

Death is a dream vacation sweepstakes.

And here I am, Ram the Lowly Reaper, the big chicken-dinner winner.

*Tell Ram what he's won, Bob!* Well, Jim, our lucky death sweepstakes winner receives a one-way, first-class ticket to the Great Beyond Resort where he'll spend infinite days and nights swimming in the Big Black River watching our sun expand outward and engulf the quicksand beaches of Endless Void! On top of all that, our lucky prize winner will get to spend Forever alone and adrift in the Oblivion Sea of Regret and Eternal Damnation!

Yeah, I'm a real motherfuckin winner.

Least that's what you'd think standin in the lobby of the Death Notification Agency. Floor-to-ceilin digital walls displayin ever-so-slow-movin images of peaceful shit like islands or forest landscapes – the DNA's way of hintin to their walkin-dead clientele that maybe, just fuckin *maybe*, their afterlives could be spent in some blissed-out postcard with marshmallow clouds and orgasm happy hours. But make no mistake... we're in the belly of the minotaur. Death pays the mortgage here at the House of Nevermore.

This, my friends, is the Tombstone.



Don't be fooled by the pleasant bureaucratic propaganda spewin outta the ten-foot-tall DNA holoployees "walkin" among the hundreds of doomed citizens waitin to talk with real flesh-and-bone *employees* about one thing only...

Death notices.

"Here, at the Death Notification Agency, we put the power of death in *your* hands. We are here to help with your Transition and make sure you begin your upcoming journey with the peace of mind you and your loved ones deserve. Please remember there are no extensions or corrections to death notices. If you here to file an appeal or an extension, you may do so, but an investigation will only be carried out *after* your Transition. We want to remind you that the Machine is never wrong. Your time is limited and may be better spent preparing for The Great Adventure that lies ahead. But if you choose to continue waiting, we welcome you and thank you for your

patience. Please listen for your number to be called and make your way to the corresponding window. We look forward to assisting you today and hope we can resolve any issues you may have in life, and of course, in death.”

*The Machine is never wrong.*

Did you catch that bullshit buried under all that other bullshit? The DNA’s constant little reminder about their precious fuckin Machine. I swear on all that’s Holy – mothers, children, clits, cocks and sushi – I’m gonna enjoy burnin this bitch down.

I know, that’s a whole lotta talk for a hairy overgrown baby in an aloha shirt scheduled to take the Big Nap in twelve hours and seven minutes.

Better off than poor Jonesy.

She has under two hours left on her clock. Not like you could tell. I look over at my sister-in-arms and she’s got a little piss-lickin grin on her face, just takin in this whole federal agency shitshow. From the giant halo of light stretchin across the entire ceilin spewin pixels out to form those ten-foot holoployees to the DNA seal etched into stone underneath the worn soles of hundreds of folks here to fight for their pathetic lives.

It’s an upside-down tree of life.

That’s the DNA seal you can see all over this Church of Death. It’s a circle with a buncha fancy words in Latin or some shit, then a tree of life with an upside-down tree growin underneath it. The DNA’s subtle way of suggestin there’s life after this one, that life grows down into the dirt same as we grow up out of it.

What a fuckin joke.

I spit on the DNA seal under my boots – my own tiny shot across the bow – as I hear Jonesy huffin and puffin, anxious to get her rocks off.

“Where’s Camille?” asks Jonesy.

“Give her a fuckin minute.”

“Don’t have too many left to give.”

Sure, Jonesy's losin patience, but there's somethin else brewin in her pot.

"You good, princess?"

"Fuck off, Ram. The bag's getting heavy is all."

Jonesy shifts under the weight of the military duffle she's got slung over her shoulder. You could kill ten thousand people with what's in that bag. But it ain't the bag or what's *in* the fuckin bag that's weighin on her...

"I'm scared, too, Jonesy."

"*Scared?* I don't think so, old man. I haven't been scared since I fashioned my junk into a slit. These fucking bureaucrats in here talk about death being a Transition. Fuck Death. Try lopping off the head of your dick to make a clit. Now that's a fucking transition."

