the two mattresses stacked without a bed frame, the green blanket in a pile near the side of the bed, a clothes dresser, a 27" television placed in front of a coffee table, and a blue couch adorned with red and white stripes.

"It's standard fare. Don't act like it's all new to you," Adam said as he walked into the bathroom adjacent to the kitchen. He opened the mirror and took out a blue-handled toothbrush and took off the soft plastic purple bristle cover. He looked upon the frayed teal and white bristles for a moment, then threw the toothbrush into a nearby trash can.

"How'dcha get a kitten anyway, man? Rachel's like the only one I've seen," Seth asked. Adam ripped off the hard plastic which encased a new version of the same toothbrush he had just discarded.

"Lucky number three out of ten, apparently."

"And you bein' in the council had nothin' to do with that?"

"Who knows," he answered as he ran the new toothbrush under the cold faucet water. He looked through the medicine cabinet for the generic "TOOTHPASTE" label which had been placed at two random locations on the wrapper.

Adam heard Seth's voice float in from the living room and he pushed the bathroom door shut and smiled. A blue-white foam dripped down his chin as Seth's muffled voice tried in vain to communicate... something. As he brushed he looked into the mirror and analyzed the reflection he saw. The face he had grown up being accustomed was replaced by the thinner bone structure, the dark shadows under his eyes, and the unkempt stubs of unshaven hair. Gone were the boyish looks he had been familiar with through his years as a graduate student only eight years ago. He stared straight into the eyes of his reflection; those ice cold discs that met with a small sunburst of hazel

around his pupils. His eyes were one of the sole features which he felt were truly unique to him and they served as the sole reminder to him that he was still who he had always been.

A knock at the bathroom door brought his focus back. Adam spit the mint foam and saliva from his mouth into the sink and lapped up some water to cleanse his mouth. "One second," he said as he turned the faucet off. He wiped his mouth with the shoulder of his shirt and opened the door to see Seth sitting on the couch. The grey-spotted white fur of the kitten was perched atop couch backrest near his head, and Seth laughed as Rachel batted at the boy's sprawling mass of red hair with her small paws.

"Dammit, I can't ever remember how old she is," Seth said, his head rotating to meet Adam as he walked through the room.

"Three and a half months... So roughly a week older than the last time I had to tell you." Adam opened the second drawer of the white-painted wood dresser near the foot of his bed. He rustled through the unfolded shirts until he found the wrinkled blue fabric of an old favorite button-up. He felt a quick tinge of mental pain and hurried to cover up the blue shirt with a couple of white t-shirts which were buried below it.

"Erm, Adam, I wouldn't bother with that."

Adam looked down at his clothes. He had on a light blue t-shirt with a faded brown stain across his stomach — goddamn coffee — and dark blue sweatpants with a useless reflective white line running up the center of each side. "And why is that, Seth?"

"Well, see, it's kinda raining out," Seth said and his face fell to the floor, once again.

"Son of a—" Adam said, glancing over at the image of the island paradise forever frozen in the poster placed above his bed. "Bitch." He tossed back his head and took a few moments before he said, "Alright, Seth, out with it. What's up?"

"To be honest, I dunno. I checked the console right when my shift started 'round midnight and nothing was wrong *then*," he said as his face looked the area around where Adam stood.

"And... after?"

"Well, I checked back again at four and... oh man, *everything* got fucked to hell. Someone broke into the room and set the console to rain from now until, well... until

someone fixes it, I guess," he paused for a moment. "Oh and someone set the damn thing to leave all the skylights off too. If the goddamn street lights weren't separate from the weather the whole of the shelter'd be pitch black."

"Some punk break through the windows again?" Adam asked as he remembered the last time something like this had happened.

"Naw, everything aside from the console is fine. No broken lock, no broken glass, *nothing*," Seth sighed.

Last time this happened, some ninth grade kid was dared ("triple dog dared," as he put it) to turn the weather into the closest to a monsoon as he could manage; he failed, for the most part. Though that didn't change the fact that Adam had to spend the better part of a week trying to stop the weather and skylights from changing randomly every three hours. After that he made the city council approve increased security measures to protect the critical shelter systems.

"Okay, Seth, it's not your fault, so calm down. Let's get over there and see if we can't do something to fix this before everyone wakes up."

Adam looked to the small table near the door and noticed a pile of torn pieces of black fabric scattered about the ground near its base. He sighed, walked over to the table, and bent down to grab the rounded black handle peeking out beneath the table legs. He pulled it out and analyzed it before he outstretched the metallic pole and popped open the umbrella. Through a large hole in one of the outstretched wings he saw, beyond the frayed, torn, and shredded black transparent fabric, the dilated pupils of the white kitten staring at him. She licked her thin, pink-tinted lips and cocked her head to the side. Adam just smiled at her as he listened to Seth's failed attempt to suppress his laughter.

