

# **Before The Cult**

## **A Glimpse Inside A Depressive's Mind**

By Sandy Masia

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## **Dedications**

*For Saya Heather Pierce-Jones for always being an inspiration.*

*Ritah Mafokwane, for staying up with me all those nights.*

*Lauren Pillay, for always being around.*

# Scarleton Series

Scarleton Series is partially chronological although events that happen in one book usually intertwine with other books and bring light on some issues expressed in other instalments. It is more of a thematic series; events on one book might be occurring at the same time, before or after the events in another book. They might influence each other or feed off one another. Each book takes centred look on one of the characters. Each book can be enjoyed on its own, but will be enjoyed even better within the context of others. All books are based in the fictional town Scarleton. Before the Cult is where it all begins and you are about to read about one of the most influential and pivotal characters to the series. Enjoy!

# Prologue

She lay on the mattress free bed, tied to the bedframe. Her breasts severed and cauterized. Hair seared off and ears cut off. Her body covered with bruises, scabs, festering burns and wounds. Coagulated blood staining parts of her body. Too sore to move and dispirited she was. Her breathing wheezy and irregular. She had no idea how long she had been there, or where she was, but it was long enough to drain all the hope she had. The scars that were inflicted within her were oceanic. Her ear shattering screams were of no avail.

The man in the long dark trench coat came back into the torture chamber. He took a seat beside the bedframe. A dark silhouette in the dark room, his back turned on the grimy small window that ushered the only natural light into the damp place. He watched her naked body for a while, allowing the unsettling quiet to take over. When she began shivering and panting he spoke, "Remember what we asked you when we first brought you here?" A modest voice came from the shadow, coaxing in nature.

She couldn't say anything to him, she had learned how futile it was the hard way. All she could do was listening. Besides her thoughts, he was the only voice she heard in a day.

"We asked you 'What price is your life worth?'" He always spoke in plurals like that. He sat back into the chair and audibly exhaled. "You said you're priceless."

She waited for him to carry on, he always lingered in silences like that. "After a few modifications to your body you don't wanna live anymore? Do you see how absurd that is? You have diminished the value of your life to the loss of a few parts." He sighed. "Each time you convince us of how worthless your lives truly are. It's why we don't think twice before using

your lives to buy in into a home.” He shifted in the creaking chair. “Isn’t belonging the only thing invaluable after all?”

With that, he unwrapped something in his hand. "Your wish is granted."

He began sprinkling some liquid on her. Gasoline, she smelled it. “No. no, no. Not like this please!” she wept, wriggling on the bedframe. “Haven’t you hurt me enough? Just make it quick and simple, please.”

He snorted, stood to his feet. “Consider the pain payment. Put your death to good use, you should be happy knowing that your death helped someone out.” A camera light fell on her face from the tripod. She squinted trying to make him out behind the light. He heard him unbuckle his pants and letting them fall on the floor. He began heaving. Then he flicked the lighter on. When she looked down at his groin she could see him touching himself. Before she could even make sense of it all flames engulfed her.

“Fuck, yes!” he snarled with pleasure.

# Chapter 1

## 1

“Would you shut the hell up?” I snapped.

Macfearson shrugged. “It’s just strange what you guys are doing here. Who listens to music like that? I’m tiptoeing around this place afraid to make a sound like you have your freaking heads buried in a book before an exam. Afraid because I might, “he added air quotes, “distract you.”

“I think you can’t stand being alone,” said Macxermillio.

“I think you missing the point. I can’t stand being in a room with fucking zombies staring at a screen watching every little move I make. No, I can’t stand the silence oozing from the undead. It is just awkward.” He began approaching with a coyly careless gait. Leaned over from behind us to take a look at the screen. "Oh my dead dog, you guys are just staring at nothing? I thought you were looking at visualizations or something. You just staring at the player?”

Macxermillio shook his head. “You wouldn’t understand, music is not just meant to be heard but experienced and be enveloped in it. That requires your undivided attention and the moment you realize how beautiful and magical the experience is maybe you would burn yourself a bit less. Nothing strange here.”

With a shrug, Macfearson sat on the bed behind us situated at the corner. He rolled up his left sleeve, grabbed a lighter from his pocket and held his arm over the flame, searing his skin. He groaned, “Oh yeah. That does it.” He leered at us then slumped on his back over the bed. “You can freakin’

carry on now. I'm gonna take a nap. I like the whole keeping the room dark thing but what you guys are doing is strange."

"Every time you speak you just distract us and we have to start all over again. This is an *album* not a random collection of songs like a pop record. We need the silence!" I said.

Macfearsonn sighed heavily. "Why can't you start where you left off? It's like a fuckin' movie on pause, right?"

"Some experiences beg to be experienced without a pause or an interruption. It's not the same, it's a thing of its own kind," Macxermillio answered. "Do we have your cooperation?"

"Can I snore and have a freakin' ciggy?"

Macxermillio chuckled. "You can't fuckin' snore."

"Alright." He stuck a cigarette between his lips and let it dangle on the corner of his mouth for a little while. "Okay, I'm ready. You can hit it?"

With a gentle tap on the laptop's keyboard the album started and the room filled with a modest stream of sound. Soaked us in it. Soon our minds were drowning within the affect world of music and the spells of the experience. The external world submerged into a darkness, so deep and out of sight that the furniture reverted to its lonely creaky nature. The tree out the window and its shuffling leaves miniature, the bird songs mixed in the background fog of student voices, cars, motorcycles, trucks and dog barks. Such abstraction from the university's morning stir. The music spawned webs the size of the universe and we swam in the volume like whales.

**KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!**

Aggressive and disruptive, tugging us from the depths of the music. With a grimace on his face, Macxermillio muttered under his breath, "Who the fuck is that?"

"No, fucking clue," I said.

**KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK !**

“Fuck,” I cursed under my breath as I got up, exasperated. “On my way! Cool off.”

“I wanna see who this dopey is.” Macfearson got up and waited.

I opened the door. “Jay! How are you?”

He ignored my greeting and went straight to his point. “I can smell the smoke in the hallway,” he said. “I told you to stop smoking in your room. I can't give you hours for this, but the sub-wardens will. It's just fuckin' annoying, man. Please be considerate to all the people living in the res.” He paused. When he did I realized he was coming from the shower, his towel wrapped around his waist. He was still wet and for the first time I could see how far his belly hung out and how flabby his biceps were. I also found myself not hearing half of the stuff he snarled, increasingly apathetic. He lived three doors down from me and my neighbours never complained about the smoke, but occasionally the music. “Please, will you stop? It's a fire hazard.”

I sighed. “Okay, I will, Jay.”

He studied me closely for a while, incredulous. “I am serious.”

I shook my head. “I see that now.”

“Next time I'm telling the one of the sub-wardens.” With that, he stepped out of the doorway and went down the hallway.

I watched as he disappeared into his room, turned and shut the door behind me. Macfearson harboured a grin on his face, eyes sparkling with an idea. “When the flowers grow too high and too close to the window, enough to block your view. You clip them off,” he said. “Deathlings, I think we have our next sample. We have let it grow too high and wide.” He paused. “His blocking our view.” He pointed. “Fellas, that is the true distraction.”

He planted another cigarette between his lips.

“Are you gonna smoke again?” said Macxermillio.



Macfearson stared at Macxermillio for a while. Removed his lighter from his pocket and flipped it on. "If it all goes well," he lit the cigarette shut the lighter and placed it back his pocket, "I am breaking his nose in a few minutes." His jaws jerked and his breathing grew heavy. "A fucking *lifeling* can't tell us what to do. Fuck him!"

"He is probably not coming out in his room for the next fifteen minutes or so. The guy just took a shower," Macxermillio said.

"It is enough. Cigarette smoke is not easily cleared."

"I would love to watch it all go down but I gotta go to the philosophy lecture pretty soon," I said.

Macfearson nodded. "You going, Macx?"

"No, I think I will continue listening right up until the encounter."

"Guys please don't mess my room. Don't get me in too much trouble. I am responsible for you guys since you don't stay in this res or are even students here," I said.

Macfearson sighed. "Yeah, we won't. It's cool."

"Guys, don't cause too much trouble, we can't afford to draw much attention to ourselves now." I shook my head. "I guess a simple intimidation would do. Look he is a bully he can't go tell on me because that is freakin' weak according to the standards he set himself."

Macfearson groaned. "C'mon, let me break his nose. It won't cause any commotion or take long. No one will notice, not even himself until the deed is done."

Reluctantly I replied, "Okay, but only if he comes here. Don't overdo it."

Macfearson chuckled. "Alright!" He pulled on his cigarette and grinned.

"Okay. Macx, I'm trusting you, okay?"

"Okay." He nodded.

With what felt like a speck of assurance I grabbed my bag which rested against the bookshelf, opened the door behind me and disappeared into the hallway.

## 2

Stepped out the main door to find the Scarleton's morning sun yellow and hot. Cruel and intolerant. Across the lawn where the cobbled-stone walk lead, students walked to their morning lectures in various conglomerations of groups and the lone. The girls in short pants, sundresses, tight-skin denim skirts rendering the day bit more bearable with their pleasurable distractions. The bashful conventional ones brought with them an atmosphere of order, direction and purpose. Considerate and mindful they were, the conventional ones, but never boring unlike the conservative ones. Unlike popular opinion, I found the conservative intriguing. Like any other minority in that they inspired a great deal of curiosity, mystery and open-mindedness in their quest not to conform. As for boys, they were boys. Like every male first year, excited over the freedom from parental supervision, they basked in the seven deadly sins. Nevertheless, intolerance never ceased to pour from their mouths and spill from their swagger. A masking scent that my nose was way too sensitive to.

The lecture theatre was no more than five minutes away at a brisk walk. I was already five minutes late but on my standards that was on time. At my arrival, the lecturer would be recapitulating yesterday's lecture and dealing with some general confusion expressed by the students before he gets into the day's lecture. As he finishes with the recap, I would be barging in through the door on the right side of the lecture theatre and take a seat on

the first row of the right column on the second seat from the aisle. Up front and where the early birds are easy to ignore. Without fail on the left column, past the middle column, first row on the second seat from the aisle, sitting alone like me, would be Courtney. Her frazzled black hair tied into a pony-tail and a black or grey over-sized shawl on over her shoulder. In a black, white or grey embroidered dress she would be taking notes on her notepad. As I take my seat she would raise her head, brush away a strand of stray hair with her pen hand, look right at me with a smile upon her face and greet me with a nod, a wave or mouth a 'hello'. That would not be the beginning and the end of our silent exchange, it would go on throughout the lecture in non-distractive intervals at specific cues as if we shared the same frame of mind and sixth sense. Never have I spoken to her other than those times or with the use of my voice. That was just enough, that was fitting for us. I knew we were similar in many ways because although I was never one to raise my hand in class and be vocal about my views and problems she would do it for me, often she was vocal and when she articulated her views it felt like she was an external mouthpiece for my inner thoughts. Elegant, pure and mystifying. It looked as if she could sense it too.

Five minutes later I walked in and resumed my seat. Instinctively, I glanced over where she would be and as if on cue she raised her head, smiled and gave me a firm nod. Infected by her warm spirit, I smiled and mouthed a greeting. As expected she had a grey over-sized shawl over her shoulders and wore a white embroidered dress. I noticed she also wore a beat necklace bearing an orphic symbol that was star-like. Something that lent her an almost occult aura and poise. Upon seeing it, I decided that that would be the day I speak to her for the first time, because unlike the other dumb *lifelings* in that lecture theatre she had proven herself time and time again to be something truly unique. I could feel my thoughts and deepest yearnings start to salivate at the anticipation of the encounter.

For her I carried less anxiety, I assumed. The possibility that a soul like hers could be judgmental, impatient and unwelcoming was minor. She appeared to be one who faces even the strangest of circumstances and people with a healthy dose of ease and thoughtfulness. Rashness and pride were absent in her demeanour and approach in class. She was brave and cautious. She stood out to me because she was odd in the sense that she did not possess the usual traits that one expects from her kind, the frivolous die young spirit and the idea that they are the pinnacle of all civilisations and the pervasive belief that they are invincible and entitled. They swear by open-mindedness but what they mean by that is selective openness, if an idea appears archaic and exotic they cringe and cower to the depths of rejection.

"Now utilitarianism does not believe that an action is intrinsically wrong and right. The only determinant of whether an action is right or wrong is whether or not it maximizes overall happiness," the lecturer continued.

"What is meant by intrinsically wrong or right is the idea that some actions are just wrong or right regardless of their consequences. For an example, acts like murder and rape are just wrong even if it means committing them would save fifty people from burning. This is precisely what utilitarianism rejects. Does anyone see a problem with this?"

No one responded. I glanced over at Courtney who was frantically taking down notes and evaluating them, a frown of concern on her face.

"Courtney?" the lecturer called.

She hesitantly shook her head and mumbled something. Then replied, "No."

"Okay. I guess everyone gets it." the lecturer giggled. He walked over to the pulpit, gazed over his notes and said, "Well, imagine this. You are walking past a dam and you see a child drowning and you are in such a position that you can save the child. You are not particularly in a hurry or

anything, you just happened to take a walk and this happens. What do you think would be the right thing to do?"

"To help," a couple of students blurted.

"Why?"

The classroom was silent for a second then a student from the back raised her hand.

The lecturer pointed. "You."

"Um...because you are saving a child's life?" she said.

The lecturer nodded his eyes on the floor. "Yeah, because saving person's life leads to more happiness. The utilitarian would give a reason like that while people who believe in intrinsically wrong and bad actions might just say because to help someone is a good thing. Do you see the difference in those two reasons? Helping someone is only good to the utilitarian because it brings about more happiness while on the other view the act is good because it is a *good* act no matter what happens as a result."

*Does that mean if the act was murder the utilitarian would deem it fine as long as it increases happiness?* I thought.

Courtney raised her hand.

"Courtney."

Her raspy voice yanked me from the valleys of my mind and into the moment. "So what this means is that you can substitute the action in this example with any repulsive action and it would still be deemed correct because of the results?"

The lecturer nodded. "Yes, that is what it means. You're right."

And the mental affair between our two souls began, alive and enrapturing as ever.

They had been waiting for me, set aside a chair for me completing the triangle formation. Having just walked in I was not in the mood for a little conclave. I conveyed my unwillingness by shuffling over to my designated chair and dropped my bag on the wooden floor. Took every opportunity to show my enervated state in my actions, breathing, posture and facial expression. Macxermillio was not discouraged a bit by my display of unwillingness.

“Look, guys,” I suspired, “I’m a bit doped. Can we –“

“What the fuck happened?” Macfearson interrupted.

I sighed, clearly reluctant to explain, slightly because of the difficulty I sensed would come with putting some words together.

“Do you find yourself troubled by the philosophy lesson today? I know it can be a tight noose,” Macxermillio said.

“It’s not that.” I glanced at Macfearson. “Fearson did you kick Jay’s ass?”

He shook his head. “Nah, that’s part of the reason we should have this meeting now. We think enough time has passed since the last sampling to take on the next one.”

Macxermillio added. “The town has quieted. Does not seem to have gathered a lot of information regarding the disappearances. The whole thing has spun into senseless sensationalism that nobody cares about from some student newspaper and nothing major. The one that everybody always makes fun off?”

“You mean The Active?”

“Yeah, that one. Nobody is taking it seriously and everybody is circulating memes on the internet about The Active’s speculative article about the missing students which was not even close to the number we have nabbed. This means we have been extremely careful, having devised a new

technique I think it is time for our next sample. Maybe our last before all of this catches fire.” Macxermillio paused. And later added, “This time it must work.”

“You know I have been thinking about this a lot,” Macfearson said, wagging his index finger. “I mean the reason for these experiments is to avoid going to heaven or hell or staying in this *calling* haunted world. It is so that we end up at *the crop* where we truly belong.” He paused.

The calling, an unfathomable being like time, everybody had an idea of what it was, but they were never quite sure what it entailed. Not of this world but interacting with this world. No telling if it was merely a deep feeling of loss and homelessness inside us or the cause of that feeling, whether it was an entity with the best of our interests at heart or a force of this world designated to choke and drive us to self-annihilation eventually cleansing this world of lunatics like us. For most of our time, we had known rejection and the unflinching arms of acceptance and love the calling embraced us with where suitably a subject of such doubt and scepticism. The calling had one promise: Do as I say and all will be alright. Just a string of words which never correlated to nothing tangible this far. Trust is earned or promises are subjected to tests like any hypotheses.

“Yes, that is the reason we study their eyes when they transition,” Macxermillio said.

Transition was just another euphuism for dying.

“What if there is nothing wrong with how they transition. That we are missing an element. I propose this element is not control over their state of mind but control on the state of their soul,” Macfearson said.

“This means what?”

Macfearson hesitated. “I was thinking we lack an occult element. A ritual or a sacrifice of sorts. Something to manipulate the transition process. Then if it works we could use it on ourselves.”

Macxermillio shook his head. "No, we can't mess with the unruly forces and spirits and shit. Don't wanna find myself in a situation I can't get myself out of. The occult is extremely dangerous it might require us to even add a stranger to our team, someone we can trust. Who even knows if *deathling* blood is very precious and on crazy demand for those occult *lifelings*? Let's keep things within our vicinity where we can control it and remain safe and discreet. I hear you can't even read an occult writing without inviting some spirits. We already have enough on our plate with the weight of the calling on our backs. That is as much as we can handle now." Macxermillio paused and shifted in his seat. "It's too much of a risk. Too demanding and not dependable."

Macfearson grimaced. "You have thought of doing this before?"

Macxermillio looked away a degree. "Someone I knew tried. Let's just say that."

"What happened to him?" I asked.

He sighed. "Men came in the middle of the night where he slept. They dragged him out to the graveyard. Whipped him, flayed him and drained his body of blood. They took his soul too. Only these things weren't men, but spirits summoned upon him by studying the occult arts."

"Was he one of us?"

"I was too young to tell."

Macfearson nodded.

"Now, as I was saying we are ready for our next sample. This time, I think we should strike close by. Three doors down from here and end the reign of Jay. His been a jerk to you and everybody else. People would be relieved his gone and we will be happy we got to break him. And when alarms start going off that students have been disappearing hopefully we will have our hands off." Macxermillio turned my way with command and control, "We



need you to have your lunch on the same table as him and his cronies. Find out what they have planned for the weekend.”

I sighed. "You mean I should watch him until he goes to the dining hall and then go to eat," I complained. "I'm already starving, Mac. What if he goes there after an hour and a half because he has a lecture or something? Can't we do it tomorrow? It's only Thursday tomorrow."

Macfearson intercepted. "We need time to prepare and gather resources." "Why are you so cranky though?"

I kept quiet for a moment, rubbing my neck. "It's Courtney, Mac."

"Courtney?" He leaned forward. "What happened? You finally spoke to her?"

"I tried. My words died in my mouth. I felt like such a fool."

Macfearson laughed.

I continued. "She waited on me to say something but I was stuttering like I never had before. Then that pretentious class rep bitch interrupted us and ruined the whole thing. She chatted to Courtney and basically blocked me."

"At least she gave you the chance to escape," mocked Macfearson.

"Why now, though?" asked Macxermillio.

"It just felt like the right moment to talk to her. She had remained an enigma for far too long. It felt right."

"Next time I guess."

"How will I face her tomorrow? I feel so embarrassed now. She knows I'm that weirdo guy who tried to talk to her. I don't know what to do." I jumped up and threw myself onto the bed burying my face into the pillow.

"I don't wanna deal with anything right now I feel like such a loser."

"What?" they asked, having heard nothing but muffled ramblings.

I shifted my head to the side. "I feel like such a loser. I feel quite sick actually. Hope I haven't ruined the little thing we had by being such a freak."

I was basically choking for about twenty seconds in front of her my mouth gaped like a...

"Like a?" asked Macxermillio, amused.

"I don't know! I don't even know what I was gonna talk about or do. I wonder what she is thinking of me now."

"If she is a petty *lifeling* who cares?" said Macfearson.

"No, she could be more than that. She is quite unique." I paused. "I don't know how to explain it."

"It sounds like you ruined it with your dirty cursed hands. You are not meant to be loved or liked by any of those folks. They look at you and they just see waste. They don't care about you. They would rather have you stay away than come near them. I'm sure you saw the disgust in her eye when you approached her. She might have signalled for the girl to block you away. She does not want you. Maybe you were wrong thinking there is any hope for companionship in this piss of a world. Isn't she part of the very fabric that is so intolerant and coarse on our souls? She blends easily doesn't she?" spoke Macfearson.

I stayed silent for a moment. "Maybe you are right. She is just as superficial as the others. Nothing of substance there. Took being closer to her to finally see her true colours."

Macxermillio solemnly spoke, his hands clenched together in front of his groin. "It is such precious things that the world constantly denies from us. Twisting and driving us under the soil they tread upon. It forgets us and misunderstands us, judges us and reminds us we are of no value to it. But this is not a new thing to a *deathling* but a horrid truth like death that no one ever gets used to or gets over. I grieve for you, *deathling*. And this is exactly why you should have that lunch, we can't be here any longer to endure such torment even souls as hard as ours grow frail."

## 4

For lunch I was served my favorite meal; baked hake, fried chips, cooked spinach with steamed carrots. As I had predicted Jay came to lunch during last thirty minutes of the lunch period (which span from 12 pm to 1 pm). The dining hall sparsely populated all around but the table where Jay and his friends and a few students from our house regularly sat was occupied from side to side and head to tail, except for one seat situated right next to him at the end of the table. I put my tray there and sat next to him. Strangely I was feeling confident and less nervous. Maybe because of the knowledge that his demise was nigh.

“Hey, guys!” I greeted.

They all stayed silent as if they had not heard me.

Puzzled I repeated, a bit louder this time. “Hey, guys!”

Still the same treatment, the little grin I had employed this time began to quiver.

“Guys, Sandy, says hi,” Jay said ironically.

A few responded with laughs.

He leered at me. “Sandy, no one says ‘hey’ to another guy. It’s gay.”

I giggled paradoxically. “But I always say ‘hey’! It’s a greeting. There is nothing girly about it.”

The others laughed. One of his cronies replied, “Say somethin’ like ‘howzit’ or something.”

“Yeah,” said Jay, spreading his arms. “For God’s sake, Sandy, stop being a bitch nigger for once.”

“What’s that? What’s a bitch nigger?”

Half the table exploded in laughter, laughter directed at me. A few voices going, “C’mon, Sandz! Yoh, everybody knows that.”

“Sandy, you wish you were white don’t you?” said Jay. “I’m even surprised that you decided to sit with us today you always sit with the white guys.”

“What do you mean I wish I was white? I am who I am.”

“Guys, does Sandy speak, walk and act like a real nigger?”

Half the table replied, “No!” While the other quarter exploded in laughter... The last quarter, bystanders mumbling under their breaths about how rude Jay was being but lacking the balls to confront him in case they get cauterized.

"Guys, have you heard the music that Sandy listens to?"

"No. what does he listen to?" asked one of the students at the far end, seeming genuinely curious rather than participating in the mocking.

“He listens to that heavy metal shit. Like that devil worship kind. All you hear when walking past his room is screams and squeaks. You can’t tell what the fuck is going on. He is probably in there slashing his wrists or some shit.”

The boys responded with a mixture of gasps and roaring laughs. Spat drinks and food flying everywhere. The bystanders covering their mouths with their hands and swallowing a few giggles.

I attempted to stop it by using shock. I rested my elbow on the table and pulled down my sleeves to expose an array of cut marks across my left arm, descending to my concealed upper arm. The most recent cut still seeping.

"You are right. I actually was slitting my wrists." I grinned widely.

"Impressive isn't it?"

Some scowled, some flinched, some stopped chewing and some spit the food in their mouths back into their plates. The silence swept the whole

table, everyone just staring and some gasping at its sight. Then there was mumbling. They started looking at each other.

“That is disgusting,” Jay said. “Put that away please.”

I defiantly stared into his eyes. “No, let’s carry on talking. Are you gonna tell me black people don’t do this too?”

“Sandy, please put that away dude. We are eating here. We are asking you nicely, okay?” said one of his cronies, his eyes watery.

I covered it up and resumed eating my meal as if nothing had happened. I could sense their dumbfounded glances exchanging around the table and a select few just staring down their plates unable to shake the image of what they had seen, twirling and probing it in their heads. A significant number of them plainly dazed.

“Sandy, if you ever go on a killing spree, because your kind does crazy shit like that, would you please not start with me?” said Jay with a tinge of sarcasm.

A few people laughed.

He addressed them. “I’m serious though guys.” He chuckled uncontrollably. “Sandy is some manic depressive freak, I tell ya. You gotta try be on his good side.” He turned my way. “Sandy, please just let me know, dude. If you just snap at least don’t start with me, okay? Be fair, give me a head start.” He chortled. “Okay, Sandz?”

The whole offered some type of weak laughs, but the most vigorous were from him and his cronies.

As the pain escalated and the shame worsened I bit down my tongue as hard as I can. I figured I could not ask him what he would be doing this weekend from here. With a bloated heart and enveloped by a veil of darkness, my lips began to tremble and tears blurred my vision before slipping down my jaws in rivers. The thought of sinking the table knife in his neck a very tempting one, I fought and trembled to let go of the knife

and the fork. Images of blood spurting out his neck as he shudders and screams filled my mind. His shocked wriggling body waning and kicking the furniture around and the bystanders petrified and flustered at the sight.

*Soon, Jay, very soon you will know how it's like,* I thought.

Quickly I arose and flounced out the place.

## 5

Standing under the willow tree outside in the garden, I distraughtly wiped my tears burst after burst with my rocking palms, fingers, and fists. I would not walk to residence from there because I ran a risk of running into someone which would make the encounter even more embarrassing. Could not bear the thought of anyone else witnessing my desolation. The willow tree was where no one would think to look even with a mindless glance, not even a place where a stoner would want to be. It was damp and mosquitos whirred about. The self-blame started boiling up inside of me resulting into more waves of tears that rendered my hands slipper, I noticed that I would have to use my wrists if that continued. Against my pathetic attempts to calm myself stood the resounding insults inducing a sensation of a thin thread being pulled through my brain, leaving me with a pulsing headache. Another wave of tears began as the self-loathing gnawed at my state with its range of insults and commentary that perpetuated the feeling of being alone in this world and how it would be best for everyone if I slipped a noose around my neck. Mostly reminding me of how I can barely stand living underneath this scarred skin and how I would appreciate total annihilation of my soul. Too much hate and emotional hurt for one soul to carry without exploding. That is when the craving for a blade on my skin reached its peak

and the ground beneath my feet ceased to hold. There was one way I only knew how to help myself from being buried by the darkness that was eager to consume me. Pain, self-inflicted pain. I fiercely butted the tree's trunk with my forehead three times or so.

It must have been a few minutes or so when something warm and moist fell on my forehead. I opened my eyes and above me the sun shone clearly through the bristling branches. Distant voices, the rambling of vehicles on the road across the garden and the coming and goings of students by the stone cobbled walkways from the dining hall leading to an array of places eased me into consciousness. My shirt felt soggy on my back and mosquitos and flies buzzed over my body. I wiped my forehead with my fingers. Inspected them to find bird feces mixed with my own blood. I felt my forehead and discovered I had a gash right in the middle of my forehead. I figured I must have knocked myself out from banging my head on the trunk like that. Then I stumbled to my feet, looked around and it seemed no one had noticed. I brushed the leaves and grass off my trousers and started walking to residence.

"How did it go?" was Macxermillio's greeting when I walked into my room. Macfearson was on the computer surfing the internet. Eyes on the screen, all he could do was to echo Macxermillio absently.

"Um..." I tried to speak then Macxermillio interrupted, "What the fuck happened to your face?"

Macfearson looked up from the laptop. "Did Jay hit you?" Darkly, he smiled.

Macxermillio tittered. "What happened?"

"New form of SP." I walked to the mirror by the basin to inspect the wound, it was swelling and seeping. "I banged my head against a tree. Too upset."

"Did not go well then?" Macxermillio asked.

“I don’t know.”

“What did they do?”

“They got to me. Showed them my scars.”

“Why?”

“Needed to shut them off.”

“It worked?”

I grabbed my towel on the rack beside me and started wiping the blood.

“No. It only got worse so I went outside and did this.”

“So nothing got done?”

“Yet.”

“So when?”

“Supper. Perhaps.”

“Okay.” Macxermillio exchanged a glance with Macfearson. He cleared his throat. “Do you wanna be left alone?”

“I don’t know. Doesn’t matter if you are here anyway. Nothing I can’t do with you guys around except masturbating I guess.”

Macfearson stood up from the chair and walked over to view the wound in the reflection. “Man, you are hyperventilating. Never seen you this upset in my life.” He peered deeper into the wound, narrowing his eyes. “I think you should cover it up.”

“No. There is something about it.” I paused to think. “It’s a conversation starter.”

Macfearson chuckled. “I guess so.” He turned Macxermillio. “Macx, what do you think?”

Macxermillio only laughed. A smile flickered on my face. “I’m gonna go for a walk to the shops now. I’ll see you guys later,” said Macxermillio, picking up his backpack from the floor.

“Cool. See you later.”

“You guys want anything?”



Macfearson replied, "Can you get me a new lighter and pack of ciggies?"

He nodded. "And you, Sandz?"

"It's Wednesday. Get me three beers."

"750s?"

"Yes, please."

He left the room.

Macfearson stared for a long time at the wound, clearly contemplating something.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Don't you wonder how it will be if you cut it? Extended its parameter?"

I laughed. "Sounds like a brilliant idea."

## 6

It's not happiness in a bottle but an illusion of one. That is what alcohol is. Happiness is a state of being I have never been close to or know the taste of. The thing about alcohol is that it detaches you from your problems, it does not sever you from them, it just distances you enough to be desensitized to the degree your predicament actually affects you. It offers a false sense of hope for the first few drinks, then as I continue drinking my outlook becomes even more dreary. Then dread draws closer to your face until it all becomes fuzzy and muddled as this world with its unfathomable norms. The grief for what I never knew, for where I should be and for how things are supposed to be disperses for a moment and later it returns denser. Then the coagulated sadness strains the body and the soul of its energy and will. Each subsequent slumber grows longer and from each I wake even more tired and dazed than before. Faced with my forlorn hopeless state, I

dwell in my crying fits, quivering to the floor and helping myself to a slit or two. As the self-harm loses its ability to feed the craving a bottle of alcohol works as a mediator. Somehow it kept me alive... not that being alive is what I want. I think drugs, any kind, were there not to soothe the pain or provide relief but to help us endure a bit more, they are the equivalent of the last dive you make at the end of a race – their usefulness is conditional. Creatures with our kind of consciousness are given the ability to escape our current reality and drugs manipulate this ability, stretching it to its bounds. The 750ml Black Label beer bottle looked cold. It was tantalizing and I was eager to manipulate my consciousness to ward off the calling's weight.

“Do you have classes this afternoon?” asked Macxermillio.

"No, I don't. I'm done for today," I said, staring at the red and black label on the bottle of beer on the desk next to my laptop. I read what's on it, “Champion beer for champion men.”

Macfearson laughed. “Beautiful isn't it?”

“I fuckin' love beer.”

I knew after drinking I would lie down. I looked forward to it because it would be dreamless. It would be a break from the nightmares that haunt and tire my soul. I would wake up unable to remember what they are about, left with the terror and the sheets dampened by sweat. Napping that afternoon would be different. I was going to wake up with a headache and a confused mind, but that was better.

Macxermillio picked up a greasy glass on top of the table. Rinsed it at the basin and placed it on the desk. He gestured for Macfearson to open the bottle.

Macfearson sighed, grabbed the bottle and opened it with his mouth. “You guys should really learn how to do this.” He gave it to Macxermillio.

“No thanks,” replied Macxermillio as he poured the beer into the glass. He slid it to me. “There you go, Sandz.”

I stared at it, suddenly overwhelmed. "I can't go to supper guys." Tears began blurring my view. "Eating is work. I can't keep doing it anymore. Feels like I'm forcing food down my throat and chokin' myself. I don't have the energy to keep going there or being out there. I am tired guys. I just wanna be alone and stay alone. I don't wanna see anyone or talk to anyone. I can't go to supper. I just wanna sleep now and...maybe never wake up."

Macxermillio nodded. "Okay."

"I'm sorry guys."

"Are you gonna do that after your drink?" Macfeanson asked.

I stared at the gold beer, bubbles racing to the top. "I don't feel like drinking anymore."

I turned to my bed measuring the energy and the will it would take to be in it including all the associated activities like taking my shoes and clothes off. The calculations' results were daunting.

"Macx?"

"Huh?"

"Can you put me to bed, please?" I wept.