Jonesy's got me laughin.

Can't help it. She's one of the funniest motherfuckers alive. At least for a little while longer. I'm gonna miss her if we can't find this Moirai and set this shit straight. But the sad reality is, I probably won't keep her waitin on the next earth too long. Chances are we'll be shit-talkin our way through the goddamn afterlife together. If there is one, which I'm pretty sure there fuckin ain't.

"There she is," says Jonesy.

Camille, my guardian angel, who never asked for this fucked-before-it-started bodyguard gig, is across the lobby tryin to use her DNA credentials to get into a special section manned by fifteen armed guards. But she won't get past 'em. We know that 'cause *she* knows that. This is part of our plan.

Well, *her* plan.

See, Camille's the only one who's been here before, so she gave us the whole layout when were plannin this jackpot. Above where Camille and the guards are standin, I can't help laugh at a sign with one of the DNA's stupid fuckin mottos:

SAY GOODBYE ON *YOUR* TERMS.

Underneath that dogshit that makes me wanna upchuck in my mouth is what the guards are guardin...

A golden elevator.

Sounds ritzy like outta one of those fairytale books I'd read to Sam and Olivia when they were young, but it ain't. This being a government agency just like any other, the only gold the DNA can afford is cheap plate over cheaper steel made in some other fuckin country no doubt. Nothin fairytale about it. I'd say this whole mess is more of a *cautionary tale*. Or a fable whose moral got kidnapped 'cause I ain't sure what I'm supposed to be learnin from this whole fuckin lesson. Either way, that gold shitbox is where we need to be.

That's the way to Moirai.

The way to my salvation. And judgin by the fact that Camille's now walkin away from the gun-totin guards and headed our way, through the 10-foot-tall holographic figures and the desperate-to-live crowd, I'm guessin we're gettin close to the start of the show.

Camille gets behind us in line.

"Don't turn around," she says.

"We set?" I ask without turnin.

"Yes, they know I'm here now," says Camille.

"I don't get it," says Jonesy. "Won't they care more that Ram's here if they really did set him up? Isn't *he* the one they want dead? Like deader than fucking dead? Like-?"

"Yeah, we get the point, Jonesy," I says.

But it's a fair question. I've caused these fuckers quite a bit of distress since I got my death notice handed to me in Lionel Dukes' office all those hours ago in District 598.4A. Hollywood, Florida. Shit. Feels like decades ago now. If there's any goddamn way I make it outta this whole death parade alive, one thing I won't be doin is goin back to Hollywood fuckin Florida.

"They already know he's here," Camille says.

"What? How?" Jonesy asks.

"The Slither," I realize.

*That fuckin Slither.*

I still got no real idea what the fuck it is... but besides killin me when my time's up, it's keepin tabs on me? 'Course it is. 'Course they know I'm here. They're in full control. The DNA, and this fuckin Magic Man Moirai knows everything about my life... and my fuckin death.

That's why we're here.

I get it. But Camille can see that Jonesy, being one of those analytical, rational types (unlike me), needs a bit more hard evidence to chew on before swallowing whatever she's fed, so Camille breaks it down further for my heavy-minded compatriot...

"Ram alone doesn't get us face time with Moirai. He doesn't meet anyone in person. He hides behind intermediaries. He's a ghost. An invisible hand. No one even knows what he looks like. And as far as killing Ram, it's easier for Moirai to just let Ram's Slither finish the job."

"And why do *you* matter to him so much?" Jonesy asks.

Jonesy must be gettin more suspicious the closer she gets to death. Or it's just good-ol Stranger Danger when it comes to Camille. Guess Jonesy's always been that way when it comes to new folks in her orbit. Hell, I understand, when it feels like the whole world's tryin to push you a fuckin cliff, you tend to ask a few more questions. But I can see Camille don't wanna do any more explainin to the dyin peanut gallery she's got in tow, but she's the type of woman – *my* type of woman – who's not afraid of a little confrontation.

