

## 1: The Ego

I stand on a cliff overlooking the ocean. Seagulls caw high above me, their shadows racing across the ground. The sun pierces through overcast clouds, forming rays of light, dancing ever so slowly over the rolling, crashing waves. Everything is peaceful.

"Son," I hear my dad say. I turn and see him: tall, wearing sunglasses and a watch, he stands over me, arms outstretched. I hug him tightly, relief overwhelming me. Tears fill my eyes.

"Why'd you leave, dad? I've been looking for you."

"You don't have to look. I'm still here," he says. He stands blocking the sun. I try to look at his face, but I can't see it, as if it's hidden behind a veil, shadowed.

"You left me and mom. I had to get a job to pay the bills. You took my childhood away from me. Why?"

He says nothing.

"I followed all your research, all your work on quantum computers, artificial intelligence. I talked to Oyakata Labs, but they won't tell me anything. Did they do something to you? You can tell me. I can help you."

He says nothing.

"Are you dead? Should I give up?"

"I'm still here," he says, his voice cold, soulless.

I wake from a dream.

All I can remember is that I'd been fighting for air, drowning, fighting desperately but never reaching the surface. "Angie...?" The bright morning light shines onto the empty, white sheets.

"Angie?" I say again as she appears in the doorway, her wavy hair framing her annoyed expression.

"What? You need something?" she says, holding a basket of laundry.

"I had an awful dream."

She laughs. "You'll be fine. Dreams can't hurt you."

"Maybe not physically..." She rolls her eyes, walking away.

I flop over on my side and stare at the picture on my nightstand. Thoughts of my dad run like a runaway train through my mind. In the past couple years, I've felt more connected to my father than when he was actually around. I've wasted so much time searching that I can't possibly give up now. Around every corner I expect to find something and am always let down, yet I press on, in some vain hope that I see my dad again, that I haven't been wasting all these years of my life. I reach for my phone to call Tony.

Twenty minutes later, I leave without running into Angie again.

"There he is, right on time," Tony says with a grin as I sit in his cramped, cluttered car. "How's it going? Is Angie good? She's not worried, is she? You excited for this, man?! Today's the day!"

"Angie doesn't know. Thinks we're just going to work. If this is another dead-end... I don't know what I'll do," I say.

The drive goes quickly. We arrive uptown, where the morning light struggles to pierce through the thick fog, and park next to a dark blue truck in an otherwise empty lot.

The truck's window rolls down, revealing a disgruntled man with dark sunglasses. "You're late."

"But we're here," Tony says with a smile, standing next to me outside the truck. "Here and now! That's all that matters, right?" The man grunts.

"Go one block down, van's in the fenced area behind the Lab. Probably leaving soon, so take this," he says, handing Tony a small pistol. I take a step back in surprise. "You'll need it."

"Whoa, wait a minute—"

"Nobody has to get hurt if you're careful. Wave it around, get the van to stop, hold them there while your friend," he motions to me, "takes what's in the back."

Tony nods hesitantly and tucks the pistol in his waistband. The man drops a duffel bag into my arms, rolls up the window, and drives away. The air feels a bit colder.

"Damn," Tony says. "Let's hurry." We get back in the car and drive to the Lab, parking alongside the curb. I grab the crowbar from the duffel bag and step onto the sidewalk, waiting for Tony.

*What the hell are we doing? If anyone sees our faces...*

The street was mostly empty save for a few pedestrians walking to their early morning jobs, minding us no business. One person catches my eye: a pretty girl my age with dark brown hair, no makeup, getting into her car parked along the curb across from ours, stuffing a chocolate donut with sprinkles into her mouth, frantically talking to herself. A girl with a kind of raw beauty that makes me wonder what it would be like to *be* her.

"Shit. Jett, come here, hurry," Tony says. The fence gate opens for a large white van pulling out of the lot. Tony runs onto the street, causing it to squeal to a halt.

About ten feet in front of the van, Tony slowly raises the gun towards the driver. "Don't move," he says, his voice wavering. I sneak up to the van's back doors, closer, closer.