He lifted me off the chair with his arm placed under my knees and the other under my shoulder blades. I was a dead weight in his arms. He placed me in bed, took my shoes off and pulled my pants off. Then he covered me with the duvet.

He patted my arms. "Sleep well."

I could only manage to thank him mentally.

"Would you like us to leave?" Macfeanson asked.

I did not answer.

"Sandz?"

I could not respond. The truth is I did not care or know the answer.

“Okay,” said Macxermillio. “Um...we gonna take the rest of your bottles to the fridge in case you want it later.”

Upon opening my eyes from sleep, I saw a figure sitting in a chair watching me sleep or waiting until I wake up. I froze in my sleeping position. In the silence, the figure leaned back in the chair with his legs crossed. He appeared to be wearing a robe, his tall silhouette seemed to suggest. No noises came from the hallway which was a sign that it was late at night. The life of the residence was inactive, some students must be already in bed, went out or were surfing the internet or using their computer for something else absorbing.

Sweat broke on my brow and I strained my breath. After a few minutes, I gathered enough strength to say something. I figured the best strategy would be to exert enough confidence and surprise the intruder by not sounding caught off guard.

“What the hell are doing?” I said.

*If he is here to kill me that would be nice,* I thought.

The figure leaned forward. He murmured, “You don’t need to do it anymore. We heard him speak in the hallway we got the information we needed.”

“Who?” I frowned.

“Jay,” it was Macxermillio. “We are nabbing him tonight. If you want you could rest, we only sampling him tomorrow. I and Fearson can handle him.” I could sense him smiling in the dark. “Prepare to bid him farewell.”

“Thank you. What were you doing?”

“I was just watching you sleep.”

I frowned. “That’s kinda weird.”

“Well, I wanted to tell you face to face. I had to wait. I know how you hate being woken up.”

He stood up and walked to the door, the floor creaked under his weight. He opened the door and stood in the doorway, the light from the hallway fell into my room, laying his giant shadow across. He glanced my way.

"Goodnight, Sandz. You know, after tomorrow we won't have to live like this anymore...if all goes well."

"Goodnight, Macx."

He closed the door behind him and the darkness took over the room again.

# Chapter 2

## 1

One of those things that weren't for sober minds was the sampling.

We were not afraid of death whether it was the image of it or the sight of it or its imminence. We honoured and revered it; if it came we would embrace it. We wanted to die (both because of the pain of our existence here and the fact it could transport us where our existence is welcomed), but we just had to do it right. The trick of the sampling was tormenting the soul and the body of the sample until we broke its will to carry on living in this world, much like the same tormenting worthlessness this world imposes on us until suicide presents itself as the only way. We did whatever it took, decapitation, drowning, flaying, mutilation and all sorts of torture, to make them grovel for their own death. We offer them a way out in a form of suicide we choose. This way their state of mind is a bit similar to ours, their death is self-inflicted and possibly when they transition we will be able to tell from observing their eyes where they end up (heaven, hell or our home). It can take days, weeks or months to get them to that state, but we always managed to push them there. If the way of suicide, which is a form of transportation of the soul, is discovered that would take us home (as the calling made us feel) we would do it without a flinch. It's not the pain that concerns us, the more the pain the better (Macxermillio says you will be able to feel the death on you, you will be able to feel the journey and that

the pain is equivalent to the road in some instances). To dwell about is endless torture; each creature deserves to be in a place where it rightfully belongs, its habitat. A place of belonging is an integral part of one's personhood. If it is death it takes to feel like a person, even remotely, then death is what we shall accept with an immeasurable joy and gratitude. The quest to attain our personhood is not an easy one, it is not without sin or evil.

The blade of the sword sunk into his bicep like a blazing knife through a cold block of butter, it was just a slit.

*Sweet sweet beautiful blood*, I gasped mesmerised at its sight. Excited.

The sample flinched into consciousness. "Oh shit! "

"It's about time you woke up," Macfearson spoke. "We've been waiting ever so patiently."

"Shit! Fuck! Sandy, what is this?" He tried tugging his left hand off the wall, unsuccessfully so. He was cuffed with beast depowering iron cuffs attached to the stone cobbled wall, hinges reinforced into the wall. His ankles suffered the same fate. We had stripped him off, spread him like a canvas. Our own little Jesus.

"Sandy, you bitch! You sick freak! Fuck you!" he raged, I loved watching his belly tremble as he did. "Help! Help!"

Macxermillio comically looked around. "Huh? Looks like nobody cares. Or is it that they can't hear you?" He cackled with an almost lunatic revelry.

"Help! Help ! Hel- "Macfearson punched him in the stomach.

"Why do you think you're not gagged?" Macfearson rhetorically asked, glaring at him.

Macxermillio was behind me on a crate of beer, sipping on a 750ml. The place was wrecked and had been abandoned for years unknown to us. Dirt accumulated on the floor, collapsing ceiling spilling its insides, mould, woodpile scattered around, bins, paper and plastic. The Sampling Chamber, as we had named it, was Macxermillio's find. Far away from the city or the

*lifelings*. Perfect for a sampling ritual. It was dark and gloomy with just enough light for a *deathling* to dwell in, which was little light (that was how we preferred it). I could sense generations of ghosts of the persons who once stayed on the abandoned farm scampering about and watching us, lonely spirits of the countryside being treated to some horror style entertainment every time we visited. If they cowered in repulsion or horror, it was way better than the decades of boredom and un-eventfulness that this place was accustomed to.

“You freak! You’re mad you know that?” He continued, “What you gonna do? Kill me? “

“It’s actually weird that you are asking me this question when you have always known the answer. Do you remember what you said to your mates?” I softly spoke my eyes fixed on the blood, felt the hurt, anger and hatred towards him simmer like pins and needles.

He did not respond, only wriggled and panted hopelessly.

“Either way, don’t you think it’s a bad idea for a person in your situation to be so mean?”

Silence.

"Let me remind you," my voice mellow to my ears, every word making my compulsion and anger worse, "You told me, in front of your mates, that if I go on a killing spree to remember to spare you. Now, why would you believe that and always managed being an ass to me? Belittle me, humiliate me in front of others?"

"I was joking, just messing around. You know how the guys are. That's what guys do, I did not mean to tune you, Sandy!" he spluttered.

“And I didn’t mean to get hurt,” A dark smile flickered across my face. This was exhilarating every time, never got used to it. “Answer honestly. You have always seen me as a freak, right?”

“C’mon, man, let’s not do this!” He wept.



We devoured the moment, the moment of complete power over another person's will.

"You are a freak! Fuck, you not even one bit human! You are insane!" He shrieked.

*I am not human*, I cognitively agreed.

"You see that is why we are, Jay. I am not human. I don't belong here," I shrugged, "We both know it. That is why you gave me a hard time. That is why we need you to be our little Jesus today."

The calling stronger than ever, I stared down at my feet. *Lifelings* are creatures devoid of tolerance. They deserve anything lesser than mercy because they never grant it either.

"I am gonna kill you, Sandy, when I get down. Even in my death, I swear to God, I am gonna make sure I make your life a living hell," Jay threatened.

I disappointed him with my bland incongruent response. "If you were somebody else, another student, I would have been kinder, but you see it's people like you that don't deserve that. If not all of you *lifelings*." I paused. "Tell me. What would you do to be home right now, Jay? To see your parents or your loved ones? To go back the res? Or whatever shit you're into? I hear moments like these make people ponder how they have lived their lives and usually they discover what matters most or what mattered most. I know that you have that thing in your mind, tell me what would you do right now to get out of this situation?"

"Everything," he pleaded, his face sweating with desperation.

"Tell me, Jay. Who likes desperate people?"

"Uh-um. No one," he mused, his breath trembling under the weight of fear.

"Why are you being so desperate then? Chill out, man."

"Okay. Yeah, whatever you want man."

I sighed. “Whatever I want? Fuck, what did I say about being fuckin’ desperate, Jay? “

“Nobody likes a desperate person. I’m sorry. “He spluttered.

“Fuck, man! This is so hopeless. Now you’re sorry?”

“I don’t know what you want me to do, okay! Fuck, man. You’re messing with me!” He bawled.

“Good. I imagine your balls.” I mused.

“My balls?” He asked, confused.

“You would give your balls to see your family again, wouldn’t you?”

He stayed quiet for a while. “I guess so.”

“It’s either you know or you don’t!” I grabbed his ball sack. He whimpered and trembled, eyes tightly shut. “If you are not sure make up your mind real quick.” Placed the blade of my folding knife on the base.

“Shhhhiit!” He shuddered and gasped. “Uhhh... give me... give me some time, okay? Just a few seconds, please!”

“Fuck. You’re not losing your balls just answer the goddamn question, okay? “I replied in exasperation.

“Okay. Yes, Yes I would!” He cried.

“Good. Very good, Jay. Now I can move on.” Pause.” You see, Jay, I wanna go home too. Where I truly belong. To the fields and the crop. We are going to film your face while you die to solve the transition puzzle I suppose. So is be a good genie pig, okay?”

“Is this some kind of a morbid cult?” He scowled, incredulous.

“Do you know anything of the crop, Jay?”

“No. What the fuck is that?”

“If you do just tell us.”

“No, I don’t.”

I examined him. “Swallowing tough news like a man, huh? Trying too hard not to seem desperate? Good boy! Your eyes are big. We will be able

to make out all you will see.” Pause. “Oh, Jay, I have been waiting so long for this. The compulsion was just too much, or shall I say the calling?” I found my face warmed with a grin, thinking of how it was all worth the wait and trouble.

His brow creased, clearly confused.

“Let me do the honours, today,” I asked Macfearson.

“I will give you a chance, but I’m still the one who gets to spit his skull when you are done,” He spoke with enthusiasm, like a kid about to have a slice of his birthday cake.

This was the day, my holy fucking day.

“As long as I get to shove the barbed wire dildo into his ass.”

Macxermillio added, “Love me some painul!”

## 2

The sun shone through the windshield as it drowned into the horizon. It rather drown than grace such monstrosities like us with its warmth. That we respected, that we expected. The dirt road was peculiarly bumpy, not shying from expressing its discomfort and dislike. That we detested. Its judgmental and callous attitude rattling our truck to its joints and bolts. That was to be expected from a dirty dirt road, but this afternoon the mood was not that gracious in the truck. It was one accompanied with clenching jaws and flaring nostrils. An atmosphere not fond of intrusion of distraction.

Macxermillio was the agent of its fortification, his hands tightly grasping the wheel. His breathing laborious the more discomfited he became. With the same discomfiture, Macfearson played the clip in a loop desperately hoping he had overlooked something or, even more desperate, that we had

not filmed well. The more he watched the more irrefutable the conclusion became. We had failed.

Macfearson sighed and wearily dropped his hands into his lap, his mouth gaping and eyes staring into nothingness. “No,” he mouthed. Seeing defeat on his face was a scary sight because it was rare.

“Maybe we just have to lay low a little or move,” Macxermillio said putting up defences, or maybe he was attempting to convince himself of a different truth. “Avoid being caught, of course.”

Deep into his being he sensed how foul the whole practice was. Not because it was repulsive and malevolent but because it was not solving our problem. The practice was never just a means to an end, it was also an end in itself because it facilitated much-needed pleasure. The kind of pleasure that easily becomes the centre of all our pursuits and aspiration. The malice of it (the sampling) is the merciless drive to erode conscience and rob all the affection the heart has to offer and channel it onto itself. Often by establishing blind loyalty and an incorruptible ignorant will to feed its bottomless desire. A pastime pleasure evolves into a need and then an endpoint in itself. The tragic part is that the practice was also instrumental because so often the line is easily blurred. The line between doing the sampling for the crop or sampling because we just enjoy it. The latter is unhelpful but not easy to give up, so the sampling had to show some validity and results in order for us to feel like we are actually doing something. The lack of any results was disturbing and threatened not only our self-image but could spoil our pleasure as well, because then we would be no different to a *lifeling* killer. So defending validity of the sampling was important to maintain an unsparing appetite and an image. And learning that we had no reason to continue sampling was unacceptable and indigestible. We were unwilling to accept at the heart, not in the mind.

In moments of emotional tension, my mind would spontaneously play songs in clips as if my subconscious is trying to communicate something to me in a language I can easily comprehend. After all dreams and psychosomatic symptoms are never clear and to the point. Not to say the songs were helpful either but it was a point to begin. The effort to follow the leads and interpret the clips seldom came and I just appreciated this peculiar trend. It was incredibly distracting and sometimes soothing because there was no place like music where I found sanctuary, meaning and felt understood to a degree. And in the car they began rolling:

*"If I could find the time to speak..."* Evans Blue's Painted, the vocalist's voice embedded in profound hurt and despair. *"...they never said I'd end up like this..."* Marilyn Manson's Unkillable Monster. *"...We finish and wish we can start again..."* Hurt's Fall Apart, the song carries on to say *"\_So woe is me when all falls apart..."*. And then a desperate scream portraying a futile protest for peace in a storm of melody, *"No...No More"* from Hurt's Overdose. Then an almost crooning voice in a state of numbness and mental decay, *"...if you were me what would you do? Probably nothing..."* from Korn's Faget. And another one from Korn's Make Me Bad *"I am watching the rise and fall of my salvation..."*. Then with...

Impulsively I uttered, "We gonna end up like Calvin."

Macxermillio gave me one of his hard to read looks from the driver's seat. Then he shifted his attention to the road as if nothing had been said, or perhaps he did not even have the energy to react. In the meantime, my words awkwardly hung in the air, troubling me.

After a few moments of silence Macfearson gave a weary snorted laugh, his eyes fixed on the dashboard. "You never knew him?" he murmured.

"What?"

"Calvin," He said. "You never knew him."

“Yes.” I reluctantly agreed, not getting his point. I wanted to say “so what?” But I suspected that would agitate him.

His shoulders slumped and his facial expression became softer and contemplative. He sighed. “You are right. A noose around a neck would do it right now. Perhaps the best thing.” He paused as if he expected a scolding. After prolonged silence he continued, “I see why he might have given up. Why he might have felt so alone and in pain that he delivered himself to the unknown.” He paused again to take a deep breath. “Is that not the best thing? The only escape?”

“Out of this mess?”

Macfearson stayed silent for a little while. “The calling has a way of convincing us that suicide is the way that makes complete sense. It distorts reason and instinct. I still hold that to go off to a beautiful lie, if the calling can’t be trusted, is the most peaceful death.”

Apart from dealing with the possibility that the calling might have deceived us about suicide as a transition tool (one of the things the calling whispered in our ears) to home there was the possibility that we were doing something faulty methodically. The other possibility, which intuitively felt unlikely, was the possibility that we had not discovered one more mode of suicide; it started to feel like digging against a rock. Nothing was coming out of it. Something had to be wrong. We were back at doubting that the voices in our head (the calling communicates with feelings and our respective mental voices) truly spun from a place of wisdom and goodwill. We also began to question our perspective on the situation of being stranded in a world we don't belong and the means of transportation.

We were meticulous at carrying out the sampling. Even with that record on our side, we couldn't carry on making people disappear. With every sampling, there was a shred of evidence and clues that were left behind, at this point the accumulation of evidence was becoming really substantial.

The town being a small town, suspects were easy to make, connections were easily drawn and the authorities had too much time in their hands. Not too much time, just sufficient and effective. We had given all our best to Jay's sampling. Twenty experiments and no results. In our most logical of places, we knew that either we needed to expand our cognizance on the issue or implement different approaches. Although we despised it, maybe the sampling was not the solution and maybe the calling was never going to help with anything. The pragmatics and engendering a will to change was the overwhelmingly hard part, because we had no one else, but mostly because the weight of this world on our lives' essence was becoming alarmingly depowering. Pushing us closer to annihilation, leaving no room for sanity and well-being.

With it our minds were becoming leisurely. A leisurely mind has no drive or will. A mind orientated towards leisure alone is a dead mind. Very close to nothingness and death. And soon a dead mind bores itself...and when that happens we end up as Calvin with a noose the only medal and reward for our quest. The scummy smelly butt print on the sofa the only mark you leave behind. A leisurely mind is a given up mind.

Macfearson spoke in a controlled voice with his bellicose frustration shimmering underneath, "You ever had good coffee?With no sugar?"

"Yes?"

"Bitter. And when you're done you have this tart aftertaste just sitting there in your mouth. Delicate and lasting, enticing you to have another. Calvin was like that," he paused. Then sternly he continued, "He might have gone the way he did, but he never tried to drag anyone down with him. He knew it was over for him, but that is no indication that he did not believe in what we were doing. He was bitter with integrity. Failure is not what tore him up, but the weight of this world twisting and gnawing at his core."

I nervously nodded, uncertain of what kind of response he expected. His eyes were not on me, but I could feel his mind's eye burning me with a concentrated and an indignant gaze. Belligerent energy exuded from his frigid and deceptively disinterested posture. It was enough to turn my insides pale. The conviction that if I uttered a sound I would trigger an explosive quarrel moved me to silence. Inside, a tempest of desolation drowned my thoughts and spirit.

There was bump and then the rattling ceased as the truck turned right into the tar road towards the town. On the horizon lay wealthy outer suburbs where roads were guarded by pine trees and life was tranquil.

With his eyes still fixed on the road, and perhaps tuned into my affliction, Macxermillio uttered, “*We need help!*” The unwilling words a weight on his tongue. Because, put simply, we were in too deep.



# Chapter 3

## 1

Friday morning we reconvened at my place. Each of us had retired to our homes on Thursday evening, still in awe. We would also have elected to rid ourselves of the thoughts that pervaded our minds. Through the night, I stared into the darkness until it was no longer dark anymore. I tossed and turned devoid of sleep and restless. My neck stiffened and baked with tension making it impossible to rest my head. They made being awake intolerable, constantly petrified by premonitions and an elevated state of alertness. My sheets soaked in sweat. Around 2 am I jumped out of bed to take a hot shower hoping it would calm me down. However, my shoulders remained as firm as steel, the anxiety worsened and the sweat found new pyjamas to soak. Cutting was not an option since it had the effect of making me alert, I couldn't also bet on the low possibility of adverse effects. As I jumped to my desk scratching, hyperventilating, fidgeting and trembling, my thoughts grew darker and the night seemed to be stretched to infinity just to torment me. I rushed to my window, climbed on the windowsill so my feet dangle outwards. My right-hand hand grabbing the frame, I looked down, so eager to jump and end it because I felt like I would implode if I endured a second of the confusion, the anxiety and the hurt. Tears blurred my sight, a teardrop fell from my left eye and I watched it drop into the darkness and out of my sight where a bed of daffodils and tulips waited. *Tonight they will be drinking blood*, I remember thinking. There was no fear or hesitation only the delight in having found the answer. Even if this

was a temporary problem of sorts, all my mind knew and could think was that I wanted the feeling gone, and I wanted that now.

“Okay, I should count to three!” I whispered to myself.

“One, two - “ Then an idea shot through my brain, *I should go out to a song...I should play a song.*

I gazed at the computer sizing the effort it would take for me to get there and if it was worth the trouble at all. Then something shiny caught my eye past the computer on the bookshelf. It was the glass of beer I had never touched, then I remembered I still had three bottles of beer to myself packed away in the common fridge.

*I should drink, that will help.*

Then it dawned on me how stupid I almost became. The solution was right there and I had almost walked past it into death. The beer would at least carry me through to the morning and then I could be alive for the meeting I have with Macxermillio and Macfearson. I knew how useless they would be if I tried contacting them at this time and after what had just happened. As far as I knew they were soldiering through the night also, they wouldn't be any help but daunting with their benighted states. Alcohol makes a duly friend.

*We could figure something out. Macxermillio knows a ton of shit when he is better.*

I journeyed through the silent corridors and passages to the ground floor and retrieved the three 750ml bottles of beer. They were extremely cold and I was surprised that no one had not helped themselves to them as people stealing stuff from the fridge was not a foreign story around here. When the first bottle went down I started to feel better. With a fat grin and a tipsy head, I started with the next bottle which went down smoothly and uplifted my mood. Suddenly I was in the mood of listening to some old tunes on my computer, something sombre and touching. Then I started craving some

company which led to opening a few tabs on my internet browser logging on into multiple social networks. At that time, there was barely anyone worth talking to online. It got me wishing I had more international friends on a different time zone because the ones I had were no longer as active. Then I resorted to Chatroulette which was filled with perverts after perverts until I stumbled onto a kitchen view on my screen. First it appeared no one was in the kitchen and the laptop was left online. Then a brunette in her forties or so appeared into view, as if unaware of the display on the laptop. She wore blue jeans with a navy blue tank top. Curvy hips, petite breasts and lean torso. Daylight came in through the kitchen window. She went to the zinc poured herself a glass of water and turned to the laptop. At first she just watched, then approached and pressed a few buttons.

She smiled, leaning over the table into the screen and her tantalizing cleavage showing. "Hi there!" she said. "What you doin?"

"Hi, I'm just chillin' having a couple of beers. Needed some company. You have a bottle of wine with you?"

"No. Why?"

"So we can drink." I giggled.

"How old are you?" She squinted.

I shrugged. "I'm twenty."

"Really? You look a bit older than that."

"Really? Thank you."

She moved out of view and came back with a can of beer in her hand.

"Where are you from?"

"South Africa."

She gasped. "Wow. Really? You not kidding?"

"I'm not kidding. No need to tell me where you from I can already guess."

"How come?"

“American accent is very telling.”

“Huh. What’s your name? Is it difficult to pronounce.”

“I wish.”

“Huh?”

“I wish it was hard to pronounce. I find most black men including me have the name. Can you guess?”

“Is it Jerome?”

I laughed. “No. It is Sandy. And yours?”

“Joni.”

“I guess you are a housewife.”

“What gave that up?” she sarcastically replied. “What time is it there?”

I checked on the right bottom corner of the screen. “2 am.”

“That’s crazy. Why you up at this time are you one of those pervs jiggling their junk on this site? Lonely?” she light-heartedly said.

“No. I think this is the third time I’m here and you the first person I have talked to for this long. Others just awkwardly stare and skip me. Got me a bit self-conscious.”

“Is that so?”

“Yep.”

“Do you live with your parents?”

“Yes and no. I’m at uni.”

She nodded. “So, uh, are you celebrating anything?”

I shook my head, smiling.

“What’s the matter?” she leaned forward into the camera.

“I couldn’t sleep. I thought a drink would help me catch what little sleep I can get.”

She nodded. “Alright. Things aren't that great?" She lifted her can of beer and took a sip.

I considered. “Yes, there is something keepin’ me up.”

“You logged in for counsel?”

“Perhaps. I have no idea. I had one beer felt and like company.”

“What are the chances that you would be matched with someone willing?” She smiled.

“I don’t know. One in twenty thousand?” I laughed. Then I looked down on my lap as my countenance changed into something sombre and revealing of the inner turmoil. “You are an honest looking woman maybe you can help me figure something out.”

“Maybe I am.” She smiled and took a large gulp of the beer.

“I have done something really bad and now I realized it might have been all for nothing. And if that is the case, I don’t think I could live with the things I have done. I thought it was all for a good reason and now it doesn’t look that way.”

Nodding she glanced down then took a sip from the can. “Sounds really serious.”

“It is. I don’t know what to do. I don’t feel guilty. I am just worried of what happen next and if there is a next for me.”

“Do you mind being specific or is it something you can’t tell a stranger on the internet about?”

I stayed quiet for a while. “No. I don’t think it is something I can tell anyone just yet.”

She shrugged. “Maybe you should see someone. It really helps.”

“What do you mean?”

“A therapist. Are there therapists in your area? If there aren’t find someone you can talk to who won’t tell anybody, like a priest.” She took a sip.

I nodded. “I’ll think about it?” I downed what was left of my glass. I poured myself another glass and raised it. “Thank you.”

She grinned. “You’re welcome.”

I took a sip and watched her, the veil of shame falling on my shoulders. She reciprocated the thought filled the silence with a gaze of her own. It was the type of a pause in a conversation where minds retired to their private rooms for miniature consultation before resuming. There was a lot to be talked about, that did not mean I was without worry. After sharing something of this magnitude the mood sours and the flow of conversation is jarred which could lead to the end of the connection altogether. The end of the connection would be a hurtful thing, a form of rejection that I could not be able to stand now. Joni might have been a *lifeling* stranger on the internet, but something about her was comforting and reassuring more than the drink in my hand. I hang off the edge of a chasm and she gave the only hand keeping me from falling, I dreaded what lay at the bottom.

Joni cleared her throat and flicked her hair, then let out a weary sigh.

“Are you gonna skip me now?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No. Why?”

“You promise?”

She squinted. “Sure, I will stay.”

“Thank you. I really need this.” I paused. “You know a lot of people would leave me right about now. People can’t stand people being honest. You are a good person. I mean why can’t people stand each other and be with each other through such times?”

She grinned, nodding. “Yeah. Very true.”

Then the screen went blank, she had skipped me.

The smoke from Macfearson's cigarette filled the room. He reclined in his chair and stared straight through the wooden floor while he flicked cigarette ashes to the floor, not bothering with an ashtray. His left leg tapped on the floor, trembling.

"What we do now is just pull back and don't do anything that can make us get caught while we think through what just happened to us. There is no need for us to be anxious as that could draw attention our way,"

Macxermillio said. "We must remember that the whole point of this was to establish some sort of credibility. We may be disappointed and taken aback by this, but this scratches at least one method off the list."

"We are fucked!" I said. "Now we dug ourselves so deep that we may never get out. What if we get arrested and we never get a chance to pursue home? The law will be on us. It is only a matter of time and I don't believe we are any close to getting out of here."

Macfearson shrugged. "There is still a possibility that we did not do it the right way." He flicked the cigarette butt to the floor and stepped on it.

"Don't you get it?" I said. "We can't kill any more people! This killing is the problem, we can't risk that shit anymore."

"No, we just have to do it right." Macfearson shook his head, shifting to a more upright posture. "Are you a little rattled after fleeing a few *lifelings*?" He scowled.

"I'm not guilty over killing them. I'm not guilty at all. I'm saying you can't dig a hole deep enough to cover all this mess for long enough!" I said.

"That *may* be the case," Macxermillio said. "As far as I am concerned there is no reason we should be edgy about that right now. We should worry about the fact that these voices from the calling are there to jeopardize us and stir us away from our goal."

"We are not sure about that just yet," said Macfearson. He lit another cigarette. "Maybe we picked the wrong samples. I have been thinking about

this all night, tossing it in my head and I think we need to sample a *deathling*.”

“Oh my fuck!” I shouted.

“What?”

“You’re bloodthirsty that is what you are. You are addicted to it as much as you are to the self-harm. You can’t stand the possibility of going on without hackin’ someone’s head off,” I said.

He flinched in his chair. “Fuck off, you miserable dead freak! You have no idea what this is about. These voices in our heads appeal to our brute instinct as *deathlings*, if there is a way to uncover ourselves is through them. Maybe with a bit more self-knowledge we might do something right and head off to the fuckin’ crop.”

“Well, I think we have listened too much to our instincts. Don’t think it is getting us anywhere quite frankly. We are still here, maybe even right back where we started. The calling is just another system of rejection like the atmosphere of this world that we are forcing down our lungs. It is poison.”

“Mac, maybe we should use this prick as a sample next,” he grunted.  
“You fuck.”

“Calm down,” Said Macxermillio. “The sampling was just one way of testing for credibility. What we need to figure out is the alternative to sampling.” He cleared his throat and slowly rubbed his hands together,  
“There must be something.”

“Does it have to be killing people?” I asked.

Macfearson glared at me.

“No,” Macxermillio answered.

I leered at Macfearson, watching him for a reaction. “I think we should see someone,” I said.

Macfearson darkly grinned. “What?”



“I think one of the ways to start fixing this is by getting an alternative viewpoint. We are too close to this to see clearly. I think a therapist would help weed out some garbage.” I offered.

Macfearson jumped up and kicked his chair to the wall almost breaking it. “No way!”

Maxcermillio watched as Macfearson ruffled his hair in frustration and punched the closet multiple times. I cowered in my seat, cringing at the thought of being battered by his fists.

“Pipe the fuck down!” Maxcermillio bellowed. A tone and a choice of words foreign to his repertoire, because of that it chugged Macfearson to a halt. Macfearson got on his feet and authoritatively gestured for Macfearson to sit down. “Sit the fuck down.”

Hesitantly, Macfearson picked up the chair and set it. He glared at Maxcermillio, this time with less intensity and contempt. “He --”

“It sounds like a fuckin’ good idea, alright?” Maxcermillio said. He turned to me. “Obviously we can’t tell anyone about the sampling we have to think of an allegory of a sort. Great idea.” He shifted his attention to Macfearson. “I know it may feel like we falling back, that we are starting over, but this is not the case. Believe me. You know, it is just part of the process, burning old bridges to build new ones. At least now we know a dozen things that don’t work and that is progress. We are narrowing down and closing in. I think you are so desperate for this to be right because you can’t handle putting your faith in something else and have it belied again. I understand that pain, we all feel it. But now, by doing this we are taking another step, exposing ourselves to a different doctrine that may very well dispel all this pain and suffering. I know, you wanna leave this place as soon as possible, you can’t stand not doing something pragmatic.” Then to us all, “I know we are hooked on blood. This can help us with that urge and

maybe distil a bit of focus and clarity. Buy us some time before we fuck things up.”

Macfearson spoke through his hardened mouth, “Where are these *therapists?*”

I leaned forward. “The university provides free counselling for students. Obviously you can’t use that service so I will go on our behalf and share whatever knowledge I can get.”

His nose flaring, Macfearson grimaced. “You will?”

“I will.”

“I don’t need to tell you what I’m capable of.” Macfearson rose and marched out of the room banging the door behind him.

Macxermillio turned my way. “He has a hard time letting go and moving on. It’s one of the reasons I took him with me. Keeps us from wandering.”

# Chapter 4

## 1

We had to learn about the crop, our home. Although we got the sense the place was forbidden and we, although we hadn't learnt our nature, would not succeed in unravelling the mystery. Something was growing on those fields and it was a call of destiny to uncover what it was. It felt as if the whole meaning of our existence, if not existence itself depended on it. There was completeness there. It has been a year since we began taking on this ordeal as a trio. Before then things were murky and bleak. We coming together was also in the foggiest and hopeless of circumstances. I should make it clear that they found me, on the mystical day amongst the woods of an unknown land. Mystical because it is hard to pinpoint where and when in my memory, nonetheless the detail is fair, even to one with a blurry mind-eye it is simple to see.

I heard hoofs at a gallop approaching. Apprehensive, I turned my head to its direction. There was shouting and a faint cry of a man. Through the fog, further amongst the trees and in sight, something silver shone from the distance. Then the faint cry swayed back and forth from panting to crying. A wretched man in muddy jeans and a white jersey bolted into view. As he passed a trail of fear hung behind. He was a man pushed to his limits, running from immediate peril. He was clumsy, the mud slowed his heels and strained the bit of strength that was left within him.

Then emerged a black horse and the rider. His velvet cloak, red in the inside and black on the outside, fluttering behind him. Its collar spiked to

his ears, mingling with his long white hair. There was dirt and stains on it like he had been fighting in a medieval battle. Focus distorting his face like anguish, his eyes determined and sharp. His right leather gloved hand at the reins as the left grasped a long sword. As he manoeuvred his way amongst the trees and branches the sword moved effortlessly and expertly like a part of his hand.

At the verge of my sight the man tripped. Slammed to the ground head first. His face submerged in mud and grass. He turned to his side and then to his back, spitting, wheezing and coughing. In a few seconds, the rider had caught on. With a tug, he reeled his black monster to a halt. Climbed off the saddle and strolled towards the man in his heavy black boots. He hovered over him for a few moments disgust, wrinkling his face with each second.

As the cold tip lightly pressed against the man's throat he whimpered. "Take a dope it's just a dip," the rider said, clearly exasperated. His voice guttural.

The man continued wheezing, his chest convulsing. "Please...please," he implored. Affright, he tried to speak but he was tongue-tied.

"Why was your name on the inscription?" the rider demanded.

"I don't know what-"

"One more of those and I will slit your throat!" He paused giving the man a chance to think it through. "What is the crop? What grows there?"

The man began sobbing.

He poked the man again and he flinched. His sob stifled. "You are a priest, right?"

"Yes."

"So you know the truth."

"Not that kind of truth."

“What other kind of truth could there be?” the rider interposed sarcastically. “You work for the man farming it? This God of yours?”

“I know nothing of a crop or a farm for that matter!” he cried.

“How do you explain the painting?”

He did not answer.

“Tell me!” the rider snapped.

“You are a mad man,” the man moaned. “I don’t know what you –“

There was stillness then his voice broke it again. “I just wanna see my family again, Lord.”

