

Day 47 — 10:20am

"What the hell? Did you take my damn *belt*?" Adam asked.

He looked at her blue-green eyes and noticed her head tracking his movements across the house. Adam walked over to the dresser and picked up a pile of books and papers on the ground, found nothing below them, and tossed them back onto the carpet. He looked back to the bed where the kitten was still staring at him with her thin black pupils as she basked in the synthetic sunlight coming in from an open window. At first he hated the direct light. Every day, save the rain days, from 10:00am to 11:00am, the bright rays of one of the floodlights flew directly through the window above his pillows. After a few days of it he began to see it as a kind of alarm clock.

"Keep it up. You'll be out on the streets by the end of the week," he said. "Or, hey, maybe I could just make a nice little coat out of you. I'll call it a 'Kitten Coat,' and it can be all the rage around this place." The white kitten gave a weak meow as she brought out a paw and started to bite at her extended claws. "Yeah, you *better* trim those talons," Adam said. He walked over to the cat and briefly scratched the base of her ear.

He had just started searching beneath another pile of books and papers when he heard a knock at the door. "Door's open," he yelled and tossed the papers back to the floor when he found nothing hidden below. Another knock at the door. Adam sighed and walked over to open it. Standing in his entryway he saw a tall, thin man dressed in a black suit with a grey fedora.

"Seth told me you fixed the weather issues we had yesterday," Kain said once Adam had opened the door.

"Yup."

"Care to tell me what happened?"

"Yeah. Yeah, sure thing," Adam stepped aside from the door and motioned for Kain to come in. He didn't. "Basically, I was able to fix the weather machine, but I've got no clue what went wrong in the first place. I'd say someone intentionally screwed with the machines." Kain's light-blue eyes continued to stare at him, unwavering in their intensity. He added, "You know anything about this?"

"We found the person responsible earlier this morning."

"Why didn't you just tell me that from the get-go?" Adam asked. Then he heard a noise from behind him and glanced back and saw Rachel scurry across the floor as a thin, black leather object trailed behind her. "God damn cat," he said, more to himself than to Kain.

"Just wanted to hear your side of it," Kain said, still focused on Adam.

"Who did it?"

Kain paused before he said, "Just some kid. We've already got it handled, the boy—"

"What's his name?" Adam asked. He hoped that it wasn't the same one as before.

"Like I said: it's been handled. Had you been in your office this morning, you'd have no need to ask..." Kain trailed off and the faint outline of what should have been a smile appeared on his pale face. "Well, maybe you could have prevented—"

"—Prevented *what*? You trying to take one of my jobs? I work for you at City Hall only because you insisted, but I was brought here to teach. And you and I are both *very* well aware at how much these kids need some positive..." Adam tried to continue, but he wasn't ready to bring this particular subject up after what had happened in the previous weeks.

"Yes, well... We'll see just how long you continue to actually believe that," Kain said, then turned around and opened the entryway door to walk back outside. Once the door was shut Adam turned and walked back into the house, slamming the door behind him. He looked over to his bed and saw Rachel lying on his comforter using the wall as a brace for her raised head. She had apparently fallen asleep while trying to eat away the leather sides of his belt. Adam walked over and pet her head as he tried to take the belt out from under her without waking her up. He succeeded only to have another knock at the door wake her up.

"Son of a *bitch*," Adam groaned. "The door is open!"

Adam heard the door open and looked back at it, surprised. He sat on the bed with Rachel as a tall black-haired man walked in and shut the door behind him. "Oh, Jack, thank god. I thought Kain was back."

"Yeah, I saw him walk out. Since when does a mayor make house calls?"

"When he wants to threaten someone, apparently."

"Is he still trying to get you to drop teaching entirely?" Jack said. "Man, I can just *imagine* how fun that would be. No more loud, annoying, high-schoolers... Instead you'd get more time with a brooding, greedy, unemotional fortysomething guy with those soulless circles he probably thinks are eyes."

"Yeah, really, what's with those?" Adam asked as he stood up off the bed and made his way to the kitchen sink to get a glass of water. Jack made his way to the couch and sat down on it, stretching his feet onto the small coffee table in front of it.

"Can you figure out what color they are?"

"Yeah, I think they're just really light blue. Maybe grey... Can people even have grey eyes?"