He closed the umbrella and let it fall to the ground. In doing so he noticed that the cat's ears had flattened back and the fur along the center of her back had flared up as a small growl was emitted through her closed mouth.

"S'okay, Rachel. You murdered the goddamn thing," Adam said as he approached the cat and stuck out a hand to scratch the top of her head. Rachel brought her ears back up and rubbed her head up against the outstretched hand. "See you later, buddy," Adam said as he walked away and opened the door to the entry way. He once again analyzed the dingy, bare cement of the large entryway. "Seriously, whoever decided we needed these

entryways needs to *go*. I would gladly have given up this useless space for a bigger bathroom," he said as he stuck his feet into a cheap pair of black flip-flops on the ground near a small shoe rack. "Come on, kid, let's head over to City Hall and get this shit fixed."

Adam opened the door and looked at the abysmal scene outside. It was raining harder than he had ever seen. The raindrops fell from the half-mile high ceiling of the shelter, though the source of the water was obscured by both the darkness and, Adam presumed, a thick layer of synthetic fog. He walked out of the warm entryway into the torrential flood of the too-familiar outdoor scene. And despite the wet feeling which accompanied the heat he thought that, for a moment at least, the rain made leaving a bit more tolerable. He stood still on the "Home, Sweet Home" welcome mat that was set at the base of every door of every house and apartment in the shelter and stared into the darkness. He noticed the symmetrically-placed houses, the large black wall in the distance, and how the usual bright aura of the streetlights was made useless by the heavy rain.

Seth emerged from the entryway with an open red umbrella spread overhead. "Ya could've just waited," he said as he centered his hold on the umbrella in order to fit Adam under its protection.

"This sounded fun," he said. He wiped the water from his forehead off as the two of them began to walk out of Block B. The area was completely silent aside from the footsteps of the two men and the splashing of the rain into the light layer of water covering the flat cement ground. Adam looked around the surrounding area and at every turn he was met with the same oppressive black, granite wall — filled with an uncountable number of featureless windows. Each one of the four Blocks was set apart from the open area of the shelter by square, seven-story housing complexes which formed the Block's perimeter. They had just passed his house, which was one of the twenty-four houses just like it contained within the inner section of the Block. Every one of these identical "island paradises," as they were called by the architects, had the exact same make and style.

As he thought about that, Adam looked back at his own house as he and Seth made their way out of the Block. Its grey siding remained untouched by the rain due to the sloped black-shingled roof which stretched out a foot each way beyond the outer

walls of the houses. The two square-foot large windows in the front of the house stood out to him despite the early morning darkness and rain, their white cross-like supports seemed to follow him no matter where he went. Adam turned his attention back to Seth. "You know, you could've just turned up the lights a bit, make this a bit more tolerable."

"But they don't *work*—"

"Easy, kid, it was kind of a joke," Adam said as he pat Seth's back.

"Kind of?"

"Kind of."

Adam and Seth entered one of the four tunnels that were designed for entering and exiting the Block. These tunnels were hardly more than large holes in the housing complexes which were tacked on very shortly before construction actually began. Adam read a written document from the City Hall archives a few weeks earlier that detailed the events leading up to the construction of the complexes. From what he remembered, the complex never had plans for a Block tunnel until one of the unnamed workers for a construction crew asked the lead architect how people were supposed to get in and out of the blocks. And as a result of the late change to the architecture, apartment windows actually lined the sides of the tunnel, and it was not uncommon for Adam to hear the muffled sounds of an argument taking place through these windows (which were almost always kept closed with blinds drawn) as he walked by.

When the pair emerged from the tunnel Adam took a look at the large span of open space in front of him. The rain continued to fall in indiscernible sheets to the ground in every direction. There was still not a single person walking the streets that Adam could see. He turned his head and looked at the submerged grass which surrounded the fenced-in field to his right and in it was a large eight-lane track, four hundred meters long on the inside lane. The rain had concentrated into a large pool centered at the dip in the cement within the inner oval of the rust-colored track.

"Looks like you won't be running today, huh," Seth said as he turned his head away from the track.

"Says you," Adam said, his attention was still focused on the pool at the center of the field as they turned to start walking west. He watched as the rain pelted the top layer of the pool, the small droplets falling so fast that the ripple each created had no chance to

spread freely across the surface before being interrupted by a near-instantaneous successor.