The rider sighed, slumped his shoulders and then suddenly hacked the man like he was chopping wood with an axe. He was ferocious and cannibalistic in his execution. The sounds were eerily similar to the one shovelling mud with a spade makes. There was a spray of red haze spewing into the fog. Blood spurting into the riders face and attire. He hacked the throat and the head multiple times. It was silent. No screaming, no laborious grunts. Just the sound of that merciless act, the man’s body shuddering as life jostled out of him, the gurgling and the shovelling. Then the wretched man widened his eyes, there was a stare he gave...like he was looking at something of amazing awe. An enchanted stare, then I knew it was over.

The rider turned towards me and sized me up with a couple glances. “I’m Evlin Macfearson. What is it that you seek?” He grunted.

Surprised he had even noticed I was there, I blurted. “The crop.”

And that was my first encounter with Macfearson.

We walked in the woods, to a destination he only knew. I felt kidnapped by, caught and trapped by tendrils of his presence, and robbed out of thoughts of escape. At first it felt awkward but as we progressed it felt instinctively right, like a decision I had made. One that really mattered this time, one that would give the meaninglessness of my existence significance. There was no mention of what I had seen and he did not bother to explain anything. There was an assumed understanding it appeared. There was not much talk than "watch that puddle" or "let's go this way" or "don't try pushing through the branches ". I watched curiously and studied him as we went along. He was surprisingly observant for his contemplative state. He was fully engaged in two worlds, the mental and the real with sharp efficacy. All I became aware of, the further we walked, was how my calves ached and how increasingly lost I started to feel. My thoughts began to shift from the abstract to the more pragmatic, like the need for water and rest and how amazing it would be. As time went by thoughts got darker and morbid, of how maybe I would be impaled at midnight by this stranger I just met in some cult ritual.

*Why can't he just have me dig a grave and rest, I thought.*

Quenching my thirst ceased to matter at that point. Not even rest in the comfiest of beds. I desired a deeper release... the kind death can only offer.

*Oh, Death, you conjuring seductress.*

Every entity ... everything ...

We got deeper and deeper, in the uncharted corners of the cosmos. The paradoxically inaccessible and accessible, the remote and abundant, the foreign and very familiar, the certain and uncertain, the real and unreal. A thin cord between the horizon of the existing and purely imaginative. Whether this is an explanation of my experience or a statement about the nature of things I am yet to discover for myself. However, that was the point I lost and discovered myself, and so I believe.

We reached a clearing. And as I walked into it, exhausted, a thought fled in my head.

*The truth is in the irony.*

The kind of thought that reaches and calls from the intuitive well within.

“You know how it starts,” Macfeerson explained, the campfire illuminating his pale face. The truth is there was no way of knowing how or when it starts, it is something that you notice. It is there but cannot be put to a timeline, neither beginning nor end. I knew what he meant. He was speaking of the moment you start noticing it, not necessarily when it starts because no one can know for certain if it really did start, no one could remember. “You grow up in a house where you are always an absent member of the family. They forget you, at birthdays, the store or even when you are at home. The only time they give you attention is when you have done something really bad. ‘Silly boy!’ they call you. Your father gives you a beating and sometimes you don’t know why. Sometimes you can’t remember why. You do stupid things like drowning puppies and dissecting your pets so you can better understand what makes them tick. You don’t understand why but you are driven by energy, a certain curiosity that always lands you in trouble. Your mind is on a different lane than your peers and so are your senses. You feel so confused and out of place. By this point, you cannot tell if you are the mistake or you make mistakes. You are just a dumb child, a dumb burden of a nuisance,” he paused, his face contemplative. Somewhere between trying to figure out the best way to articulate what he had forming in his mind and deciding to continue, not out of lack of words but a state of being overwhelmed by a whirlwind of surging emotions. Memories as nostalgic as a black and white portrait of a childhood never lived. The mind buries such things (sometimes in a form of delusions and illusions) making it hard for one to recall because it knows their danger and pain. Perhaps that was the reason of his pause, discerning

and delving for the bitter truth. He gazed at me for the first time since, forwarding his intense aura. Tragically vulnerable and battered he was, exhausted on site by the weight of his demons. “Then the neighbour’s kids won’t come play with you. When they about to play a game of soccer or cricket you never get picked for the team. If they do you don’t stay long in the field, they kick you out. Then they start teasing you, calling you names. You are always a subject of ridicule and annihilation. Annihilation because they make you disappear. Makes you feel invisible. Then you isolate yourself, you get used to loneliness not because you desire it but because it is all that makes sense. At least in that deep nothingness nothing can hurt you but the problem is that the emptiness craves to be filled, it eats at you. Of course, right now your parents are relieved of all the complaining parents because of the trouble you cause. From then on your life exists on the periphery.

“Then you start noticing the feelings. They have been always there but all this time you did not see it, you only needed time alone with yourself to notice them. You start seeing things, realizing things. You get it, right?”

I nodded. I was losing my composer, this was an uncanny experience. In my life, I had never met someone who understood. Someone who truly knew...

“It is like you are at a wrong place. A false realm of reality... like the angels had made a mistake when delivering your soul to a body. That your existence is a mistake. You feel like wrongly human. The wrongness consumes you... an emptiness that eats up any human emotion you have. A nothingness that shouldn’t have any effect at all, because by definition it is non-existent. A ghost that *you* can only see,” he stared at me gravely. I had an impression this was one of his pauses again that he needed to tell me his story without a reply of any sorts. His inner face had revealed itself, all the toiling, agony and loss. I became deeply sad just looking at it. Then his eyes



became teary. “You begin to wonder what the point to all of this is. Who are you? What is the nature of your existence? Why existence at all? Why life?”

He paused, snorted and looked away. “Once you realize you are an eagle among penguins you can’t help but fly.”

I knew what he meant, only then we were penguins among eagles.

“The truth is...there is no life before the crop, now we are slaves to finding it...because there is nothing else that matters really. And that makes us *deathlings*. I have never lived until the day I set out for my quest. I am still dead now, but the only time we get to live is when we get there. Find what grows there!”

“Am I the only *deathling* you have ever met since?”

“No, there is one more.”

Before I could ask he answered. "He will meet us here. This is where we sleeping tonight. He went collecting some wood. We had been hunting the priest for some time now. We thought in a few hours we would catch him and get the answers. We saw him at the town at first, but he was uncooperative, thought being here he would have no choice. We knew he comes here to pray every now and then." He paused. "But we have our ways.”

“Do have sleeping bags?” He knew what the sentence implied.

“Nah, we going to our house tomorrow. It is just this night.” He shrugged.

“What have you learned about the fields?”

He shook his head wearily. “Let’s just wait for Macxermillio, okay?”

I watched the flames as Macxermillio and Macfearson discussed something a few feet from the light. Macxermillio had not said much when he came. He added wood to the fire, offered me pie out of courtesy. He appeared very cautious and calculating. There was shrewd malice to him even though I had not witnessed it, a man like him carries his deeds with him like a smoker carries the smell of tobacco. Macfearson abided by him, following his orders without a sigh or question. Every now and then Macxermillio gave me a suspicious look, like he could see in my soul or I smelled like dog shit.

I could hear them talking in whispers but could not make out what they are saying at all, not much of it anyway. When that was the case I tried to use their tones to discern their attitude or conflict, if there was any.

“So what happened to him?” I heard Macxermillio ask, speaking a lot more loudly but still not easy to make out.

“He didn’t cooperate.”

“He saw you do it?”

“Yeah, the whole thing.”

“Are you sure that...” Then I couldn’t make out the rest.

“Not really.”

“What does he know?”

I saw Macfearson shake his head from the periphery. “Didn’t say. But he wants you to tell him.”

Silence fell, I felt Macxermillio’s cold gaze on the back of my head.

“Okay then,” said Macxermillio, striding to the fire. He sat cross-legged across from me. Macfearson joined next to him.

He studied me for a moment, for an uncomfortably long time. “Tell me what did you see when that man died?” Macxermillio’s voice was detached and distant, not what I had expected. I thought he would be interrogative and fierce.

I glanced at Macfearson who signalled my cue. “Um... was like he was realizing something he had forgotten. Like he forgot to update his will or take out the garbage so his wife won't be pissed. Just the expression on his face. Like when a women gasps and they put their hands on their mouth...they always seem to widen their eyes like that. It was like he saw something... something and it's too late to do anything about it. I don't think it was fear. It was all serene.” I shrugged and shook my head, looking down at my lap. Felt like I was getting an orgasm, it was just that release of tingling sensations wriggling through me.

“How'd you feel?”

“Like cuming in his face,” I wept, there was a convulsion of shameful emotions surging in me. Ones I never knew I had and did not want to have, but at the same time it felt homey and right. It was truth that slipped through my lips, strange and unlike me at first but the truest thing I had come to learn about myself. Saying this was as good as letting go of long-held guilt or confession of a burdensome secret you had kept for so long to a loved one. I had never felt better and worse in my life. "I wanted to kiss it, take his picture and cum a dozen more times. Oh... it was beautiful. It was a disgusting thought, but I couldn't help myself...I can't help myself. Like a porn addict who wants to stop. The only difference is that I don't want to stop.” I paused and wiped my tears with the back of my hand and I could feel dirt on it. I realized I had been unconsciously punching the ground. I could not hold my head up and or face their eyes. The weight of the shame and the pain was paralyzing. I felt like a crack-whore, dirty, ruined and helpless. Hated every inch or thought of my being and my heart more for sustaining the abomination I am.

*Hearts...mindless careless things*, I thought.

Maxcermillio unwrapped something, then gave it to me. It was slim and cold in the weather. Unwrapped, it was a razor blade. "Takes the edge off," he told me.

The warmth of the fire was comforting like a blanket on a cold night, but the razor blade was better comforter. The first cut across on my wrist burned, the blood slowly seeped out. The most elegant thing I had ever seen. Then the shawl of pain and shame slipped off like the wind blows a hat off. I wanted more and the more I cut my wounds seemed to heal. The five fresh scars on my wrist, oozing, was one of the most enrapturing sights I had seen in the cosmos. It had to just make one happy. I watched, fascinated as each drop soaked the ground between my legs, if I could I would have devoured the soil but I was transfixed.

"The crop can rid us of all this pain," Maxcermillio told me.

"How do you know this?" I asked.

"It is all intuitive. The truth is we don't know in what nature does it exist, but we have seen and felt enough to know it does exist"

"Like what?"

"Those man's eyes, maybe. And how you have always felt a wrongness about you, the world and the not belonging here. Like you are lost. Feeling like something is hidden from you and your every move to find it is hindered constantly because you are constantly watched."

"What are the fields or the crop?" My heart hang for the answer.

"That's what we need to uncover. I'm sorry I know only what I have told you and nothing more." He paused and gazed at my wrist. "The blade won't ever rid you of the pain, it is temporary but still even when most of it is gone the afterglow of the pain can drive a man mad. It might kill you doing it too much and we are not sure yet if that is a way. Watch how much you cut as much as you can, as long as you can, we lost our friend Calvin from

the self-harm. He endured to his limits and so can you. You have gotten this far alone, and now you have us.”

# Chapter 5

## 1

We went up the first flight of steps.

“Remind me, is this our fourth or fifth visit here?” Macfearson asked.

Looked over my shoulder. “Yeah. I think so.”

“The agreement was that you share with us what you learn. It’s either there is not much help you are getting or you are being selfish.”

It was hard to tell what annoyed me the most, the fact that he was alluding to how frustrating the sessions were and how smug his tone was. The gloating kept me from giving up and admitting how wrong I was or how bad the idea was starting to seem now. I simply couldn’t give him that satisfaction. Macxermillio was not bothered by the pace, it gave him time to delve into his notes on the ontology of worlds and beings and to review the sampling and make better sense of the calling. In his leather-bound book, he kept with him, he would scribble and scratch notes almost constantly. With my student card, he accessed a lot of resources and books from the university's main library. Other than that he was preoccupied with filling his time with other habits in an attempt to tame his craving for blood. For Macfearson battling the craving was what mostly occupied him the last few weeks with impulsive bursts of rage, mostly he was irritable. But seeing me fail somehow put a wide grin on his face. In general the despair, pain and faithlessness were sucking the momentum off the rest of us. The suicidal thoughts were pestering and wearisome, it packed an almost demonic compulsion and enamouring promise. Skins were burned and slit, bottles

were downed and pillows sunk with tears. The philosophical studies were even more dispiriting, sacking all the hope I had in reason. And when Courtney first talked to me it was saddening, she had said, “Dude, are you alright? You don’t look so well.” Whether the pain carried a scent with it, the many showers I had missed or my downcast demeanour that gave it away was not clear.

“Seriously, I’m not sure. She hasn’t said much about me, *the calling* or what’s really going on. She seems reluctant,” I told Macfearson. “I will make her tell me this Friday.”

We walked down the hallway past a few other silent doors, to the glass double door marked “Counselling Centre”.

Macfearson pushed it open. “It’s too quiet here. It is quite unnerving,” he lowered his voice walking into the reception and waiting area. “Witches be scheming.”

The receptionist acknowledged us with a smile from her desk. She was a middle-aged Indian lady, beautiful in that Bollywood film star manner. I often found myself wondering who locked down such a divine creature, and if she was as happy at home or if this was just professionalism. An act. Congratulations to whoever came back home to that.

“Sandy?”

“Yeah.”

“You are here for your one o’clock appointment I presume,” her voice could bend a knife and lower the gun without even trying, without even a slight moment of hesitation. There was no telling what men would do if she tried.

“Yeah.” I forced a smile.

“Okay, have a seat and I’ll let her know that you’re here,” she grinned, her head tilted in a flirt-like manner, or maybe I saw things.

For a moment I ogled, pistol whipped. I shuffled on and took a seat, still relishing what I had seen.

“Don’t you wonder?” Macfearson asked, looking up at the notice board.

“Wonder what?” I replied.

“If she really cares.” He paused and turned to me. “I mean it’s her job. What if the whole thing is just a job to her and she has to pretend to care, be interested and invested?”

*We can’t have that, our deathling souls are poured into this project. Yeah, who knows what she really thinks or says when she is with friends and family. What if deep down she thinks I’m just a dumb freak, she does not like me. What if I mean nothing?*

“You mean who exactly?” I stalled. Unnerved by the thought.

“Your therapist. Cheryl.”

I quivered inside at the sound of her name. “To be honest I do think about it. And by the way, she is our therapist, we agreed I would do this on the behalf of all of us.”

“Quite troubling thoughts. How many people does she see in a week or a day? It makes you wonder about your significance to her. She is whoring herself. You are just one of many, maybe our situation is blurred and diluted by all the whoring.” Macxermillio added.

“Look at her,” Macfearson pointed at the receptionist, “nobody can be that happy and nice all the time. Shit’s getting on my nerve. Doesn’t seem like she has an odd bad day at all. Being that happy or acting like that all the time is not normal, or at least impossible. Doesn’t make sense.”

I studied her for a moment, she passed a bright glance while busy sorting some paperwork. A beep of a smile accompanying it. It was eerily mesmerizing etiquette, puzzling at the same time. It started to make me nervous.

“If she really is happy how does she do it?” I uttered.



“Maybe it’s all a courtesy or in the job description,” Macxermillio said.

“Do they even go to lunch? They are always here. It is lunch now isn’t it?” I replied.

“Sure,” Macfearson answered.

“It is weird, it’s like they’re some kind of super-human creatures.”

“If they are guarding some secret knowledge and expertise in such matters as ours, it would make sense why they devote so much of their time here,” Macxermillio suggested. A plausible argument indeed, it felt right.

“You reckon?” I demanded, despite my conviction. It was good to hear good news one more time.

“Well, it makes sense. Then again they might be nothing more but *lifelings* and we could be wasting our time here,” He replied, not what I hoped for.

“Best we are not on a race against time,” Macfearson sarcastically spoke.

“Don’t forget the calling is getting stronger with each moment. We are running out of strength,” Macxermillio said.

## 2

Staring at her, I studied her. I figure if I wrote a poem about that moment it would go something like this:

I, the ink,  
Substance of subjectivity,  
Staining and marking,  
In shapes and sizes,

Without meaning or purpose.  
You wield and mould me,  
Give me purpose.  
In truth, I am sheer nothingness.

Perhaps not an embodiment of the moment, but an embodiment of the nature of my relationship with her. I felt it there more than ever. Alone although in company. Why does it even matter? Sometimes I asked myself. There is no company without a bond, Macxermillio would insist. No relationship without trust, no trust without empathy.

“I have something on my mind,” I told her, sighing. Settled in the chair, stubbed my elbow on the arm and rested my left cheek on my left-hand’s palm. Crossed my left leg over my right. Then gave her the look.

“Okay,” she gestured for me to go ahead. Her nod attentive and distinct as ever. For an unknown reason, I disliked that. It was quite similar to when a parent offers to hear a child's point of view only to disagree with them or, worse, punish them for their transgression anyway. There was something already decided and made up about it.

“Me and my friend we used to do this thing. We would fuck each other in the butt. When it was his turn I would hardly feel him in my hole. But I pretended to until he finished. When it was my turn I would zone him. Zone him hard. He would wince and moan,” I paused trying to remember why I was telling her that.

“Okay,” she frowned. I couldn’t tell if it was from disgust or shock.

“You see there was trust between us. We continued doing it because there was trust between us. The problem is I don’t know how he could have felt if he knew that I was the one truly fucking him all this time. I used the trust against him, to use him. Any emotion a person invests can always be used

for better or worse. Right or wrong. You see ... it's because of this revelation that I came across an idea. The idea is that empathy is necessary. Being able to put yourself in the other person's shoes in a way turns you into that person for a moment. Then from there you will know how to treat them fairly or right. When you put yourself in their shoes their problems become your problems, and you helping them seems like actually helping yourself out. You do it out of genuine concern because at that moment you are the one facing the barrel. Do you get that? Am I making any sense?" I said.

"What you seem to be saying is that in any relationship empathy is important for the parties involved. It leads to healthier more productive relationships," she replied.

"Yeah, exactly."

"Sandy, seems like you have a lot of insight there. You have been doing a lot of thinking. May I ask why you bringing this up now?" she murmured.

I shifted in my chair, changing my posture. "Because I want to know if you really care about me. That what you are doing here with me is not just a job for you but you actually are interested and involved, Cheryl," fingers clenched together I lowered my gaze to her lap. She stroked her pen smoothly, her hands resting on the notepad.

"I see. If you were me and you had a choice, would you continue seeing a client you didn't want to see?"

I imagined. "No. I guess not."

"Yeah. There you go," she smiled.

I lightened up a little, a smile flickered across my mouth. I blushed.

"Have you found yourself having to make such a decision?"

"No," she giggled, "at least not yet."

*So I'm not that special*, I thought.

"How many people do you see a day?"

She hesitated. “Why do you ask?”

I sighed, nervous. “I don’t know if it’s the right thing to say or what it will do to our relationship, but I guess I gotta tell you. I like you,” I paused, then continued, “not like romantically,” didn’t sound that certain, not to myself, “but more as a person. I don’t know how it is possible because I really don’t know you. This relationship is sort of one way. When you say that you haven’t, and maybe you see like fifty people a week then I am not that special. I get jealous and concerned. It’s as if you should only see me.”

“You wonder if you are special to me?”

I waited a moment. “Yeah.”

Silence.

“Am I?”

"I can't tell you that. From the first time you came in here, you've always thought of yourself as unique. What do you think now?" she replied, professional and warm at the same – a rare mix.

*What are you trying to say? The fact that I'm unique makes me special to you? Is that what you are insinuating?*

“Yeah, I still think I am,” I spoke with disguised exasperation. “But I don’t know what to make of it,” I paused to think, “Scratch that. I honestly don’t think it is a good thing. At least here, in this universe. Have I told you about Kirst?”

“No.” She shook her head.

“Well, I met her like two weeks ago in my Psychology class. Well, that’s where I first saw her. I thought she looks cool. She had a nice smile and her hair always tied in a ponytail. She was sweet. Very approachable although she walks with her head down she had an inviting energy about her. So I walked up to her on her way passed the Administration Office. It was around twelve O’clock noon. So I assumed she was going home ...”

### 3

From her brisk walk and self-directed focus I guessed all she wanted to do was go home, take a shower, eat and lie down. Yes, these images suited her. The sun was pelting. Beads of sweat started on my brow, drops breaking free from my armpits (deodorant failed). I hurried to catch up with her, licking my dry lips and clenching my armpits tight. My heart raced, before I knew it waterfalls flowed from my hair line. A knot tightened in my chest, a lump rose to my throat and my breath hollowed. Images of me saying hello started flashing, they indicated smoothness, delicacy and confidence. The problem is I knew I would stammer, helplessly so. The images were a false prophecy I wished would come true. I had no remedy, no hope.

*Fucking go for it already! What is it they said? Without hope, without fear? Something like that.*

She glanced over her shoulder, saw me approaching.

*This is it! Say hello!*

Nothing but a faint whisper within personal earshot escaped my lips, a premature ejaculation-like blunder. Embarrassing.

*Not this again.*

I reached her and, to my surprise I managed to say it. “Hi,” I smiled at how perfectly executed that one syllable word was. It felt as if I got some pronunciation of an esoteric word correct in a spelling-bee contest.

“Hello.” She flicked her head and smiled. Her skin pale but cheeks rosy from sheer make-up. Her eyebrows artistically shaded and shaped in a delicate manner. It reeked with a bittersweet goth touch, a distinct instance of what defies heaven and hell. Her iris light brown with lightning autumn yellow furrows. Her cleavage, I got trapped in it, glistening and supple, a

bosom for a honey heart. All became foggy and I was no longer walking but floating, her presence carrying me. A heady experience.

“How are you?” my voice sounding foreign to my ears.

*This is my voice isn't it? Why is it so surreal? I woke up this morning, didn't I?*

“I'm fine. How are you?” She gave a quick glance and continued looking down, not slowing her walking pace.

“I'm well. I'm Sandy. What's your name?” I gave out my hand which went unnoticed.

“I'm Kirst. You can call me Krissy.” She smiled, offering her hand.

I wiped my palm on my jeans and shook it. I was weak and gentle compared to her firm handshake. “Why Krissy?”

“It's what everybody calls me. Is Sandy your real name or short for something?” She giggled.

“It's my real name. Just Sandy. I don't get why people always assume it isn't. Doesn't make sense to me.”

“It is quite unusual for a guy.”

Having nothing to say, I resorted to the mundane – the safe.

“Um... how is Psych?” I asked, faking the enthusiasm.

She sighed. “It's okay. Just gets tricky for me at times. How's it going for you?”

“It's going great. I'm kinda enjoying it I guess.”

“What other subjects are you taking?”

“Philosophy, English and Classics.”

She lightened. “Oh, wow. I'm also taking English. Wanted to take Classics but it clashed with Law which is like my major.”

“Law? You like Law?”

She laughed at my scowl of disbelief. “Yeah, why is it so hard to believe?”

I snorted, gathering my thoughts. “It’s... it just seems impersonal. I like things that appeal more to my human nature, stir my emotions and passions up. Then it does not feel like studying when I study anymore, it’s just pure bliss. Law just feels like... a slow boring way of killing time.”

She burst laughing. Then brushed my arm with her hand. “Hey, what study method are you using for Psych?”

“Um... wow. It’s hard to describe now. It’s just something I will have to show you. I got it from a book I read a while ago. It’s really helpful.”

“Okay. Look I gotta split now. I’m almost home. Give me your number and I will call you over to show me sometime. I really need a study method for Psych. Are you keen?”

I had always hated the idea of studying with other people but for her...

“Yeah, it’s cool. I don’t mind.” I shrugged, stifling the protester in me.

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The atmosphere blushed; we could sense it as our skins crawled. We breathed as if we did not want to, all part of flirting and teasing with the air. I could feel my heart pounding on the back of my throat.

She looked down. “Hey, how are you?” Her tone was packed with genuine interest. This was not a mere courtesy. This was the first thing she said after letting me in through the main door, through a maze of decorated (female residences always had colour and elegance, they felt homey) corridors and stairs to her room.

I glanced at her to find that her gaze was one of concern.

Having read my face, she added, "Haven't seen you in class these days and you have been very quiet. Walkin' with your face down.”

*She cares about me. She seems to be able to see through me somehow.  
Good God. She noticed me. No one ever does.*

Although reluctant I could feel my defences start to thaw. My jaws jerked and I could feel my heart become dull. I was scared, felt like I was being gagged. The room shrank in size.

“Are you just asking that for the sake of asking it or you really want to know?” I had a streak of impoliteness in my voice. I could not stand to look her in the face, anxious that she would see *me*. I was sore with the idea I am naked in front of her. My soul started cowering to unknown corners as I stalled her. I wore darkness on my face; I felt its weight on it – a numbing force that conceals readable expressions.

“I really wanna know,” I heard the suit of sincerity her voice wore, but I couldn't see through that. It was mollifying.

*Maybe I can trust her. Yet how do I explain? How do I tell her? People are never this forthcoming or any bit caring. Not in this kinda world. She is like someone who has just walked out of my fantasy. Do I tell her?*

With my lips pressed I smiled. “Is this some kind of joke?” I laughed dryly. Afterwards, I thought of how rude those words might have sounded. She did not seem bothered, like she understood I was being blunt with no intention of offending her. Were these ‘the jitters’ I was experiencing? Maybe that is what she thought.

She laughed lightly, only to accommodate mine. “No, it’s not a joke.”

Kindness rippled from that voice, dislodging my restraints.

I could feel the door to my heart creaking as it opened, left slightly ajar. Where it was just right. Gently and lovingly.

*This can't be real. This can't be right. This is wrong.*

I sighed. “Aren’t we here to study, I mean what if we get caught up in conversation and we never really start?” I muttered, the words were a shy away from moaning.



“I have all the time. The night is long. We can always study another day,” She gladly told me. “If something is bothering you we can’t just ignore that or we won’t be that productive.”

I nodded. “How’re *you*?”

“Um... I’m well. Everything is fine.” She quickly replied.

She gave me an eager glance. "How are you doing academically, socially and personally? I want some details. ‘Fine’ is very generic." I stalled. Trying to prepare how I was going explain to her what is going on with me. Mind mapping. I was not going to let that stop me from hearing what she was going to say.

“Academically is going pretty, well. I am enjoying what I am studying and everything. Except the reason why you are here. Which is psych?" She glanced up, her forefinger to her chin. "Socially things are pretty awesome. After the whole serenades experience, I have gotten to make a lot of friends, including here in my res. Things are very smooth and looking up you know. And look, here you are as well. This can also go somewhere. Personally... I kinda miss home. The family environment and my siblings and all. They call me every day so it’s kinda chilled. I feel like they are here in spirit with me. I have been looking forward to this whole ‘varisty experience so I’m kinda excited. I am stepping in this new phase and they also kinda excited about it, you know. It still feels like it is one of those things we are doing together as a family so it is not that bad at all. Not that lonely.”

I nodded. “ You seem to be very close with your family.”

“ We are. They were all I had while growing up. They are like both my best friends and family.” She raised her shoulders seeming to find it difficult to elaborate. Like she was giving up on explaining it, but profound things like these – as much as you do not have the words to truly describe them – you feel driven into talking until you have said enough or ran yourself into a senseless corner where you cannot really say anymore. “

They are the best thing ever. God, I wish we could all live together in one big house even after I am done studying. Spend as much time as we can together. I dread the day I will have to move out and make a living for myself. They are everything to me. My biggest fear is losing my parents. I do not know how I would handle that or deal with it. I pray to God that He keeps them until I am ready.” She paused staring into the air. “A boy who comes along and convinces me to move in with him or stay with him will have to be worth it. He will have to be smoking good, freaking magical that is. I swear to God. Haven’t you ever loved something like that? Am I making sense?”

I was quite struck. “I think I get you. There are such things in life where not even a compromise is worth considering. I think I know what you mean,” I assured her. I started thinking of home (the crop) and Macfearson’s unshakable commitment to sampling (his was an addiction interwoven with love, and after all to love is to be addicted).

She fidgeted a bit and leaned forward, brushing the hair behind her ears. “How about you? Are you close to your family?”

I swallowed. I could feel I was making some sombre face, slightly looking down and my thoughts already hazy with...

“Um...I don’t really miss them,” I spoke, evading the question. Nonetheless that was crystal truth.

Her face showed she misread my facial expression for contempt. “Is this part of the issue you facing?”

“No. I just never really saw my family that way. I’m neutral on the whole issue. They are more like companions or people I just happen to be with until some other ish happens. I’m numb towards them. I have no ill feelings towards them or anything very affectionate. It is cool that way. Lifts off a lot of the emotional baggage. I do believe they love me and to some feeble

extent I do too. I really don't care if that makes me a bad person, or not a person at all."

The whole conversation was now begging to give something off. These things make me get lost and nostalgic about things or a place that really does not exist. The delusion that it does exist is just tantalizingly suicidal.

"Sandy, I can see you're stalling. Why?"

I let her question resound in my head, slowly devouring the contents required.

"Are you afraid?" she kept on.

*You mean of you?*

"No," demurely I began. "It is overwhelming. I don't know where to begin or how to put it. I would like to have a chance to think it over."

"In silence?"

I considered. "Perhaps that would be best. It would be awkward, though. This is your room I can't really dictate anything. No matter how troubled I am I don't have that right."

"It's okay." She appeased.

*Too kind. You are way too kind. This is just like in those soapy movies.*

*Fuck!*

"How did you know?" I asked, my eyebrows creased with intrigue.

"Know what?" she asked.

"That there are things going on me with me. I know you spoke of not seeing me in class, but that could have meant anything from being lazy and smoking weed to just plain careless."

She nodded. Exhaled. "Um, It's just there in your face. You look like you are going through shit. Half the time it seems like you are not here. You have the face of a guy who thinks a lot... no, I mean brooding. You don't think, you brood. You look awfully tired like the rest of your life-force and enthusiasm has been sucked out of you. It might just be you had a bad day,

but from the look of your body language and posture you just seem like you have been carrying this boulder for too long."

*Very observant*, I made a mental note.

She drew a box of cigarettes from her blouse and a lighter. "Mind if I light one?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"Thanks, " she pulled her first puff, squinting as the smoke blurred her view. She wanted to have a look at me as if to make some judgment, but it was only because she had more to say and she needed a prop. "I find I have the best ideas when I smoke," she said, as a side note.

I stayed quiet, waiting.

She continued. "You don't finish your words when you speak. They kinda die out in the end. Very low voice. I know too well that it is not a sign of laziness but a discouraged spirit, Sandz." She paused for a puff. Knelt back towards the window to ash. She shook her head, "Can I call you that?"

"People call me Sandman, but Sandz is also fine. Carry on."

"Can I offer you wine or juice? Anything? You look very thirsty."

I started to realize my mouth had gone quite dry, probably from being struck by all this. I would have asked how she noticed, but it seemed best to say as many few words as possible and not disturb her thought process.

"Water," I replied.

She got up and sauntered to the bookshelf and picked up a white mug. Stuck the cigarette between her lips and bent at the purifier and poured me a glass. In the same confident manner, she delicately put it down at the table in front of me.

She jumped on the bed again and resumed her posture. "You have the look of someone who has not slept for days."

The words stung so much I grappled for that numb feeling.

"Anybody can have all these characteristics and not have the problems you are having. So in the end is more of my intuition. And I have learned to listen to the damn thing very well. I have learned my lesson. Your soul screams for help from a shadowed dark corner of an abandoned location-less, meaningless, horrid room. It's a terrible scream, Sandz. Deafening."

Puzzled. I just stared at her like the meaning of all she just said was completely insane.

She spread her arms wide. "Can't you feel the vibe in this room, Sandz?"

*What is it, though? It's been here all this time.*

My heart thumped and sweat broke from my brow, drips from under my armpits began. And there, she saw all of it happening like a predator standing over poisoned prey. I took a sip of quaking water from a shuddering rim as I could not steady myself.

"Yeah," I managed.

"You see I am not insane. You feel it too. Intuition is perhaps a closer word. We are sharing some kind of field me and you." She said. Then later added, "I don't go around inviting random guys to my place, Sandz. I had a feeling about you. I knew your essence somehow. I see a fish wriggling on dry ground. I'm here to help. You can trust me."

I was utterly stunned, yet quite elated. A rush.

They say some things come as easy as breathing – some things are as hard as taking a hard crap when constipated. I was neither of those things. Sometimes we refrain from telling people certain things because they know nothing, sometimes it is because they know too much and they are too abrupt. This situation is none of those things. It is too perfect. Too enthralling. Not even in the rarest possibility. Perhaps a tremendous scam.

I needed my henchmen with me. Scrolled through my contacts and found Macfearson. Sent a short coded message: *Do rotto abba!*

I was becoming that which I should not become, I was becoming the *thing*. Seized by pure impulse and quick manic understanding.