"Bah, whatever — fucker is just *off*." Jack said as he dug the TV remote up from in between the couch cushions. "Hey, grab me a beer while you're in there." Adam just looked back at him then lifted his hand up and pointed at the clock hung above the TV. Jack shrugged. "Well, hey, we have a heavy excess of two things around here: beer and coffee. Beer is better for me. Alcohol is the new caffeine."

"Can't argue with that kind of logic," Adam said. He got up from the bed and walked into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and took a bottle from one of the three cases of beer lining the shelves, "Want Beer, *Beer*, or BEER?" Adam asked as he looked at the labels on the three boxes.

"Aren't they all the same?" Jack called from the living room.

"Last I checked. Maybe the labelers were just feeling *spunky*. Hell if I know."

"Beer, then."

Adam took a bottle from the fridge and walked out of the kitchen. He dropped the beer on the couch cushion and sat on the armrest at the edge of the couch. "Nothing for you?" Jack asked as Adam watched him pop off the bottle cap against the edge of his coffee table.

"Nah, I'm going to head to school soon," Adam said. "Kain pisses me off though. I do my job for him well enough and I think I'm one of the better teachers around here... Why can't he just let it be?"

"Because then he wouldn't be Kain. The pretentious, hollow, manipulative, evil—
"

"—Yeah, I get it," Adam sighed and walked over to his bed to sit down. "How the hell do I deal with this?" He asked, mostly to himself.

"Fuck around more. Don't be so goddamn reliable. Skip work every once and a while—"

"I think I can do without spending a day in holding." Adam thought about getting a Physician Pass to get out of work more often, but quickly realized that Kain would probably come to his house if he ever didn't show up.

"Oh, shit. Yeah. Forgot about that..." Jack said, taking another gulp of his beer and flipping through the channels on the television. "Well, hell, just show up to work drunk or something. Act more absent-minded. Being competent isn't exactly something that would go unnoticed by that bastard."

Adam stroked Rachel's head as she walked on the floor beneath the edge of his bed. He then brought up his legs and laid down above the comforter, staring up at the palm tree paradise on the ceiling.

"You were never able to actually *hold* a job before all this happened, were you?" Adam asked as Rachel climbed up on top of his chest and curled up into a furry little ball.

"Nah."

* * * * *

March 11th (Five and a Half Months Earlier)

Fred hit Adam over the head with a book. His own book.

"What the hell, Fred!?"

"You haven't told her?" Fred asked, in an apparent effort to confirm that the book-slap wasn't based on a misunderstanding.

"Uh, well, I haven't really gotten around to it. Yet," Adam said. He paused for a moment as an old woman walked up to the cheap, fold-out table. He pulled a book out of his bag and placed it on the table in front of Adam. He exchanged brief small-talk with her — "You're such an accomplished young man" and the like — before she carefully put the signed book back in her bag and left the store.

"You told *me* a few days ago. Me. Your editor. But you 'haven't really gotten around' to telling your goddamn *wife*?"

"That's right, what in the fuck—Hey, how are you today?" A mother and daughter came to the table and placed a copy of Adam's book in front him. After a few pleasantries were exchanged, the pair walked away and Adam turned back to Fred and said, in a quieter voice: "What *should* I do?" He paused for a moment. "Oh, hey honey, the end of the world is approaching, but don't worry about me. I'll be fine," Adam then said in a higher-pitched voice, "Oh! That's great, darling! Make sure you come back for my corpse! Love you forever, kay? Thanks, bye!"

Adam looked down at the carpet and hoped that Fred could say something to make him realize the error in his assumption.

"Well, Adam, I don't know what to tell you," pretty much the opposite of what Adam was hoping to hear. He was about to say something, but then Fred continued, "I mean... We don't even know if anything is going to happen! Why get all worked up about this, right?"

"Name one time the government was actually prepared in *advance* of something," Adam said. Then he remembered what he had been told the day before, "Not to mention that I'm due for permanent placement anytime in the next month or so."

"When'd you find that out?"

"This morning. It's strictly confidential that the 'third batch,' as we're so affectionately named, is due to move out at some undefined time soon. The short estimate is a couple weeks."

"Oh, well that's great! That means that you could be around here for even longer than that!" Fred said. Adam laughed when he noticed the old man almost springing out of his chair at, as he took it, the good news.

"The long estimate is a month."

"Oh." Fred sat back down in his chair.

