

SPEIRA



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Doo-doo-dee-doo.

The sound of the alarm fills Rao's bedroom. Too bright, the summer morning pounces on him, and he resists as long as he can. He was flying again last night, wasn't he? Those moments don't come often enough in his dreams, but at least he wasn't being chased and hunted for once.

Doo-doo-dee-doo.

Rao grunts, moans, stretches, and basically yells before reciting his morning mantra, "Fuck. OK fine," and grabs his phone to silence his alarm. No texts to read, no emails to respond to. *Perfect.*

Maybe today he can avoid all human interaction—except for the daily "What's for lunch, Rao?" from his circumferentially gifted co-worker, Hobin. There are, it turns out, *three* absolutes in life: death, taxes, and monotony.

Has the world always felt this static and lifeless? He vaguely remembers feeling something as a kid... what was it? Almost like an *anti-dread*? As if the universe hadn't all been mapped out in that damned book? Nevermind that, he didn't want to get into *that* argument again. He can't really remember his childhood, anyway. The harder he tries, the fuzzier it is.

Coffee. Coffee always helps.

Rao sluggishly slurks his way into the kitchen of his one-bedroom apartment to brew some liquid life, holding onto the memory of flying in last night's dream. He squeezes that feeling tightly as a lifeline until it fades away, leaving that familiar sinking feeling in its place.

In 9 hours he will be home again, and that'll have to be enough. Maybe he can go to sleep right after dinner tonight so he can chase that flying feeling. But until then...

Shower time, podcast on. Oh, shocker, another famous person who can do their *thing* perfectly. Ravishing. Tell me again how great you are at that thing; it really makes me feel alive. Wait, tracking *lions*? That's what you do? That's an option? Talk about a lucky draw.

Rao shakes off the resentment as he continues his morning duties, knowing he has to leave for his life-sucking job much too soon.

Every day, the same routine. The same jazzed up cop directing traffic with his giant hands, impossibly happy smile, and ninja-level peripheral awareness. A world of drones assigned to their *thing*, seemingly blissful and content.

Rao doesn't know what that feels like, and that's probably why he feels so alone. Doesn't anyone else think this whole existence is broken? Is there a purpose to any of it? Even the philosophers, as they rudely kicked him out of the library,

called these questions blasphemous. “It’s all been figured out,” they said. “Don’t ask why or how. Maybe you should read *The Handbook* again.”

Rao arrives at this desk, enclosed in a 3-walled prison of mundane repetition and flatlined inertia. His posture slumps, his eyes glaze over, his hand finds his phone. “Only 7 hours and 59 minutes,” he mutters to his Einstein bobblehead. “Did you ever have to cold call restaurants, Albert? How many leads did you have to generate at your desk job?”

Bobble, bobble. That wild look in his eyes, so full of life. How Rao longed to see that in the mirror.

“What’s for lunch, Rao?” Hobin asks.

“Same as always, Hob,” Rao replies dryly. “Monotony with a side of emptiness.”

“Oh, it’s not that bad. I really like making cold calls every day,” Hob says. “It’s so nice to not have to think. Heck, why would I bother with that? *The Handbook* says this life is perfect. When was the last time you read it, Rao?”

We’ve had this conversation dozens of times, Rao thinks to himself. That useless, oversimplified book has always been used against him. He’s read it *more* than a few times, in hopes that he could find hidden, cryptic gems in the stale text. He usually gives up right around section 2.1 entitled “Don’t Ask Questions. Do Your job.”

“You know, Hob,” Rao begins, “I just don’t think that book is as great as everyone says it is. They say they’re figured everything out, that if we follow the rules during this one life, we go to Heaven forever, and if we don’t, then we go to Hell forever.”

Hob starts to shift uncomfortably in his seat, a glob of mayonnaise ornamenting his upper lip. “So, our only choice is to color inside the lines,” Rao continues. “We’re told that the sky is blue because that’s the color that it is. We’re told that plants don’t have consciousness, so we can cut down as many trees as we want. Things are *just* what they appear to be, nothing more. There’s no magic, no mystery, no substance.”

Feeling a flame inside his chest begin to burn hotter, Rao continues, “There’s more going on here, Hob. Have you ever wondered why a spiral galaxy is the same exact shape as a hurricane or a nautilus shell? Have you ever pretended that trees, with their forking branches, are like lightning bolts shooting up from the ground? Don’t you think there’s more to life than *this*?” he gestures with his hands.