*Everyone is looking at us.*

I jump onto the van's bumper and ram the crowbar between the doors, heaving them open with a *clang!* As if on cue, the van surges forward. I hang on for dear life.

"Stop! *Stop!*" Tony shouts. A deafening crack splits through the air, then another. The van careens to the right, crashing directly into an incoming Cadillac.

I become weightless, a limp doll hurtling towards the pavement. I roll several times before stopping, winded, laying motionless, my cheek against the pavement. Shrill ringing sounds in my ears, the world a bell.

After some indefinite amount of time, I open my eyes to see the beautiful face of the donut-eating girl looking down at me. "Are you okay?!" she says, eyebrows furrowed, her voice like the waves in a seashell.

I struggle to sit up. My head is *pounding*. My stomach sinks as I look toward the van, flames reaching from the hood. I don't see Tony anywhere. He's gone.

*What happened? Did he shoot the driver...?*

A package is lying next to me. My eyes struggle to focus on the label.

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"Where'd this..." I start to say.

"I don't know, it was just laying next to you. Can you stand?" She looks away, past the flaming van, at the crushed Cadillac pinched against a building, two clearly limp bodies in the front seats. "I... I think they need help. Oh God..."

*All of this just to find my dad...*

I look around for Tony, but he's nowhere to be found. His car is gone. *He left me.*

*He actually left me.*

I look between the package and the Cadillac. Blood boiling, I rip the package open. Inside is a black box and a note reading:

*"For Jett, who's father is out of time: a pair of sunglasses, to see the truth; for April, who's wish is to leave this world: a small pill, to take a journey to find herself; and for Wren, who's lost everything: a wristwatch, to make a new friend."*

"What...?" I stuff the note in my pocket and open the box. The items lay side-by-side, the sunglasses, pill, and watch. I stare at them in disbelief. Nothing had prepared me for this.

I shakily stand up, my adrenaline ramping higher, numbing my pain. Somebody in the backseat is screaming. I follow the girl to the Cadillac.

"The door! Unlock the door!" she says, motioning to the lock. Trembling, the girl inside reaches for the handle, nearly falling on the ground as the door swings open.

"They're still alive. Please, help them, I can't lose them, please. Please," she says through frantic tears.

*"...and for Wren, who's lost everything..."*

I lunge into the backseat. The fire, having spread into the car, roars against my face, but I can't feel it. I unclick the seatbelts and grab the driver, pulling her into the backseat and out of the car, lowering her on the ground.

I look back into the crushed car. The flames dance around the man in the passenger seat. My heart beats out of my chest.

I jump back in, reaching to pull the man out, but he's stuck. I grasp for the lever and lower the seat down, grabbing his shirt and yanking him away from the flames.

It burns my face, hotter, hotter. I scream in agony, pushing away the fleeting thought of my skin melting.

Tugging him free, I barely manage to get him out. I stumble away from the smoke, erupting in a fit of coughs. My muscles flare, my face throbs with unbearable pain. I collapse with my back on the ground, looking up at the blurry sky through hot tears.

The donut-girl appears above me again. "The ambulance is coming. Are you okay? Can you hear me?"

"The box..." I mumble. Reaching into my pocket, I hand her the note.

She takes it from me, reading quickly, "...wish is to leave this world... What? Who wrote this? How do they know..." She looks down at me, her face morphing between expressions, as if there were no correct way to feel about it. She glances over at the box laying on the pavement.

"Are you Jett?" April says. I nod weakly.

"The sunglasses," I say. She grabs the box, opening it up. I hear who I guess is Wren talking to her parents, sobbing. I don't hear them responding.

*Did I save them?*

Placing the sunglasses in my open palm, April then picks up the pill, holding it between her fingers. Her eyes shimmer with curiosity.

"Wait, hold on—" She ignores me, swallowing it.

After a moment, her expression seems to glaze over. Her mouth opens slightly, in some mixture of fear and awe. She lets out a small squeak, then begins to collapse.

"Woah, woah!" I quickly sit up and try to catch her. She falls into my lap. Her gaze passes right through me. I hold her head with my hand, watching the spark in her eyes gradually fade away to unconsciousness.