Adam looked around the bookstore and noticed that most of the customers were beginning to leave. Adam still had to do one more public reading of a segment of his book in an hour, but he wasn't quite sure what to read yet. Adam liked to wait until he noticed the kind of crowd that showed up before he decided on any material to read. If the crowd was mostly adults he chose a segment towards the end where some kind of minor revelation was made. For college kids he chose an early chapter where something

shocking occurred. Something romantic if he noticed a number of couples. And if he couldn't decide on a general demographic he generally chose a light-hearted, comedic segment.

Adam looked over at Fred, who was leaning back in the two chairs the store had provided them with. He was staring at the banner above the table, which had Adam's name written in big, bold letters along with the name of his book.

After a few minutes, Fred looked over to Adam. "If this happens to be the last night I talk to you, I just want you to know that I'll miss you, kid. You were like the son I've never had and, for the last fifteen years, you've given me a reason to keep going." He brought Adam close to him. "Just... Take care of yourself."

Adam wasn't sure what to say in response. He wanted to tell Fred that he thought of him like his father. He wanted to tell him that he didn't have to leave him — not really, anyway. But he didn't. And the two spent the majority of the rest of the night without talking to each other. An hour later he had attracted a sizeable crowd of listeners for his reading; he realized it was one of the largest groups he'd ever had.

He read the last chapter of his book to them.

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Adam woke up from what felt like a half-hour nap. He opened his eyes and saw Rachel curled up on his chest. He picked her up and set her on the pillow next to him. Since he couldn't think of anything better to do, he decided that he'd just head to school early. Looking over at the couch, he noticed that Jack was watching TV with a beer in his hand and two empty bottles on the table in front of him.

"I find myself angry, yet oddly entertained, by the fact that one of the four non-news shows they show us is about a group of people stranded on an island together," Jack said, turning up the volume on the episode of Gilligan's Island he was watching. He then drank the remaining half of the bottle he was holding on to.

"Uh-huh," Adam said while he scanned the floor for a shirt to go over his dark blue t-shirt.

Jack turned his head around to look at Adam, "You were always one of those kids that used to watch these reruns and think that maybe, just *maybe*, Gilligan would get everyone off the island in that particular episode. Weren't you?"

Adam had found a shirt and started to button it up. "Nope. I think I watched about three episodes and figured out that they would never get off the island. The series finale would be something like the Skipper finally getting sick of Gilligan's shit and going on a batshit crazy murdering rampage."

"Aided by the Professor," Jack added.

"Of course," Adam said, trying to find where he put the belt once he had taken it out of Rachel's mouth.

"Well, let me tell you, Adam. I'm glad you're the one who will 'educate the future generations.' The kids will have a nice, optimistic, mentally stable figure in their lives," Jack said.

"Hey, drink another case of beer to start off the day why don't you?" Adam realized that he should have just left the belt in Rachel's mouth instead of putting it... Wherever he put it.

"You're hilarious," Jack said as he walked to the fridge.

"Oh, I know," Adam said as he opened the door to the entryway. He slipped his feet into a pair of flip-flops and then walked back inside to give Rachel a pet before he left. "Shut the door on your way out, Jack."

"Sure thing," he said. Then as Adam was walking out into the entryway again, he called: "Hey, Adam!"

Adam turned around and looked at him on the couch from the entryway threshold, "Yeah, what?"

"Can I really have a case of beer?"

"No," and Adam shut the door.

As he left his house he realized just how nice the rain the day earlier had been. Instead of a random storm taking place, he opened the door to the outdoors and saw the same amount of lighting hitting the same spot of land which remained entirely unaltered since the day he moved into his house. At this moment Adam wasn't exactly sure whether the morbid rain from the day before was more disheartening than the current sunshine, trees, and flowers that were in front of him now.

During the standard work day in the shelter, which was generally perceived as starting at 10:00am and lasting until 6:00pm, music could be heard throughout the streets.

The source of the music was a pair of loudspeakers which were attached to the post of every streetlamp. The choice of music was a combination of ambient noise and a varied choice of music from the sixties to the first few years of the twenty-first century. As Adam walked down the streets, he looked around and saw life as it was intended to be. The trees and flowers were picturesque — and fake. The people wandered around the streets like some small-town photograph before the pre-War chaos. He found himself wondering why the loudspeakers didn't just loop Louis Armstrong for added effect.