*I have questions you have answers. This is not even a trade, my love. You owe me! I think I know what you are.*

“If I am a wriggling fish who is wielding the net?” I asked grimly.

Foolishly and coyly she answered, " Tell me what is this net you caught in so I can help you find out. I want to help."

She dryly chuckled and flicked her hair, a blazing smile slicing through my eyes.

*You beautiful monster.*

I played along with the overtones.

*I will give you what you want my love but don't think you are fooling me. I may be a fish, but I sting. I sting so badly Krissy that you have no idea what I am gonna do to you.*

I smiled, sweetened by my own sacred thoughts. “I will tell you,” I chuckled, unable to impede the brewing *thing* inside me.

*God help me, this is the last thing you will ever hear, okay dear?*

“I have this thing holding me down,” *The calling you see. Not anything you would understand* . “I don’t know what it is. It is not really a thing with me you see,” I sighed, took a swig of water. “I talk no one hears me. I am there nobody sees me. I just exist, passing by through the textures of this frail existence. I am alive yet I feel dead. I just am. I am among people yet I feel extremely lonely. Everything is just ash, everything is just stale and tasteless.”

*This world of yours is just ruined, an excuse for a world. When God created this one he was probably doped out of his mind or he hated you people so much he did not care one bit what kinda world he was building for you. You may marvel at how intricate and beautiful it seems, but this is child's play compared to what he is really capable of. You are God's*

*practice project, something left to gather dust along with old records and relics. Clearly he wasn't trying. Of course, you would say I'm mad, crazy for thinking such things. Call me names. Call me a freak or weird. Not to my face but at least behind my back where I can't hear you. I hardly care. The truth is you are made so badly that the very crap your reality is composed of you can't smell. You call it adaptation I call it deception.*

*And you will not believe me, your slaves of science and reason.*

I paused to take another swig, concealing my expression behind the mug.

"I just know that I don't belong here," *This place is shit. Your universe is shit,* "I am just a burden, to myself and others. There is no love for me. I am unlovable. No peace, no hope. There is a constant ache within me. The agony I can't explain. I feel like sighing, grunting, screaming and slashing my throat. I wanna rip my heart out and squash it. I am angry because it's beating, keeping me alive therefore sustaining this torment that has befallen me. I am on a constant search for salvation yet I never find it. I neither wanna die or live. I am just asking not to exist in any sense if this is what life is," I lifted my head and gazed at the smudgy image of her rendered by my tears.

*I know what you gonna say, don't say it,* I shot my thoughts at her.

"Wow." She shook her head.

"You don't know what to say?" I told her that, expecting her to be.

A smile flickered from the corner of her mouth. "Sort of – I mean yeah."

"I believe that in situations like these people often know what they think, but they are struggling with appropriate things to say. It is not about saying something that sounds right it is about telling me what is going on through your head. More like what you are thinking. I am not a huge fan of being courteous." *It makes my life easier, quite frankly I don't have time for pretend. I need to know when or if I should sample you or whatever the fuck is that thing Macfearson hinted at, 'the right sample'.* " In fact, I hate it.

True experiences come from genuine encounters. For that reason, I have learned not be easily offended ." *Will not to show that I am pissed off, that is until I am stabbing through your heart.* "Feel free," I told her.

She displayed an incredulous glance.

"Don't think. Think aloud for once." I was far from a saint. Who was I to judge anyway?

"It is true what you say." She grinned lifting her shoulders bashfully, pressed her breasts together in the process, an archaic trick of seduction. Nonetheless working. Chest arched forward, my love, was appetizing.

\*\*\*

Maxermillio and Macfearson sat in front the big flat screen at their house. The room dark except for the light emitting from the television screen. They slumped on the couch watching a Marilyn Manson Concert from their plugged in external hard drive. The television was connected to a home theater system via auxiliaries. The sound was coming off just fine, not too loud.

Macfearson's phone beeped. He read the message: *Do rotto abba!*

"Hey, Macx, have considered that right sample theory of mine?"

Maxermillio glanced at him. "Why do you ask?"

The leather couch creaked as Macfearson turned to face him. "Would you explain to me why? The calling requires a *deathling*, changing the state of mind of people is not turning them into *deathlings*. I think there is a flaw there."



“If that is true then what?” Macxermillio said. “All I know is that we can’t rush anything now. Let’s see what comes out of these therapy sessions first, alright?”

Macfearson chuckled. “Sandy, sent me a message. He is craving.”

Macxermillio gazed at him, his countenance dubious. "Pure shit," his tone slightly fazed. "Tell him we are sticking to the plan."

Macfearson shifted his gaze to the screen, a pang of some unknown emotion surging in his chest. “What do we do? He is with the person. This is coded message S.O.S!”

Macxermillio was eerily unresponsive and cold. Underneath his skin, he was afflicted. His lack of expression was there once more. Seconds were burning through the moment as thoughts twirled and tittered. "Tell him if he tries anything he should kiss himself goodbye," he spoke with a low grunt.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, he will have to believe. He won’t cause shit,” He paused.

Macfearson typed away, then he looked up before pressing send. “He better not fuck this up! Why are you so sure he will listen?”

Macxermillio smiled. “Because he listens to me.”

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“You don’t find me weird, Krissy?” I asked as the seduction continued, unbelieving that something of that awesomeness was occurring to me. A stupefying experience. Some would pinch themselves to test if it were real, I would slit my wrists.

She giggled. “No. You are just unique in your own way.”

She tilted her head and pushed her hair back to expose her neck.

*You don't know who you are about to fuck.*

If I were like other men a storm would have stirred between my legs. My heart would have raced and I would not have been able to contain myself. The amount of saliva in my mouth would have surely increased and my breathing a bit heavier. Shuddering with extinguishing and delicious lust. I knew the tease was to be the best part, it always was the best part. Sustained arousal is much like suppressed anger that one cannot wait to release and ravage the object of its obsession. All men are beasts at heart and the women tame these beasts.

“Krissy, I have tried so many things to be happy... to find peace or whatever it is that is missing in my life. Everything.” I paused. Then gazed at her throat. “You are much like a piece of art, mei lady. Distraction from all this horror.”

Silence.

“Would it surprise you if I told you that I never really made any friends in my life?”

“Including your childhood?”

“I never really liked people when I was young. Did not know how to talk to them or understand them really. I enjoyed my own company the most. I played alone and did all things alone. It is tough being here with you and talking to you or opening up to you the way I have. Always been aloof.”

“Maybe that is why you feel so lonely and miserable.”

“I thought so myself. So I went out and tried making friends. I socialized, as people put it. I faced constant rejection and ostracism. Truth is, I felt more miserable with people than I did alone. This is a cliché isn't it?”

“What?”

“My story. Lonely boy meets an angel who attends to his needs and accepts him when the world has been nothing but terrible and uneventful for him. Sounds like something you would watch in a movie.”

“And you don’t like this. Is it too pretentious for you?”

“Much of the world is. I would hate my life to resemble something I strongly despise.” I smiled.

She looked down and withdrew, her posture serene and decent. I could sense disappointment on her side. Although I may never truly know what was causing it, I had always known that I had an adverse impact on others. Never understood what I did wrong or what was wrong with me. For this reason I dreaded human conversation, I had therefore told myself the only way it could work is if I am fully honest at each turn. Clarity made things fall neatly into place, but not in this world. I had to learn, not nicely, the world does not work that way so I was confronted by an even stranger reaction from my peers as a result of my frankness. I hated the anxiety that came with my history of my poor social interactions and the way, despite my efforts, I was clueless and, without fail, screwed things up. With Krissy, I cared less, I felt unrestrained

“All I am trying to say is that I have never met anyone as gracious as you or who makes me feel the things I feel here. You are very desirable and I would love to fuck you.” I paused to study her. She lifted her head to confront me, her cheeks flushing. Her eyes fraught with shock. “I don’t give a damn if that offends you. It shouldn’t. It’s a compliment and a clear indication of my intentions... which you have guided.”

She gasped. “What?”

“Please, have sex with me? Maybe that will help,” I coldly demanded.

She scrutinized me, still dismayed. “Wow,” she could only manage to say.

“Say something.”

“Is this how you speak to girls?”

“This is how I talk to everybody,” I blandly said, not getting even the point of asking that question.

*Is there a customary way of addressing girls and boys?*

“Very blunt. It actually works for me. I like that,” she grinned. Then added with enthusiasm, “Turns me on for some reason.”

I mirrored the excitement.

*Phew...*

“You have wine?” I enquired.

“Yeah. Turnin’ things up, huh?” she lightly cackled, a free spirit resounding.

“Read foreplay is the most important part.” I stupidly answered, as an afterthought I realized I didn’t have to.

She got up and fetched two mugs and placed them on the desk. Students never really owned wine glasses. She fetched a box of cheap wine and filled the mugs to the rim. All of a sudden there was wind in her movements. She hummed gracefully, in a way that evokes peace and comfort. Fun wore her.

She opened her laptop. “Music?”

“Yeah. What do you listen to?”

“Are you music sensitive? One of those guys?”

“I like metal and hard rock. They basically the same but you know what I mean.”

She nodded with a mixture of approval and surprise. “O-kay. How ’bout some Linkin Park?”

“The old school shit only, not this recent crap.”

She laughed and shrugged. “It’s not that bad.”

“I would rather not discuss this. Do you have Hurt?”

“What?”

“Hurt, it’s a band. Not Hurts I mean *Hurt*. You know of ‘em?”

“Never heard of them.”

I felt disappointed, I needed their music for the moment. Any song by Hurt would have done.

My phone beeped and it was Macfearson, telling what I had concluded soon after I sent my message: *If you do it, kiss your ass goodbye -*

*Macxermillio*

Something began brewing. Something malevolent. Something cunning. And suddenly something rendered me anxious.

*Don't you ever leave me you fucking lifeling bitch!*

Suddenly there was an unpredictable presence about her. It was too perfect. Unreal as a flawless play.

*I am being dined before I get fucked.*

Although I gnawed against the growing sense of premonition, rationality drove me under. My arms were feeble and fluid-like against the cold coarse surface of the premonition. Common sense would have it that it was fitting. She seemed to like me although she had more reasons not to. It did not make sense. An agenda was being carried out at the cost of sex and pretense. She was advantageous in her lair.

*Wait...*

## 4

“I don’t wanna bore you with the rest of the whole story because I don’t think this is what this session is about.” I glanced at the clock, 01:15. The damn thing always slipped to 01:50 far quicker than I thought it was fair. When the time came it always felt too soon. On the way out my mind would be shrouded with the “what-ifs” and “shouldn’t-haves”. Then my unresolved enigma would fester. Much like a hangover deep in an existential crisis.

“The point is... I got to see her that day - I mean on the date we had set together. It was an eerie cold night. A bit windy. I wondered why she would want to see me at night. It was just odd that she trusted me to be with her alone in her room. Is she naïve? Was she just friendly? Am I gonna get there and find her with a group of friends? I wondered. I mean I wouldn't feel safe inviting myself if I were her.” I paused.

“You think others shouldn't trust you?” she asked.

"Maybe," I answered, incredulous. "People just assume I am a good person, I am not saying I am a bad person, but I really hate that. What is it that I do that gives people this picture? I still wonder. So I went over. It was very pleasant. We chilled. I taught her the method and we studied. We didn't get to know each other enough to be comfortable, therefore the silence in the room was just thorny. It's at this point where I started talking to her, asking her trivial questions about herself in hopes that I will understand her better. She was intrigued by me, she asked me a couple of questions. The same kind of questions. Everything I said just sounded like a lie to me. So I told her the truth about myself and my problem. I cracked. She held me and told me that if I ever need someone to talk to she will always be there to listen. I felt like she got it, that finally I found that shoulder I could cry on. It was too good to believe, but she was believable. Before I had only seen stuff like that in movies. It meant a lot to me that it was happening to me.

"As shit happened during the week I called her. I needed to talk and stuff. She didn't answer my calls nor reply to any of my messages. On Facebook, she would be active but never flippen' replied to my inboxes. My emails were never returned. So it's clear she was avoiding me or ignoring me or just plain doing both. It is not like she did not have time from the looks it, her status updates were posted plenty of times. What is confusing is that whenever she sees me in class she is all friendly and jolly like nothing

happened. Come the end of class she just goes on about her business like I had just vanished from her world, like I never came into it at some point. Even those chats are not really chats but only small talks. This freakin' confuses me, it makes me feel stupid. As Macfearson would say, it smokes me up! I'm puked-up! Why is it when people don't like you or they don't care about you they don't just tell you? Not in a harsh insulting way but in some civil or appropriate to the situation manner. Save all of us the heartache." I sighed. Submerging into the ghost of those harrowing, pulverizing moments.

My heart sagged, malfunctioning. I felt ashamed, angry, rejected, tormented, patronized and jizzed on. It stunk as much as it sucked like rotten flesh, my face did a good job not hiding it. This was grief for myself, or perhaps the *lifelings* themselves. Not that I cared. There is no greater beast than that of human making.

Cheryl leaned forward, making me nervous.

*Don't poke at me lady*, I bawled inside, much aggressive than I would be once I set my eyes on her. My defiled self cowered as it felt exposed.

"So how would you phrase something of that nature without being rude?" she said.

I fidgeted. "Well, I would say something like 'Sandy, I can't promise to be your friend or be close to you, not that I don't like you. I think you are of value to some other people but not me and not now. But we can always be acquaintances'. But if the person does not mean any of that they shouldn't bother saying it. If the person hates me and they don't like me they should just say it. If they think I'm a freak and a punk they should just say it. If they think I'm a going-nowhere-John they should say it. That is so much better."

She slightly turned her face to one side, eyes still on me. "You won't find it rude or upsetting?"

I looked up, formulating my answer. For a moment, I got caught in the idea that I was searching for an object to demonstrate with. "Well, to be honest, it would be hurtful and concerning. Still better though. It is easier to get over. No mystery, no trouble. It's like getting your school results only to discover you failed Math. If that is important to you, you will be sad or stressed out for a couple of days but eventually you will have some perspective on what to do next. It saves a lot of time, energy and a trunk of heartache...shock and confusion. You see? What music do you listen to?"

"I don't understand."

"Do you listen to commercial rock?"

She shook her head smiling. "Sometimes." 'some' and 'times' sounded miles away from each other in her utterance.

"Have you heard 'Broken Strings' by James Morrison?"

"I'm not sure."

"Not that it is my kinda shit. I'm usually into more underground alternative stuff, but I like that song. It says something about the truth hurting but the lies being even worse than that. I agree with that. I believe more in the truth being the ultimate cure, no matter how sour. Lies are nothing more but sweet poison. Much like ciggies, lies can destroy you. The truth is a hard medicine to take, but it works. Don't mind people being honest, I love it. What I hate are posers. Superficiality. I don't get that. I hate that. What is the fucking point?"

She nodded tentatively. "I see. I understand. I am just wondering if you ever considered that some people may find it hard to be honest with you."

"Yeah," I said. "In fact, I think they do. Anyway, I was telling you this whole story for a reason. Not because of my issues with trust and stuff like that. What I was trying to say is that... being unique and different puts me up for rejection, misunderstanding and ostracism. It's like I am a piece that does not fit *here* in this puzzle. But a puzzle that belongs to another alien



one. And I feel the out-of-place-ness. I feel my edges bent and ruffled with so I may fit. Even when I am finally forced in or somehow altered to, I remain an oddity. A stain on the canvas. I am nonsense. Without real ultimate use. The fact that I'm camouflaged into the painting is so undeniably visible. I boil with the disprovable fact that I don't belong here. It's not my place to take. If I find the rightful piece I will gladly give it the spot it deserves. And I hear, smell, and feel my family calling me on the other side. Longing for me as much as my heart does. There is wind blowing through the hole, insects crawling in and out, and dust filling in. It's every creature's nature to forget and grow accustomed to something. One thing that remembers even in the mist of forgetfulness is the heart. The urges and emotions will soon grow out of explanations and rationalizations. Soon the mind declares it just a mood. From that point, we are forever lost, hopeless and helpless without even knowing it.

'It's just the blues,' we say, but the heart knows different.

'It's just senseless thoughts,' we say, but the spirit knows different.

'Oh, it's just a dream,' we say, but the forgotten mind remembers.

'It's just a compulsion' we think, but our instincts know better.

It's *the calling*, it's the *call*. Only you can't comprehend it. Some drug themselves senseless because of it. It nags and nags until some search for answers is initiated. It's so unbearable that some end their lives. Then I wonder if it is out of choice, or if they hear, believed and done what had to be done. Like taking the right bus, knocking on the right door. Laying your life to sweet fate.

Do you know what my *cousins* say?" I paused, suddenly aware of how discreetly solemn my tone is. I had zoned out.

"No, you haven't told me," she said, intrigue blatant - something was also present there too.

I stalled, licking my lips, clearing my throat and resettling in the chair.  
“They say to me ‘Blood waters the crops!’”

“You know what it means?”

“No. I don’t”

Silence.

“Then I see the red fields. And some kind of a Gregorian chanting rising behind the hills ‘This is Deathiculture. This is Deathiculture. This is truth. The is It. The It. The it that is. The is that *is!*’” I talked without my lips moving, I had a sensation that I was frozen in place. It wasn’t anything disconcerting or aggressive. It was a sweet release, an orgasmic caress of goose bumps. Shimmering and rippling like a head rush.

*Fuck me now*, Macfearson’s voice whispered into my mind. That’s what he always said as he had his first cigarette of the day – never in the morning but in the afternoon.

“What do you do then?” she asked.

“I... I just sit there and become so... so... so something else,” my voice cracked and trailed off.

## 5

It struck 01:40 pm. Macxermillio and Macfearson waited patiently and silently. Each romping in their own internal landscapes until Macfearson spoke, "Mac, think you can play the game?"

It wasn’t much of a game with clear objectives, rules and ultimately a winner and a loser. It was an exercise. Macfearson’s remedy for his cravings when he was removed from his lighter. It only consisted of

imagining the most grotesque and gut wrenching possible ways to kill a person and dispose of the body.

“Hit me, Fearson. What do you have?” Macxermillio grinned, delighted.

“Imagine if there was a way to strip a person of all their flesh and bone and all you have are his insides laying there. His head is still intact and okay and somehow he is alive and you have his heart pumping there on the table and all the juicy action,” Macfearson initiated.

“Wow, that would be sweet. It would be like some kind of a squid with guts as tentacles.” Macxermillio laughed, already visualizing it.

Macfearson giggled, he was very fond of that laugh. It rarely came. “Then what we would do is put his guts in a mixer and shred it like we making juice for vampires.”

“With the head stuck on top as the lid?”

“Yeah-yeah. We gotta see that motherfucker’s eyes when we rip him apart!”

“I like that.” A pause and a nod. “Fuck! That would be awesome!”

“There won't be any screams, though.”

“Still cool. Silent horror style.”

“Would be nice to see anguish without all the noise getting in the way. High definition fuck-up there.”

“See fear but not hear it.” Macfearson nodded, excited.

Macxermillio rubbed his palms together. “That would be fucking amazing to do.”

Macfearson squinted. “Oh, my fuck! You are drooling in public.”

“An empty waiting room.”

“Still a public area!”

They both laughed taken by their shared mischief.

“If the receptionist hears this we’re going to a psychiatric hospital,” Macxermillio teased.

“I can already imagine CPU coming in here and cuffin’ us.”

“That would be embarrassing.”

They went silent, imagining what they discussed. The activity was accompanied by stifled laughs and giggles. Macfearson’s game was a spontaneous exchange of rare unrealistic ideas. Whether it fed our desires or aggravated them was shunned, not to be contemplated.

“What if Sandy walks out of that room changed? In a way this is a brainwashing institution,” Macfearson started, the fun absent in his voice.

“You mean how?”

“Say he comes back and he suddenly believes he is just sick and can be treated for a mental illness or whatever bullshit they teach here. He starts asking us to join that little cult of his,” Macfearson said.

“What are you saying exactly? What are you asking of me?”

“Would you believe him?” Eyes on the floor, his voice damp with suppressed emotion.

“With reason, Fearson. I can’t imagine anything that will lead me to forsake *the crop*. Even God failed, for *crop’s* sake!” Macxermillio smiled.

“I don’t trust these people here and I am not saying this because I wanna go back to sampling. It’s as if evil spirits roam around here. It feels like it’s spellbound. There is a lurking evil here, and it drones. As it drones my skin shrinks. It’s not pleasant at all. The Cheryl looks like a goth devil worshiper.” Macfearson scowled.

“We have done far more unpleasant things in our quest.”

“I disagree.” Macfearson shook his head. “This is far worse. I feel it.”

“I respect your intuition and I will keep that in mind. I will urge him to be careful. We can’t just stop and call it off now.” Macxermillio replied.

Macfearson’s jaw jerked and he spoke through his teeth, “I see.”

“What is wrong with me? Do you know what this *thing* is?” I asked Cheryl.

Right then my removed self, the watcher, was astonished by all the agony in my voice and how a sob-like sound tainted it. As much as we were desperate for answers, groveling wasn't how we wanted to go about it. My lips began to tremble as if to emphasize how much control I was losing. It was always shameful to cry in front of someone else. Maybe it was not shame but how frightening being vulnerable was and the self-loathing that came with being hurt because you trusted someone. I hated myself enough, I did not need another reason to. I was tormented enough by thoughts of my flawed being and misfortunes that the will to sustain my life in this plain of existence was waning to microscopic proportions. The only reason that was not enough for me to end it was because of the uncertainty and the lack of trust I harbored for suicide.

I broke-down because no one can withstand such a grand deal of loss and hopelessness.

A frown formed on her face, grave and disconcerting. She stared at the floor for a while. “Personally I don’t like to put labels on things but it seems you have a severe case of depression. The lethargy, suicidal thoughts, negativity, hopelessness, a dark mood, lack of pleasure or interest and all these things are signs of depression. In your case, there might be some anxiety involved and distorted perceptions or delusions. I think it is necessary to run some tests before we settle on a diagnosis.”

As the whole world jolted to chugging pause, I thought, *maybe that is the word they use for the calling. Depression the word for the universe twisting*

*our souls to annihilation with its weight and with the calling somehow taking part.*

I had to ask. "How do you cure it? How do you get out of it? Can you really help with that?"

"It's something that can be treated, not really cured. It also depends on your own situation. Depression is a disease of the brain, a mental illness, usually treatable with therapy and some medication or some lifestyle changes."

*What? That cannot be the calling. Some psychological issue or brain problem does not account for this. I was wrong to think she could help. I don't have a mental illness, she should see that. I should take the stupid test so she sees it, maybe be it is a process of elimination.*

*You were wrong to think a mere lifeling would understand us or do anything to help. All they are preoccupied with is themselves. They don't care. She does not care about you or has any interest in saving us. If she did she would at least try to understand you and not pass ignorant judgments, my thoughts took the flaming voice of Macfearson , It is subtle rejection, Sandz!*

"I have seen you for like four weeks this is what you give me? Do you even really care or see how much this is hurting?" I asked, on the edge of breaking into a sob.

She nodded, calm and almost unaffected. "I see how that can be upsetting to you." She glanced at the clock as if she had somewhere to be and was finished with me.

I felt my body start to tremble as I fought the surging emotions in me. Then the world became fuzzy through my eyes, I realized with , disbelief and confusion, that my eyes were tearing up.

*What the fuck is going on?*

I sobbed. "I can't go on," then I sobbed even harder, cowering into dark places within me like a tortoise. I felt exposed. "The waiting is killing me, Cheryl! I need something to make sense, some answers. I don't think I can keep on living. The calling is too strong, not even Macfearson or Macxermillio can save me from myself at this point. Each road I cross I'm tempted to jump. Images of my dead body are my only comfort...and maybe this place." I paused as the next wave of tears hit. My thoughts racing and my heart a boulder in my chest. The world grew gloomy, I could sense a sly smirk and a mischievous leer from it. A deep hatred that I was not sure I deserved. My head dropped, shoulders slumped and my will was sucked out of me.

Wearily I spoke, "Why can't I just die? So many people die every day. They are very fortunate, I don't know why the world mourns them. I *envy* them. I'd just like to disappear, that is better."

"Sandy, look at me."

I reluctantly lifted my heavy tired head and emptily stared at her.

*What can you say to make it any better?*

"I'm sure there are people who care."

"Like who?"

"Your family and friends."

"I don't have friends and my family does not understand. I think sometimes they forget I exist. I think they would be glad if I didn't exist."

"Then what about Macfillson and Maxmillio? They aren't your friends?" she leaned forward.

I contemplated, somehow the sobs had become gentler. "I guess."

"Look, we about to run out of time. I will give you some homework for the weekend as a step towards understanding this, then maybe next week we will look over it and work from there, okay?"

*If I make it next week.*

“Okay,” I nodded.

“You can start tonight if you want, it’s Friday,” she enthused, a smile on her face.



# Cheryl's Notes

Patient: Sandy Macxermilian

## Session one

*Struggling with suicidal thoughts*

*Tough time adapting to the environment*

*Constant negative thoughts*

*Feelings of loss not belonging*

## Session two

*Anxiety?*

*Spends most time alone/dislikes his peers--why?*

*Has anhedonia*

*Pessimistic about the future*

*Crying spells and deep sadness "pulling him inside"?*

*Major depression?(should remember hm)*

## Session three

*Loses track of thought, long silences – spacing-out?*

*Delusional*

*Lacks trust*

## Session four

*Long sleeve shirts always, self-harming maybe? Winces a lot*

*Unhygienic/insomniac/ lethargic*

*Expresses apathy*

## Session five

*Delusions? The calling?*

*"lifeling behaviour?"*

*Rmbr : ask what is “lifeling” + “calling”*

*The crop?*

*The calling = depression?*

*Socially inept*

*Cnt. Speaks of death and killing*

*Macfeerson and Macxermillio derivatives of pat. surname.*

*Hallucinations?*

*Not found in the univ. Records = Not students/not real/townies?*

*Rmbr : Give homework (social hm) = CBT*

*Spends all time with M+M (only friends mentioned)*

*Nts: should follow up on M+M*

# Chapter 6

## 1

Time: Sometime

Place: Nowhere

A relic of truth.

*Blood waters the crop,*

*Fertile red soil,*

*Heat rises from the furrows,*

*The sun casts red light,*

*Horizon to horizon,*

*Oh, the fumes! Oh, Deathiculture!*

Here all questions are answered. All makes sense all fits. There is peace and happiness here in the fields and crops of infinity.

## 2

I awoke to a soggy and salty pillowcase. I realized, in a sluggish train of thought, I had cried myself to sleep again. A headache wriggled through my brain. My temples throbbed. My wrinkly shirt now plastered with cold sweat. I could not get myself to think more or do anything just yet. I waited for my heart to stop and to cease breathing completely. I lay there, not knowing what time it was, only knowing with strong conviction that in the next few moments I would surely cease to breathe.

An hour passed, I couldn't tell for certain, but that was how it felt. It felt like a lifetime. Thought I was paralyzed and stuck in limbo (between life and death), a gradual death. With all my senses, I clenched onto it. Gnawing at the rusty hinges which tied me down to my life-force. At last I saw my life seep out, ashes upon ashes of burned fuel in liquid form.

I snapped out of my fantasy to an ambient guitar solo.

*“Six am Christmas morning*

*No shadows, no reflections here*

*Lying cheek to cheek in your cold embrace... “*

Marilyn Manson's voice seeped out the speakers. His raspy voice accompanying the melody and the lyrics to perfection. A song of diabolical true love burned off its bones. An eclipse of sorrow and pleasure.

*“...She pressed a knife against your heart.*

*Saying 'I love you so much you must kill me now' “*

It felt like I'm floating. Giddy, it took every ounce of my will and strength to swing my legs out of the bed and touch the cold wooden floor with my toes. Even when that was done a huge part of me stayed behind crippled on the bed. An old wrinkly man with white hair coiled up like a frightened

child. He was pale and weak, incapable of controlling his bowel movements. He trembled in the cold and heat, whimpered in the night and day because his anguish and the horrors he has seen never ceased bombarding his mind. He would have gotten out of bed if he could, but he was petrified to severe anxiety. Poor fragile joints and bones that ached with every turn and moment. Because life and nightmares became no different from each other. I carried him with me.

My shoulders slumped and my head heavy, it all started coming back when I stared at the bookcase in front of me. Although with no complete certainty.

*I am in my room,* I thought, not quite convinced yet.

Couldn't shake the touch of uncertainty off my back. It would take turning my lights on and scanning the room, looking out the window to see where I was and what time it was, walking into the hallway to check the room number with my name underneath and the two doors besides mine (as if rooms uprooted themselves and moved). Half satisfied, I would return to my room have a glass of water and look under my bed. Then I would sit and brood until the haze is slightly lifted.

### 3

The bottled water tasted like salvation. I sipped it instead of downing it in one go like most, a habit of mine. As I watched out the window two girls passed by, the one on the further side captivated by what the other was telling her and suddenly she laughed. Her cheeks glowing and by chance she looks up at my window and she paused until out of sight. Was it my

starry eyes that caused that? Perhaps sensing my foul nature pouring onto her. I couldn't tell. I didn't give a fuck.

"Staring still at the thin fabric of reality?" Macfearson said. I had mistaken his entrance for a note being slid under my door, he was stealthy like that.

"Not really...just thinking."

"That's the look of a dark lord you're wearing, deathling," He grinned. "I love it."

"And I guess you're here to tease it." The emotion surging within was pure antipathy and love at the same time.

"Wish I could hate it!" He ambled over. His eyes peering into my heart. He pulled out my scrapbook from under his trench coat, opened it to a specific page and gave it to me. "Lesley Sebeko died in a car crash last Saturday. I added him to the list," his tone bland. He was not used to suppressing his feelings, he was trying. It was as uncomfortable as putting off going to the toilet to him, he had to relieve himself and the only time he did was when my lust was visible. We harboured ill feelings towards each other. We pretended the tension did not exist although we sensed it in the overtones.

I scrolled down the names, newspaper articles, pictures and headlines but could not miss or dismiss the highlighted lines. I had to read them twice each like smelling roses.

*Alexis Dune*

*Raped, eyes gorged and a shattered beer bottle shoved up her vagina.*

*Thabang Dithebe*

*His genitals severed and face peeled off.*

*Mpho Violet*

*Her head severed and staked through her breasts.*

*Julia Storm*

*Baked in the oven just when she turned three...*

*Hape Juliet...*

Page after page, it was appetizing.

“Do you have an idea what we will be looking for today?”

Reluctant to look up from the book I absently replied, “We’ll find out.”

I felt his questioning look on the back of my neck.

“It will make sense when we get there,” I said.

“Are you sure she’s not just assimilating you into one of them?”

“I don’t think so.” Truthfully her intentions weren’t clear to me.

He snorted. “She is sending you to a goddam bar.”

I looked up, a scowl on his face. “She is sending us.”

“You told her about us?”

“No, but we are all in this together aren’t we?”

He shook his head. “I never agreed to any of this.”

“I also never signed off on the sampling. I followed. Thought you would be over this by now, seriously.”

He clenched his fists on the side of his legs and manically grinned.

“Alright, alright! I’m coming with you to the bar tonight.” Eyes bulging from his shaking head, stray hairs trembling over his forehead. “Enjoy your book. I’ll see you tonight!”

The university, a place which its prime objective is to sell and create new information, failed to solve the problem. Questions which I had assumed were only natural and answerable appeared downright insane. Discovered how lost this place was, declaring the truth to be relative. How could one live in a growing abyss like that?

Intuitively I knew something was off. The calling was all the proof I needed. The wrongness in the world and life itself seeped deep into the cracks; my burden was knowing it.

The calling grew audible with each passing sand of time.

“Jump. Head first, snap your neck and dissolve into bliss. The nothingness, the not being. It is the only way out. You better off dead. No one will miss you, no one will care. The misery, the pain, and the confusion it will slide away. What is life anyway? What is existence?” the calling enticed with its voice, transfixing me.

“What is death? What does it mean? The end of me or bliss and peace?” I asked, staring out the window as the entity slithered beneath the thin fabric of reality.

Then there was a cringing pause. Just then the pain of the calling consumes me. Broody, I cried. Hating myself for existing. There was a bottomless sadness and grief over being so undone.

“No one understands you. They don’t get you. They don’t see you. You are invisible,” tears race down my cheeks as the calling whispered from within. “You don’t deserve anything. You are a freak. A wandering mistake, unlovable, and nothing. Not even the gods who created you can love you. All you give will be taken from you. You will always lose friends and carry this unbearable pain in your soul.”

“Why can’t I be happy?”



“You are incapable of it. How can you even know what is happiness when you do find it if you have never felt it before? You will always be lifeless, lost, and dead inside. Come, come, jump!”

“What’s wrong with me?”