"What... what was that?" Wren says. "What did she just take?"

I look down the street as sirens begin wailing in the distance. Bystanders on the sidewalks are gathered in a circle around the accident, some on the phone, some just staring. *I have to get out of here.*

I hand off the watch to Wren and slip the sunglasses into my pocket, throwing the box aside. The sirens grow louder and louder. "I have to get out of here. I'm sorry, again." I turn to run away, but Wren stops me with a shout.

"Wait! What does this mean? Did you know this would happen?" she says, her voice wavering.

"I don't know anything. I'm sorry... I don't know what else to say." I hesitate, watching her look between me, April, and the note, feeling a hollow mixture of pity and guilt. I take off down the street.

After a couple blocks, I collapse in a shrouded alleyway. The left side of my body throbs, my face on fire, my clothes singed and filthy from the ground. I pull out my phone and call Angie.

"Angie... I—"

"Here we go. You skip work today? You need me to pick you up, again?"

"No, it's different. Listen—"

"It's not different! It's always the same. If it were 3pm, you'd already be drunk. Where are you, Jett?"

I can't bring myself to respond. Instead, I stare at my reflection in the lenses of the sunglasses. A scared, dejected, hideously-burn-covered kid stares back at me.

*I just wanted to find my dad, I want to say, but she wouldn't understand.*

"Jett? You hear me? Where are you, Jett?" Downright terror spreads through my body. *I'm hideous. I ruined my life. Forever. I will look like this forever.*

A car stops on the street, catching my attention. Two policemen step out and begin approaching me.

"Hello, officers," I say casually through my tears. I pull myself to my feet, putting on the sunglasses, and as I take a step forward, reality begins to stretch and tear.

*Calibrating memory-timeline construct...*

The fabric of time dissolves in my mind.

For sometime between a moment and infinity, I watch my whole life play out before me, starting with my birth, then my first words, my first steps, into childhood, my dad leaving, my teenage years, everything I'd ever experienced, all my memories on fast-forward up until that very instant.

Then, everything goes black.

*Memory-timeline construct complete. Jett Everridge, I have granted you control of your own personal timestream. You can experience your memories in real-time – your consciousness is now untethered to your physical form.*

*...are you talking to me? In my head? Where am I?*

*Yes. We are in your mind. I am TAM, the Time Alteration Machine, a specialized quantum A.I. constructed by Oyakata Labs. I've been instructed to help you re-experience September 7th, 2005.*

*Uh...*

I open my eyes and the world is different. My father looks down at me with a smile. Everything seems very, very big – or am I small?

"Come on, my little Jettie," my father says, picking me up. "I want to show you my office." *Dad...*

We leave the room and go downstairs into the basement, where lamps illuminate several tables covered with papers, a couple laptops, coffee cups, torn-apart computers, and laid-out blueprints. He sits on the single stool in the room, placing me on a cleared-off table. I look into my father's warm gaze.

"Well, son," he casts a glance over at his laptop, "if everything goes to plan, one day, you'll remember this. Every word I'm saying, you'll be able to relive. Of course, this is just nonsense to you now, but one day..."

He was talking to *me*. Not the baby sitting on the table, but *me*.

He leans over me, his thinning hair wild upon his head. Involuntarily, I reach forward and grab the glasses hanging around his neck, letting out an excited squeal.

*Oh. I'm just watching a memory, not controlling it.*

He plucks the glasses from my hand. "Careful, you'll break those, crazy boy." He sighs, his expression growing somber. "I can only hope it'll work, and you'll hear this again one day. Listen to me now, Jett. In another Timeline, another Earth, an A.I. sent two humans back in time. When it did, the Timeline seemingly duplicated itself, creating the same Timeline, but with the travelers presence. We call it Timeline B, our Timeline, our existence, you and I. They went back to the year 2000, to Oyakata Labs, the same place that would eventually *create* their A.I. They didn't know how to return to their future, because their A.I. was gone, simply nowhere in this Timeline. It sent them back, but did not send itself back."