When Adam arrived at the school all he could remember was dark monolith that the building turned into at night. He stood at the base of the stairs leading to the first-floor lobby and looked up the side of the building. The school extended into the synthetic layer of clouds that covered the ceiling. Above that was a shelter-wide grid filled with floodlights which were powerful enough to give the illusion of sunlight to the entire shelter. Adam had once looked out the windows of the twelfth floor into the mechanical array of lights which adorned the space well above the actual height of the building. He never went to the floor again which was an easy task, since no aspect of his work demanded that he do so.

He walked up the stairs and through the heavy steel revolving door into the lobby. It was a large, bare room with walls of undecorated cement, painted white. The corner to the right of the door was designed to keep guests occupied with the sizeable plasma television while they remained comfortable in the L-shaped grey leather couch. This distraction proved a boon to the sole secretary who worked in a cramped, square desk at the far right corner. Against the wall to Adam's left were four coin-driven vending machines which served little-to-no purpose in their credit-driven economy — Adam wondered why they were still even in the room. And in the far left corner were bulletin boards and display cases showcasing the top male and female students from each of the eleven floors of the school.

Adam walked through the room in the direction of the two elevators which were along the far wall of the lobby. He looked over at the secretary, whose head was bent over her desk so that all Adam could see was her radiant, straight blonde hair. The hair was enough for Adam to realize it was Pam, a student from his 2:00pm-3:00pm tenth grade composition class.

"Hey, Pam," he said as he walked towards her desk.

She took a moment, but eventually she brought her head up to face Adam. "Hey! Aren't you early? I thought your classes didn't start until noon?" She brushed a bit of her long blonde hair out of her face.

"Yeah, I am. I—" Adam looked at her for a moment; her pink eyes seemed on the brink of crying. "Are you alright?"

"Oh, yeah, great. It's just... Yeah. Think you could help me with something?" She picked up a pair of rimless glasses off of her desk and put them on, brushing more of her hair back behind her ear.

"Sure thing. What's up?" He dropped his bag to the ground as Pam rifled through some of the papers on her desk. She eventually brought up a piece of lined paper and set it on the black (with white speckles) plastic top of the desk. Adam recognized her loopy handwriting from a paper she had written for one of his classes a couple of weeks prior. "... This?"

"I just need to know if the introduction sounds alright," she said. A high-pitched screech was emitted from the computer to her left.

"That may just be the most horrendous sound I've ever heard," Adam said as he scanned through the first paragraph of Pam's paper.

"Sorry about that. Mr. Stoll doesn't let us change it. It's supposed to be, like, a signal for important messages," she swung her chair around to face the computer. "Keep reading, I'll just be a sec."

Adam had already read it twice. He also got a quick read at the scribbled text that was on the back of the sheet. He wanted to wait until he had Pam's full attention before he talked to her about it, so he walked around the lobby looking at the display case. He knew a majority of the students which had been awarded the "Student of the Month" for each floor; an accolade which seemed to lose its importance as the average age of the students rose with each floor. It was a fairly logical increase, with the exception of the first floor which was dedicated to administration and special events. The kindergartners and first graders had the second floor, second and third grade on the third, and so on. After the eighth floor, which was for the senior year of High School and College freshmen, the rest of the building is intended for collegiate studies. The twelfth floor was

intended for graduate-level studies, but was currently only filled with about twenty to thirty students. Floors two through eleven had in the range of two hundred to five hundred students. Overall, if Adam remembered correctly, there were about four thousand students enrolled.

"Alright, what'd you think? It okay?" Pam asked, turning the chair to face Adam.

Adam walked back to the desk, "Yeah, it's fine. Just keep it up and it should turn out to be a good paper. Now—" Adam flipped the paper over and tapped at the unstructured, unpolished mess of loopy pink ink, "—about *this*."

Pam looked down to whatever was hidden behind the raised desk wall. "I..." She didn't make an attempt to continue whatever she wanted to say.

Adam looked around the lobby while he waited for Pam to say something. He listened to one of the elevators make a muffled beep, which he assumed was from it stopping at the floor above. The purposeless, empty vending machines hummed in their corner. "Okay, here's what we're going to do. First, the obligatory teacher stuff: I'm always here for you in your time of darkness, despair, and contemplative self-destruction," she gave a slight smile. "And I'll try and usher you into a decent spot into the waitlist for our lovely psychiatrists."