His attention was stolen from the field when his right flip-flop was swallowed up by a muddy puddle of water. The pair continued to walk in silence through the unoccupied streets under the dim light from the streetlamps, each of which were placed fifty feet in every direction from one another. "I really need some fucking *coffee*."

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February 21st (Six Months Earlier)

Adam stood in the middle of the red-tinted dining room as he brought the top of his undecorated coffee mug up to his nose and inhaled the aroma. He stood, drinking his coffee, and faced the blinds which covered the wide dining room window. He pulled them aside and felt blinded by the bright morning light; his finger slid off the blinds and when he opened his eyes, he felt slits of red light sliding across the room until the blinds lost the momentum in their swing. He walked over the cord and pulled the blinds entirely open, and watched as a burst of red light filled the room. Adam looked out at the horizon and saw a bright orange halo which surrounded the red brilliance of the sun in its slow ascension into the cloudless morning sky.

He was brought back to reality when the broken doorbell speaker emitted a quick, ear-piercing high screech which lasted only a second before dwindling into silence. "I need to fix that goddamn thing," he muttered to himself as he set the coffee mug atop the dining room table. As he placed the mug on the table, he noticed a yellow post-it note pasted to the table's ornate oak surface. He smiled as he glanced over the contents penned in a familiar style. He picked up the note, folded it in half, and put it in the left breast pocket of his blue button-up as he walked over to the door. He opened it to see a man in a suit with a red tie facing him, a pair of cheap sunglasses obscuring his eyes.

"This is the Carlton residence?"

"Yeah, what can I do for you?" Adam said. He noticed that the man looked down to the open folder in his arms at the response.

"And you're Mr. Adam—?" He asked without looking up from the folder.

"Carlton, yes." The man looked up at him and then back down to the file.

"Yes... Is your wife home right now, Mr. Carlton?"

"No," he paused, "She should be back soon though. If you'd like to wait," Adam said.

The man in the suit reached into his jacket and brought out a well-kept envelope with a red wax seal, a design which Adam couldn't make out. "That won't be necessary. Read this letter in absolute privacy and follow the instructions in it. We will return tomorrow with further details," the man said. He handed the envelope to Adam and turned to walk back to the black Cadillac still running in the driveway.

Adam turned the letter over and noticed that it had no visible markings aside from his birth name, not the name the man had referred to him as, typed neatly in the center of the envelope. He walked back into the house and shut the door behind him. He ripped open the top of the letter as carefully as he could with only his index finger and took out the neatly folded single sheet of paper which was contained inside it. He unfolded the letter and skimmed through it quickly. Afterwards, he brought his head up to look around, and then staggered towards the nearby red leather sofa and sat down. He eyes quickly glanced over certain sentences again, not comprehending their meaning, just simply running through the motions of reading.

— HAVE BEEN SELECTED TO ENTER THE SHELTER — TRANSFER TO
CODENAME PARADISE WILL OCCUR IN TWO WEEKS — **NOT** ALLOWED TO
BRING ANY POSSESSIONS UNLESS APPROVED — FAILURE TO COMPLY —

Adam skipped down to the end of the letter and read over one of the last sentences in the letter.

— YOU ALONE ARE GIVEN THIS PRIVILEGE TO **PROLONG HUMANITY**.

Adam reread the sentence again and was only brought out of his trance when he noticed a drop of water fall onto the paper. He stared at the center of the letter for what felt like hours. He gave up reading the document and simply stared at a random word, "failure," before his concentration was interrupted by a knock at the door. He looked up and heard the lock on the door — when did he lock it? — turned from the outside. The door opened and he heard a smooth, gentle voice flow through the space between the door and the living room, "Hey! Honey, you here?"

Adam stood up and folded the letter back into its original form as he answered, "Over here." He kept his hands behind his back as he worked to stuff the paper into the back pocket of his faded jeans.

He watched as he saw her familiar figure emerge through the threshold of the living room, her brunette hair flowing over her shoulders as she turned in realization of his presence in the room. He looked over her thin figure as her brown hair showered over her shoulders as she turned to face Adam where he stood. The details of her face were shadowed against the bright red rays of sun which shot in through the open window behind her; then again, he really had no need for the specific details. He conjured up her face in his mind and the image of her dark blue eyes began to take over the silhouette. The bright smile and the luscious red lips also took their rightful place in the shadow of her face. She walked over to Adam and brought her gentle hand up to rest against the back of his head.

"Hey, honey, did you get my note?" She looked into his eyes, "... Adam? Are you al—are you okay?"

Adam smiled. "Yeah, I'm fine," he said as he brought the tail of his blue shirt up over the remainder of the letter which stuck out from the back pocket of his jeans.

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"It's a damn good thing it's impossible to get lost around here, eh?"

