

THE ART OF DEATH



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DENIAL



"The mind knows the truth when your heart denies what it feels. When you don't feel safe to let people in it is because you're not ready to deal with the pain of honesty."

-- SHANNON L. ALDER

HOPELESS OPUS



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I dedicate all the works I've made in the last almost year really but specifically those in this project to the team behind Death and Taxes. It will always hold a special place in my heart and I plan to stick around as long as I can. It's been my muse and my joy, and brought Tad, the love of my life, to me which I can never be thankful enough for. There has to be some serendipity in the fact that, under the most specific set of circumstances, we were brought together by our love for a character named Fate. What else do you call that?

Love and thanks for everything,
-Mich

HOPELESS OPUS

By Mich & Tad

APPROXIMATELY SEVEN DAYS FROM THE SCHEDULED END OF THE WORLD:

It is the 21st day of the month, and Grim is nervously bouncing on the balls of their feet in the elevator as it ascends to the top floor of the building. They are watching the levels tick by one by one, apprehensive anticipation building where their stomach should be. They are expecting a rather somber discussion today. Things are winding down, after all. Slowly but surely falling into place. The end of the world will be upon them, if all goes according to Fate's plan, one Week from today. And Grim is worryingly uncertain about the whole thing. They know this is what Fate wants of course, what they have insisted is best for everyone. But Grim isn't so sure. They've been worried about Fate, for awhile now. They agreed to this to...well, they aren't really sure what, if they're completely honest with themselves. To make them happy? Try to change their mind? Perhaps they have just enjoyed being useful, being trusted and confided in. If they were trying for the latter, clearly they haven't made much headway. Things are still chugging right along; the slow train to the ends of the Earth.

But upon opening the door to the office, Grim is greeted with an unexpected sight. Fate...isn't at their desk. Which has never once been the case when Grim has come up here before. Their jacket is thrown carelessly over the back of their chair, which is spun around and askew. There are several large stacks of papers that lean in anxiously teetering towers, clearly having been abandoned. Had Fate left? Had something...happened to them? Upon closer inspection they realize something even more worrisome. What at least very much appears to be an empty wine bottle is sitting on the desk as well as a newly opened one. A corkscrew with a cork still attached is abandoned nearby...

As Grim is trying to put the pieces together, the sudden booming of Fate's voice from across the room through the open space, several levels louder than necessary given the distance, makes them jump.

"Grim! Ha-ha!" Fate calls from across the room. They turn, in a heavy sway, almost spilling the glass of wine they're holding. They're uncharacteristically unkempt and disheveled. Bow tie undone, shirt half-untucked from their pants and crumpled. Their sleeves are hastily rolled up, the normally painstakingly ironed-straight cuffs getting crushed in the process. They've got a massive grin on their face that looks horribly out of place given the situation, and there's a lilting to their voice that comes out in something of a slur. "My my, aren't you a sight for sore eyes? Come here, come here my friend."

Grim gapes in utter shock, frozen in place. There is no way they are seeing or hearing this right. A bizarre dream? Or perhaps, a nightmare.

Fate laughs, which should be a welcome sound except it isn't. Grim would have felt the hair stand up on the back of their neck if they had any. It's a careening, mad laugh that sounds like it may just veer off the tracks at any moment. They sound..unhinged. "Don't be shy, c'mere!" They emphatically gesture Grim over.

This is very much real. Grim somehow gets their feet to work and they walk over cautiously, as if assessing the damage. This was the absolute last thing they would have expected to walk in to today.

As Grim gets closer, their eyes widen in fear and surprise and they have to force themselves to keep moving. While yes, Fate is grinning, there is an underlying almost..agony to it. There's a twist in their face that looks miserable underneath that overwhelming facade of being jovial, and it's...disturbing. Grim has never quite felt afraid of Fate before. Generally they're pretty easy to predict. Softspoken, poised, not one to give much away. More morose as of late, but generally in higher spirits since the plan has been going as ex-

pected. But right now Grim has absolutely no idea what Fate's going to do next, and the guilt and fear rise up again like bile in their throat.

"Ah, Grim. My, my loyal comrade, come, come look." They gesture out the window and put their other arm around Grim's shoulders, who definitely looks nervous and concerned. Fate doesn't seem to notice this, however. Nor do they notice Grim blush in confusion.

"Wh-" Grim's mouth has fallen open in shock at what they see. There are giant streaking balls of fire in the sky before them, blazing across the horizon in fiery arcs. It's almost beautiful, in a morbid sort of way. They're desperately trying to form the words to address the situation, and it is an uphill battle to say the least. "Is- is that a..are those..meteors?"

Fate gestures idly with their glass. Grim swears some of it spills. "Ahh, meteorites, my dear Grim. Three of em, n'fact."

"And they're all going to hit the Earth?"

"Of course." Fate shrugs. They tsk, "Ohh, no. You know what that means, hm?"

"Uh...w-what?"

Fate's tone is more serious now, their voice lower. They set their jaw more sternly, the jovial expression vanishing. "Oh they're going to be just dreadful for the economy...will really do a number on it, yes?"

Grim blinks at Fate in shock. What? The economy? It seems so outlandish and flat out absurd that they could be concerned about the economy of all things in the face of a massive natural disaster. What the hell was that going to matter, anyway? What, with the world ending? Grim shakes their head slightly and starts to say something. "I-..I- Wha-"

"hhA HAHAHA-" Fate snorts and breaks the serious expression, wheezing breathlessly with laughter. They keel

over forwards and slap Grim on the back. Grim watches in confused horror, shaking their head slowly in disbelief.

Fate stumbles somewhat when they straighten back up, squeezing Grim's shoulder as they pull them in again. Grim feels their face get hot, and in the heat of the moment they aren't entirely sure what from. "Ahh c'mon Grim, don't be so serious heh-heh, it's only the he- the end of the world?"

"Ah, look at em all," Fate sniffs and wipes at their eye, still recovering from their episode, "So, so many of em. Like little," they rest their wrist on Grim's shoulder for a moment to mimic pinching their thumb and first finger on a human below, their eyebrows furrowing like they're squinting, "Ants infesting this place. Heh. Not for much longer. Not," they poke Grim in the chest with the hand holding the glass, a lopsided grin spread across their face, "Not after you're done with em! Ha! Ah..I wonder how it will end. You think..hehe..you think you could boil em? That'd be grand."

Grim looks from their hand with the drink, to their face, and back out to the people below, with a slow, building regret. "Ah...uh..heh..yeah, probably. If uh...if the climate change trend continues," they swallow hard, their voice wavering, "The whole, seas may boil..like a giant, fish stew--"

Fate laughs, cackles almost, and slaps Grim on the back a little harder than they mean to, nearly causing Grim to lose their balance. Grim looks and feels even more concerned by all this than they had been by Fate sounding miserable in the Days leading up to now. "Oh! Gods you're funny, Grim. Oh that would be just beautiful wouldn't it? A true masterpiece. Yes..pity it'll be just us to appreciate it. Your-? My-? Our magnum opus?" They raise their glass to Grim and take a drink.