"But—" Pam took off her glasses and set them back on the desk.

"Nope, that last bit is unconditional. Though the part about talking to me is, obviously, at your own peril."

Pam looked at Adam, and then looked back down to her desk and thanked Adam.

"Yeah, no problem, kid," Adam responded; he tried to think of something, preferably uplifting, to leave Pam with. "If nothing else we — you, me, and every other member of our happy little extended family — are the lucky ones," he said. He pointed up towards the ceiling.

Pam looked back up at him, wiping under her left eye with the sleeve of her pink sweater. She laughed and Adam realized that he shouldn't have said anything. "You can't possibly *believe* that, can you?" she asked.

Adam didn't respond. He looked down at the silver-grey linoleum flooring.

"You can't. You just can't. Everyone we ever knew is probably dead. Or dying. We've been stuck down here for months with tons of people we never knew before," she

paused for a second, wiping the tears off of her red face. She stood up off her chair and yelled "I say the lucky ones are dead. The lucky ones aren't the ones waiting down here for some kind of magical 'All-Clear! Everything is A-Oh-fucking-Kay!' signal from above. The lucky ones aren't *us*. Hell, the smart ones are people like Lindsey and Michael — they knew just as well as you and I that the only thing left for us down here is a delayed death sentence. The only difference between them and us is that they had the sense to end it early."

Pam stood for a moment longer, looking at Adam. Adam watched as tears fell from her face onto the paper that she had asked him to read. She wiped under her eyes with the sleeves of her sweater again and, slowly, sat back down. The computer to her left let out a screech. Pam stared at the corner of the desk. Adam remembered going to Michael's cremation just a few days earlier. According to his own count, Michael's death brought the suicide count up to nine... And, Adam realized, that was just over the course of the last month and a half.

"How much longer do you have to work for?" Adam asked softly.

"Um... I think I have... About two hours until Rebecca gets here," she said as she remained motionless, fixated on the desk corner.

"What about Ella, is she here?"

"Uh, yeah. It's her day off work... But she should be done with her classes for the day in about a half-hour."

"Alright, well, I'll go get her to finish off your shift; go head home. I'll take care of stuff here. I have to work all afternoon, but I'll have Ella stop by your parents place to check up on you when Rebecca shows up to start her shift," Adam said; Pam absently wiped another tear from her face.

"What class does she have?" Adam asked her.

"Who?" Pam asked as she stood up from her chair, "Oh. Uh, Ella should be in... Ms. Andrews' room." Pam picked up her bag from the corner and slung it over her shoulder.

"Alright, thanks kid. Go home and relax for the rest of the day," Adam said. He watched the tall teenager lift up a portion of the desk counter so she could let herself out of the confined space. Once she was out, she tugged on the waistline of her baggy jeans

and, for whatever reason Adam thought he remembered them being a tight fit on her only a month earlier. On her way through the lobby Pam turned back towards him, her blonde hair flowing over her shoulder, and waved goodbye to him and left.

Adam didn't move to the elevator immediately. He spent a few moments leaning on the desk and rubbed his face. He looked at the door that led outside and thought about what Pam had said. Looking back at the desk counter, he noticed that the paper Pam had told him to read was still where he had left it. He folded it up and stuck it into his back pocket as he walked over to the elevators and pressed the call button. As he waited he listened to the sound of the descending elevator which amplified gradually with every ding it made as it passed by the numerous floors.

Adam looked over to the empty secretary desk and heard the computer emit another screech. The chair that Pam had just gotten up from was still revolving around slowly. And, at the sight of the paper she had him read still on the desk counter he felt a sting in his eyes. His vision blurred. He looked down at the floor and brought up his hands and covered his face in them. Through his distorted vision, he saw a small, metallic trashcan placed below the elevator call panel. He kicked it. Crumpled papers and an empty water bottle spilled out onto the linoleum while a metallic clang echoed through the lobby. Adam kicked at the fallen trashcan again and watched the canister slide along the floor until it was stopped short by the side of the secretary desk.

He realized that Pam would have no chance of getting into any of the psychiatrists offices anytime within the next two weeks. They ran sixteen hours every day for the last month and still have yet to get through the enormous waitlist of both students and adults. Adam knew that Pam, like the other few students before her that Adam had talked to under similar circumstances, wouldn't last much longer. The toll would be up to ten by the end of the week.