"Sure," Adam said. He brought his hand around to feel the back pocket of his pants only to realize he was wearing sweats.

Adam and Seth passed beside one of the four rounded corner gardens which marked the boundaries of the building they belonged to. The tall, dark granite twelve-story building was, as Adam thought, the best solution the architects had for building a big enough all-in-one school for everyone *lucky* enough to still be alive here. As Adam looked around and noticed the hazy image of the buildings within his limited viewing range he wondered what this hulking granite mass would look like from a higher point of view. It would certainly dwarf the rest of the settlement (being nearly double the height of the housing complexes, the second tallest structures in the shelter) but he could only imagine what this dark citadel would look like during a pitch black night — something that never happened due to the constantly-illuminated streetlamps. The building's four

walls were covered almost entirely with windows except for the two strips of dark granite which were populated with two dome lights per floor. These lights ran the height of the building on each side, turning each wall into some kind of vertical runway. Adam had always thought of the school as the center of the shelter, which would make the lights adorning the building's sides serve some kind of purpose, but it wasn't. Every time he saw the building he wondered why, of all the things to put into the shelter, the hundreds of lights decorating the education building made the cut.

"It sure is a beauty, ain't it?" Seth said as he looked at the school.

"Sure is..." Adam said as his eyes turned over to the hospital building, the actual center building of the settlement. He gave a slight smile whenever he saw the hospital, if for no other reason than it was one of the few blotches of color to be seen amongst the sea of granite. As he had heard it told, the hospital was originally designed to be a small building with a style mimicking the education building. Though a year and a half before the construction of the building began, a certain big-name doctor from California apparently floated the bill for any aesthetic changes necessary to make the hospital into a more unique sight from the granite-filled environment. And despite the lack of originality, Adam did enjoy the sight of a red and brown brick hospital. There was even a white-painted roof so that, on the rare event that someone got a bird's eye view of the place, the building actually looked like a first-aid sign. Whether or not the doctor had one originally, the donation certainly secured him a position in the shelter.

"And here we are," Adam announced, "Good 'ol City Hall."

The building was a mix of standard décor for the area along with some extra features to set it apart from the rest of the buildings in the shelter. The heavy rain was still coming down as hard as it had been when they had left his house (which was to be expected as, *apparently*, no one else was going to fix it, he thought). The rain was dripping over the sides of the lengthy overhang which sheltered the stairway leading up to the doors of City Hall. There was a row of about seven or eight small spotlights which lined the bottom side of the overhang and focused their light on the design of the thing itself. In the darkness, the rain that was streaming down the area lit by the spotlights looked interesting to Adam and he stood standing in the rain watching it before he realized that Seth had ran under the overhang, along with the umbrella. He was standing

on the third stair looking at Adam and shouting something, but Adam wasn't paying attention to the kid. Instead of listening to whatever it was Seth was saying, Adam wondered why the building actually needed an elaborate stairway. Eventually he came to the realization that it really didn't.

There was one thing that had always stood out about this building to Adam, and it wasn't the familiar architecture of the building, nor the columns, but rather the white marble engraving which was illuminated in the darkness. And Adam, as he looked at the engraving now, noticed something different. He couldn't be sure whether or not something about it had changed, if the light had made him see it in a new way, but he felt *something* different about the design. And it wasn't the large-face type stating that the building was City Hall but, rather, it was the two smaller lines below it. Adam brought up his right hand and wiped the water out of his face, but never took his focus away from these two lines. He read the top line aloud to himself: "Deus in Suo Caelo Rexit." And, then the second: "Welcome to Paradise." He wiped the water out of his eyes again and then heard Seth yell something.

"What the hell are ya doin'?"

Adam looked back up to the overhang for a moment and then ran under the overhang. "Seth, you by any chance speak Latin?" he asked as he wrung out the bottom of his t-shirt. He felt the flood of the expelled water land on his foot.

"Uh... No," Seth said, his eyes followed the water dropping from Adam's hair.

"So no idea what 'Deus in Suo Caelo Rexit' means, then?"

Seth stared at him for a moment. "Nope. I think I heard 'deus' before, but that's about it."

"It's Latin for 'God,'" Adam said and turned to look back out into the darkness. The streetlamps and the lights on the side of the school were the only things he was almost able to pick out through the heavy rain. He turned back to face Seth, who was trying to dry off his umbrella. "It means 'God rules in his heaven.'"

Seth looked at the ground and then straight into Adam's eyes, "Kinda weird thing to have on the front of City Hall." He looked at the bare ceiling above him. "Dude, Adam, you know Latin?"

"No," Adam said. "Let's get going."