"Oh!" Fate tsks and shakes their head, "Pft, how rude of me." They lightly pat Grim's chest in a flitting gesture before turning on their heel, "Let me get you a drink."

"Uh-" Grim starts, but he's already halfway across the room. Grim pulls their collar nervously and looks down again at the people, innocently milling about their day. Why the hell are they doing this, again? Who is this helping anyway? They were trying to do it for Fate but...watching their mental health deteriorate like.. this is only making them more and more guilty by the Day. Grim certainly doesn't want to watch the world burn. They don't have anything in particular against the humans. They don't have a bloodlust, a vengeance, or even much of a death wish truthfully. It seems like everything they wanted to do in an attempt to do the right thing, has turned out to be wrong.

And Fate's back again, handing them a drink, "Here you are, my friend." They put their arm around Grim again. Grim looks into the glass with a slight grimace. They should be tickled this is happening right? Isn't this what they wanted? But they only feel regret.

Fate pulls Grim in again clumsily, knocking the two of them together for a moment. "What shall we toast to ey? Heh," They turn their gaze back out the window and motion to it bombastically with their glass, "The end of the world? The beauty, in desolation? Our, grand artistry?"

Grim nods a little and swallows, "H-heh, yeah..our.."

Fate grins and raises an eyebrow, putting their glass up. "To us, mm?"

Grim reluctantly clinks their glass to his, "To..to us."

Grim yet more reluctantly takes a drink and winces as they look out at the world once more, the meteorites continuing their graceful and hateful descent. "Us" alright. I'm just as responsible for this, aren't I?"

"Uhh...Fate?"

"Mhm?"

"Not uh..not, to ruin the moment but, I'm just wor-

ried-..."

"Worried?" Fate chuckles, "What about?" They gesture at Grim with their glass (dangerously close to spilling it on them) and lean in, cocking an eyebrow, "Not getting jitters on me are you? You're going to do splendidly, I just know it."

Grim swallows. What exactly did they think they were going to say? If they were going to attempt to reason with them, now is definitely not the time. "Uhh..." they fumble over their words, "Um..well, n-nothing just, isn't uh, aren't Management going to uh, notice you uh, you're drunk?"

Fate scoffs and loosely flicks their wrist down in a dismissive gesture, laughing softly, "Pft, no. Come now, Grim. Don't be silly. Never did before, anyhow." They turn to look out over the room again, sauntering nonchalantly back to their desk, "They don't care. Nah. No one cares." They drop down into their chair for a moment, perhaps in response to being a bit unsteady. They go quiet in thought, "Ah, it's alright though. I don't care either. Won't matter, soon enough. Nothing will." They gesture Grim over with a flippant snap without turning all the way around. "C'mere."

Grim takes a deep breath. They take a sip of their own drink for courage, and come back over to sit down as well.

"I do appreciate your concern, though," Fate smiles a bit more genuinely. "I got a good one, with you."

Grim feels struck with an emotion they cannot even begin to place. They're touched, for sure. Happy, almost excited to hear that. But they can't ignore everything else Fate just said. Were they really it? Was Grim the only person that would have ever noticed any of this happening to begin with? Within the concern there is a softer voice that mutters, 'Maybe they all deserve to go down, if they're that oblivious.'

Fate seems to get lost in thought for a minute, slowly

sliding the liquid in the glass back and forth. The entire expression on their face has changed. They look... almost miserable, again. Conflicted, perhaps? Or did Grim just hope that was what it was? Definitely a pensive sadness. They clear their throat and look up again with a chuckle, that vaguely disturbing smile back on their face. "Ah, sorry, got distracted. Forgot what I was doing." They refill their glass, Grim watching with a grimace. 'Oh boy.' they think anxiously, likely anticipating where this could be heading. Fate pushes themselves up again, clearly restless, tripping over themselves in the process as they head back to the window. Before they even have to say anything, Grim is already over there at their side once more. The arm goes around their shoulders again loosely.

"Ah...you know?" They look over to Grim with a somewhat more natural smile, albeit still rather dazed. "I'm not sure I could have done it, if I didn't have you to back me up." They knit their eyebrows, "I'm...not used to having anyone back me up, heh, actually..."

There is a sinking feeling in Grim's chest. Was there some way they could have stopped this? Can they still? The blame feels like it's compiling, compounding on Grim. A cacophony of thoughts whirr through their head. Did they cause this somehow? Of course, they were glad to be Fate's confidant but...not like this.

"I...I'm sorry, that's terrible. You...you deserved better than that."

Fate shrugs and scoffs with a..tinge sadder chuckle, "Ah, not really. No, no I'm not sure I do. Or have, I suppose. If I did I would have gotten it by now." They furrow their eyebrows slightly and tilt their head in thought, then look back over at Grim. "Though, here you are, right at the end. Heh. In all my, y-years I, didn't expect to find someone so loyal to me. You actually..seem to care. Interesting." They look back out the window and squeeze Grim's shoulder. "I hadn't really imagined anyone could, at this juncture."

"Could...could what?"

Fate shrugs, "Notice? Care? I dunno. It's negligible now, not that any of them will be around much longer." They take a drink idly, "Wallowing in their own ways I suppose. Yes their own, miseries I suppose. Perhaps I'm doing them a favor. Won't have to worry about it much longer, though..." They clear their throat, "Ah, regardless. I'm..glad you're here, Grim. S'uh, a welcome change."

Grim nods, swallowing hard, "Me..me too, I..I can't imagine anything else.."

Fate grins. "Ah, that's the spirit. I like the way you think." As they look away again, they gradually start mumbling under their breath, "Change..change..change.. oh yes..going to be a lot of change. Doesn't even sound like a word, that. Change..."

Grim has no idea what to do now. Nervous that they're going to slip into that insane, tangential rambling (again), Grim lightly, timidly, rests a hand on their back. Fate looks up out of their reverie and smiles. Grim manages a somewhat sincere smile back. The two of them go back to a..well as comfortable as a silence can be, as both of them are going back and forth on their decisions without realizing the other is doing the same.

Eventually, Fate finishes off their drink, and leans back a bit too far as they do. They stumble, and may have totally lost their balance if Grim's hand hadn't been there to steady them. Grim's face twists in concern "Woah, hey, are you okay?"

Fate puts a hand to their temple and shakes their head with a slight chuckle. "Uh..yeah, just..just a bit dizzy. Maybe I should s-sit down, for a minute."

Grim nods quickly in agreement and helps lead them back to the desk. They sit down abruptly with a heavy sigh and lean back into the chair, running their hands into their hair. They completely mess up the very tedious way they normally comb it in the process, and it's a strange thing for Grim to witness. Almost like they shouldn't

be seeing it. They press a hand to their forehead. "Ugh, I think I've had too much to drink. I..always do this." They push their hands under their glasses and mumble almost too quietly for Grim to hear, "Why do I always do this to myself?"