"As a long-time DNA employee who is the only witness to a major cover-up, and the victim of that cover-up is also right here in this lobby, I – *we* – will start mattering to Moirai very soon. Any more questions, Jonesy? Take your time, not like it's running out or anything."

As Jones glares razorblades at Camille, I'm stuck on a word.

*Victim.*

That's the only thing I heard outta Camille's mouth just now. I

don't wanna be that no more. I've felt that way my entire no-good fuckin life. A victim of circumstance. A victim of my own bad decisions. A victim of loss, of fate, of hate, of heartbreak. I'm here to make a victim, not be one. Moirai's the only name I wanna see etched on this fuckin Tombstone. But first...

I gotta trap the ghost.

Camille's breaths are shallow, laced with panic – which puts me on edge. I know the sound 'cause I know fear. I know what it does to the frame. The mind. And right now, the fear's pinballin around in Camille's ribcage. She's scared. Not about what happened, or even what's happenin. But what's *goin* to happen. And I don't blame her...

Things are gonna get ugly.

"You sure this is gonna work?" Jonesy asks.

"They're calling upstairs as we speak."

Sure enough, one of the golden elevator guards hangs up a phone built into the wall. Then he grabs a small battalion of soldiers and starts headin Camille's way. But this ain't gonna be a friendly visit. I can tell by all the hands startin to position on the automatic weapons swingin from straps around their torsos. Told you...

This ain't no fuckin fairytale.

At least the plan's simple.

*We* move when *they* move.

"Time to nut up, Jonesy."

"About goddamn time," cracks Jonesy, who throws down that bag. It lands with a clunkin sound only made by heavy metal. Artillery. A siren call for ex-soldiers and killers.

Music to our ears.

As Jonesy rifles through the bag of murder tools, I feel Camille's hands on my body. She turns me around and pulls me close to her.

She kisses me.

"Don't die," she whispers into my mouth.

Camille's lips feel electric. But there's somethin in this kiss. Somethin I can't put my finger on. Somethin that sends a chill down

my spinal column. And that chill is tellin me that our best laid plans ain't gonna stack to shit... 'cause now we're in the Tombstone. We're in the ninth circle, and that little fuckin chill in my spine is tellin me this could be the last time I kiss this woman.

It's tellin me somethin ain't right.

"Camille—"

"Ram, we've been over this. It's the only way."

"What about your boy? What about Alston?"

"Don't do that, Ram."

"Do what?"

"Pretend to know me like that. My son is *all* I'm thinking about, believe me. He'll know I did the right thing. *This* is the right thing, Ram."

She's tryin to convince herself more than me.

"Then why don't it feel that way?"

"Because you're a good man."

She kisses me again.

I feel her on me as long as I can this time. And that chill in my spine... it ain't fuckin goin away. Must have some meanin to it, that instinct I carved over the years now screamin at me. But this ain't no time for psychobabble.

"Jonesy, toss me a burner."

Jonesy passes over a mod-pistol I never seen before, definitely some aftermarket, Iron-Park special. It's way too light for the full-auto power it's packin, she custom polymer framework with a 100-round dual-drum magazine attached. This thing could torch a fuckin village.

"Bit much, isn't it?"

"You said a burner, right?"

"Guess I did."

"Well, that's a fucking burner, Ram."

As that battalion of armed guards closes in, I take a deep breath. Then...



I take a hostage.

Just so happens I think I'm fallin in love with this fuckin hostage. But it's probably too late for me. And way too late for love.

I'll be dead soon.

That's the only thought jammed in my fuckin noodle as I feel the air rush outta my lungs and through my voice box...

*"Everybody get the fuck back!"*

Screams pierce the crowd on account of the considerable fire-power we got on display. The armed guards stop and get into battle formation, their assault rifles all mad-doggin me, itchin to put some copper teeth in my jugular.

So, here I am in the lobby of Death HQ, standin among hordes of people who are gonna be dead within 24 hours, with Jonesy's burner pointed at my hostage.

Camille.

So much for being a good man.