“Your very existence.”

“Will death extinguish it?”

“Come, jump!”

“Will it be painful?” My heart thudded.

“Yessss... sweet explosions of pain. It’s the most beautiful thing. No drug can make you feel that good. This does not have to go on. You must break to become less fractured. “

“Will I go home?”

No answer.

“What is the crop?”

No answer.

“How can I trust you?”

Silence, then it slowly spoke, “Look inside yourself.”

“How do I get to the crop?”

Silence.

“You lie, right? You’re lying,” I bawled, trembling to my loins

Silence.

I picked up the razor blade from the windowsill and started slashing my wrist. That way it would leave me alone for a moment. A moment of strange incomplete and murky peace was worth the trouble, always. The hopelessness and helplessness lingered like drug abuse shame.

# Chapter 7

## 1

Dark sky grumbled above, thrashing us with sweet vomit and turning the world into acid. As green as Scarleton was tonight something was flooding the life in it. It was not the water that raced down from the hills or the rain, carried by the gale that beat down mercilessly. It rendered the streets quiet and desolate, an unusual occurrence in a city where Friday nights tremble with drunken commotion and congested with party people. Usually at the time cars boomed with party music roaming the streets, on the sidewalks drunk students chanting various bar songs, cheering girls, rowdy conversations, and vendors selling fast-food. It was the peak of freedom, rebellion and victory for these students and they were shredding it to oblivion every chance they got. Their minds and spirits were united in making mayhem. On those nights, the streets were bright, too bright. Tonight the streetlights were dead and in the shadows a darkness was lurking, scheming and conspiring. The sky unsuccessfully trying to hold in the rage and menace. Malevolence residing in the alleys, chilling. Eye balls quivered and darted their glances about, apprehensive.

“She sends you here and you are here,” Macfearson said, his face still frigid with disbelief and protest. “Gosh, Mac, how did it come to this?”

“It’s a smoking *lifeling* fest in there,” Macxermillio said, sounding the least confident about our assigned task compared to before when we were not standing in front of the bar.

Sounds of revelry were buzzing out the bar. That musk of friends, hook-ups, cougars, girlfriends, students, sex, flirting, conversations, jokes, and rejection. All the overwhelming and disconcerting things to a *deathling's* ears. A racket.

"Guys, I am the one getting drenched here can we go in, please?" I ignored them.

"Oh, that's what you get for being a whiny little pretend-to-be *lifeling*," said Macfearson.

"Sandy, all of the bullshit going on in there hates us. Even if we were a good band, or famous you know they won't like us. We do not belong in their world and they don't even appreciate our existence. They call you a *freak because* of us. We are you and you are us, but they do not see that. They are perfectly human, but we are not," Macxermillio said, staring down at me, pleading. It became more apparent to me, although I always knew, how half-heartedly he was doing all of this. Macxermillio, always easy to compromise within reason. I couldn't count the times his brain and his heart were on lockdown. Like all things strong and hard that ability withered with time.

I gazed at him and I knew what he meant. We were never really part of the normal. Found my gaze shifting to their long cotton trench coats, for a time amazed by the fact they were so dry, untouched by the rain. As I shifted my focus I could see the rain curling around their bodies before contact as if repelled by a layer of energy.

"Guys, let's just do this?" I begged. "It will be good. It might just work." I was trying to convince myself and it showed in how hollow my tone was.

The place had the worst nausea-inducing smell of them all, and that was the smell of superficiality. Superficiality meant hypocrisy, deceit, silent rejection, and humiliation. How do you read a visage when it is constantly

masked? How do you read the signs? Even with those sharp eyes we were like Oedipus.

“I don’t see it. Feels like a waste of life to me,” Macfearson downheartedly replied. Jaws clenching. A mixture of distaste and anger radiated from him either at the prospect or at me. It was hard to tell.

“How is this meant to help? Did you at least ask her that?” Macxermillio asked, the conviction that the whole task was futile shamelessly displayed.

“Like we haven’t tried people before,” Macfearson added. “Did we grow up in the wild here or something? Why are we here? With *them*?” he pointed towards the bar. He sighed then added. “We are enough.”

I sighed, dropped my shoulders almost oblivious to how hard the rain was bashing me. “I don’t know guys,” my voice came out strained, tears forming in my eyes. “Maybe it is a test to see if we are truly who we say we are.”

This was becoming that moment where desperation produced belief even in the most unintelligible things. I so wanted that to be the truth, hopelessly hoping. Possible because the mind has a way of fooling itself especially when the heart is involved, situations turn dire because that bastard beating heart is stubborn to change. So stubborn that it won't stop beating even when stopping would reduce suffering and the benefits of living were outweighed by those of death. Is the heart a foolish thing? It seems that way, but then how things seem and how things actually are is totally different.

“Fuckin’ Jesus! Are you crying?” Macferson asked, frustrated with me. He went on to vent under his breath.

“I’m not conforming to their sinister ways. I want whatever this is to be honest and pure,” Macxermillio said.

“Macfearson, do you have that sword on you?” I asked.

“Yes. Why?” He frowned.

“Why bring it here?” I asked, puzzled.

“Why bring me here?” he replied. As I opened my mouth to protest, he grunted, “You are a dirty motherfucker. A cunning bastard with no gratitude.”

I could only stare. Made quiet by where the insults and accusations could escalate.

He added, “Some people just don’t deserve to live and I am god enough in this world to decide that.”

Macxermillio and Macfearson were never conventional. Collars of their thick ashy trench coats were elevated like Mount Etna. Macfearson’s hair long and white like a wizard’s, they were just in their late twenties, but the scar that straddled Macxermillio’s left cheek to his right eyebrow was there since life began to slip. How many souls had they claimed?

## 2

Once a door is opened nothing can ever change the fact that it has been opened. A time traveler can come and undo it, but nothing changes the fact it had been opened. The cosmos is carved with trails of unfinished and abandoned paths, these truths are information and instances that can never be erased. That within this universe, from a subjective point of view, from a view that is disturbingly ignorant (by nature not by choice) nothing we do leaves trails behind if we decide to undo it. Nothing said can be taken back, nothing done can be undone but something broken can be fixed while something dead cannot be. To say it simply, there is no such thing as turning back...no such thing as repressed memories either. As we warily stood by the door of the bar, awaiting a never coming sign to enter, we

knew this fact. Everything is permanent. The heart of Scarleton resided in this bar and that was not good thing. I was cold and soaked but they were dry and warm. That alone served as an incentive to enter.

“It’s never too late to change your mind, Sandy,” Macxermillio murmured. His face saturated in sentiment.

“It seems like if she wanted you would kill us.,” Macfearson moaned his heart out.

“How can I kill a part of me?” I said.

“You are suicidal, that’s how.”

“Why are you so threatened by this? I am not changing into something else different! There is something she expects us to learn here,” I promised and the promises I made to myself I kept and there were no exceptions.

“They say it’s small steps, Sandz. This sure looks like one of those.” Macfearson sighed. “Fuck, I have never seen you like this. Is there something she told you that you are not telling us?”

“Of course not,” I lied, squirming inside so that it does not show. It was maybe too late to try hiding that I am lying, because the words had already came out my mouth without any proper execution for the illusion of truth and confidence.

Macfearson stared at me for a while, quite incredulous. His eyes surveyed my face and eyes for cracks, that is all a person with eyes as sharp as his only needed to peek in the inside. He knew how to read another *deathling* more than anyone else. Then he said, “Okay, let’s go in.” His eyes fixed on me, clearly conveying he will be watching me and the fact he is agreeing to this is no sign that he believed me; but , ‘hey, let’s be civil and patient about these things’ (not because I, Macfearson, am a patient person but because I have so much confidence in my abilities that I know it won’t take long to know something is wrong). An observant fellow he was.

I nodded to this challenge disguised as a sudden ease and agreement.

We ambled in like an animated searchlight tower jumping into the deep, uncertain in its ability to float and remain above water or find what it seeks in the immense dark ocean among a million creatures. Risking being lost and crushed under the weight of the overwhelmingly vast waters, the volume of them immeasurable.

“Nobody notices us. It’s as if we didn’t just walk in,” Macfeqrson said, scanning the room.

“We’re just dead to them. But we were always dead since the beginning. What is it any way about life that’s worth having. It’s just empty and nothing is good...I bet that death is sweeter. *Just* not being able to feel anything and forget that you were. I hate these people,” Macxermillio said.

“Macx, it doesn’t feel so sweet from where I’m standing,” Macfearson sarcastically said.

“Look how happy they look, it’s as if they are dead,” Macxermillio said. “Sandy, do you know what exactly we are to look for here?”

I replied, “From what I gather we just have to interact and things will work themselves out.”

“We’ve never been good at that,” Macxermillio said.

“I thought we might pay someone.”

Genuine happiness is like light, there is no denying its presence and how annoyingly bright it is. Music set the norm and conduct, weaving the social atmosphere and attitude. For us, an unsurprisingly hostile atmosphere. Kisses for love, hugs for acceptance, smiles for pleasure and games for belonging. We stood there resentful of their happiness. Something was eerily ritualistic about it.

“Hi!” Called a blonde girl through her conniving superficial smile. Running her delicate fingers through her wavy shiny hair, chin cocked back she transfixed me with her ravish glance. That is when the tides of her perfume started rolling in. I assumed she had run down the stairs from the

second floor. She was a presence, whether of worry or delight was hard to tell then. In an arbitrary sense she was repelling, maybe because I sensed her expectations and standards. Too *lifeling* for me to live up to, which did not bother me.

Superficiality meant that an elusive door of opportunity was open but at the same time that I was a possible victim of deceit or manipulation. Illusions are not real, that is the very fundamental feature about them including that they swindle one's consciousness and mental faculties to doom. And beauty also is a kind of an illusion, although real, it makes you susceptible to repeating and making the same old mistakes. The irresistible mirage of the soul.

"Hey," I softly replied. She had to read my lips. It showed in her eyes and in how her smile faltered at how disappointing that had been.

Her smile gradually came back on, forced and hollow. "Kim"

I shook her hand, limp and fragile to touch. "Sandy."

"How long have you been waiting here?"

"Um...two minutes at best." I was uncertain, all felt foreign and forlorn. Even if her hands were driven by a veritable need to help the situation was hopeless. I tried to convey the opposite of what I felt for the sake of deceiving Macreason the hawk (maybe myself more than anything).

"I moved from the bar upstairs because the service was slow. Hope it is not the same with this one," she told me, as I gave her the disquieting cold and empty stare. The inadequacy of my social skills demotivated me, the over-sensitiveness making it even harder to say anything.

*Useful information*, I thought, an unpredictable and seemingly random thought.

I grinned, my eyes gliding up her cascading hair to her green eyes. "Can I get you something?"



She smiled and sized me with her eyes, rejection stinging from her glance(not at all unexpected, I never measured up anyway). “Um...no I got it,” She said shifting her focus to the bar, a nudge and a fuck-you of a kind.

“She is actually thinking that you wanna screw her tonight,” Macfearson whispered into my ears, sending a chill down my spine. “I thought she would fall for the black guy big cock thing. Maybe give you a chance?”

“In this case, Sandy, you are just not tall enough, I guess,” Macxermillio said.

They were right, at least I believed.

I blurted. “I will give you a fifty if you spend thirty minutes with me.”

Startled she shifted her attention back, clearly the wrong idea was on her mind.

I reconstructed my word, “I just wanna talk at that table over there...that’s all I want. You just seem like a nice person.”

Her face was smeared with bewilderment and suspicion. She must have thought it was weird and strange, but for a half-drunk girl she didn’t think of it as weird as she might have if she were sober. I craved to talk with her, have a conversation that is naturally intimate and close to heart. I had been lonely for a long time.

### 3

“Thank God I got myself a boob-saver tonight!” said Kim.

“Boob-saver?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah you know, I now have fifty bucks for my mouth instead of showing a guy my bobs for a fifty” she shrugged with a pout.

I stared down at her boobs, quite tantalizing they were. "They're good I see no reason why a guy wouldn't do so."

"You think? Wanna have a look?"

"No thanks," I said at first but thinking it might upset her I afterward agreed reluctantly. Life is not a film and we should not try making it one, this situation was beginning to be more like one. Not exciting for me nonetheless. As far as I was concerned this did not feel worth the tears I spared in the therapy session.

*What am I supposed to get from this creature of great and maybe underserved bliss?*

She giggled, gazed at me contemplatively, or so it seemed to me. "Why did you say no at first?"

I sighed. "I have a general respect for women I would say."

"Ah, nice guy, I see. Says a lot." She nodded tentatively, eyes on the floor.

"Like what?"

"Why you're lonely and desperate." She sounded bemused.

*Desperate and lonely but not for the reasons you confer.*

"Ah. I see."

"Wanna get laid?"

"Is there also a price on that?"

She twittered. "It depends."

"On what?"

"How much you are willing to pay."

"So there is a price," I paused. "I don't do this kind of a thing."

"I will pretend like I have never heard that one."

"That is modest of you. Why do you think men say that?"

"They care what I think of them," she shrugged.

“Fifty for your boobs. Another fifty for a blow job. Another one for penetration and another fifty for anal?”

“Two hundred and fifty!”

“What’s the other fifty for?”

“For the time.”

“Okay.” I nodded.

“So your place or the bathroom or my place?”

I frowned. “No...um I just wanna... wanna talk.”

“You don’t sound so sure?” she smirked coyly.

“You are hard to resist I will not lie.” I flattered her.

She held my hand and brushed my shoulder from across the table, her lush breasts my eyes’ prize. “I will make your night, honey heart,” she whispered seductively. Her voice was truly suitable for phone sex. I was salivating, not because of the orthodox sexual trappings.

Macfearson nudged me. “Fuck her like a whore!” All sarcastic.

Macxermillio whispered, “Is this truly what you need, or what will make you any better? Is this what the whole trip was about?”

“If the world wants to fuck, I say fuck it,” Macfearson said.

“Fearson, how can this be helpful?” Macxermillio said.

I gulped and leaned back.

“Fuck me!” she said it like a pornstar would. Every man dreamed of fucking one once in a lifetime at least.

I looked around to check if anyone was looking or if anyone on the table nearby could hear.

“I won’t lie...I really want to,” I said. Rage in my pants and a storm in my mind. Not of the orthodox appetite.

She smiled. She was so *beautiful*, beauty being the combination of hot and sexy.

“First let’s talk.” I insisted.

## 4

Bewildered, I found myself asking. “How do you do what do you do?”

She looked down at my drink, still untouched. “I just give myself over, it is no big deal at all. The worst thing would be trying to be in a relationship for me. I hate those.”

“Aren’t relationships a place of magic?”

“No. Don’t wanna be owned by someone anyway.”

“Isn’t it owning each other?”

“It’s very limiting and oppressive.”

“Are we ever free from everything?”

“Some things we choose to be held down by.” She paused. “What I’m doing makes quite a good contribution to society.”

I felt nothing but disgust for her at that moment, it was much more instinctive like the way one flinches when an object is thrown at them by an enemy. The disgust was caused by my hopelessness in changing her disbelief in the one force of life that makes life worth enduring. Even with this hopeless racket of a life. Something about relationships construct a life worth living, it makes it bearable.

Macfearson ambled over to her side and leaned behind her, drew his sword and pressed it against her neck. He smiled, his chin tilted backward to make himself look even more gruesome. He tugged her head back by the hair. “She is just a maggot eating away at life itself how can life be worth living when such a disgrace is walking the earth. Humans have become shallow... buried under a river of superficiality and disregard for the things that really matter.”

I would have loved to see it... to see her eyes gorged out. Her head under the heel of my foot while her throat is choked by an overflow of crimson juice. The vessels spraying blood in my face.

“To cleanse or to cease,” I whispered in a dream-like voice, consumed by my fantasy.

“What went so wrong that you had to pay to talk with someone?” She asked as soon as she realized that I had not been listening to much of what she was saying, I had tuned out. I was preoccupied alright.

“I am just tired of people in the world being superficial. Wearing masks around their faces. Asking you questions they don’t want to know answers to and saying things out of courtesy rather than flat out commitment or interest.

“I am paying you to be authentic. I am paying you to remove the mask and stop the act. I am paying you to ask questions you really wanna know answers to. To truly speak from your heart rather than cheap courtesy. Honestly, I don't give a fuck, neither do you that is why you suck cock from any hole on your body where it could fit. I would like to fuck you, but it shames me... paints me as a loser. For once I want to get things because of what they are and their sake rather than what I have to offer.

“Don’t get me wrong, I am not mad. I am thrilled,” I grinned a grin as sweet as a sour lemon. My voice was devoid of emotion but the pattern in which they came made an unmistakable point.

“Fuck! I did not know that the talk-whore business was this heavy,” she smiled, something worth a thing beginning to take form in her face.

There is power in sex, maybe the kind that it makes it worth dying or living for. Maybe that is why the whole population of *lifelings* is still going strong. Like an incurable virus they spread. These were weird creatures indeed I didn't know what drives them or understand their ways. That place...that room seemed so disorganized and confused. Yet those people seemed to have developed a set of norms that allowed them to function in that environment and perhaps blind themselves from the truth, our truth. To them, there was no chaos but clear patterns, I did not feel human at all. Sometimes I thought my eyes were a curse or I am an angel sent from above who has a severe case of memory loss and I had got used to the idea that I am human, so much that I tried to be.

"Just imagine your hand up her thigh. Screaming out her name as you fuck her," Macfearson's voice grumbled with lust for Kim.

Nothing else seemed truer than the pleasure that would give me. It might have been my gateway to salvation. Suddenly I felt inconsolable. Why? Every time I thrust her it would have been a reminder to her that all men are monsters or pigs or whatever she had grown up to believe about men. I wanted to change that, convince her otherwise but as much as I did I wanted to fuck her and spit in her face... slap her and call her a whore at the top of my lungs. Which of these two truths was I as a man and an individual? She might actually have been so skilled at what she does ... it might just have saved me. At the same time, I was deeply disgusted.

"Why are you here?" I asked. Macxermillio wiped a tear off his cheek.

She shifted in her chair, tilted her chin forward and grinned. "I am here to have fun, enjoy myself and meet a couple of friends."

"You really enjoy being here, drinking and doing whatever it is people come here for?"

"Yeah, it is fun. Meet new people and have great conversations."

"Meeting new people? How do you do that one?"

“You know, you just talk or whatever. Sometimes your friends introduce you or some shit like that. Sometimes it is a must do situation equal to being trapped in an elevator or some shit like that. Why wouldn’t you do it?”

“Maybe I am learning?”

I was blank there. How do you know what is appropriate to say? How do you contribute to a conversation the right way that gets people chilled rather than stare and shake their heads? How do you avoid the awkwardness and the constant feeling of being looked at like an alien or freak?

There were things she instinctively knew, things she could teach me or explain to me but just expected me to *get*. She couldn’t have though, not honestly, because she must have sensed the *it*.

How do you stay when you can see their rejection blurring through their masks? How do you endure that? How do you find genuineness? For what reason have the *lifelings* stopped being genuine or avoided it? What was the point to it all?

“You don’t look like you belong here,” she said.

I winced.

“No, no, no. I’m not saying this because you’re black, it has nothing to do with race. You just seem very clueless and pent up.”

I nodded. “I see. I get it. I think you’re bridge is locking onto my side.”

She laughed.

# Chapter 8

## 1

It must have been an explosion...or something resembling it at a psychological level because I went deaf for a while. Kim babbled on about things and stuff, as the boulders of fate veered with determination. Oblivious to my awe, not surprising since the nature of *lifelings* is one of blindness.

“So why?” Kim asked.

“Why what?” I returned with such simplicity it seemed I was listening all along, a tone with a tint of shrewdness to it.

“You have been really unnerved to do what you doing to me now.”

“You think?”

“Yeah.”

I sighed, more out of habit than real emotion. “Let’s play a game,” I paused searching my mind for ways I can make it sound like a real game rather than an evaluation or an interview before the job. A skill I never had but one that formed itself quite quickly and comfortably. “We each get to ask each other five questions, With each question we have to answer or avoid to by downing a glass of beer.” When I saw her look down her lap, I added, “And yes it has to be beer.”

She pulled her head up, chin forward. “You will have to pay more for that.” She shrugged. A gave her a still stare making it look like I was considering her proposal. It felt like the proper thing to do. I did not want to come across as too keen.



“Game on,” I grunted and she welcomed it with a snort.

I went and bought four pints of beer, carefully calculated. She will drink three and I will drink one if I play my cards right.

“You go first,” I gestured, as soon as I sat down.

She roamed her eyes and fidgeted. “What got you so upset?”

I grabbed a beer without hesitation and downed it. She opened her mouth to speak, but I silenced her by raising my hand. “My turn,” I burped. “What is the name of the ‘oke behind you?”

She glanced at him. “I don’t know?” she replied, scowling.

“Drink.” I pushed a glass to her side of the table.

“No,” she shook her head.

Puzzled, I gave her an inquisitive look.

“I answered, those were the rules. At least that is how you put them out. As long as I give the answer I don’t have to drink,” She protested.

“Well, I forgot to mention that it has to be right or true.”

“Well, if I had known downing was punitive I would have went and got his name.”

I grumbled. “Okay then. Next time alright?”

She nodded her eyes still retaining what was left of that spark of defiance. I felt her disappointment, I was too agreeable for her taste. She glanced at the floor again. When she pulled her face up again I knew that was going to be a tough question.

“Are you trying to get me drunk?” It hit the bulls-eye. And she could see it in my face how unexpectedly right she was, she was not oblivious to that. A smile flickered across her face, appreciation of her small victory.

MacFearson sniggered. “Guess we in trouble.”

“Tell her the truth, Sands!” said Macxermillio.

Macfearson leered at Macxermillio for a while then his face softened into a contemplative gaze. “If you drink it she is going to get more edgy.” He

glanced at her. “See she is already quite restless like a hell hound in this type of weather.”

Macxermillio’s gaze shifted towards me. “Tell her the truth.”

“Well I hate to say this but I agree,” Macfearson blandly contributed. He put on a sly smile and added, “Well...tell her half the truth. You do want to dope her, at least give her that much and we chilled. She doesn’t have to know what we got in store for her for the rest of the evening.”

“Like we would have a plan without telling you at all,” Maxxermillio said.

Macfearson laughed. “Believe me we have a plan. Maybe not with you, but *we* do!”

Macxermillio grabbed me by the shoulder. His questioning gaze striking me.

I raised my hands. “We have no plan whatsoever, okay?” I explained. “Don’t let Fearson play you. You know how he is.”

“Then tell her the truth. Tell her why you getting her drunk. Why you are here and why you feel she has to be doped before she can hear it! Ask the questions and open her eyes and see what she has to say. See where this road is taking us,” said Macxermillio, all the while shaking my shoulder into what seemed like a shrug.

Macfearson sulked, pain on the fringe of his cheeks. “Like she will believe,” he groaned, something he rarely did unless he was hurting.

*Lifelings* never got it, which is why Macxermillio was in the wrong here.

“Maybe this time there is a point,” Macxermillio murmured, clearly not trusting his own words. Casting doubt to whether he believed it at all.

Unsettling silence hung between us. Macfearson’s head drooped. Macxermillio sighed. And I shook my head.

“Are trying to get me drunk?” Kim repeated, her smile implying she took my silence and gesture as a yes. I could not help but smile guiltily.

Admitting defeat.

“Yes!”

She laughed gaily, the laugh was infectious. There was no telling what was on her mind even when she pulled her head back up to face me. I was clueless at how she would react to that.

“Your turn,” she said, no sign of how she felt.

I took a moment and then asked, “Who is the president of Sri Lanka?” “She frowned at her hands and then fidgeted. She wished she knew, but it was clear she didn't, she looked hard into her hands as if somehow the answer would materialize.

“Drink up.” I grinned.

She snorted her defeat and downed her first drink. Macfearson hissed a yes, Macxermillio cleared his throat excitedly. She downed it with no difficulty at all which I never expected from a chick at all. Maybe prostitutes were used to men being this way. Men who seek to have some fun time before the real feast begins. More like appetizers. Maybe men who needed affection and company just hired her to hang around with them for the duration of the evening.

*Maybe she just loves beer. Period, I thought, She is not reluctant to drink beer, but something is definitely on her mind ...she wants me to pay more.*

“Right?” I concluded my thought audibly.

Macfearson nodded.

She was roaming her eyes again, a gesture that was distinctly hers. I could not figure out what it meant yet. There was something frisky about it and quite solemn at the same time. A token of some sort. There was a prophylactically clever aspect to all of this. With that observation, I suddenly felt my heart skip inducing a wave of a pitiful feeling, that rolled

to my stomach and receded. The circle occurred over and over again making me lose my appetite.

“Your turn,” I said, surprised at how my voice came out. It was roughly out of breath support, almost a whisper. In simple words weak. I wondered if *lifelings* ever felt like that. If they did I refused believed it was to such a degree. Life would have been lived differently by them if that was the case. They would have time to think of a whole lot more than purpose and meaning of life, and stop answering such questions with unsatisfactory evolutionary science like it had the gist of the point to all of existence after all. Guess no one can know what they cannot know my nature. Of course, we were an exception. Being called weird and freaks all our entire life just proves it. We were just at the fringe of what they cannot begin to comprehend.

“Do you masturbate?”

It went silent again.

“She knows what questions to ask, doesn’t she?” Macfearson remarked.

Macxermillio nodded in agreement, amused.

She studied my face, she shrugged, quickly shifted her glance to the beer and back to my face in a suggestive manner.

*God, she is so much fun.* I thought.

“Yes,” I answered. Not what she expected I would do from the drop of her shoulders. I felt naked, I told her one thing I never told anyone not even to myself alone.

*This is how it must feel when someone admits a fact they are in denial about, like their gay. This must be the relief and shame that engulfs you like mist. And then goosebumps follow like you have confessed your love to a girl you love. Never thought answering such a question would be such a romantic endeavour.*

Kim smiled. Blushed like I had told her she was pretty but, honestly, I was the kind of guy she would only give a chance if he proved himself. Something foreign came upon me then, a compulsion to get to know her, no agenda, just *her*. It felt like being drawn in.

“What is your surname?” The feeling had overwhelmed me.

“Besert,” she flicked her hair and shifted her head to the side exposing her neckline. It was though her voice was the sweetest thing I had ever heard suddenly, the kind of a classic tune I would want to hear for eternity chanting absurdities at me. It was the equivalent of semantics to words, it breathed life.

“What are you doing?” Macfearson demanded, sensing the change in tone.

“Don’t worry she is the perfect sample. She is exactly what we need,” I heard myself lie as if in the distance, anything to deflect the distraction.

## 2

“What you been up to?” asked one of the two girls who came to check on Kim. Friends who seemed full with vigour and joy, nonetheless of the same oblivious herd. She cast an empty glance at me and returned back to Kim showing not acknowledging my presence in any way. Not even a nod. Felt like I was a fly. The same rejection and judgment was reeking from her. Nevertheless, my face was not congruent to my distaste for her.

They chatted among themselves, private girls’ talk. It was accompanied by gasps, controlled giggles and wry smiles. I grew impatient with every feminine hand dance they did. They maintained strong eye contact, something that I always found inefficient about women. As far as they were

concerned we were not here, they were absorbed in whatever nonsense they discussed. It was very disruptive and disrespectful.

As I shifted my gaze towards Macfearson he was shuffling his feet and biting on his sleeve. He glanced at me briefly feeding off the little of patience I had. It was just darn right annoying. And in a while I suddenly got back to noticing the other people in the pub. The smokers in corners. People around the bar trying to get their next heavenly invitation. Some climbing up and down the stairs. It was a happy place there. People talked loudly, laughed and seemed to be on some enchanting gas which couldn't affect me. As I scanned through the cigarette mist the people exuded a deep connection and thrill as if something had brought them there to witness a spectacle. Of course, they were students like me but what I sensed was soulful unity. It escaped the range of human comprehension but was close enough to experience intuitively. It was the *lifeling* fabric sealing them like a shroud, forming an organ. Outside of the sheath dwelt all the pain and wretchedness, they were not protected from it. They were merely blinded from it.

*Perhaps blindness is a form of protection.*

And from the speakers coincidentally spoke the voice of Lil Wayne:

*... but wisdom is bleak, and that's the word from the wise...*

And what were we?

Some fits of intuition are like a wave in the fabric of reality. Not just a wave but a sign of transcendent forces at work, weaving and driving us towards some direction. The frequency reaches certain sensibilities and its nature is an indication of the hands at work.

“Can you feel it? You must have had a touch at it, that *fabric*,”

Macfearson mused.

It had been a minute since we moved from the table for our own private conclave. We shared the same peculiar experience, it ran a thread through our hearts. Hot and impaling. We stood in disconcerting silence, each whirling in their own supercharged thoughts. I just stared at my feet all the while, wondering... struck and almost impervious to the kind of cogitation it required at the moment.

“It is trying to drive us off course?” Macxermillio added to the frustration, a heavy tone. His distress presenting itself as mourning upon his face, because that is what it felt like to lose a project embroiled with blood and souls. Our blood and frustration this time around. Mourning for what was imminent.

“I was there for a second, at the *fields*. And...” Macfearson’s voice trailed off, clearly a secret he was uncomfortable sharing but this moment demanded it and he was afraid it could be too late to be sharing now, if not close.

We were stormed, Macxermillio more than me because...

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Macxermillio scolded, his eyes narrowed and rebuking.

“Because... well,” He chuckled dryly, maybe at his stupidity or he was just dumbfounded.

“I saw it too,” I involuntary confessed. My skin shimmering already, waves flowing through it. Ripples that were unnerving. I cringed in anticipation of a scolding from Macxermillio.

However, Macxermillio was daunted into silence, understanding how futile his frustrations were in addressing the real problem – maybe understanding too that his anger might interfere with any attempt at a solution. “It is enticing, isn’t it? Trying to show us what we may be throwing away.” His eyes glittered.

I dropped my shoulders and drifted...



# Chapter 9

## 1

There was stinking heartfelt silence, my eyes fixed at my feet. It was just between the three of us, adeptly localized by an almost sorcerous nature. Now we were the ones preoccupied, transfixed and oblivious to the rowdy life of the bar. There was a strange feeling lurking about, much like the calling. Creeping in like an illness. Grass through the cracks. I felt my stomach lurch into my chest, asphyxiating. I was drowning in it, paddling to keep my head above it. Terrified of what might happen if I gave in. It was eerily familiar, a calculating little thing that would consume me. Of course I knew how it would end, and I did not want that... not here, not now.

"What was it like?" Macxermillio asked eagerly. His eyes gleaming with what looked like dismay. Awestruck more than anything. That much was evident in his voice, but he was like one who has lost grasp of adequate consciousness.

Macfearson wandered about struggling with the right way to put it. "It was," he sighed, "it was red, immense and felt like *home*."

"What did you see?"

"Something growing in the fields. *The crop*, Macx." Macfearson stared at him, his eyes teary. "There was blood," he continued in what was more like a moan, his face sappy like a romantic confessing his love in a mist of an emotional climatic turmoil, "We gotta find it. If not die for it, die trying. Everything you said was right. It is the truth which we have known all along. Our souls were never wrong. It was overwhelming; maybe... maybe

that's how heaven feels like. Maybe that is what the *lifelings* mean by bliss. It is greater than love, ecstasy, that pang of happiness or life itself. It is a daydream come true, fantasy made into reality. I cannot convey what I feel or felt with words for you to comprehend it, much like a near-death experience you must experience it."

My vision got blurred by tears. I knew what he meant. The sheer beauty, without even flaunting it. Those moments when your emotions surge like a tide and nothing seemed to matter but it, this enigmatic *thing* upon you. Suddenly everything you ever loved, everything you are and all pleasures are minor and irrelevant; all of that drifts into nothingness and *the crop* remains the only thing. Sole beauty. That was the *crop*, that was the *fields*. Surpassed your true love telling you she loves you back and knowing it to be truest of all truths. The cure for AIDS or Cancer. It is all that matters. This life is a grain of sand compared to its magnitude.

I gazed at Macxermillio, his face almost unrecognizable, "I need to get a drink."

He left for the bar.

"Why have you hardened your heart so when you have seen what I have seen?" Macfearson asked.

"Because we can't trust anything the calling shows us. I know you don't believe it, but I think it is just here to destroy us and stop us from achieving this. It sees we are heading in the right direction so now it is desperate," I said.

Macfearson snorted. "Or maybe number twenty-one is the answer. Maybe it knew we would be here with her." He shifted his gaze to Kim who was busy reassuring her friends she is fine accompanying me. "She is no *lifeling* and she is no *deathling*... You feel it. You can't put her in a category because her nature allows her to adapt. That is why she whores herself...she

moulds to every shape and changes into every substance. She is the perfect sample and maybe that is why we saw that vision today."