Grim's heart or- well where they'd have one, pulls. They feel an overwhelming desire to help. But it feels like wanting to attempt to help the tire rolling down the side of the highway back to being a full, working car. "Do..do you want me to uh..help you back to your room, or something? Get you some water?"

Fate nods, and brings their hands back down, jostling their glasses off but not enough to entirely knock them off their face. Grim's lifeless breath catches in their throat: they get just the briefest look at Fate's eyes, but it's too hard to really tell anything other than that they're glassy. "Uhh...yeah. That's probably a good idea. M'sorry to uh, burden you, with that."

"Oh, oh it's uh, it's nothing, not a problem." Grim sets down their glass and gets up, offering a hand with a sad smile. "C'mon."

Fate looks over them in confusion for a long moment. They take Grim's hand like it's an entirely foreign gesture or concept, and allow themselves to be helped up. They nod slowly and manage a smile. "Thank you."

After a good twenty to thirty minutes later of getting lost, ending up on the wrong floor, and trying frantically to keep anyone from seeing the two of them despite Fate's insistence it "doesn't matter", Grim finally fumbles the door to the flat open. 'Yikes,' they think, 'This place is a disaster.'

It's obvious to Grim based on how meticulously the decor is placed in here that it's not...usually in such disarray. Fate's extremely anal after all, and likes things just so.

There are papers and open journals splattered all over every possible surface. Notes and clippings are pinned up to the walls haphazardly, with pieces of tape and string connecting things together, hastily (though.. decently) scribbled sketches with long captions under them. There's a massive map that Grim can't make absolutely any sense of and isn't sure they could even if they studied it. The books in the many bookshelves are all put in wrong, some of them with pages hanging out of them, some even by a singular piece of tape. Glasses, bottles, plates litter the tables as well, and..oddly specifically, a lot of takeaway boxes from a place called "Linda's Kitchen".

Grim doesn't have much time to react to the situation, since they are focused on getting Fate in the bed before they can't support them anymore. Fate collapses on their back with one foot still on the floor for support and rubs their face again. They sigh heavily and groan. "Ugh, finally. M'-m' sorry you had to deal with this Grim, it's terribly unprofessional of me."

Grim shakes their head and squeezes his shoulder in an attempt to be reassuring, "Don't worry about it, uh-" they chuckle a slight nervously, trying to ease the tension, "I think our whole plan is rather unprofessional after all, right?"

That gets a soft laugh out of Fate. "Ah, yes. Perhaps you're right."

"Here uh.." Grim looks around, completely bewildered by the space, "Lemme...lemme grab you a glass of water."

"M'kay." Fate mumbles in an abnormally accepting tone, letting their arm flop over their side like a ragdoll.

Grim makes it to the doorway before anxiously looking around again, checking to make sure he hasn't moved. Still right where they had left him, be it in a bit of a heap. Grim catches something out of the corner of their eye when they go to look away again. Just unexpected enough that they do a double take.

Fate's trouser leg is ridden up enough to reveal their socks. Which, in and of itself, shouldn't be anything of note. But what does catch Grim off-guard is the...polka-dot pattern on them? They had really never pegged him as a...prints kind of person. It's a bit jarring despite how simple it is in reality. Perhaps wondering if it's a trick of the light, Grim tilts their head and flicks their eyes to see if they can see the top of the other. It is indeed just visible above their still-on shoe. And it's...striped? They're mismatched? Grim knits their brow in confusion. What? They'd definitely never thought Fate would- whatever.

They shake their head, not wanting to waste any more time trying to decipher what any of this could mean, and rush off to find the kitchen. Thankfully, with some rather quick success. Upon finding it, it's..very nice, despite it being a bit of a wreck. Grim opens the cabinets one by one and sighs loudly at the lack of clean glasses. They go with an old plastic one that...looks like it lights up (or did once), and proclaims "SAN MARCO" in faded bold letters, with a little decal of a crane in front of a sunset on it. This is getting weirder by the minute. They quickly fill the glass and hurry back to the room. Fate is splayed out somewhat, and seemingly half-asleep already. Their bowtie has been flung carelessly onto the wreckage that is the side table. Grim shakes them a little to get their attention, "Hey, sit up."

They grunt and begrudgingly sit up, their glasses once again askew but it's too dark for Grim to make out their momentarily exposed eye. Damn it. While clearly woozy, Fate does as they're told and sips at the water with both hands. Grim runs their hands down their face. 'How did I wind up in my boss' room, giving them orders? What bizarre fucking plane of existence am I on?'

"Thank you." Fate murmurs, leaning their cheek against their free hand as they look up at Grim.

Grim nods and rubs their own arm a bit bashfully, "O-of course, no problem."

Fate sets the glass down on the nightstand (somehow)

and slumps back heavily against the headboard. They hang their head and shake it defeatedly, "Ugh..how embarrassing, m'sorry Grim. That y'..that you've, seen me like this. I...I'll admit, I've made a terrible habit of this in the past."

Grim knits their brow and shifts in place, still trying to steal glimpses over Fate and around the room in an attempt to process what the hell is going on here. "What do you mean?"

"Ah..." they shake their head again and sigh, "It's a long story."

"I..I don't mind."

"Mm..." they look up at Grim again with a soft, sad smile. "I'll...I'll tell you when I'm sober. Now, off you go. You've accommodated me more than enough today, heh."

Grim nods with an equally sad smile, feeling extremely reluctant to leave all of a sudden. "It's..not a problem..uh..fellow accomplice."

Fate laughs and rests a hand on Grim's arm softly, "Ah, you're funny. You're a good friend, Grim."

Grim pauses, blushing, surprised and somewhat overwhelmed. Boy, do they not feel like one. "Uhh...heh, thanks, I try. You uh, you are t-too."

Fate chuckles and shakes their head with a slow, sad sigh. They flop back down on the bed, shifting from their back to their side to Grim's relief. They let their face fall on the pillow again and wrap an arm under it, languidly draping the other over the side. "You and that relentless sense of humor of yours." They mumble into it dismally.

If Grim had felt good for a moment, it's gone just as quickly after that. They take another look around the disaster zone of a room, feeling claustrophobic suddenly. They aren't a good friend. No, the absolute opposite, as a matter of fact. How in the hell did they

think this was a good idea? What were they thinking? Not only were they helping to end the world, and well, everyone else here, fully and equally responsibly. But in paying their adoring attention, they'd also somehow managed not to notice entirely what was going on with Fate. Regardless of them reassuring Grim that they were the 'best friend they'd had'. That was a crying shame, if Grim was it in the last innumerable millions of years that Fate has been around. Would he have ever said any of that, if he was sober? What else had he never said? What else did Grim not know, and likely would never even get the chance to?

They wanted to help, some stupid misguided attempt at it in any case. Clearly said attempt has only been making things worse, for every single person involved. No matter how much Grim helped now, Fate didn't even think he deserved it. Hell. Did he? Did they? Nothing makes any sense anymore. They feel angry at everyone else for not noticing or caring. In a partial defensive way for Fate, and a partial selfish way that they wound up having to shoulder this, at this level of severity, all on their own. Maybe the whole lot of them deserve this. Hell, maybe everyone does.