Silence. *Damn it. Lost him again.* Judging by the blank stare on Hob’s face and the ever-growing glob of mayonnaise on his lip, this conversation’s finished. “I’ll see you later, Hob,” Rao says with a forced smile as he gets up from the table. “Enjoy your sandwich.”

4pm. One more hour. *Blast, is it really only Tuesday? Does time pass more slowly when I'm unhappy and bored? It sure feels that way,* he thinks as he scrolls through photos of deep space on his phone. *What is time? Has time always been here? Does time exist after I die?*

"Rao, can you come with me, please?"

He was so lost in thought that he didn't even hear his manager, Eilaan, approach his cubicle.

"Rao, I don't want to keep having this talk with you," she says, in her sweet but firm motherly tone, dressed in her presidential clothing looking like the quintessential business woman. "If you want to keep your job, you need to be on the phones. Like *The Handbook* says, 'Your job brings you joy. It is *your* job. You are your job, and your job is you.' I'm starting to think your job isn't bringing you joy, but I can't begin to understand how that could be possible. You were sent here to work because it was a perfect match for your DNA profile. What's going on, Rao?"

How would he explain this without creating drama? How could he articulate the dreadful emptiness and intense longing that he's seemingly alone in feeling?

"Eilaan," he starts, "I think there's been some kind of mistake or error. I don't know. I'm full of questions. Questions that *The Handbook* ignores, and the answers it does provide seem wrong to me. I've tried to not think about these questions. I've tried everything. Working this job and trying to accept *The Handbook's* words as truth, I feel my soul being torn more and more every day. There has to be more to this life than we're being told."

She sighs audibly and looks him in the eye with deep sympathy which sends a shiver down Rao's spine. She reaches for her desk phone.

"Claudia," she says while holding the intercom button, "send her in."

Releasing the intercom button and turning back to Rao, she says, "I was afraid this was the case, and, Rao, I wish there was another way."

The door opens, and a woman with brown hair walks into the office, dressed in full officer gear and displaying a cold, hardened exterior. Despite looking no older than Rao, her badges and accolades suggest she is quite high rank. Every step calculated, every movement precise, she looks sharply at Rao.

Rao's heart begins to pound faster, fear setting in. But, there's something else. Some other feeling inside as though there's something odd about this officer. *Why does she look so familiar?*

She looks at Rao with intense eyes and says, "Rao Beleneur, identification number 81292KZA. I am Officer Valkyrie. You'll be coming with me."

Rao looks out the window of the black, unmarked van, watching the monochromatic urban sights pass by and taunt him with their grey uniformity. The heightened state of fear and intrigue he felt initially gave way to the familiar numbness that pervades his life, because even though this is a novel situation, he knows he'll just end up back in his apartment and at his desk, bored as ever.

Didn't I used to like summer? Rao wonders, trying to grab a memory but struggling to find anything solid. Lately he dreads the sunlight, the heat, and everything about summertime, so maybe it's always been that way for him. He can't really even remember what the other seasons feel like. It's as if he just woke up into this endless summer of day-after-day routine, and he can't remember what came before. Maybe he's dreaming, and this is just a nightmare? A nightmare that keeps going and going?

Well, at least this nightmare seems to be going *somewhere* now. Somewhere in a black van.

She'd actually be pretty cute if she had a soul, Rao thinks, glancing at Officer Valkyrie as she pulls out a rectangular tablet, sitting across from him in the back of the van. Her brown eyes fixated on the device in her hands, posture erect and stiff. She taps her fingers to the screen rapidly in a methodical pattern with almost machine-like precision, waking up the device. *Ah, an expert touchscreen tapper*, Rao thinks. *Every little girl's dream come true. Congrats, Officer. You did it. You've really made it.*

Officer Valkyrie looks up, meeting Rao's gaze. The look on her face is stern yet disinterested, an impenetrable shield of blandness that looks all too familiar to Rao. *Huh*, he thinks, *well that's interesting. Maybe she hates her job as much as I do. Or she just hates me? Yeah, probably that.*

"Before we arrive," Officer Valkyrie begins, "there are some questions I must ask you, so answer to the best of your ability." Rao returns his gaze to the world outside the window, wondering how this life is even real. So many people going around doing absolutely nothing, yet endlessly busy.