"You are wrong. If the calling is this desperate it goes to show that what we are about to do here today is even bigger. Perhaps there is something it would hate if we discovered."

He sighed. "Listen to me. I don't know what you have against sampling a whore and if that fails we could easily come back here and continue with your process. This way we can do both. Just me and you, no Mac. He is too slow."

I shook my head. "You know he won't allow it. He knows it's stupid. This is bloodthirstiness toying with our minds. The kinda thing that is self-destructive and he is well aware of that. The truth is we can't trust your judgment, not until Tuesday when I see Cheryl."

"I feel something when you speak to her... It's not lust for her blood. I feel purpose and duty, something I never felt before. It's as if my heart touches the essence of her spirit. She is something else. A lamb for the sacrificial altar. Talk to her some more and tell me if there is nothing that you feel. A deep rage, love and hatred for her, a lust not just for her blood but her essence and life. You want to preserve it and honour it, it's as if you can't stand it but at the same time you can't live without it. You also care for her. Tell me you don't pick up on it."

## 2

I took three shots of rum, the past flashing behind my closed eyes as I squeamishly swallowed. The broken, the lost and the irretrievable. The things that are forever out of reach, in between all the sanely insane deeds I

would take on to try reclaim knowing full well I would fall short. And also vivid images of the bleak future that lay ahead for the hooker. The bar folks lumbered about as I lumbered in my past, a resourceful reflection of the future. Think this: it is not old habits die hard, it is duty and natural instinct taking over (pure and blameless).

Kim beckoned me to the table just when her friends left. Her shoulders were lifted and she had a grin on her face. Her eagerness too apparent. Those sparkling eyes stirred me in the core. I was struck by the sudden power they held on me, at that moment it was difficult to tell what emotions they were evoking.

*Oh, beautiful Miss Bersert*, I found myself smiling back.

"I am sorry about that," she said as I sat down, gentle and genuinely friendly.

"It's chilled," I said, feeling the possession of alcohol taking place. The ease and certainty I would have my way coming with it.

"Yeah, um ... where were we?"

I ogled at her glistening lips. Symmetrical teeth and her sexy nose. Her skin tone perfectly preserved, if not makeup. Her neck... her vulnerability undoing. A toy thing she seemed. A doll. A relic.

"I can't recall," I answered.

Silently, I watched her think back. Tapping her feet and eyes rolling. Her eyebrows creased.

"You are beautiful," I blurted, distracting her process.

A smile flickered across her face, followed by a comically curious look. The fidgeting and the rolling eyes had paused.

"Where is this going?"

"Nowhere," I mused.

She laughed. "Just as everything else."

I considered. "It's all nothingness."

“Don’t think so.”

“Why?”

“I feel it.”

I knew what was coming, I clenched my fists hoping this time it would be different. Cautious, I asked the fundamental question, “What else do you feel?”

She breathed as if she knew it too. “Abundance,” she answered, sounding more like a question than an answer.

“Of?”

“Love, happiness and life,” she shrugged.

Sigh.

She looked away almost troubled by whatever was going through her mind. “But ... it’s just as everything else.”

Her beauty began to fade, and an image of something else was starting to take form. Her words were stripping her.

“Going nowhere?”

She locked my eyes with a ‘yes’. Like her superficiality, it was clearly conscious. She added onto it, “Disposable.”

“Worthless?”

She closed her eyes taking air in. “Temporal.”

“Empty?”

Her eyes still closed. “Meaningful.”

Her answer reclaimed her beauty, but I was still intrigued by what I saw.

“Don’t try to see me,” she ordered, her tone meek and fierce at once.

As my face moulded into a charming persuasive look she laughed killing words in my mouth.

“I’m not gonna buy any of it,” she explained.

I narrowed my eyes, saddening even more. “You don’t see it? You have no faith nor hope? You don’t believe I might truly care?”

I had a compulsion to convince her the grass gets greener.

*But greener, the more snakes,* I thought to myself.

“Humans are corrupted easily. They smile at you while sticking a knife on your back. That is who they are, that is who we are. We are horrible evil monsters. We use charm and wit as bait,” She spoke earnestly.

“You can’t trust anyone?”

“No one.”

“Love? If there is anything that is real in this world I am sure it’s that.”

She studied me. She rolled her eyes and sighed in the I-have-heard-that-before gesture. “Not convinced.”

“Never will be?”

“‘Til the grave,” she spoke blandly.

*I can make that sooner,* I thought, *You feel empty like I do.*

I smiled. “Hope you get lucky soon.”

She giggled.

“I guess there is something you can always trust.”

“What?”

“That it’s just as everything else.”

### 3

Like everything else ...

Pointless, vast, demeaning and undoing. Like everything else, a huge void filled with mere modifications. Nothing ideal, certain or right. Finding a place of loss and taking comfort in it. Taking comfort in what is missing, misery in search of that which is substantial. Its flaw depends on how you

look at it because objectivity is a flaw. That which is intangible and disprovable has ultimate reality.

Just like the memories.

"I'm intrigued," I said.

She accepted by a smile.

"You've had a fair share of scars?" I asked.

She giggled. "Now why would you think that? You are Psychology major?"

"I am, but not that kind. Organizational."

"Then why? Read some stats on hookers and their daddy issues?"

"I'm sorry, but I keep on forgetting that fact."

She rubbed the tip of her finger on the rim of her glass slowly. "Then why?" her voice husky.

"I have a hunch."

"Hmm... Intuitive," she remarked.

We sat in silence for a while.

"So tell me about your life," I requested.

She sighed, studied me and stared down. "We are not on a date, Mister. Why would I wanna tell you that?"

"You find me trustworthy. We agreed to sit here and talk. The time we have been here you never second guessed a drink I offered you. I would assume that someone in your profession would be cautious of men offering drinks. You not stupid neither am I, there is a wave of intuitive connection between us and it's real as this table between us." I paused. "Unlike everything else," these last words just slipped out, not quite sure what I meant or what they meant or why they felt so right.

She sighed. The silence lingered, nothing but her solemn expression filling it.

"What?" I probed.

“Nothing.”

“There is no such thing.”

“Well, I don’t know what to say. Or rather I don’t want to speak,” realising what that could mean, she corrected, “At least not about that or maybe not now.”

“So you do wanna talk about it?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged.

“This is a question of confidence,” I told her. “Whether you are confident enough to tell me?”

“No one ever wants to hear my story, at least that is what their reactions tell me. It’s a question of whether you’ve got the balls to sit through it,” She returned, her eyes laser-bright.

“Then I guess we have a need for some bondage here. Didn’t you say you wanted to know how I ended up here?”

I began to feel like I was in a presence of a lioness. With alcohol lubricating my mind, I had become quite impulsive. We sustained a gaze devouring each other. The shackles of inhibition were slipping away.

“I gotta go to the bathroom,” She got up.



# Chapter 10

## 1

It swelled up from my chest at breakneck speed. A gulp of emotions climbing up my throat. Could not understand it at first. The way my face stiffened and chest quivered. When it exploded I sobbed, waterfalls of tears. I could have used a hug, a cigarette and most importantly a razor blade. The darkness and the pain overwhelming me.

Macfearson looked down at me pitifully and asked the obvious. "What's the matter?"

"It's...it's all wrong. Everything is a mess," I managed.

*Everything? The everything that merely translates to nothing, I thought. Nothing is certain, only the crop and the fields ... but even that is elusive. I'm so tired...just wanna lay down on a train track and die.*

"What do you mean?"

"Existence, life itself. Kim," I wiped tears with my palms. My blurry vision burying me into my darkness, adding to disorientation. "I don't know if I can carry on after her. I have given everything and tried everything else. I'm done." I felt the strength seep out of me and I tried nothing to hold onto it.

"Sandy?" a woman's voice called.

Raised my head to find that it was *her*. The one Macfearson dearly hated. Her face nicely framed by her shining black hair. Black eyes teeming with concern. Whether it was genuine or not was impossible to know.

"Cheryl?" I uttered with a sharp sob.

“What’s wrong? You want me to call any help for you or take you home?” She asked in that therapist’s voice of hers. I always wondered if it ever changed around different people, or her personality did. She always gave out a reserved, cautious, concerned and calculated atmosphere. The possibility that her role is not genuine was bothersome. Could not tell if she liked me, hated me or thought I was downright insane. Her client-centred therapy approach was questionable, it insinuated that she did not care.

## 2

Time: First Therapy Session

The view was beautiful, heavenly in a divine sense. There was a transcendent aura to it. Maybe it was how people looked like ants from up here or how external noise was almost diminished. From inside the world out there could be mistaken for a mere illusion. Leaning into the armchair like I owned the world felt comfy. Out there flourished a wilderness of chaos, here simplicity and order - a small table with Kleenex on the side in case I wept. The order here was imposing, too much comfort can get unnerving.

Her black eyes focused on me for a while, glistening like wet pebbles behind spectacles. She slithered in black silk pants and a woollen V-neck shirt. Black hair curling under her jaws. Her earrings nothing dashy. All you could get are her hands and wrists if you got lucky, knees kissing and a clipboard on her lap.

“Okay,” she pressed her thin red lips. “We just gotta go through your form right now to get the basic idea of why you are here and basically how we can help you,” she paused and flicked her hair in an attempt to remember something.

I merely nodded, biting my lip.

“Alright. My name is Cheryl and I will be your therapist.”

*Therapist? What the fuck it's not like I'm crazy, don't say it like that... like I'm troubled or shit.*

*Okay...okay...maybe be this is just routine, something she has to say.*

“Are you alright with me being your therapist?”

I studied her.

*Yeah, you look good, trustworthy, reserved and somewhat enchanted. I like that, quite goth.*

“Yes, yeah it's fine,” I nodded somewhat amused.

She nodded, glanced at the ceiling and back. “Okay, Sandy, I just want you to know that everything you say here is confidential. I am not gonna go tell anyone about it not even my family or friends. The only time I would, which is rare, is if you are a danger to yourself or anybody. In that case, I may speak to my supervisor or contact your family. That is only if I am certain that that is the case.”

*If only you knew all the smoked-up things I have done already.*

“You won't be judged here, this is a safe place to share and be comfortable.”

*Man, this voice. It's... it's... I don't know.*

“Okay?”

“Yeah,” I nodded.

She shuffled through the file. “Is this your first time here?”

*Why would anyone lie about that on the form? Maybe they would if they thought saying they weren't will get them help quickly. On the other hand, if*

*I am here to find the "truth" and I say I have never been here I would fail a seemingly innocent line of questions that is designed to decide whether or not I deserve to be or I am part of the secret society that has the " truth".*

"Yes," despite my beliefs I answered.

"You have ticked quite a lot of things here. What interests me the most is the suicidal thoughts. Can you talk about that and what brings you here specifically?"

I stared outside at the world a bit (from up here and my imaginative eye), tapping into the thin nature of reality, my emotions and my thoughts. Then the undeniable sense I am floating captured me.

"Anything specific you would like to share?" she repeated.

"Cheryl, it's the wrongness of it all. I feel it. It's rotten cheese, I'm not the mould, but they are. This reality is a curtain, one we can't see, touch or smell. It's lurking deceptively so. It's not steel, it's more of a phantom. You can hear, in fact, feel it, that there is another level of reality. It's like I am a fish wriggling in the net, only this time I'm confusing it for home. It's suffocating."

### 3

Nothing is ever what it is, nothing is ever just. It is not what it is for its own sake, or purely for being. It has a life and meaning that is never linguistic, emotional or spiritual. There was a god among us raping existence to the finish, it's true manifestation. An enigma that binds us so tightly. Knots and cuffs that free us.

Macfearson drew his sword. "I'll cut her into pieces if you let her ruin this for us."

Macxermillio stopped in his tracks.

"There is something different here I feel it. It's not the same. If we keep on listening to her, we won't see this through," Macfearson spoke at Macxermillio.

"But we are here because she told us to come here. This woman you hate is the reason we are here. Maybe she knew we would find something here. Maybe she is with us. Isn't that the reason we started this all along?" Macxermillio responded, his palm on Macfearson's shoulder now.

"You came here with a different purpose. On her terms. I made you see what you couldn't have seen. I opened your eyes to the prize! I took you off the sort of rubbish she has been feeding you. Can't you see what she is doing to you too? It's like you are brainwashed or some shit." Macfearson flicked Macxermillio's arm off and moved back.

"Fears-"

"Shut up!" Macfearson pointed the tip at his throat. "You see that tone you are using with me? Don't do that, okay? I know what I am doing. This is for your own good. Don't talk to her. Make her leave. Just make her go. You hear that, Sandy?"

I nodded, quite unsure. Flew a glance at Macxermillio who turned out useless, this did not suit him at all. He was still muddled with shock and confusion, so was I.

Cheryl still waiting on me spoke again, "If you can't go through with this or it is too much for you, you don't have to do it."

"Hey! She fuckin' leaves. We can have her say no more than two lines or I kill this bitch!" Macfearson grunted in a whisper.

*What do you think will happen?* I thought.

I considered. "I am okay." I told her. "It's just something else. Me and this girl I just met are having quite a good time I must say, Cheryl. This wasn't a bad idea at all. Kim is awesome. Thank you."

I faked a smile and wiped my tears.

She nodded, and looked as if to go, not quite certain what to make of this. “Okay,” did not sound convinced. She pointed as if to say she will be around and I can reach her if I needed anything. “Kim?”

“Yes. It’s working.”

“Okay.” she sighed, looked around and left.

## 4

"Sorry I took long," it was more than a courtesy. Kim sat and took a sip from her drink. She leaned forward, cocking her head back. Her luscious neck exposed.

*How delicate and beautiful.*

I sat shut, gazing at her collar bone. Her skin looking like it's bathed in oil, so tender and moist but not messy. She got messy with patrons, but she was not a mess. She made mess but she was not messy. No, not at all. I began to drool over what it would be like to press my thumb right there and dig into the base of her neck. She swirled like something delicate and weightless in the wind ... a curtain. She was an impression of an exaggerated slow motion sexy shot from one of those *lifelings'* music videos. Her name is Kim and she made me bleed ashes, not my kryptonite, but my something?

“You know,” She flashed a smile, the kind you only gave to a friend, “I had a revelation.”

“While in there?”

“Yeah.”

“Isn’t it dirty and loud in there all the time? How on earth did you get the chance to even have one?”

"Besides all the mess." She giggled, she clasped her hands together, eager to tell.

“You know what my favourite room is in a house ?”

She shook. “No. What?”

“The toilet,” I laughed.

“Why ?”

"For that moment you are alone and in your little world. No distractions and pure privacy. You let go and you just become. You have all the monologues and can actually come up with some good ideas. For a moment, you don't feel like you are here in this world. Like everything else." I paused. "But there is fear, you know.”

She nodded. “What fear?”

I paused for a moment. “Getting out there.”

The image of my home toilet door appeared to me.

She looked puzzled. “Why ?”

“It’s a sanctuary of a sort I guess.”

She leaned back and glanced at her drink which was now full. “Should I be scared?”

"Well, that depends," Macfearson grunted, “On some little thing we call *the calling*.”

“Our compass to other worlds,” I whispered.

“What? I didn’t get that ?” Kim replied.

“What was your revelation?”

“Um, you know how people are right?”

*Oh fuck yeah...*

“Living like there is tomorrow. Making most of our present and shit. We party, fuck, fight and fall in love senselessly. Basically, we are like animals.”

“Yeah.”

“Have you tuned into the radio recently?”

“Yeah, long time ago.”

“Why?”

“Because I think it’s shit. The music sucks.”

“Right!” She nodded enthusiastically. “The music is just about sex, booze and partying your life away, like that’s all that matters. This generation is the party-yourself-senseless generation because there is no meaning to anything. Because of how we have chosen to live, our lives have no substance to them anymore. You know why?”

“Why?”

“How many times have you been told the world will end? That is the answer. We think this is the end. Or perhaps it is near. You will never know when it could, it could be any time. So why make a piece of music, art or literature that will be epic, monumental and classic? Why do anything that has prolonged meaning anyway? Something to surpass the times. It won’t last, it will be over today or tomorrow. Why stay in this marriage? Why go to church? Why love? Why go to school? Why raise a family? Why hope? Why dream?”

“So everything is justified?”

“Everything goes.”

“Is that what you believe?”

“It’s what I am subjected to.”

I glanced at my henchmen. Their attention drawn away as if the sword incident never happened. I could only imagine what thoughts were going through their heads. Macfearson the most.



*What is she? Is she a lifeling? I think she feels the state of decay her world is in like us, but yet she blends in with this world regardless. How could she see what we see and lives like she lives? It does not make sense at all. She is with me in this bubble and at the same she dwells in the same shroud that separates us. I feel something when I am here with her, cosmic transcendence and twirled with belonging. She can't fake this. I think I know what's to be done if she is a deathling, she will help us ... it seems like she knows something I don't. If she is a lifeling, isn't she a perfect sample? But what is this other almost mind-altering emotion I feel that she is radiating to me? What is this "thing"?*

It was not surprising to see Macxermillio and Macfearson become uneasy.  
*Is she the key?*

"What? What do you think would be the solution?" I inquired.

"Getting rid of the end," Kim replied, a grin on her face.

"Why?"

"A finished painting imposes meaning. It's meaning can be relished in seconds and forgotten. Once a main character of a story has reached his goal, killed the big villain, saved the city or married the girl he wanted his story is no longer interesting anymore. We could interpret differently, talk about it differently, but it matters no more because it has ended."

"I see." I nodded.

"If the world needs a solution it will come from those things that never end. Not things that last forever but unfinished things. A story that is unfinished. Now that's more interesting. It allows for wonder, imagination and curiosity. People are left with questions that it does not answer for them. Now they have purpose and create meaning from that which is unresolved. That is better than any great piece of art because it's a mystery. Mystery is the best gift you could give to this generation, something that haunts them and compels them. It's things that never end that give utmost

meaning to life. Maybe Christianity is one such story. What the fuck happened to Christ?"

I sat silent, taking it all in.

"I'm not saying there isn't real art in the world. There is, but it hasn't reached its potential yet. If it's meaning and purpose we need as the lost generation it will come from that."

"I see."

She took a swig of her drink and sat back. "You wanted to know the story of my life."

"Yeah."

"Well, I will tell you the version that never ends. Maybe that will answer your questions."

# Chapter 11

## 1

The raindrops pelted the window like miniature mountains. Rivers went down the pane, rivers from a deluge. By then the bar would be filling up, nothing held the Scarletons from partying but today was unique.

Macfearson awoke from his brooding. "I think I know what is happening here or why it is happening. I see it now." He had scuttled Macxermillio to a booth by one of the windows. After minutes of staring into empty air, these were his first words followed by an eerie pause of the same magnitude.

Macxermillio waited impatiently, eager to finally get rid of his own speculations. He leaned forward from across the table and nodded on encouraging Macfearson can carry on.

Macfearson looked about the bar and fixed his surgical gaze on Kim and I. "I think this situation is orchestrated. Not that it is staged in any way but that something is manipulating this situation for a purpose." He sighed. Macxermillio's reserved nature was greatly appreciated by the break, allowing Macfearson to draw his thoughts together and weave them into a more credible web that did not only make sense to him but to his henchmen as well. The process was a delicate one, like any underdeveloped idea. He could lose it at a moment's distraction like a very good idea extinguished at its infancy by short-term memory loss. That was a frown of a man who was working hard to make sure that does not happen. He did not wince in pain,

he did so to contain himself. The worst distraction then would have been one that comes from his own impulsive mind.

“The calling is always telling us to commit suicide, when we refuse we become so frustrated we sample people out of fear of the unknown.” Fear was never the word we used. We just wanted to be certain about what we getting ourselves into. The calling gave us clues and tips we just needed to verify our suspicions. “The calling never tells us anything when we ask, except maybe ask that we trust it or just do as it wishes. I believe that the calling has wanted to communicate with us, but not by words. What are words and explanations anyway, the calling is trying to reach out to us in more powerful ways that gives us an experience and inject it into our conscious experience immediately. Do you get it?”

Macxermillio felt the venom. “Are you saying that – wait, how did you come to this conclusion?”

“We always doubted the calling to an extent, haven’t we?”

“Yeah?”

"As soon as we went to the therapist the urges became stronger. I believe that was a sign. I can't tell you what but I believe it was for something. When we were about to come here the crop revealed itself to us in a vision or something. We were there and it was real as you are in front of me here. I believe the calling did that. And I believe that right here in this place with Kim the calling is trying to tell us something we have missed all along. Macx, there is an answer here, in this conversation with her and I feel like we are missing it. We may never get it back if we miss it." Macfearson took in a deep breath. "The calling may be using her to communicate with us and guide us to the crop. You felt something didn't you?"

Macxermillio reluctantly replied, "There is an odd feeling I won't deny that." His tone embroiled with doubt.

“We should be very attentive of what she says or said, not only that but observant as well. I was wrong about her being a sample. There is something about the way she speaks and this new revelation she just had. It is no coincidence,” Macfearson said.

“What other reasons do you have to believe this?”

Macfearson closed his eyes trying as much as possible to gather and formulate his syrup of perceptions in a way that Macxermillio could taste in full and appreciate his view. The web of thoughts had collapsed though, it was hard to revive it in a way that did not only make sense to him but could be conveyed.

*What is it am I saying that is not right? How can I put this in motion and make him understand? It is very crucial he does. Damn it! I always seem to be bad at explaining things. He is the genius he should get it,* he thought.

There used to be a time when they understood each other as if they shared the same mental field, now he wouldn't tell you what happened or why when it is needed the most it did not come back.

“Macx, it is not something I can't fully explain to you. You just have to experience it. Look, the vision was a preparation for what is coming. Now Kim is the second instalment of that message. Do you feel the calling pressing down at your hand right now?”

“No.”

“Obviously we are doing something right. We are getting closer to the crop. Kim is not a *lifeling* at this point... nor is she a *deathling*. She is now a servant. The calling can't talk to us directly to address our questions, but at least we have something. I feel it so strongly and perhaps in time you will,” Macfearson said. Then without his authority, his tongue added, “Our salvation depends on it.”

They came out with such conviction that a glaze appeared in Macxermillio's eyes, perhaps finally getting it.

“How much money do you have with you?” Macfearson asked.

Macxermillio looked at him as if Macfearson was an impolite stranger. In a way a lot had changed and the man in front of him had surpassed him, maybe not in knowledge or mastery but insanity. For a while he did not say anything, his mouth gaping.

“I don’t imagine we have much time with her,” Macfearson indicated with a nod.

Macxermillio firmly shook his head. “I have a hundred bucks at least.” Still maintaining a reluctant gaze.

“Good, good,” Macfearson’s tone enthusiastic and nervous at the same. He ruffled his hair in vain. “We should tell him to extend our time then. Maybe another thirty minutes?” his voice was bearing an elevated desperate edge.

Macxermillio shook his head. “No.”

“What?” Macfearson frowned.

“No, I don't wanna be part of this one. I don't know what the heck you think you see, but I don't see it. I'm not with you on this?”

“What?” Disbelief and shock the subject of Macfearson’s frown.

“Have you and Sandy been popping pills or some shit?”

“What?”

“Where is your vocabulary, *deathling*?” Macxermillio shouted. With the music around it wasn’t as frightening as it could have been, but since Macxermillio was not the kind that shouts it made an impression. Surprise and shock provoking.

“What the fuck?” Macfearson muttered. “What the fuck?”

“Look at me, dopey!” Macxermillio demanded.

Macfearson did, seeing his face might help him swallow the pill.

“You threatened me with a weapon today all because you were *feeling* something about her. All you have been talking about are just hunches and

theories and nothing more. Why the hell put all our money on it? Sounds all the same to me. There is still no reason to trust the calling whatsoever. It is Satan tempting Jesus in the wilderness situation. It is enticing us. This is what it wants to go off course. If it has possessed Kim a little well that is fine, but we are not gonna be led astray. You fucktart!"

"But this is *it* !" Macfearson protested. "It is different. The vision had a different vibe Sandy saw it too."

"Why the hell should we mess up an opportunity on something so vague?" Macxermillio spluttered, not in the manner he usually spoke - fierce and confrontational.

Macfearson inhaled and as he exhaled his words were swallowed at infancy as soon as his mind nimbly warned him how terrible a response it would be. How ridiculous would he sound? That is the last thing you want to do when you want to convince someone, but this was not just someone. It was Macxermillio.

A first fight with a friend is always the most harrowing when you have spent years with them without ever having one. Your guard is literally down. You have not paid much attention to their strengths and weaknesses so that come a time for a quarrel you will have devised enough strategies to carry you through. Why do so anyway? After all, you are not going fight. It is blasphemy to even consider the possibility of it, in fact, you cannot imagine it because there is never going to be a serious fight. Yes, there may be arguments and disagreements but those are never really like a fight. In arguments, people do not make personal attacks and speak at such dark and fierce tones. At least not Macfearson's friend Macxermillio. This was a double impact, an argument and a fight at once. That is how it felt for Macfearson, Macxermillio was continuing to reject him and belittle him. The words which darted out of Macxermillio's mouth and in the manner in which they did made a pretty conclusive case for him.

Macfearson, not the one good with words, had risen to his feet.

“Don’t fucking give me that!” He exploded, all the act unsurprising for Macxermillo, he might as well lean back and watch. “You never questioned Sandy with his therapy idea. You gave him a go. Never held him back and put him through such scrutiny.”

"Well, it is still being tested. Wait your fuckin' turn. Jeez, you such a hothead! Stupid," Macxermillio said, sensing the envy.

“Mine can only work now. It is a brief opening.”

“What do you want me to do, exactly? Give this whore more and more money until what happens exactly?”

Macfearson gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. “I will know it when I see it.”

“You are asking me to have faith?”

“Yeah... faith in *me* at least. You never have for a while.” He spat.

Macxermillio stayed quiet for a moment. “You know what to look for?”

“Yes.”

“Intuitively?”

“Yes.”

“Can I ask you something else too?”

“Yes.”

“Why did it only show itself to the two of you?” Macxermillio asked.

Macfearson suddenly understood what it was all about. The man had spent most of his life working at this and doing most of the hard work and the very thing he searches for did not reveal itself to him. The one whose efforts had been immeasurable.

“I’m sorry, Macx.”

Macxermillio paradoxically smiled, a tear hanging in his left eye. “It knows I wouldn’t have fallen for it or it plans to make me suffer.”



## 2

“You are too modest for someone who is paying to talk to someone. Too paced. It’s almost suspicious,” said Kim.

“You would be.”

“If I knew what you were going through maybe,” She said as she picked her phone from her purse.

“Are you disappointed, Kim?”

“Why?”

“That I’m not interested?”

“I will not answer that,” she wagged her finger.

“Give in to the mystery of this situation, my dear.”

She looked up and rolled her eyes as exquisitely as ever. The way she did was artistic, possessing of both cheerfulness and innocence. Her grin a snowflake you wish could be frozen in time and kept. Its vigour and liveliness polarizing. It was no mystery why men would want to thrust that, but it is a mystery why she carries on when she could stop. At least I assumed she has the privilege to.

“Dear or deer?”

I chuckled. “Whatever you choose to be.”

“Deer.” She nodded.

“You want to be hunted.”

“No deer has such a wish I believe.”

“You wanted to be my deer. Now I decide what we do. You are mine, I own you now.” I playfully leered at her.

I could hear her feet shuffle underneath the table on the wooden floor. She put her hands out of my view under the table. It pleased me to imagine she was reaching for her pussy to pleasure herself.

“Alright,” she nodded.

“Now that you are mine can you tell me why you carry on doing what you are doing. Your business,” I asked.

She just stared at me. For the first time, she looked dull. “We don't have much time anyway. I might as well tell you, assuming this is what you are really interested in. You paid me ... and you were very kind.”

“Thank you.”

“Why did you approach me with such a request, though? I mean why did you choose me for this kinda thing?”

“If you think because you looked like a whore or someone who might need the cash it is nothing like that. I chose you because you have this feeling about you. A very pleasant presence and you looked kind enough not to just dismiss me.”

“Okay. Let me tell you this. I'm not addicted to smoking or anything. I get a head rush now and then. I don't know what it's like to crave ciggies. But I smoke anyway. I don't want to stop smoking neither do I want to carry on. It is just something I do without a real good reason why I'm doing it. I'm just doing it because it's what I do. Sometimes I don't do it and it is fine. Mostly I do it and that is fine also. Ever had a thing of that nature? Something you're not exactly sure why you're doing it, why did you start, why you're carrying on or why you would not stop? And I'm not saying this for some poetic effect or fucking dramatization. I mean something that has this specific nature,” she enthused.

I nodded my response, suspicious that my words may ruin the direction of things. Also, because I never had such an experience and I would not risk the chance of her smelling that.

She continued in her rapt demeanour, “It is the same with what I’m doing. It’s so. There’s no profound reason. Not that it’s required anyway. It’s just a goddamn thing. It’s just an *it* for me. I’m not saying no reason is satisfactory. What I’m saying might be that it is a mystery or I have never bothered thinking about it. I shouldn’t think hard. Remember what I said? Give in to the mystery.”

“I guess this one is for both of us.”

Truly I did not know what she meant exactly, I could not comprehend it. Some things did not make sense to me or perhaps I was not paying attention. I did pay attention as far as I was concerned. As a philosophy student, not that this is a major integral part of my life, I knew the power of analogies. How easily analogies can highlight the subtleties and open your eyes to some truths. It is like someone is literally pushing up your eyelid and enhancing your vision so that you see everything clearly. I needed to see what she meant, on that mental level – to let our minds kiss.

She laughed. “Well, perhaps. So aren’t you gonna spill the beans for me?”

### 3

“Honestly, it is entirely up to her,” Macxermillio said with his smug and suave tone. Not far from his default one.

“What do you mean?” Macfearson asked a frown upon his face.

“If she wants to stay she will stay. If she wants to go she will go. Our money can’t make her do anything really,” Macxermillio replied rubbing his chin with his thumb and forth finger. That could mean he had already made a judgement from an observation he had made, most probably from...

“Does not mean we should not try it. We will see what she will do or decide. We should at least present an opportunity for her. Who are we to say what she is going to do next?” Macfearson contested.

Macxermillio tightened his lips. He looked sulkily reluctant because truly he had lost. “We can. She seems to have her mind made up though. The offer we made her is a bargain.”

“Maybe we should offer to fuck her then.”

“Offer?”

“She is more keen for that than all of the chatting. She detests the chatting, she does not really enjoy it. But sex is something she would do anytime and anyway. She has been pushing for this point from what I gather. That says something indeed. Doesn’t it?” Macfearson challenged.

Macxermillio’s eyes glistened at the thought. “You would do that? Buy sex?”

“If you think about it, it's not really buying sex if she wants to get it on. I am merely donating or leaving a thank you note in a form of cash.”

Macxermillio shook his head. “Maybe you should find out first before you hand her the cash?”

“Are you implying something?”

“Maybe she hungers for cash than your cock. Have you considered the possibility?”

Macfearson's scowl teemed with sarcasm mixed with frustration. “Have you been listening to her?”

Macxermillio withheld his reply and simply gave him a questioning glance, the kind that made one question their confidence. As the purpose of his gesture was met he glanced outside and grinned at a private thought he had with glowing confidence.

“What?” Macfearson asked, unnerved.

Macxermillio kept his silence and manipulative indifference.

“Are you saying she won’t fuck me?” Macfearson said. “She would fuck anyone for no fucking reason and I would bang that pussy if it got me the chance at the crop.”

Macxermillio held his silence a lot longer enjoying the impact it has. Heightened emotions and Macfearson were a lethal chemistry.

Macfearson went on. “She definitely won’t mind, she is definitely serving it up tonight.”

"Do me a favour. If you wake up drive your sword through her heart. Especially when she orgasms, or faking it – I really don't give a damn as long as you sample her," Macxermillio replied darkly. He had the type of sarcasm that was hard to note because his tone did not fluctuate as much. One had to know him to get it, perhaps that is the difference between dark humour, sarcasm or awkward humour. Macxermillio stood upright and gave him the glare of reckoning, graceful in its demeanour. His tactic was mostly one of incongruence, the opponent never gets what they expect from listening to that voice or studying his face. Also, there was a mysterious scar which no one knew where it came from. Stories were spun about it, but none was free from any doubt. I never knew what those stories were, never truly wanted to know – it was one of those things about him that granted him automatic authority. Respect a man with a scar across his face. And no, even when we asked he never told us.

Macxermillio ambled towards the door. “I’m not aiding you. We agreed on this. Don’t ruin it...you know what happens when you do that.”

“Ah, do I worry you?” I asked Kim. Puzzled by her tone as she requests I tell her what brings me here.

“I’m quite curious. It is weird to say the least.”