After making sure they're asleep, Grim gently, carefully so as not to wake them, pulls off Fate's glasses. They turn them over slowly in the light, as it nearly bends off the lenses entirely, before taking in the sight. Even with their eyes closed, it's surreal to see Fate without their glasses on. How many people, who have been in this building for thousands, millions upon millions of years longer than Grim, have ever seen what they are seeing right now? They look almost...small, in a way. Vulnerable. Grim's face falls into a frown as they look closer. Fate looks unfathomably exhausted, and there's still a drunken flush across their face. If 114 had talked about being able to tell a Human Department reaper by their dark circles, Fate is the dead ringer for CEO of said Department. Grim can't really blame them for wanting it all to be over. It just feels cruel to force someone so miserable and run down to keep going. But...the feeling nags at them that there has to be some other way...something, anything they've overlooked...

Before they even realize what they're doing, Grim absently fixes Fate's hair off their face. An almost longing pulls in their chest. How could they have done things differently?

They'd wanted to tell themselves they could still fix it. But the extent of the damage rests on them in this moment, the quiet deafening. The reality is, it would take a miracle to turn this around. And even so, Fate likely wouldn't come out of it. They had to bear this onus, now. The loneliness, and the regret. And, little did Grim fully realize, Fate would have their own. The costs of freedom were more taxing than they had expected. But now there was nothing to do but bear them. Glass in one hand, and their accomplice, loyal to the end, in the other.

So, did you get what you wanted?

With a hard swallow Grim folds the glasses shakily. They set them down with the utmost care on the side table, after quietly clearing a small space for them. They don't want to just leave Fate like this, but there's no way to pull the covers over them now. Glancing around the disconcertingly hectic room, they locate a couch. It has been mostly repurposed into research-space, but has a blanket or two sagging off of the back of it. Grim wastes no time slinking over to grab one.

They carefully pull it over Fate, without so much as a stir in response. 'They really are out of it.' Grim muses. They seem to be sleeping relatively soundly though, minus the occasional pull of discomfort in their expression. Grim doesn't even want to think what they could possibly be dreaming about. Knowing how well they've been sleeping themselves lately, it can't be anything good. They take a deep breath and clench their fist, taking one last wretched look before they go to leave, slowly shutting the door behind them.

They steal a quick glance again in spite of themselves. There is a soft jingling, to Grim's surprise, as Lady hops up onto the bed. Grim hadn't noticed her follow

them in or...at all the entire Day, actually. Admittedly they'd been rather...distracted, to say the least.

Lady had been somewhat apprehensive of Fate in his manic, clumsy, drunken state, and was relieved Grim was there to handle it. Be as she may, there is only so much a cat can do. She looks over Fate and her tail flicks. Grim can almost hear a cat-sized sigh as she does, head cocked while she surveys them. She gently kneads her paws on them and settles down against their back. Lady hasn't seemed thrilled with matters as of late but, she is especially distressed and disappointed now.

Grim knows how she feels. A cat could not save the straw that broke the camel's back, and neither could they clearly. As she gets comfortable, her yellow eyes settle on Grim's, who is still watching through the crack in the doorway. The look seems to convey a silent 'thank you', before she burrows her head in and shuts her eyes. Grim never thought they'd see the day when they and Lady would agree on anything. Nor when they first started working here could they have ever dreamed they'd wind up here, like this.

"Night." they mumble. They shut the door the rest of the way and attempt to keep back the lump in their throat, but fail miserably.

'Just like everything else'.

ANGER



"Grief, regret, pain, and of course anger. Another loss. And when you compare this one loss to the hundreds and maybe thousands that occur people stop thinking they matter. It does matter though. Every loss matters."

--NATALIE VALDES

THE SPARK

By Betelzebug

It was an odd thing, life. A movie mortals adored once said "Life finds a way." It came and went in fire and sparks. Or, if you were a spawn, in the bubble of a cauldron and the void of space. Perhaps that was why, at first, all the spark could recall was her very first moments.

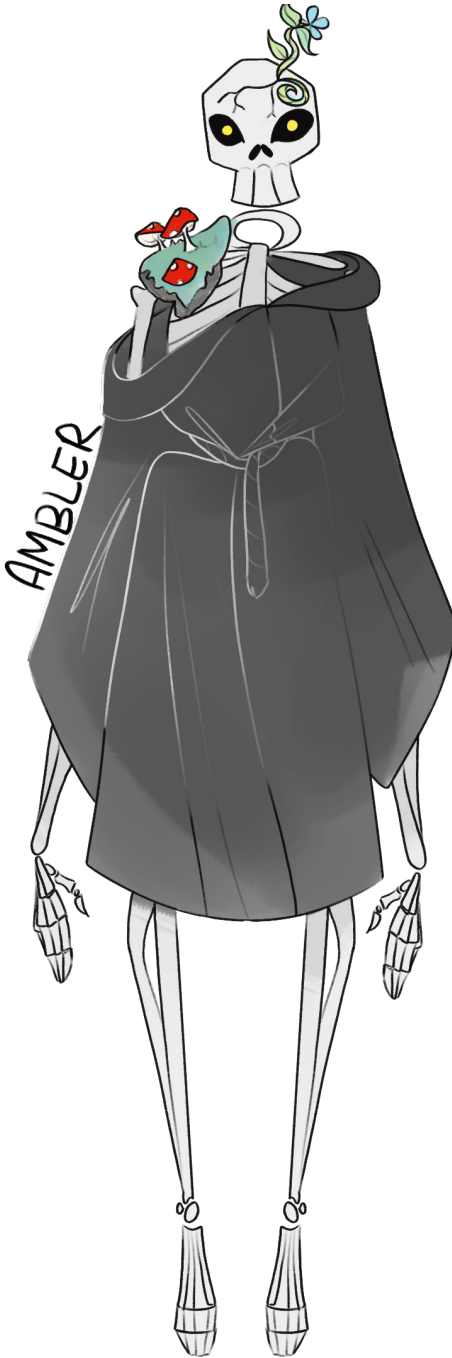
She wasn't the original. He had waited and waited for the ones he'd made before, but they never opened their eyes. She, however, had been wide awake even as the cauldron still boiled. She could recall the joy of creation. The roughness of the iron cauldron and the endless heat of his concoction could not hold a candle to her ecstasy.

She existed. She could feel. And so, as he took out his stirrer and leaned in to witness the fruits of his labor, she leapt up at him. Her hot, boney arms embraced him. She chattered, a meaningless sound holding all of her joy. An awkward Destiny had held her as the room had come into focus.

Back then, things had been different. Ancient and complex, the Office had no trouble embracing the oddness and awkward angles of life. There were no grey corridors, no desks. She had been his first employee, and so things were rather informal. She'd called him a friend. He had led, and she had reaped. For ages, the two of them were enough. They knew each other better than they knew themselves. And for a while, the distance between higher management and those on the ground had been negligible.