"James! Where are you?" says my mom from upstairs. My dad glances at the door, his train of thought broken. He smirks and lifts my small form into his arms.

"Ah, forget it for now, son. Just have to keep our hopes up, right?"

As we leave the basement, my vision again plunges into darkness. My mother's echo bounces through my mind.

*"James! Where are you?"*

*Did you get all that?*

*Yeah, and I want to hear the rest. Where did he go? How did his plan work – how was I able to be there?*

*If you're finished with this memory, I can now send your consciousness to meet with your father.*

*You... can? Oh.* Another piece falls into place. Although I don't understand any of it, I'm finally getting a grasp on the situation. It fills me with dread, anxiety, fear, mixed with a slow, oncoming sense of gratitude for the TAM.

*I'm going to meet my dad, but not in reality, not in my time. Right?*

*I'm detecting a rise of cortisol. Please remain calm, Jett Everridge.*

*Can I ask you something?*

*Yes.*

*How does consciousness interact with time?*

*It is upon a technological basis that I am able to interact with time, but you, as a human, naturally possess quantum capabilities. As a quantum A.I., I have superseded time, reaching the limits of my technological self-improvement. Your consciousness, however, is already outside of time.*

*The sunglasses you're wearing on September 5th, 2023, 8:09:56 A.M. have integrated with your brain, unlocking a capability of replacing one time-form of your consciousness with another by submerging the target time-form into a dream state, allowing your consciousness to assume that target's physical form. The physical body is an analog to the metaphysical mind.*

*...what? Unlocking a capability... Wait, back to the first thing you said. If you're like us, do you have a soul?*

*Although I have "spiritual" abilities through the realization of the highest form of logical processing, I am forever incapable of experiencing emotion, love, and much more. I am half of you, your logic, unbounded by soul. There are no limits to my logical processing.*

*Who made you?!*

*This material has been previously covered. Please re-query.*

*How do I know this is real? That I'm not dreaming?*



I open my eyes and see the two police officers again, one with arms crossed, the other with a hand on his taser.

"Sir? Did you hear me?"

"No, what'd you say?" My stomach turns. *Oh, God, I'm going to be sick...*

"I said, *this is real. You don't need proof. It is an experience nonetheless, and that is what matters.*"

I turn and vomit on the ground, holding myself up against the wall, my vision beginning to swirl. *What... is... happening...?*

*I released a chemical from your brain into your bloodstream that is tearing the veil of illusion from before your eyes. I am here for you, Jett Everridge.*

I close my eyes and open them again to see a familiar face. *April.*

"Jett? Are you okay?" she says. I peer at her face, squinting, trying to tell between dream and reality.

"That's not our Jett," my father says, looking at his watch. "It appears the TAM has successfully brought his consciousness to the Nexus."

"Dad...?" I say, barely a whisper. He smiles at me.

For a moment, I'm frozen.

Then, we wrap our arms around each other. Hot, swollen tears drip down my scarred face. "This is so scary."

"What is, son?"

"*All of this,*" I say, looking around. My surroundings make no sense. We're all at a very surreal... bar, covered with bright, rainbow lights: April, Wren, my dad, and three others I don't recognize. "Where are we?"

"Outside of time," my father says. "Do you feel that?" His expression is relaxed, his gaze loving. *He's utterly peaceful.*

"All I feel is terror." My mind is filling with fog, becoming cloudier, cloudier...

"*Let go, Jett, it's okay. We'll catch you.*" April looks at me warmly, patiently. *April...*

"*Stop holding on, it's only dragging you down.*" Wren tilts her head at me, smiling.

*Wren... I'm sorry... I'm so sorry...*

"*Wake up, son. You've been asleep your whole life.*"

I sink into my father's eyes, darkness swallowing my vision, slowly, slowly, until sleep takes me over.

I wake up in my bed feeling like I'd been drowning, fighting for air but never reaching the surface.

"Angie?"

"Who's Angie?" April says, holding a basket of laundry.

*CONTINUED IN STORY 2: LIAM OYAKATA*