“It might just be I wanted to talk to you. Thought it would be fun to pay you, gives you something to talk about or think about. Mundane things never spark any conversation, it is the most unusual of things that do,” was surprised the words rolled off my tongue and I had no belief in their truth or falsity. The quantum of genuine confidence in them was feeble.

She took a gulp from her drink and hooked her handbag on her shoulder. She sat upright like one preparing to leave. As I studied her, questions bombarded my mind.

“Never looked like one in the business for just that,” she said.

“That means?”

“It never appeared to be your intention to be honest. Never showed much interest in me specifically for your claim to stand ground.”

“Hmm, I have been told that I’m very bad at expressing myself. I am awfully hard to read. That might have been the case,” I contended, scooting off to an argument I wish she would not follow. Some things I would rather keep to myself, other things I couldn’t trust a *lifeling* with. Jelly is better at holding things into place than they are. I made the mistake of disclosing once and I would not do it again. Creatures of deceit and dishonesty these *lifelings* were, even a shove of passion between her legs would not sway them.

“I’m not saying your expression was absent or difficult .”

“In your view what would constitute someone who shows genuine interest to talk to you. How would you tell by just looking at them or reading their face – whatever the fuck you do?”

She pinched her lower lip. “Okay. Okay. Are you saying you can’t read people’s faces and what they mean? ”

“I’m not sure I can. We are not animals that is why I prefer honesty to the full. People being blunt and straightforward. Body language is part of a ‘guise. I am not the kind for faith and making conclusions based on it like playing a game of poker.” I paused. “Say faith!”

She frowned. “Faith?”

“Yeah, say the word.”

“Faith,” she looked puzzled.

“Just saying it tires you. Isn’t it the most tiring and monotonous word you ever heard?”

She giggled.

I continued. “Now imagine having to *do* the word. It is a waste of time, Kim.”

“Okay-okay. I see. But if you value being direct so much why can’t you be?”

“What gives you the idea that I’m not being direct? Is it your faith once more?”

She gasped in exasperation. Dropped her shoulders and glanced down. “You make it hard for people to care for you I imagine,” she quietly said, almost to herself.

A tinge of emotion swelled in me, sudden and convicting.

“Why are you saying that?” my tone was more sullen and thoughtful. I could feel the muscles in my face droop with the weight of some grave emotion.

She scowled, surprise or maybe shock in her eyes. “Um... well, you never really wanna chat or open up. This way, I just imagine it must be hard for those who would like to get to know you or for those who know you to be there for you,” she spoke in very impersonal manner, treading carefully so she may not upset me. This coldness was from a warm place though, one too familiar for my liking.

I nodded gradually, digesting the words. I measured the conviction in her eyes through my playful visage and I tasted the thought of crushing her confidence.

## 5

He strolled into the pelting rain. The door behind him shutting with all the music and festivities it housed. The torrent a roaring monster. The black sky occasionally electrified with tendrils of lightning through and between synapses of the dark menacing clouds. The street and sidewalks deserted by its patrons, the hawkers, students and beggars. It was a forlorn tonight. A sheet of water flowed downhill, from up campus, on the road and overflowed onto the sidewalk itself. The water thrashed like a cold shower from hell, but he was oblivious to his garment soaking and the cold. The water trickled down to his boots and into them. He just stood there as if unable to move from exhaustion. Just a dark figure with slumped shoulders and a drooping head among the shadows.

“What the fuck?” he muttered to himself. “I feel so freakin’ numb.”

He laughed dryly, lifeless as ever. He reached into his side pocket. Felt for a razor blade. He was sloppy and apathetic about the matter, not caring if he cut himself. He retrieved it. Held it in his right hand and pushed up the sleeve of his trench coat to expose his wrist. For a while, he stared at the many scars that straddled across his wrist. Some red and some brown, some covered with scabs. As the rain tapped his wrist. He felt a faint throb of pain from his fresher scars as they came into contact with the rain. Finding his wrist and lower arm crowded, he pushed the sleeve up to his elbow to find two-centimetre gaps between several thicker and older scars. He stopped to



think of how he had always considered the thickest one a souvenir of time long past and entrenched in his very being and character. It was one of the defining moments for him. He smiled and shook his head at the memories and the faint soothing voice of his mother. In truth that was all he had, that faint voice, he remembered nothing of her or her face. Nothing of his childhood. All he had to remember were the pictures of a bloody knife in a small inexperienced hand and the voice of his mother from behind his neck and how a moment afterwards there was a dull throb in his left hand. The scar should have faded, but he kept it alive as a memento. Some attempt not honouring the true shape of it but acceptably close to resembling it.

He shifted his gaze across the street thinking maybe he should walk across for his business. With no traffic but parked cars on either side of the road the idea was he would acquire some privacy on the darker side of the road where a number of streetlights were not working at all.

And so he walked.

*What the fuck is that over there? Oh, fuck! It is just a tree shaped funny. It kinda looks like a person is leaning on it with his pot-belly protruding,*

He laughed.

*Where should I sit? Ummm, I think under the tree will be alright. The image could make for an interesting portrait I think. Gloomy, dark and honest like me, not those fucking rats in there without a fuckin' breath of life in them.*

*Whoa, was that too harsh? Fuck it, fuck them! I have always been on my fuckin' way and they found me on this road. Seeking my fucking guidance and wisdom, now they think they saw God?*

*I could use a cigarette in my hand right now.*

*No. No, it's fine.*

*I just need to sit and... and do whatever it is I am doing right now. I have no idea what I am doing right? Can I possibly be wrong in all of this? Let's*

*truly think about it and bash our heads on it. First of all, they never had a clue what was wrong with them before they met me or what they were. Now they assume they know shit about it. Always been a lone wolf, really doesn't matter what the hell they decide to do.*

*Guess I belong here on the road with my logic and common sense.*

*What the hell was Macfearson talking about? It sounds like the same conspiracy bullshit spewing from the mouths of lifelings. "The calling has orchestrated it," he says. It is all the same theory twisted around, or whatever way it can be.*

*A drunk whore thinks she has uncovered the meaning of life and they go drooling over her. I see meat. Just pure fuckin' meat. I bet Cheryl has even a brighter idea than Ms Prostitute. Fuck the bitch, and maybe your wits will come back. Confusing seduction and lust for a profound life changing experience for the calling itself. Are they so desperate to believe anything?*

*Why didn't I tell him this? Damn !*

*Whoah, this concrete is cold on my- wait, I can feel the water flowing right under my balls.*

He sat cross-legged at the edge of sidewalk facing the bar. He sighed, "This feels pretty good."

As his thoughts scampered about barren territory a weight came upon his shoulders. The air around him constricted and the roar of the rain became muffled. Things occupying his sight grew trite and surreal. Colour seeped away to unknown depths, with it the sense of time and being the occupant of his own body. He felt like a smudge on the tapestry of existence and the universe. His thoughts weakening and melting into a meaningless and nitwitted goo. All he was and his core was unknown to him. He was not sure if he had an ability to understand anything or conceive of anything. It was as if his being was stretched from an agent of his own will to a spectator. Any connection to his being was diminished to a point of almost

non-being. The universe felt small and insignificant, like a painting with no depth or life but the illusion of it – the pointless struggle of becoming real, alive and meaningful. He understood everything yet felt so stupid and ignorant.

He knew, with instinctive knowledge, what he needed to ask. Not sure if his lips moved or the words flew from his mind, he asked, “Why didn’t *you* come to me?”

Like a trigger, the monstrous arms of the abyss swerved towards his being and uprooted it like a whirlwind. Violent convulsions engulfed him. His screams must have been amplified because he was convinced his throat was tearing like dry cloth and his jaws were breaking from the projectile spewing out of him. To his ears, there was nothing but the sound of the emptiness compressing him on a very congested atmosphere. He could see himself from a profile view and at the same time the sight of his physical eyes. It felt as though he had always been there and a deep understanding consumed him, divine but not strange.

The voice of the calling came to him as if from the dying embers of a soul, windy and cold, “*Wasn’t I always with you?*”

Suddenly filled with shame so deep and so unbearable, he cried, " FATHER! I AM SO SORRY. FORGIVE ME!"

He wept as more layers of his stupidity peeled and how small his knowledge is compared to the magnitude of that beast. He needed no explaining or talk, he could just understand it now. In these few seconds it seems his brain had aged a thousand more years. Mentalese was the main language here, and for that he was grateful because the voice of the calling was harrowing. The guilt was a thousand fold in weight.

"STOP! PLEASE, FATHER!"

“*Do you see?*” the voice spoke once more into his mind.

"I SURRENDER, FATHER," he cried, a torrent of tears gushing from his eyes. "YOUR WILL BE DONE!"

*"I bestow to thee, my son, this,"* forgiveness rang in that tone, but it was still too painful.

He was underserving he knew. Instantly he was elated and at peace. The arms of the calling shook him like a hurricane and tossed him to the street and into the torrent. It was gone, the calling had left him once more.

He lay on his back in the middle of the street. Weeping with joy and divine clarity. He knew now. It was too bright for the night he noticed. As he turned his head to his right side he could see bright headlights approaching, probably from a big delivery truck. Too quickly for him.

Macxermillio smiled, filled with joy and infinite gratitude at the sight of his bestowal. *"I am. I am just. I am –"* then the graceful wheels pulverized his head with the weight of the truck and its load.

# Chapter 12

## 1

I glanced on my right and Macfearson stood there. His white hair frizzled and his bulging bloodshot eyes with crimson rings testament to his state of mind. He was a man standing on burning coal barefoot miserably trying to contain his pain.

“You’re puked up. What’s wrong?” I demanded.

With his trembling hand, he reached into his breast pocket and drew a hundred rand from it. “Keep the bitch, okay?” he told me.

“You don’t look good. What the hell is going on?” I asked not accepting the cash.

He hesitated, hard to tell from how petrified and devastated he was. He was muzzy and unsteady. He opened his mouth, but it trembled so much that he could only mumble. Then his eyes spaced-out.

“Where is Mac?” I asked.

“He er... he went to the b-b-bathroom,” He said, his head trembling. “Um... please, t-take t-the money a-and keep the girl.”

“Are you from outside?” I asked.

He flinched. “No-no. Why?”

“Your shoes are wet.”

Quite flustered, he mumbled, “Um... drunks. *Lifeling*’s drinks on the floor.” A nervous grin creased his face.

*What the fuck is that in your eyes. Wait, now that I look closely he looks more like a parent trying to hide something from a child, then giving them*

*money to go get sweets at the store so they could screw or argue in peace.*

*Something that concerns grown-ups. Should I give them space?*

I studied the hundred rand note in his hand, fluttering.

“Just take it. It is important, Sandz,” he gravely said.

“What do you want me to do with this chick? Is this for sex?”

He cleared his throat. “We need to listen to everything she says. I will explain everything later.”

“Is Mac with you on this?”

His face twitched at the idea, too quickly and discrete for a stranger’s eye to notice. “Yeah. I will explain everything. I will guide you.”

“Wait, what muddled up thing is going on that you guys won’t tell me about?” Taking my vantage.

“Nothing, Sandy,” his leer admonishing.

I waffled, finding the look scorching. “Alright. Tell me something, though?”

“Wha’?”

“That this is not going to burn, Macfearson.”

He nodded with not that much conviction coming from him.

*Well, fuck it. I am drunk anyway and the world is shit anyway.*

I picked the note from his hand and set my eyes on the adorable Kim Besert with my mind slightly nudged.

## 2

“Spilling beans sounds very sexual to me,” I told her.

She giggled. “How so?”

"I don't know. Just sounds that way it has nothing to do with what it means. Sounds more like you're telling me to tell you how I feel about you since we don't know each other you can't possibly expect that. It's not that we've been playing a game of cat and mouse. The cards are on the table and everything is actually on the open I presume," words glided through my mouth.

"You want truth?"

"Give it to me."

"Look I've been here drinking and for some reason I feel an awful lot horny so if I'm not gonna get fucked at the end of the night by you or anyone I'm goin' to leave."

"And?"

"You're carrying this boulder around and I can't trust that. I guess I will have to go because you won't say anything."

"This is very refreshing usually people trust me and tell me all kinds of shit. I am like invisible to them. They don't see the boulder I carry around." I paused. "What happened to your 'give in to the mystery' theory?"

She sighed. "Okay, fuck it. I am lyin'. I just want to know why you did this. This is the only thing I ask from you. What you've done is a bit unusual."

I considered. "You'll leave if I don't tell you?"

"Maybe," she glanced down.

"Okay then. Here I go."

I turned to Macfearson. "You think this is a good idea? Should I do this?"

He firmly nodded.

"The last time I did this was with Krissy and I fucking got punctured. Drove her away, mate."

He closed his eyes, nodding his understanding. “We can’t let the world dictate terms now. We have done too much hiding. They deal with it. Think of this as a How We End Up Alone moment.”

How We End Up Alone was a single from the alternative metal band Hurt. It portrayed in immaculate, insightful and heartfelt lyrics and vocal deliverance a person who is at the verge of a conundrum of an interpersonal relationship. Inducing a state of forced apathy with the full acceptance of the hurt and loss that is to follow. Not irresponsible apathy but the kind that lubricates shameless openness and honesty at any dark price. It is a state of tolerating high risks for a floundering possibility.

The vocalist’s tenor voice crooning:

*There’s no more use in lying*

*Yeah, there is no more use in lying*

Then his voice becomes thinner as if one who is about to whimper:

*To tell the truth, I don’t care what you’ll do!*

Then returns to the same opening demeanour:

*There is no use in lying*

*There is no more use in trying*

*When there is no more denying*

Then an almost voice whimpering:

*I gave you the proof I don’t care what you will do!*



The song had a profound almost apocalyptic undercurrent. A song that makes you feel, Macxermillio always remarked at it clicking the repeat button and levitating to the rich worlds within.

Macfearson's suggestion was perfect, it was a How We End Up Alone moment. He couldn't have explained it better than that. The spirit and the gist of the song injected me with courage and enough ounces of stupidity I required.

### 3

The walls of my mind crumbled like walls from chained cannon balls. My concentration inconsistent and slippery. My glance shifting to the gentlemen on the corner laughing and joking completely buzzed out of their own minds. Then the orders of exotic names of drinks I have no idea which are or what they do on my left side. And diagonally on the left side ladies ascending and descending on the stairs. They were not very impressive or heating me off. It was odd that the girls were in leather boots and short black skirts most of them, the kind of skirts that wrapped them from their upper body to just a few centimetres under their pelvis. They left little to one's imagination really, not to think most of them might not be wearing underwear was thrilling. They wasn't a lot of women of this kind alone here (always in packs) but they kept a lot of my attention, annexing it. Smooth legs they had, silk stockings smooth.

My tongue much more slippery, "Okay, first things first. Now that we are being all cards on the table I think you should now I am horny right now.

You put a little heat on me and I would like to have the honour to plough you tonight.”

She gasped comically. “You –“

“Don’t worry about it,” I interrupted, “I know I am a bit of bitch really. I would like a bit of scene setting before I tell you this. Would you go to whoever plays music here and tell them it is your birthday and you would just like to hear Closer by Kings of Leon and can I bum a smoke from you as well? Push the ashtray closer as well, like in the middle of the table. Then I’m all yours after that.”

She laughed, frowning at the same time. “Look I will bum you a smoke and push the ashtray but trying to request songs here is useless.”

“Really? I have alwaysed thought this is a cool place. This must be a crappy place then. Do you do most of your business here?”

“Yeah, sort of. Now can you step on it and tell me what is with you now?” She made an impatient gesture with her hand.

“What time is it?”

“It is one minute after our agreed time so I’m here on my own accord really.”

“So you can leave but you do not choose to? Wow.”

She scowled. “You haven’t given me the cash for the thirty minutes we agreed on. Fifty bucks.”

I nodded and reached for my wallet. Flipped through a few notes and showed her the note. “Happy? Will pay you when I’m done.”

“Go on then.”

“I am a wreck. A fuckin’ freak really. That is why I am here now,” I paused roaming my own thoughts, “You see, I am seeing someone.”

“Ah, oh. Yeah, right. I see,” she reached to touch my hand and looked into my eyes with what might have been empathy. It was a rapid emotional response from her, one that was completely unexpected. That made it

strange and puzzling. She put her other hand over her chest and nodded as if the slow pulses of understanding were going through her head.

*Soft hands...*

"I understand now. When something like that happens I also don't feel like touching anything. I just crave for a distraction. You are probably so devastated that you could not sum up the energy to approach or even talk to anyone," She said, smiling and emitting a sudden warmth and charity. Her voice had grown more soothing and mellow as if to appease a child. It made me feel the tense muscles in me relax, lean back in my chair and let my breath flow loose.

"Yeah, so you get it," I smiled, this time sweet and sending down ripples of joy through my being.

"I have had a tough time too. If this makes you feel a lot better I am glad to help. If you don't wanna talk about it, it is okay. Sometimes speaking so soon without actually having made sense of anything yourself or come to terms with the reality of the situation can be an overwhelming experience. Very shaking and difficult," she studied my eyes, "Have you been crying so much that you can't anymore, but you feel like crying?"

I shook my head grappling with tears. "Yes," I choked stifling the simmering emotions.

"Sometimes I feel like I am in the saddest song when that happens. With images black and white, and streets cleared and lonely. Forlorn. Sappy rain," She glanced outside the window. "For you it pours. It actually pours. Maybe the heavens feel your pain, cries so much tears that this town will drown in its sorrow and grief."

"Don't they weep for you?" I moaned.

"No. I am not like you. Not even the heavens could set their sight on me,"

My heart had a sore stroke of a potent, goo-like and unpleasant emotion. I felt privileged to experience it and also troubled at once, like the way more

success breeds more responsibility. I wished she could stop speaking that way and at the same time I wanted her too, I deserved the pain. This pain was the kind coagulating with a speck of sweetness, just the deserved amount. There is no redemption for me in this world, not with her or even the heavens. Why should she care about something as worthless as me? She got me, a part of me was grateful, but a dominant part was grieving at the death she was busy coaxing into her life.

*This is what you get for trusting me...*

"I am disgusting..." the suddenly the words and emotions that I wanted to convey perished at their infancy in the exhausting swamps of my being.

She shook her head in sympathy. "Did you do anything wrong? Is it your fault?"

"I don't know. Maybe there is just something with me," I groaned.

"Is it something you did?"

"I do not think I did anything. I just existed. I just became," I paused. My hands dipped in the dark goo within my mind to find anything that made even the most remote sense. "Maybe I shouldn't have been born or even existed in some pre-existing state or another."

She tightened her lip into a thin line, nodding to encapsulate my pain. "It can't be your fault then, okay?"

I looked down as her gaze hovered on my skin. I was petrified by shame, and more of it was coming like a fog off a mountain.

"I don't think this will go anywhere, Fearson," I spoke to Macfearson.

He knelt beside me with one knee. "She knows," his voice not shy from a whisper.

"So what? What difference does it make? So did Krissy know but she ditched me didn't she?"

Macfearson sighed exasperatedly. "You don't get it. You got it all muddled up, bro. Krissy did know it, but she did not understand it. She, on the other hand, understands it."

"How do you know? How can I be sure? How will she help anyway? No one can save us, Fearson. You know that don't you? This life is our punishment. A prison for a crime we have forgotten. I mean what better way to punish someone than put them in the most horrible correctional facility and erase their memory so they think that they are just being treated as slaves or less of a human while they know there must be something better. You are put into a position where you know that there are certain things you deserve, but you can't have them, you are so convicted by the idea that you do, but you do not in reality. Maybe we don't need saving. We don't deserve it and it is impossible for us," I said.

"All I hear is a lot of maybes there. An awful lot of rationalized hopelessness, Sandz," He grunted quietly. "Let me give you one maybe. You might be wasting the best chance we have. And I'm not gonna let your fear and wounds to stop us from reaching it." He glared at me with fierce intensity. His face stoic and cold.

I remained stubbornly reluctant. "Show me how. Show me how you know what you know. Give me a test or something," I demanded.

"Ask her if sometimes she feels like she is fleeting through life. If she says yes she truly understands, something Krissy never had. Krissy was just a horny bitch, this is a horny understanding bitch." He spoke confidently with no trace of doubt or panic. It was as if he knew.

I pulled my head up and gathered the strength to ask her, my heart pounding in my chest making a distracting sound in my temples.

"Do you feel like you are fleeting through life at times? That it is all stale and you are a passer-by amongst travellers?" I asked, with trembling lips.

She shifted her head side to side like a genius when about to formulate a way to explain something to a kid. "Do you?" she returned.

"The question is 'do you'," I said, exasperated.

"Well, you know, sometimes – "

"Fuck, Kim. It is a yes or no question. It is either it is the case or it is not, has nothing to do with me. No pretending."

"Okay. No pretending," She nodded.

"Yeah. So?"

She sighed. "Yes," it sounded more like a question.

"I hope you know this is not a test. I want you to answer truthfully. What was that? You sounded unsure. Do you not understand me? "

"No, no. I am sure. It's just that you making me quite nervous. I don't wanna ..." her voice trailed off.

"You don't wanna what?"

"You know?" She paused. "Let's get outta here. Maybe fucking will help. I think you are too upset right now. You need something to get those endorphins running."

I sneered at her.

"Or we could just go into the bathroom for a quickie. We don't have to leave," she studied me. "Of course this is genuine it has nothing to do with cash although you will have to pay for the thirty-minute chat we just had. I mean, fuck the bitch, Sandy. Don't let it steal your night or fun. Right? You sound like someone who wants to end your life right now to be honest. I can help with that. I can make you feel better"

I shifted my gaze to Macfearson, tendrils of anger scorching my face. "And this does not sound like Krissy to you?"

"What did I tell you, Sandz? What did she just say to you right now?"

"She fucked me, Mac. She did, now she wants to fuck me too!" I shouted.

“This is not the same,” Macfearson leered at me, frustrated. “She said yes. That is all that matters. Trust me and we shall be free. Don’t fuck this up.”

Then he did that thing where he looks about nervously, sweat breaking from his forehead.

Very conflicted I excused myself, bells were tolling in my bladder, loud and pinching.

# Chapter 13

## 1

The silver zinc urinals on the west wall and the toilet on the east wall were unoccupied. The tiled floor was smeared with dirt and sand from shoes. Puddles of mixed liquids (beer, water and urine) dominated the floor. Careful not to slip I emptied my tank at the urinal in the middle. Then went to the basin. It was messed with water. I looked up and stared at my reflection in the mirror. Staring into my red eyes, eyelids half shut and eyelashes frizzled from crying.

The man in front of me was defeated and weak. His skin coarse with dead pimples. That man looked like one who was about to collapse any time soon. I pitied him, at the same time glad that I never got to look at his face that often. Grateful I never had to look into that seeping hole of sadness. Glad I wasn't him for a moment. Yes, that right there with rugged hair and a beaten face was not me. It was a fucking mask. I wondered if that was how beaten my soul was in the inside. That man resembled a meth addict, who probably had boils in the most inappropriate and inconceivable places. He pissed in a bag taped to his torso, it smelled foul and it leaked. It was an IV bag, only crimson, dirty and not cared for. He hadn't showered in days, he reeked. His underwear brown with shit stains all over. It was torn where his scrotum was. Skin tightly wrapped around his limbs, no sign of muscles under there, like an undernourished African child. He trembled and shuddered when he walked. Not me, it was the man in the mirror, a dirty grimy mirror.



As I smiled he dissolved.

“What the fuck am I doing, Sandz?” I asked myself. The aches kept pulsing through me.

“What is all this?”

I laughed dryly. “I get it. I don’t get it. I want it. I don’t want it. What a freaking dilemma.”

“Getting a fucking whore to save me? Am I that dirty? A freaking scum in my mind, yeah she – ”

A guy interrupted, stumbling in and almost slipping.

*She is, I went on with thought, a freaking waste of time if you ask me. No point. No reason. Nobody will mourn her if I kill her, no one will mourn me either so why is such a big deal. No one will care what the fuck happens. Why pretend to love or see anything when there is nothing. I am nothingness, how can anything interact with me or her? Fuck, Macfearson. There is no such thing as salvation or redemption. I call this –*

“Hey, You have a lighter on you?” the drunkard slurred, a smoke in his hand.

*Fucking cunt.*

“No, sorry,” I answered.

“Fuck, alright, I-I will go ask someone else it’s fine.” He put it between his lips. “What you doing there? You just standing there?”

I stared at his narrowed eyes and his dismantled state. “I’m just too fucked. Getting a little air I guess.”

“Are you high?”

“No, why?”

“You look high.”

I nodded.

"You smoke, though?"

“No.”

He exhaled firmly. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like you gonna kill me or something. I'm sorry if I did anything dude, please don't fuck me up. I'm drunk, I don't even remember what I said to you or why we talking. I'm sorry, dude," he laughed nervously.

"You did nothing. I'm always like that. It is just how I am." I grinned.

He nodded and felt for something in his pockets. "You have a lighter, china?"

"No, I don't."

"Ah sorry. I just asked you that. You look like a freakin' deep thinker. People like you are jus' ... you know."

"What?" I frowned.

"I don't know man. You want a beer?"

*-justified hopelessness.*

"I am – "

"Fuck," he placed his palm on his face, "I'm so fucked dude! Damn it!"

He stood there wobbling on his feet. His navy blue linen shirt unbuttoned, exposing his hairy bare chest. Under his armpits, his shirt soaked with sweat. It was a picture of gnawing desperation. The sleeves rolled haphazardly with wrinkles branching up his arm. His beard short and ginger marked with negligence. There were drops of some beverage hanging in it. He breathed audibly and somewhat inconsistently.

"I feel quite guilty, you know? Said I wouldn't do this but here I am," he laughed. "Feels good, though. Why the fuck would I not wanna drink. This is what college is about right?"

I nodded.

"Right?"

"Yeah." His presence was awkward.

*Am I expected to do something or say something? What do people do in these situations? Should I just leave? If I do leave what do I say? Do I tell him I gotta go? Will he even care? Would that be rude?*

He drew closer. Raised his arms sideways in what would be a badass pose if it wasn't as sloppy, trying to steady himself, "Yeah. Fuck it! Let's get some bitches out there."

He spat in my face.

"You gonna get bitches right?" he asked.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Give me a high five."

As I did he held my hand and converted the whole thing into a handshake. Gazed into my eyes in a disciplined purposeful manner. For a moment, I felt like I was agreeing to something else. Very strange.

"Good luck," he murmured. "Get lucky, china."

He cunningly said right before I felt an immense pang of pain radiate from my abdomen. Instantly crippling, I fell to my knees. If it was not for his tight grip on my hand I would have downright curled on the floor but he tugged me savagely. His fist the culprit, far from sloppy and weak. A burning rod shooting through my stomach. Alcohol and supper spewed out of my mouth from my guts. Breathing had become as cumbersome as lifting weights. Sniggering, he let go of my hand and I fell on left my side, my head bumping on the floor. Then his feet receded to the door where he made his discrete exit.

Not long after, the door swung opened and different shoes stopped at the doorway. All of the bar commotion and smell seemed to coat the smell of urine and beer on the floor where I lay, it was all a mind trick, though, I don't think it made any difference. Then a shout, "There is guy curled up on the floor chundering his guts off!"

A moment later the door opened wider and a man in black pants and big boots, a bouncer, looked down at me.

"Shit! Gotta take him out," he said, speaking to one of his colleagues perhaps. And as if from further inspection he knelt, "Are you okay?"

"Some guy punched me!" I tried, but the words died in my mouth, my voice pulling a turtle. I tried once more and again. At my last try I vomited.

"Oh, fuck," the bouncer jumped. "No, fuck it. Help me take him outside, he is freaking drunk is all. Maybe the rain will help him sober up. Can't have him in here for sure, he's just messing the place."

Like that, they grabbed me by the arms and started hauling me off. I could have walked, but that was pleasurable, being carried was always pleasurable in a bad situation or not. I vomited once more, this time followed by gasps, gazes and flashes of camera phones. Kim must have stared at me, I felt the warm touch of her concern and awe, devoid of judgment and schadenfreude which all the other eyes beamed at me.

The third bouncer opened the door in anticipation, standing by with no sign of concern or shock like it was all part of a common procedure. It could rain lightning bolts or lava that stern face would not change, seeped of all emotion. They tugged me to my feet and shoved me out into the torrent. The sharp cold snapped the little breath I had and shocked my heart into hysteria. My body shrivelling to the bone, I leaned against the wall. Stupefied.

## 2

I scurried to the porch on the left which led to the grand entrance. I sat on the porch my back facing the wall, knees drawn to my chest and arms

locked around my knees. The rain sounded the metallic railings, droplets diffusing into a soaking spray from the collision. The wind frigid and immobilising on itself had joined hands with the rain. If the sky wept for me, its tears were cold.

I maintained my indifference to what had happened, largely because it was too much of a mystery. The deep-seated fear was more decimating, the fear that I was not capable of even understanding what had happened. It was the traitor you couldn't look in the eye, where a complete denial of their existence was better. Wilfully blindfolding myself. Although it would have served me best to gouge my eyes, not only would that have been a complete commitment to ignorance but an expression grand enough to convey that facing the reality was beyond me. I looked away, unsavoury and cowardly it was. There is no saviour in apathy and inaction, no burden. Indifference is the softer form of that aspect of apathy. I was preoccupied with the pain, emotional and physical.

Suddenly the intensity of the rain lessened. Kim had placed me under the sphere of her umbrella. She was standing in front me wearing a black raincoat. I had a better look at her black stockings and heels.

She outstretched her hand to me. "Never paid me," She spoke warily.

I gave her a stern emotionless glance. Picked a fifty rand note from my garment pocket and gave it to her. She unfolded it and inspected it against the porch light, which swung restlessly.

"You look tired," she said. "Why does the note have blood on it? What's this?"

"What?" I frowned.

"It looks fresh too! Are you bleeding?"

*I'm not bleeding. Am I bleeding?*

"No, I got punched in the stomach not gutted."

"What?" she looked surprised.

“Yeah. Some guy just punched me in the stomach while I was taking a piss. That is why I am puking so hard.”

“Why? What happened?”

“I don’t know, maybe someone is playing a game of truth or dare in there, who the fuck knows?”

She cackled. Either I made a good joke or I was the joke, the later felt more probable. “It might just be pure animosity. That can be as fun as pulling a prank right?”

The entrance opened, Macfearson walked out and leaned on the wall next to the door. He gazed toward the porch with disinterest. The light above his head went off and he became nothing more than a mystified shade. His posture was far from human like he had become a shepherd of the darkness. He dropped his head, it was clear whatever visual information he was receiving was sifted through something more mental. Whether from an ache of remorse or some other brood inducing emotion, he was immobile. With the same downhearted spirit, he sparked a cigarette and smoked. A waiting escort he seemed, so dirty the rain kept its distance from him.

“Hey look at me,” Kim said, snapping her fingers.

I looked up. “What?”

“Come with me to my car. It’s cold out here and don’t you freakin’ puke again, please.”

Reluctant, I asked, “Where is it?”

She pointed, “The red one over there.” It was just three parking spaces away from where we were. “Come on,” she offered her hand for assistance.

“No. I will come by. Go on I will be there soon just need to think a bit.”

She watched me for a moment, clearly trying to make sense of the decision. She finally shook her head and walked off.

As she did Macfearson flicked the cigarette to the pavement and started advancing. There was an animal instinct and an angel's grace in the way he

did, the same swaying walk that he employed during torture. This time, it was subtle and more of an indication of the tug-of-war brewing in him. He leaned over the railing with his arms and gazed at me. Even in his composure the stifled emotions were showing in his quivering fingers and the premature frown on his face. I expected him to do something sudden and violent, cringing that it won't startle me when he does because he always had shocking timing like that.

“Let’s fuckin’ go home,” his lips stiff as his voice.

My heart began to pound. Thoughts searing in my mind, so quick I could not make sense of them. “Where is Mac?” I started shivering.

“He’s gone.”

“Kim invited me to her car.”

He pressed his lips together and slowly nodded. He sighed. “Where is she taking you?”

“I don’t think she is taking me anywhere.” Somehow he had become my master. I was getting nervous and nervous then I talked to him. Yet I had no real reason to be, what I was feeling was just a feeling. Like the feeling of distrust I have always had towards him although he had never done anything to me. His sheer presence was always something that made my spine quiver. With Macfearson you always put you back against the wall, never towards him.

Unexpectedly he beastly struck the railings with his knees multiple times. Stopped and walked a few paces back, turned and drew a deep breath. He stood tall with no sign on injury to himself, overlooking the street. Suddenly he was so composed that his prior display of rage was nothing but a fragment of my own imagination. I was dumbfounded for there was no way of telling what this whirlwind was about unless one probed. And probing had its own shortcomings in these moments, not even the subtle and well-calculated kind. That belief, however, may just have been a

reflection of my own uncertainty and lack of confidence when it came to dealing with him.