Back then, Reaping had been manual, and the process more painful. They leaned on one another for support, the weight of the human race on their shoulders. But, the world was at their feet, and they found comfort in their time together.



The Spark remembered, next, the first to come after her.

A tall spawn - Destiny had gotten the recipe wrong again. But, instead of ruining the brew, a long, gangly sibling had joined them. They were excitable. Eager. And that eagerness reignited the hope in Destiny and in herself. They'd had lunch together, and slept in the same quarters. That spawn had a name. And so had she. But, even as the spark fell through space, not a single speck of her remembered what those names were.

As more memories coalesced into the story of her early life, she couldn't help but wonder why she now existed as fragmented memories in the vast emptiness of the cosmos. Then, she struck it - the beginning of the end.

There had been a hundred or so of them. She loved every single one. She didn't much care for humans - long ago she had realized the vast distance between how the universe regarded them, and how it had regarded her. They had souls. She did not. Not as far as she knew. Their bones held a fire of life required to make a new Spawn. Clearly, there

was a value to them that there wasn't in her. And that broke her heart, just a little. But, she had made peace with that. After all, it was what it was. There was no use fighting the universe. It was better to accept one's place.

The other spawn called her "Mom." Some called Destiny "Dad", though he had expressed specific disdain for that. She always laughed when he talked about it. The way he cringed as he confided in her how uncomfortable it made him was relatable. She encouraged the other Spawn to stop and they mostly did. They loved him. And so did she. So, sometimes, they used it to embarrass him.

She had recognized a longing in Destiny, one she could relate to. The desire to be anywhere else. Blood and gore were not something one ever loved, no matter how they grew used to it. She and Destiny schemed. Perhaps there was a way to switch roles, or take short breaks. At first, there was. Management was easier. They didn't care what you did as long as the work was done. The Spawn enjoyed their freedom, and Destiny protected it. But, Destiny was in Higher Management. While a Spawn might cover another Spawn for the day, no one could cover Destiny. And so, She didn't take breaks either. They had existed long before there were enough spawn to cover one another. And so, she didn't mind keeping up the solidarity.

Then, it happened. The gangly Spawn - Ambler, she remembered now - had started to falter. They didn't meet their quotas. They took long breaks, wandering the world to experience it for themselves. They even appeared to a human without reaping their soul. Destiny did his best to protect Ambler's wanderings, certain that no matter how far they roamed, they would always come back. But Higher Management was restructuring. And so, Ambler was made into an example, and fired.

"What will happen to him?" She had asked. Destiny couldn't look her in the eyes.

"We exist to guide the earth and keep balance," He'd explained.

"And if we no longer can?"

"Then we disappear."

The horror of those words shook her to her core. Like a fracture in her bones, the pain was immeasurable. She sought out Ambler as the clock ticked away. As Destiny had thought, they had returned. She held them. Her voice shook too much to explain. The whole office gathered 'round. They watched as she sobbed.

"Now then, what's this?" Ambler's boney fingers had run through her hair. "I'm here. I'll always be here for you."

But they weren't. Right in her arms, they began to fade. Fear crossed their hollow eyes, but they were gone before she could say anything. The office erupted into chaos. They demanded answers from the only mother they had ever known. And she could only tell them that if they did not do as management wished, they too would disappear.

Every day, she expected Ambler to come back, as they always had. But they never did. Their wanderer had gone and would never return.

She watched as more fell, one by one. So many years passed, only Destiny and she herself remaining. They'd always been an unshakeable team. But as each failed Spawn passed, a void between them grew. And they could both feel it.

She went behind his back.

She managed a department of her own. A department of Spawn that would stand against Management. A department that would finally get justice for the people she loved. But as they demanded better treatment, a return to the way things had once been. And for a moment, she'd had hope, until they were fired. Each and every single one. He could always make more Spawn.

And for herself?

He'd shot her into the sun for her efforts.

Even as a Spark in the vastness of space, she recalled

the pain. Rage caused her to catch fire once again, a nova. She remembered now, where she was. Where she was going. Because there was no amount of time that would take away the pain of that loss. Or the many, many losses that came after. The anger that had scorched her hollow excuse for a reborn soul. There wasn't enough of her left to be a Grim again, but she had a purpose. A reason to exist. And so, she wasn't going anywhere, not anytime soon.

There had once been a Spawn who loved her fellow creations. As the memories faded, so too did her name. The details of her life. The details of her death. And as the structure of the office changed, as the tower took form and the new management strategy came into focus, a new creature emerged. A spectre of rage, a spectre of pain, and a spectre of betrayal.

Those they'd lost would not be forgotten. Those still suffering would have their justice. And with every new spawn that fell, her army grew. Waiting. Watching. And one day, they would have their revenge.

Percy Frauger

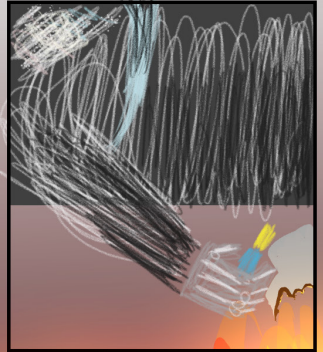
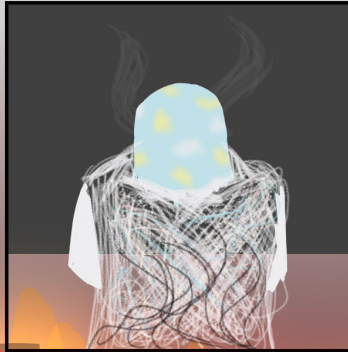
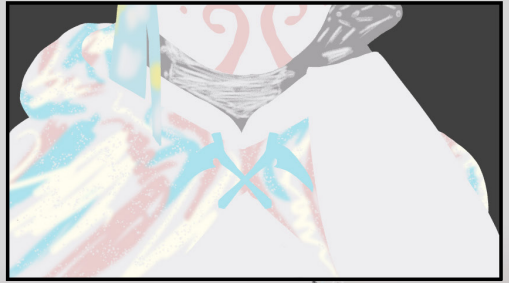
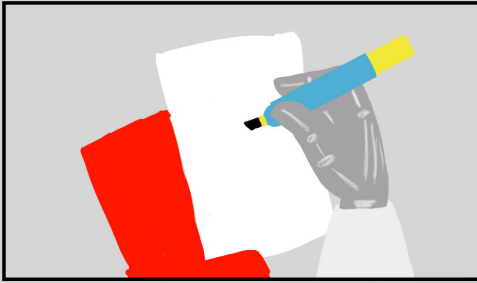
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Crunch

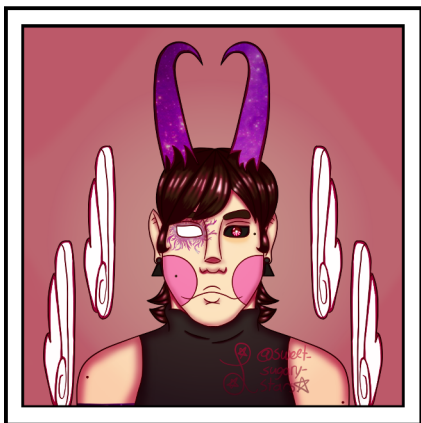
- An experimental reaper made using a frog's skull!
- Homocidal, vulgar, and unfortunately charismatic!