Out of the corner of his eye, a colorful image grabs his attention. Rao sees a homeless man on a street corner wearing a bright red shirt holding up a piece of cardboard, dancing as if he were a child and... *Is he smiling?* On his cardboard sign, written in thick black marker, reads three simple words: "What the fuck?"

What the fuck, indeed, Rao thinks. At least someone else gets it.

"Mr. Beleneur," Officer Valkyrie repeats, yanking Rao's attention back to the predicament he finds himself in, traveling who-knows-where in a van with Officer Tappyfingers. He turns to face her, meeting her cold stare, and nods his head slowly, a bit of worry and dread setting back in.

"Have you ever felt that your job is not fulfilling you?" she asks, looking down at her tablet, awaiting his answer.

Unsure if he should lie or just tell the truth to see where this goes, he sits for a moment, considering. He answers her question with his own question, "Could anyone honestly feel fulfilled from doing what I do every day?"

Fingers tap, tap, tapping away, face expressionless, she logs his answer.

"And have you ever questioned the purpose of your life?" she asks.

"The purpose of my life?" Rao replies. "You mean doing the same thing every day and feeling numb the whole time? Dreading getting out of bed, going through the motions, and then rushing to bed again? My dreams at night being the only

time I actually feel alive? Yeah, you can say I question the legitimacy of *that* as a purpose.”

Not looking up from her tablet, she continues, “And have you ever questioned *The Handbook*?”

Oh, I see where this is going, Rao thinks, feeling his heartbeat quickening again and anxiety making his body feel warm. *Whatever, this is still better than being at work. What do I have to fear? What could they take away from me?*

“Every single day of my life,” Rao responds, watching her type his answer, noticing her eyebrows raise slightly as if she’s finally arrived here in the van and is actually present.

She looks up slowly, meeting his eyes. “What is your deepest desire?” she asks, and he swears he sees something in her eyes that he didn’t before. *Is she actually interested in my answers now?* he wonders, that feeling of intrigue returning.

His periphery goes black, and all he can see is her face. Her brown eyes looking back at him, Rao gets lost in a timeless moment where all else dissolves except for Valkyrie. He sees the person sitting across from him, the *real* person. He sees the details of Valkyrie’s face and energy that betray her real self underneath her cold persona: her hair tucked behind her left ear with a single gold earring, the small freckle on her cheek, an air of innocence and intrigue.

Valkyrie breaks eye contact and looks back down at her tablet, only slightly flustered by what just transpired. *She’s really in there. Underneath this uniform is someone who sees what I see.*

Rao looks out the window again and answers her question, now with some passion, “I want to know why things are the way they are. I want to know how the universe works. I want to play music, but not the boring, repetitive excuse for music that’s on the radio. I want to create things that have never existed before. I want to go different places, meet new people. I want novelty. I want to feel like I’m actually helping make the world a better place.”

Turning to look at Officer Valkyrie, he finishes, “I want to feel another person and know that they feel me. I want to know that I’m not alone here. I just want some proof that I’m actually alive and that this isn’t a big cosmic mistake.”

He notices Valkyrie has lost her precision with typing, because she keeps having to go back and re-type, her fingers shaking subtly and causing errors. *Are you in there, Valkyrie?* he wonders.

The van comes to a stop, and Officer Valkyrie turns off her tablet, sliding it into her pack. She gets out of the van without saying anything further, and rushes away. Two armed guards approach the van and grab Rao by the arms, pulling him out of the van. Rao knows he can’t struggle free from their grip, and looks up to see an all black, obsidian building shaped like a giant geodesic dome looming ahead. The obsidian dome calls to Rao, sending a guttural droning sound through his mind that makes every hair stand up on end.

Where am I? What is this place? Rao wonders, terrified and helpless as the men force him up the stairs to the dome. Struggling with all his strength, he frees one of his arms but is quickly subdued again by the stronger men. One of the guards grunts in frustration as he squeezes more tightly.

Rao then feels a prick on his upper arm as the needle goes in, and immediately begins drifting, drifting, fading. The droning sound overcomes him, and he is swallowed by the obsidian dome.