*Gosh, what the hell is it with Kim?*

“What the fuck is going on, Fearson?” I blurted. “What is it with her?”

He gazed down at me with a dry smirk on his face, as if he was saying “You are goddamn lost”. He said nothing, only continued with his perplexing gaze. He was looking at the person I was not, the person I should be at that moment. It pleased him to have this advantage I gathered.

“You wanna fuck her?” he spoke, finally.

“I guess, you told me I should go with it,” I pointed out.

“You got fucked in the bathroom and now the magic is gone. I don’t feel it anymore. I don’t have the feeling I had about her. The presence has left her, we got sidetracked into something else. The same good old, Sands.”

“What is the feeling you had?”

He looked at me for a while, then, “Doesn’t matter. Just worthless.”

*How does he know that?*

"You were not interested in this exercise from the beginning. In fact, you were against this. Then you got here and after a few minutes or so you drive this whole expedition like some goddamn captain, to the extent that you pulled out your sword on Mac. I think you believed she had some answers." I surprised myself with such confrontation. "Maybe you and Mac fought over this matter and he left leaving you to do this on your own because he thought what you were thinking was stupid. Now you realize it and you are too embarrassed to even say anything. That is why you are so angry!"

It was like those rare moments in dreams where you find yourself intelligible all of a sudden.

Macfearson shook his head with a dark grin on his face, turning to face me audaciously. “You fucking freak!” he raised his voice. “Don’t you get it? The only reason I’m kicking the hell of those railings instead of you is



because I'm trying to be kind. You fucked up! The plan was in play now you fucked it up. Nothing was wrong or stupid, you were stupid."

I flinched at the news, not a little convinced. "Well then where is Mac?" I snapped. "This sounds like your plan, not ours."

Macfearson waved his hand wearily. "Does it matter? If I am right, does it matter? The truth is, you fucked up a plan that could have saved us."

"How?"

"By getting yourself kicked out of there, freak." He pointed to the bar, trembling with stifled rage. Apparently the kind he was displaying now was not enough. I suspected it was out of proportion, there was more to it than just a fucking plan.

"How did I do that?" I protested. "Please explain to me."

"You expect me to believe you got punched in the guts? For no reason?" he replied.

"Yes! It did happen." I stood on my feet so he could take a look at my face for any trace of deception that might represent itself, spread my arms in the I-have-nothing-to-hide stance.

He snorted and growled, frustrated. "You fucking wit! You are socially inept that you wouldn't even be aware if you fucked things up. You can't read freakin' social cues and you hide behind something you call '*being genuine*' when all you do is to be inappropriate and offensive. You know this about yourself, why couldn't you just stay in the safe zone with the *whore* you paid? You should die and go kill yourself, dopey."

Tears quivered in my eyes and my lips began trembling with ire, shame and anguish.

*If I blink the tears will fall and if I speak...*

"You monster! I will kill you!" I wailed, blindness seeping into me.

"You know it too well. All you are is pain. All you bring is death and sorrow to those around you. Frankly the world, your friends, your family

will be better off without you. If you let me I will gladly tie you a noose because I will be doing a great service to this fuckin' world. Although I despise this world I would choose it instead of you a million times over. Go fuck your whore maybe that will take things off your mind for a while, but you will awake every morning with the truth staring you in the face. You are filth," he continued hammering those nails.

He cupped my face and had me look him in his eyes, I felt his warm breath on my face. Then he coarsely whispered, "You are insignificant. Am I wrong?"

I just gazed at him, unable to make a sound than cry even more.

"Am I wrong?" he said, his voice soothing and coaxing like the clutches of sleep when one has to wake up and they are seduced into oversleeping.

I nodded, then added with a whimper, "Yes!"

As I dropped myself so I may slump on the ground he caught me in his warm vicious embrace. I made no attempt to stand, he just held me tightly as my legs dangled beneath me. I retched my sobs into his shoulder, an avalanche's worth. Weakness hit as a stroke ...

My fragmented and demented thoughts screamed in layers upon layers of an elegant chaotic notes of discord. This discomposure coming with a headache inducing throbs pulsing through my temples alluded to what absolute weakness might feel like. At this point, my rage was turned inward, crushing the very chamber which once produced it. I was collapsing on the strain of my own weight and I needed an outlet, should have found an outlet, but this felt righteously directed. All logic and law agreed, I had no right to harm anyone anymore, I never had. Every breath I once took had caused nothing but suffering. A bomb explosion wave after wave and getting stronger with each explosion. Deceiving myself that I am the sufferer wondering why everyone takes a shot at me or flees over the horizon. My feeling of misplacement is the calling telling me to stop the

pain, end the suffering of the true and accept my place as an anomaly. This was the answer... to everything. The crop, the calling and deathlings. We are death and we should become death... and death is home, death is the crop and the calling is the instinct to death.

It was all a call to matter. I had to matter, become *matter*.

## Chapter 14

“You are not real right?” I asked. Leaning on the wall of the bar. Not as cold and cosy as I was before. There was a sense of being transcendent to where I was. Lifted out of the confines of the universe, just a tinge. A tinge was plenty. Lucidity inducing.

A smile forged from the corner of his mouth, the kind that conceals a lot more than it conveys. The kind capable of misinforming and misdirecting.

"I told her you are not real," I said, hoping to elicit a response of any usefulness. For a person who always kept his emotions at the surface like leaves floating on the water, he was surprisingly and inconceivably calm. The person gazing at me now was of another transcendent nature, if men have seen demons taking over people's bodies and minds that are what it would look like. It looks as though the person you have come to know is completely gone, another personality has taken over peering through the eyes. It dwelt in the little facial features, gestures and postures. Even the presence he emitted was foul and eerie, almost cold. He stood there unshaken like a portrait, spreading mystery and unrest to his surroundings. He screamed ‘See me and be mystified to ultimate concern’.

*I should be scared*, I thought.

He answered, “Real as a character in a book, real as the meaning of the words. Real.”

My cheeks twitched. “So it does not matter you’re not a sack of meat like me or in any way material. What matter’s to you is that you make things *matter?*”

He elegantly shook his head. “Which is more prominent, Sandy, me as the product of your imagination or you as a product of my actuality?”

“What are you insinuating?” my heart suddenly pounded. Ramming the breath out of my lungs, and making breathing wheezy hustle.

“What are *you* insinuating?” He returned. “Aren’t you revealing something to yourself here?” He smiled, obviously amused in a fatherly way. As if he trusted me to understand, or knew that I did understand. I needed him to say *something*, something that would make what was to come acceptable.

“I don’t know,” I paused, “is it okay to call you an imaginary friend? Are you even just imaginary in the ordinary sense? You and Macxermillio?”

“Are you actual in the ordinary sense, Sandz?”

“Does not feel like it,” I shrugged.

He nodded. “Well, there you go. We are both struggling to accept what we are fundamentally. You are just a *material*, an *it*, trying to pass by as person. And I am an idea trying to pass on as a person. Now we see. Now we understand what *she* wanted us to understand.”

“So that we would accept it?”

He giggled. “I guess so. She wanted us to see it for ourselves. To see give in to the mystery. The details weren’t important.”

“How sure are we of this. How sure are we of what we think we know now?”

He shook his head, wide and slow. “Not that sure, Sandz. Does not feel right or wrong. Giving in to the mystery has been the theme of the night, and perhaps the theme of all the hustle we have had with the calling all of our lives. Maybe the point is we are not really supposed to know anything else than the fact that our pains and woes shall disappear.”

He held out his hand so I may hold it as if he wanted to lead me somewhere. For a while, I did not understand the significance of the gesture or what it meant. Picking up on the clueless-ness, then he told me, "There is a construction truck coming from up campus. I think we should get closer."

I gave him my left hand, and we walked to the edge of the road.  
Peacefully, we, my remaining imaginary friend and I, waited in the rain as  
the bright headlights approached from up campus.

## **THE END**

Dear Reader

Thanks for taking the time to read my book. I hope you enjoyed it. I love hearing from all of you and I take the time to read the emails and reply. Email me at [macxermillio@gmail.com](mailto:macxermillio@gmail.com). If you enjoyed this work please leave a review and rate it. Why? Because reviews help others find my work and that helps me continue writing. And also, I love knowing that someone has enjoyed my work as well.

Don't forget to check out the [Reading Club Guide](#) for *Before the Cult* and the [Before The Cult Essays](#), these were written with the aim to help you appreciate this work better and discover more. I would say one has never truly read the book if they didn't engage with that material. All this material is included in the back.

Thank you

Sandy Masia

## **Other Titles by the Author**

*Into the Grey* (an anthology)

*Scarleton Series II : Pyre of Envy* (to be released August 2016)

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## **About the Author**

Sandy Masia is currently a student at Rhodes University majoring in Organisational Psychology and Philosophy. He loves music, books and all things art. He usually spends his spare time with his siblings and friends. When he is not at university studying he stays with his family in Kutlwanong, South Africa.

# **Reading Group Guide**

These are just some suggestions of points that could be discussed, they aren't all there is to discuss. These points of discussion are designed to help you the reader better appreciate the novel, even at a deeper level (from characterization, plot, themes and more). This isn't the definite guide and more reveals and discussions will be had on my platforms. Enjoy pondering and appreciating!

## **Discussion Points**

- If Macxermillio and Macfe arson are imaginary how much of the story has happened and what are the implications of this fact?
- What does having imaginary friends reveal about Sandy Macxermillian's character? Is he divided within himself, is this a helpful coping mechanism or does it worsen his delusions? What does it imply about his sense of morality or conscience?
- What does the death of Macxermillio and the scene signify/mean to the character and to the story as a whole?
- What does Kim Besert mean to Sandy and why did so much depend upon how she treats him as compared to Krissy?
- Why is what happens in the bar so significant to Sandy Macxermillian?
- In the end what is the most accentuated theme in the novel, the struggle against suicidal and/or homicidal urges, the search for belonging, social exclusion, trust/betrayal or death?



- What aspect about death is mostly explored in the story? (E.g. it's ability to bring solace and comfort, a bridge to other modes of existence, a tool of complete annihilation, the liveliest thing about life etc.) And why is that?

- What seems to be the point of the novel?

- What is the meaning of the calling? What characteristics/symptoms does it allude to about the nature of mental illness, especially about depression, and suffering from it?

- What might have influenced the author to name the main character Sandy and what does it do for the novel?

- The author has said in an interview, about the novel, "it reeks of my struggle with chronic depression, anxiety and inattentive ADHD" and, about the period it was written, he had "a couple of suicide attempts", he was "in and out of hospital", "had a near death experience" so "death and suicide were concepts that occupied my mind". Does this translate into the novel?

- What could be said the novel reveals about the nature of depression?

- Does the novel provide a first-hand account of being a delusional depressive? To what extent and how? What do you think?

- The end, Chapter 14, what is it all about or mean? How does it fit, if it does at all, to the whole story?

## **Before the Cult Essays**

The following essays are concerning a range subjects pertaining to the novel – everything from influences, characterization to themes. My hope is that these essays will help you appreciate the book a whole lot better and spark some conversation. I will also tackle some of the questions in the Reading Group Guide in a way I believe the novel intended to portray. This does not mean your interpretations are invalid or my word is absolute and irrefutable. As far as I am concerned every interpretation works as long as it does not contradict itself or the whole, this is a piece of art so it should allow for some freedom and room to create meaning.

I hope you enjoy reading these essays.

### **Origins of Before the Cult**

There are three distinct moments in writing Before the Cult that shaped what the book would be and what the book would be doing. Moments of inspiration perhaps? I don't know, but I can trace a lot of what Before the Cult has become from those moments.

## Moment One

My first year at university I took English Literature as one of my subjects. One of the things we did was study some post-modernist literature. I remember that morning when I walked out of the last lecture on Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, I told my friend that I was going to write a novel, that something about that lecture had inspired me. I didn't tell him what but I will tell you now. Before then my writing had always followed a tight formula or structure: you had in your stories a beginning, conflict, climax, resolution, and the end all tied together by one premise or another (in simple terms a beginning, middle and end). A lot of work went into each step, it required its own work and further elements to be tweaked and dealt with – you should have seen my graphs and the multiple sheets that I scattered on my table each time I had to write, ahh...it's harrowing (I get the shakes from just thinking about it). It was so engraved in my mind that it made my writing process and the experience of it frigid and rigid. I even got to a point that the whole process drained my juices. That lecture made me realize that you didn't have to follow a rigid path or formula and you would still be able to put your message through. This new sense of freedom led to a lot of experimentation and tweaking with how I wrote and how I dealt with my premises. I began writing to create a piece of art that breathed and flourished into what it wanted to be, from then my stories began taking a

form and a life of their own (as far as I was concerned all the chiselling I was doing before was overboard and seeped the life and colour out of everything I wrote). For the first time in a couple in years, I was inspired to write something honest, something that gave an experience and something that would be its own. It was that sense of freedom that gave me a primitive idea of what Before the Cult would be. Thinking of it now, the idea is quite different to what the book turned out being.

## Moment Two

Word was the world was ending on December 21st or something according to the Mayan calendar, at least that is what documentary “experts” claimed. I didn’t care if it did end, in fact I wished it would end one day in a blink of an eye. I wanted it so bad, although a part of me knew how unlikely and stupid the whole thing sounded I wanted it over. The year was 2012 and my depression was becoming more and more severe, exacerbating my other mental illnesses turn. Without getting into the gory details (says the guy who wrote Before the Cult), I was suicidal, I self-harmed and self-medicated to oblivion. I was a mess, although I was a year and over six months into therapy, I was still a mess. The drugs weren’t working ( a reference to The Verve), and my psychiatrist had changed them two times now and I was getting tired.

I was overwhelmed by thoughts of suicide above anything else, I didn't understand why everyone didn't want me to kill myself. They all made a big deal out of it and again I didn't think they understood how it truly felt to be in such pain, all the time. As I browsed websites about depression I realized all they did was list the symptoms and explain a little bit but they never went to the core of the experience of it. In fact out of many websites, over two dozen, there was only one website that did and after that there wasn't anything. I remember going back the next day trying to find it, but I couldn't. To this day I don't know what the name of the website was or how to find it again, I have tried but I have failed.

I had all sorts of thoughts about suicide. What made suicide so bad anyway? Is it because you will hurt the ones that love you? Well, if they loved you they would understand, it is quite selfish of them to keep you alive when every moment you spend alive is in agony. Suicide isn't being cowardly, I thought, it is just what people say because they are hurt that you killed yourself, they hope by saying so they would deter more incidents. And to say people who commit suicide are selfish is just plain insulting and ignorant. Again nobody seemed to consider how attractive death/suicide is or can be. What about the fact that suicide is wrong? No, it isn't wrong, it might be taboo but it isn't morally indefensible as some acts are, for an example rape. Ethics often ponder what is right or wrong in relation to other people, that is what is often considered in moral reason that it becomes too

difficult to talk about how one should behave or treat one's self and to even offer grounds on which that is even acceptable. It seems we should be able to decide what we do with ourselves, we should be free even if that is harmful to us (as long as these acts do not affect the general public adversely as drug addiction and others might).

Boy oh boy, I was messed up. But it is these types musings that went into much of *Before the Cult*, those type of arguments. Ideas wearing masks and lurking behind metaphors, imagery and so forth, but this type of thinking is intentionally alluded to in *Before the Cult*. It changed what the book would become in a few ways, it became more about conveying the experience of being that depressive state in hopes of maybe helping others understand just how powerful those inclinations and mental delusions can be. To make the experience wrought with confusion and all the other elements I thought were indicative of the experience (like being unable to understand other people's perspectives) I wrote the book in first person and gave the illusion it wasn't entirely in first person because when you are severely mentally ill part of that experience is thinking you know what others think or feel.

### Third moment

The third moment which shaped *Before the Cult* was pretty serious.

The year was 2013, this was after the mental health hospital ordeal. So I came out with a less morbid and suicidal self than before. Things were great until July came, which is winter here in South Africa. I have always loved winter, it was very cold and I loved the cold. Then I suddenly fell ill, very ill. I don't want to get into the details here. Anyway, I was close to death, I knew I was going to die with striking certainty, I can't really put it into words. This is when I had that near death experience that I mentioned in my interview. This experience itself is not that important. The most important part is that I almost died.

I went on to be sick until the end of the year, I naturally thought I didn't have much time because although a lot of tests were run and the doctors couldn't exactly pinpoint what was wrong with me until later towards 2014. During this time, I was confronted by my mortality. I had never contemplated the meaning of life, what makes life a valuable life, what means it means to exist or the nature death that long and hard in my life. During this time I was also working on *Before the Cult*, I wanted to finish it before I die.

Although it wasn't intentional writing and rewriting the book in that frame of mind, it influenced the end product to a greater degree than anything that had come before. *Before the Cult* is filled with thoughts on death, the afterlife and existence. If life is valuable and what adds value to it. I was very pessimistic during that time and that is the strongest reason I can give

to why the book ended the way it did. The conclusion, of the novel, is very counter-intuitive but it is what the character Sandy, being delusional depressive, would have deduced from his experiences. He came to the conclusion that we are nothing but matter, we are things trying to pass on as something other than what it is fundamentally. Life is a rejection of our most basic nature, a state of temporary denial from what we truly are, nothing. That is what we are. We are pure nothing trying to mean or be something. Death, the destruction of life, reduces us to our basic form and nature. There isn't an afterlife, you just turn into atoms that will be recycled by nature into something else. That is what you are, without any more value above that. Your consciousness and self-awareness a temporary spasm or a blink of lightning in the vast universe.

If this sounds morbid and disturbing to you remember that was the whole point of the story, to provide you with that glimpse into a messed up mind like Sandy's. Although some might feel this portrayal of depression is exaggerated I would like to respond by saying we experience the illness differently. I would say it is unique, not exaggerated, because there is a lot that I can surely understand and identify with in Sandy, and there is a lot that is common with other depressives in there. My aim wasn't to tell you that life is meaningless, personally I don't think it is, it is just that all of the time I spent thinking about death I realized in the end we are all hopeless against it. That is perhaps why I permitted the ending we had. To someone



in a situation like Sandy's that is the reality. It also makes understanding being suicidal a little better : life = pain, death = non-existence, non-existence = no life. Therefore, the solution to life = pain is death, anything else is illogical. What about death being painful? As long as you feel pain, you aren't dead yet. Dying is painful (perhaps), but death isn't anything.

Maybe some of you readers are going, "Isn't that what Sandy thought from the beginning of the book?"

Here is what sandy thought at the beginning:

Life = pain, death = mode of transport to an afterlife of sorts (the crop/fields).

In this way there is still in an element of hope, however twisted, for a better mode of existence. He is not entirely hopeless, although being suicidal might send that message.

Here is what Sandy thinks in the end:

Life = pain , he then realizes that the afterlife = life(therefore pain). Those are the same therefore death is not a mode of transportation but the end. The only escape becomes annihilation. So death = non-existence.

This change in thought also illustrates a complete loss of hope.

## **Naming the Characters**

It may surprise a lot of you, but I really did not name the main characters in this novel. This means I did not sit down and come up with names for them, I knew these characters. When they came to me they already had their own names and all I had to do was get to know them.

Let me start with the simple ones, Macfearson and Macxermillio. I have known them as, wait for it, imaginary friends from 2004. I met Macxermillio in a dream. He introduced himself as Macxermillio and from then on I had an imaginary friend named Macxermillio. I was twelve years old then. Like from my childhood, I did not actively create my imaginary friends. It felt more like an organic process, the same way you don't sleep and consciously construct your dreams although dreaming is a product of your mind. I knew the images I bumped into were nothing more than my products of my imagination, but I couldn't sit down and make them do shit like they are my puppets; when I did they ceased being my imaginary friends but rather hollow images of my "real" imaginary friends. Therefore, I always treated them like persons with free will, rights, and independent personalities. So I had to get to know Macxermillio, rather than create him.

Around the third time when Macxermillio paid me a visit, outside the dreams, he was accompanied by a fellow with white dyed hair on a black horse, wearing a red and black cloak. He introduced himself as, you guessed it, Macfearson. He was subservient to Macxermillio to an extent, either he feared or respected him. He wasn't subservient to me though and he gave me a tough time sometimes. Then there was another version of me, it looked like me and spoke like me yet it did not think like me, feel like me or was me. He was always referred to as Lebohang, which is my second name, to avoid confusion of having two Sandys in a group. But everyone knew he was Sandy, I hated that to be honest with you. All of the imaginary friends were subservient to Macxermillio, this shows itself in the novel in some interesting ways, because Macxermilio is reserved, methodological and clever he isn't very aggressive in his managing style or ostentatious about his power and position. He fairly takes into consideration other people's views and comes up with the best decision for the good of everyone involved, so he is also considerably selfless and protective.

The band, Macxermillio, Macfearson and Lebohang, has been my imaginary friends for so long and actually been with me through difficult times. They studied with me, went to the hospital with me, looked after me when I was sick, and also encouraged me when I felt like giving up. There is only so much they could because they are immaterial, they couldn't stop

me from doing other harmful things from myself or from my suicidal attempts.

Now I'm sure you have realized how essential and important is the Macxermillio character, by the way the Macxermillio and Macfearson in the book are the same as my imaginary friends except in this novel I have put them in a situation for a purpose. I don't know if this matters, but they agreed to it, we sat together and decided on it and everything. Instead of having the second version of me remain Lebohang in the novel I named gave him the name which is really his, Sandy. It did not make sense to call him Lebohang when he wasn't going to be me in the book. So there wasn't going to be any confusion. Since all the imaginary friends subservient to Macxermillio are "Macxermillian" in a sense. That is why Sandy is: Sandy Macxermillian.

I hope all of this makes sense and reveals why Sandy, in the novel, is Sandy. Now a main character in a novel having the same name as the author might have other effects and spawn a whole number of interpretations and I think that is okay. I have some things in common with Sandy, a lot, but he just isn't me. And since the book is written in first person this relationship between author and main character gives the illusion of the story being non-fiction, therefore amplifying the story's importance and intended function.

## The Three Faces of Sandy

Although the ending of the novel allows for many interpretations as to what is meant by “imaginary friends” there is one thing that is clear. Sandy, Macxermillio and Macfearson, work as a single unit. Just how this trinity functions is the interesting part and reveals a lot about the nature of the main character(s) and illuminates some of the things that occur in the story and lends a lot of meaning to how and why the story ended as it did.

The trinity is modeled, in part, over the Freudian concept of the id, ego and the superego. For more information on these go online, I’m going to touch a bit on these here.

Id – the id it is irrational and fantasy orientated. It is pure desire and instinct, all it wants is to fulfill these basic instincts and desire not matter the cost or the consequences. It is the most primitive part of our psyche and it is largely unconscious and impulsive.

Ego – it is orientated around problem-solving; realistic and rational it is. It negotiates ways, between us and our world, which can fulfill the desires or

urges exerted by the id while avoiding the most pain it can to the self.

However, it does not have a sense of right and wrong.

Superego – it is the voice of conscience and the source of guilt in most of us. It is aware of right and wrong, values and the society at large. If a person gives in to the desires of the id without listening to conscience, it can punish you by guilt and other uncomfortable emotions or thoughts; the reverse of that will be making us feel proud when we do something right.

Now the trinity itself is divided into these functions or a version of them. Instead of these functions being part of one psyche they are personalized and function as three distinct personalities who have their own psyches (or at least they are presented that way).

Macfearson is the id, he is the most primitive and instinct bound of the trinity. He has these erratic energies and passions inside him, obsessive, impatient and not easily influenced by reason. He is brute desire and feelings. The only thing keeping him on check is Macxermillio who Macfearson is subservient to him largely because of the reasons I have elaborated on previously.

Macxermillio is the voice of conscience, reason. He is the superpergo and also part ego. He is the intelligent, meticulous, even-tempered and strategic one of the trinity. Without him, they have no direction and they are bound

to self-destruct, he brings order to chaos, calm to the storm and direction to aimlessness. However, sometimes, although rarely, he can get side-tracked because of his tremendous responsibilities that is why he sometimes needs Macfearson to remind him of what they are about (a bit of passion).

Macfearson needs him the most though, without Macxermillio he is bound to wind up in trouble; he requires the moderation. Macfearson without Macxermillio is oblivious to the consequences of his actions, he is race car without breaks. Macxermillio without Macfearson is a machine without a soul.

One of the chapters that illustrate this dynamic is Chapter 3.2

Sandy is part ego and part id and he is also the axis at which these personalities meet. Since he is the one with a body, or the real one, the others depend on him to exist simply because they are 'in his mind'. Contrary to intuition, that does not make him the strongest force in the trinity or the most significant. He might be the body that moves about in the world, but he is not in complete control. He, like Macfearson, is also subservient to Macxermillio. He is also drawn more to Macxermillio because, like Macxermillio, he is rational and pragmatic, at the same time Macfearson is a part of him and he sympathizes with bits of his personality because after all he is half-id.

This is why the death of Macxermillio by the calling is important, it signals the triumph of irrationality, instinct, confusion and brute forces because the force that keeps everyone together and sane is annihilated, namely Macxermillio (the superego and half-ego). Why does that happen? What is it that takes away this element of common sense and conscience? The only element capable of understanding reality or society? The trinity's, or Sandy's, only hope of dispelling its delusions? Well, the simple answer is depression. The complicated answer is the calling.

Since Macfearson, being the personification of brute desire and instinct, is the most homicidal and extremely suicidal force, that is also obsessed with the fields/the crop, he is left to reign over the weaker Sandy, who is half-ego and id and no superego therefore no match for Macfearson. This is why the self-destruction creeps in once Macxermillio is removed and the novel takes a somewhat exaggerated erratic turn. There is no moderation, a voice of conscience or a sense of direction remaining. That is why the book ends like it did.

It's worth noting that although Macxermillio is the voice of conscience and direction, he is a different kind of conscience that holds unusual values, beliefs and moral standards. This is because he is a conscience in a mentally ill mind. A mind that is warped and twisted. Perhaps the most important thing about him is that he represents the capacity to heal. He is the hope because he can initiate change and see the world as it really is.



The trinity, in a sense, is a state of perpetual internal conflict since the others are “imaginary friends” except Sandy. However, in a way, the trinity is Sandy Macxermillian and Sandy Macxermillian is the trinity: this is why I titled essay this “Three Faces of Sandy”.

## **The Calling**

What is it? What does it do or how does it affect the characters? Why did Macxermillio call it “father”? Well, this is a complicated answer. I sometimes get confused by it myself and I created it, this is because it has gotten so complex. To try and make this answer easy I will answer this question in the following sections:

- A Metaphor
- An Entity
- Influences and Relations
- A Worldview

A Metaphor

The calling is, as alluded to in Cheryl's Notes, a metaphor of clinical depression and other mental illnesses that may come with it. Think of all the symptoms of depression, that is what the calling is. So every time in the book when the character's say "the calling is getting stronger" or "can you feel the calling" what they are saying is that their mental condition is getting worse. Here is a list of the depressive symptoms prevalent in this book and are constantly referred to in different ways, sometimes indirectly by characters suddenly changing behavior:

- Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.
- Loss of appetite
- Sleep changes
- Loss of energy
- Self-loathing
- Concentration problems
- Crying spells
- Extreme sadness and pain
- Emptiness
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Frequent or recurrent thoughts of death and suicidal/homicidal thoughts (should be noted that homicidal thoughts are very rare)
- Neglecting hygiene
- Self-harm

- Delusional thinking

I feel there is much more than the list says, but I think you get the point. With self-harm, it is interesting to note that the characters use it so they may feel better for a while(to dispel the calling) but this act is nonetheless a symptom of mental illness. Self-harm can only get worse as it did with Calvin which the trinity refer to when advising Sandy about using self-harm to curb the “weight of the calling”(the psychological pain).

### An Entity

The calling is also a personification of clinical depression and the mental illness that may come with it. In the novel Sandy speaks to the calling (Chapter 6.4), the calling is described as some enigmatic abyss-like creature when it kills Macxermillio(Chapter 11.5). They refer to the calling speaking to them and they do not know whether they should trust it or not. They wonder if it is their guide to the home or it is a product of the universe that is rejecting them since they consider themselves not belonging in this universe.

They did all the homicidal experiments as a way to test if the calling was to be trusted but that came to no avail that is why they tried therapy. More on this on the fourth section of this essay.

## Influences and Relations

So Macxermillio calls the calling “father” when it reveals itself to him right before killing him. This exchange reveals that there wouldn’t be Macxermillio or Macfearson if it wasn’t for the calling. How so? Well, remember in Chapter 4 when Sandy meets Mafearson and Macxermillio for the first time? In Chapter 4.2 Macfearson tells him a story of “how it starts”. Read that and come back here if you can’t remember. What Macfearson is telling Sandy or what that reveals is how the depression started and the sense of alienation. The depression made him weird and, as a result, his peers, family and others rejected him or forgot him. Maybe because he was already in the process of alienating himself as people with depression often do.

As a result of Sandy’s loneliness and alienation (depression) he creates “imaginary friends” or the “imaginary friends” come to him. Therefore the calling (depression) twisted and warped his brain and life until Macxermillio and Macfearson came out of him. In a sense, this makes the calling the father to who Sandy, Macxermillio and Macfearson end up becoming because it shapes their feelings, bombards them with thoughts, distorts their perception and filters their experience. A child who grows up depressed or with depression is very much molded by the illness(the illness

influences their identity and what it becomes) if it is left untreated and that is what is being insinuated in the book.

In Chapter 11.5 Macxermillio calls the calling “father” when this insight is revealed to him and the calling calls him “son”. Why did he apologize to the calling? Because he hasn’t been a very good son, he tried his best not to listen to what the calling/depression orders out of him. Since the calling is the stronger force in the book it eventually beats common sense and rationality, aka Macxermillio, and kills him. This alludes to ways in which delusional thinking and some of the ways depression can affect our thinking, often killing rationality, distorting perception and keeping us delusional. That is why Macxermillio goes in the end, because depression, left untreated or not treated quickly enough, only gets worse and more powerful.

### A Worldview

The calling isn't a worldview, but it is responsible for a worldview the same way it is responsible for Macxermillio and Macfearson. Because of the alienation created by it and the suffering Sandy/the trio started to believe that he does not belong in this world, not even in heaven or hell. In fact, he/the trio strongly believed that they came to exist into this world by a mistake. They even had a name for who they were, *deathlings*. They even

had a name for where they belonged, the crop or the fields. But what does all of this really mean? To answer this, I am going to reveal to you their entire worldview/theory.

It is important to understand realms of existence as Sandy/the trio understood them. When they refer to “this world”, “the universe” or “this existence” in the book what they are referring to is a realm of existence, they are not talking about earth, a country, a universe, a parallel universe or the town. What they are referring to is a concept that goes along the lines of a mode of existence.

What is a realm of existence?

The simplest way I can explain it is in this way. Think of all that exists or you know to exist as in our picture of cosmology today. Think of the universe, the parallel universes and multiverse. All of that, to Sandy/trio, belongs to this world. It is one mode of existence. What they have in mind is that our entire picture of cosmology is only one way that things could be or exist. Not only are there other universes spatiotemporally separated from ours but they are made with a different kind of stuff altogether (not matter as we understand it but something completely alien and incomprehensible to us).

There is a finite number of these realms of existence, Sandy/trio believed, and they are thinly next to each other like slices in a loaf of bread except that in between these slices there are membranes separated the modes of existence. These membranes are where all things are formed in their pre-existing state and according to the essence of the entities formed they send the entities to their appropriate realm of existence/homes. Occasionally, a mistake happens and entities formed in the membranes are transported to realms of existences which aren't appropriate to them. And that is precisely, they theorized, what happened to them as *deathlings*. The simple meaning behind the term, as they used it in the beginning of the novel, was that they belonged in a different mode of existence altogether and the name of every intelligent being from that mode of existence is a *deathling*. They called that realm of existence the crop/the fields. They theorized that suicide done the right way might send them across into the membrane which might then direct them to their home where they belong instead of hell, heaven or the afterlife which still belongs in this realm of existence. That is what all the homicides(the sampling) were about in the novel, they were experimenting in hopes of finding the perfect suicide to transmit them to the crop/fields/home. Of course, they begin doubting and thinking their entire method is false, after killing Jay, and they regroup and try come up with an alternative while they figure things out, that is when the idea to see a therapist comes in.

They came to believe this because of the anguish that resulted from being depressed and mentally ill, and because of the delusions engendered by mental illness (the calling) they formed this worldview. In this worldview, their conception of death is transmittal unlike in the end of the novel when this view is shattered and death is an annihilator and they conclude that they are inanimate entities trying to pass on as living things, therefore, explaining their discomfort and anguish.