A usurper
route reaper!





☆ @sweet-sugary-stars ☆



Name:

Asterion

Age:

19

Position:

Illustrator/character artist/
painter

A living eldritch virus typical cryptid who creates art for others. They are usually found yelling at their own art and taking heavy naps. They can also be found playing horror games and listening to horror media where they draw inspiration for their work from.

Name:

Grim #8149 (aka Quartz)

Age:

N/A

Position:

Grim Reaper



A living skeleton with spectral flesh, they work under Fate as a Grim Reaper. Outside of work, they often knit and hang out with their fellow Reapers. They have grown confident over time and as such are not afraid to stand up to individuals higher than them. They are also a hopeless romantic, always yearning for more than what they have both in relationship and social status.

BARGAINING



"Another form of bargaining, which many people do, and she did too, is to replay the final painful moments over and over in her head as if by doing so she could eventually create a different outcome."

-- KATE MCGAHAN, JACK MCAFEGHAN

HOUSES & HUMANS

By Tolpen

Cerberus' Den was flooded in dim light; the people had gathered here in secrecy. It was a quiet Wednesday evening.

"Alright," Cerri rubbed their hands. "Door locked - checked. The tomes - checked. Everyone sworn to secrecy - checked. Hot drinks - on the stove, checked."

Death Spawn #326 rolled the lights in their otherwise empty eye-sockets. "Cerri, it's just a game night. We are not some secret revolutionary organisation."

"Would anyone please tell me the rules? In some shortened version?" Grim finally gathered the courage to ask. When Herbert (and Tim) and FRANK talked them into this, they were imagining something like Ticket to Die, Reapers of Catan or Knife Monopoly. The hefty books which Cerri had brought and the ominous clicking of bones in small pouches people began to put on the table, however, was as far from Knife Monopoly as one could get.

#326 turned to them: "Right, you're new. So we are playing Advanced Houses & Humans, second edition, because Cerri likes this one and because it doesn't let certain somebody," they glared at Florian, "send the whole campaign to hell over an overpowered bumper sticker."

"It is not my problem the fifth edition is unbalanced!" Florian threw their hands up. "My boost to truck driving from the home-made bumper sticker was completely within the rules. Just so you know, I am still taking the Truck Driver. The wildest ride from Polisville to the Towncity."

"Whatever," #326 waved them off. "The principle is that you make a human - you pick a personality type and a class, and then we have to sort our paperwork together as a group to do our taxes or die. Or both. Depends if the dice like us or not."

It made absolutely no sense to Grim whatsoever, but they nodded along as if they understood everything. "Have you got any, like, tips? Oh, I also haven't caught your name, I think."

"Sure, I am Maggie. That's short for Magnificent," Maggie gave them a grin as mischievous as a skull can do.

"I am, uh, Grim. That's short for Grim Reaper." They took the hand their new friend offered them and firmly shook it.

Maggie cackled: "You're funny. I like you. Grim the New One. Gotta love that." They took one of Cerri's heavy rulebooks which depicted a shredded accountant in an unbuttoned shirt standing in front of a decrepit house, and pushed it towards Grim with the question: "Who are you going to play as? Please don't take the Popular Girl, there is limit of one per party and I have a perfect homebrew addition with the connection to the Deepest Ones--"

"Maggie," Cerri shouted warningly from the stove where they were stirraining the tea, "no homebrew gods. I've learned my lesson and I say: No Deepest Ones. We'll stick to regular Astrology."

For someone with no lips, Maggie pouted very impressively.

Grim leafed through the rulebook and found themselves paralysed. There were simply too many options, all of them good and bad at the same time. What was the right choice? Who were they supposed to be?

"It's recommended for beginners to make their human similar to themselves," FRANK offered helpfully from across the table when they looked up from admiring Herbert's impressive bone dice collection. "It's less overwhelming that way. When you get more experience you can experiment. For example I think I've nailed the Tough Dudebro."

That didn't help Grim at all. What were they like? How were they supposed to know that? They were barely over two weeks old! Tough Dudebros, according to the rule-

book, liked a cold one. Did Grim like a cold one? No idea. A cold one what?

Cerri returned to the table and handed everyone their tea. They looked at Grim with understanding: "Don't worry. For indecisive newbies in the middle of character crisis I have a quiz to tell you which class and type are optimal to start with."

"You don't have a quiz-" Florian began, but FRANK kicked them under the table, so they shut their beak and returned to designing their new truck.

"Quizzes are good," Grim nodded enthusiastically. "I like quizzes."

"Great, that was actually the first question!" Cerri beamed. "Now get comfortable and ready for question number two."



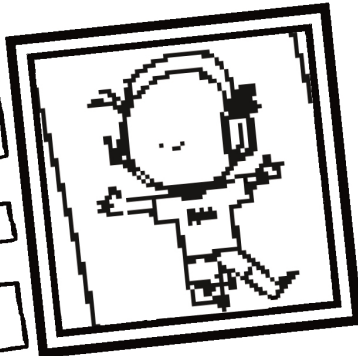
Name:

sam (sealbatross)

Age:

Position:

Student



Has just enough awareness to be worried.
Often found standing on the fringe of forests, staring.

Name:

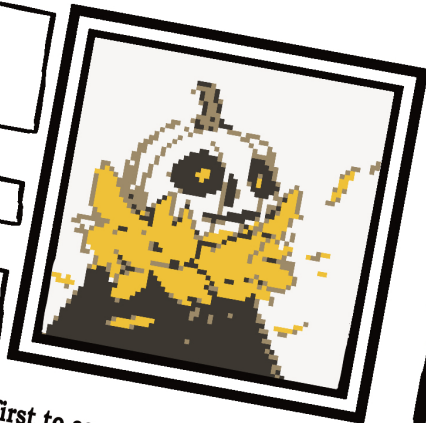
Atro Punkim

Age:

2300~

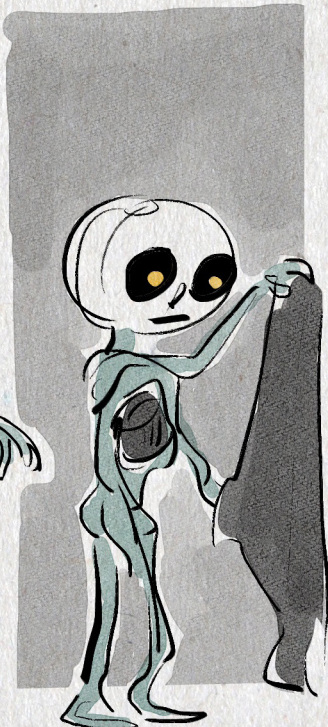
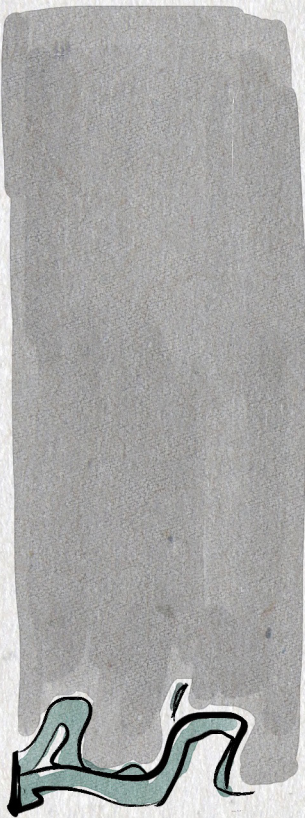
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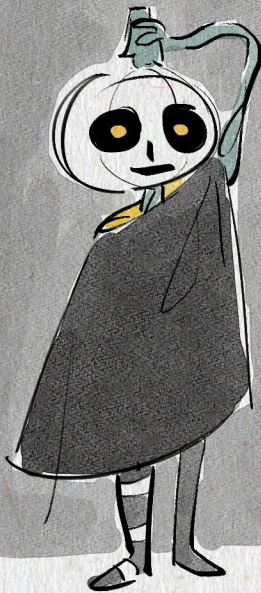
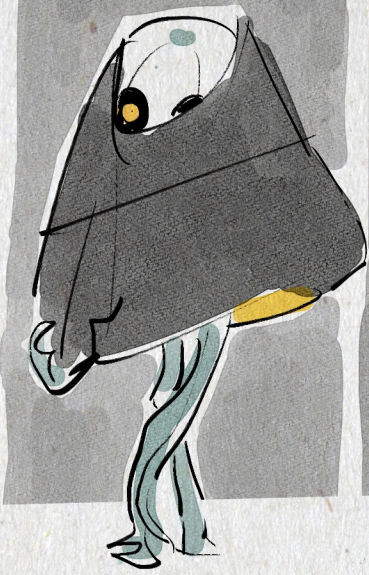
Death Spawn

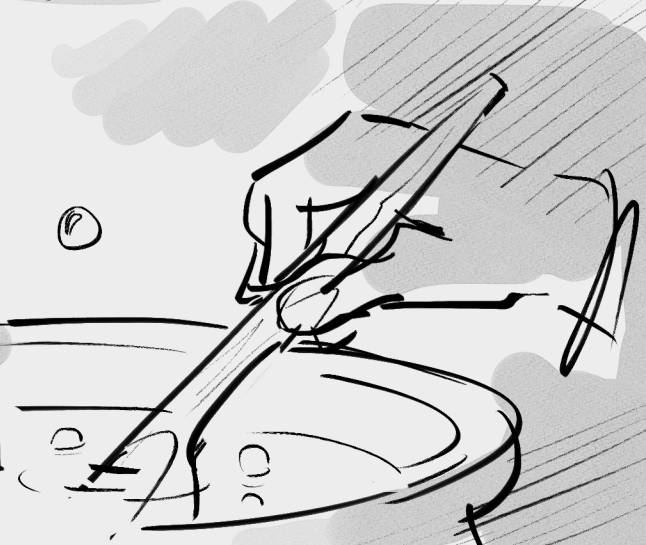
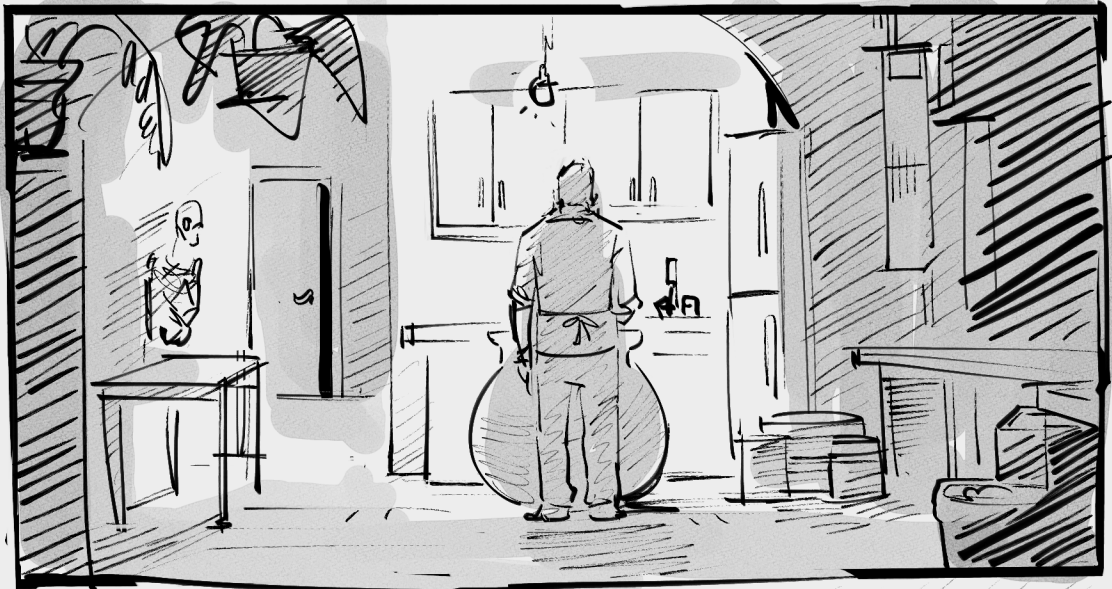


Atro is quick to hug and the first to assume the best of everyone. She was a reaper for the Blade of Grass sub-department with her two sisters. However, after centuries of the same monotony her siblings were both driven to insanity and disappeared one way or another, leaving Atro to wonder if his efforts to entertain (as the littlest sister) just wasn't enough. Still, he wandered in search of them, leading him to the human department - coveted as having the most morally ambiguous, and intellectually intriguing work. Atro disguises himself as a human department grim, in hopes of finding her sisters there, and for them to have found happiness.

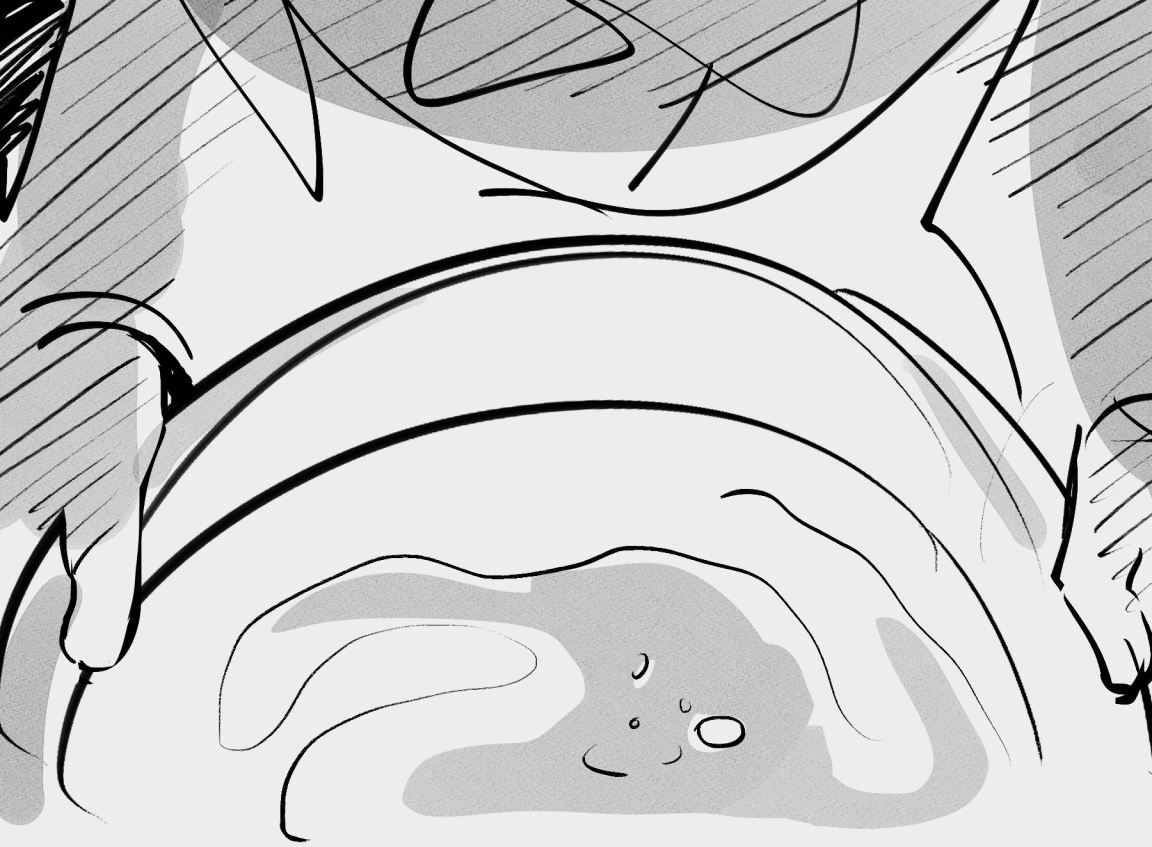
LIVE

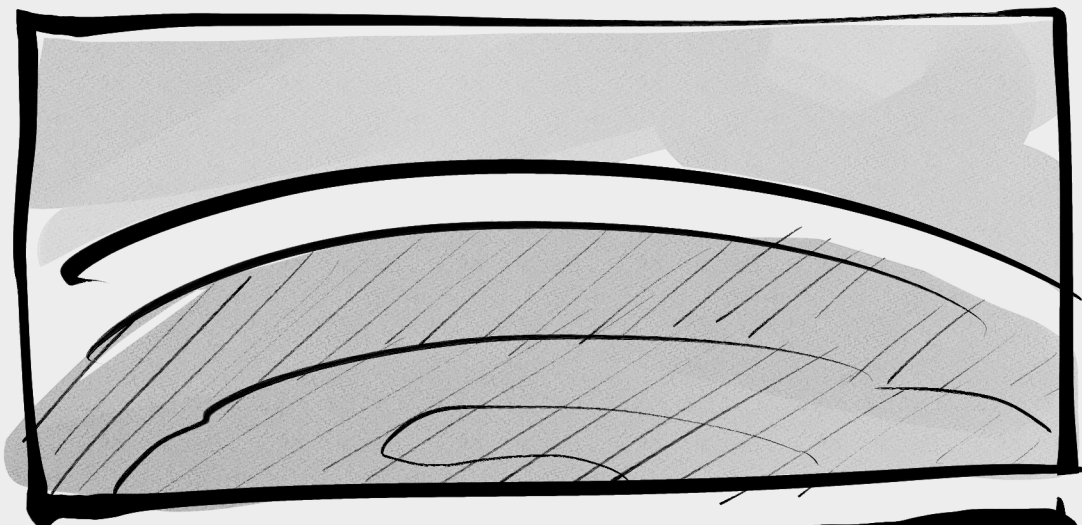
















FAN OC
(SELF INSERT)



GIRIM / GRAHAM

DEATH SPAWN # 52

Grim goes by GRIM BECAUSE ITS WHAT FATE CALLS HIM.

CEARE NICKNAMED HIM "GRAHAM" AND IS CALLED SUCH BY OTHER REAPERS.

Grim ADDRES FATE AND WOULD DO ANYTHING FOR FATE. INCLUDING FULFILL THE '...S' ENDING..

♡ I GOT YOU (SOME TEA TO START YOUR DAY) STRONGER ♡



OH... I'M GOING TO HATE THIS...



DEPRESSION



"It's so curious; One can resist tears and 'behave' very well in the hardest hours of grief. But then someone makes you a friendly sign behind a window, or one notices that a flower that was in bud only yesterday has suddenly blossomed, or a letter slips from a drawer... and everything collapses."

-- COLETTE

DESTINY REMAINS

By Sal

The ticking of a clock is anything but endless. Ultimately, everything ends. How sad, for the inevitability of the end to be your only hope. See, the endless march of time isn't so endless, is it? The only thing truly endless is death—wait, no, that one isn't truly endless either. At least not for those unlucky enough to wind up working in the Office. Not truly endless, and yet it certainly seems like it. Aeons pass without any foreseeable end, sucking every scrap of hope for a better future from the seasoned veterans of the undead. Even the Plan had failed to end this miserable existence. The ticking of the clock keeps going, adamantly refusing to end.

The sound of the elevator's doors closing barely broke through the cacophony of noise bouncing through Fate's head. Time had nearly run out and the Month had grown old—the Plan would not work. The Great Dying, the key to Fate's release, had been snatched away by the very reaper made to fulfill it. The clock would continue ticking, humans would keep living, and Fate would remain stuck in the same position, keeping the balance until the very end.

It was silly to think the end could be sped up anyhow. Nothing ever worked as it was meant to when Fate needed. Why would the Plan work, when not even the phone would? Not even a trip into the mortal realm to buy groceries could go smoothly. With the way things went, it wouldn't even be unreasonable to assume that the humans would push the End out further and further, until eventually humanity was destroyed by none other than very destruction of the universe.

Meet your "Death"



Personal Data

Name: Grim/[REDACTED]
(Alias: Grim D. [REDACTED])

Title(s): **Fate** of the World, **Fate** of Humans,
Keeper of World Order

Status: Highest Management (Tier 2)

True Age: Approx 1 Month

Functional Age: 30-35

"House...?": "Huffle puff"

MBTI: ENFJ-T

Star Sign: Sagittarius

Pronouns: They/them

Gender: Nonbinary/Agender

Sexuality: Pansexual

Bonus:

Four Temperaments: Sanguine

Alignment: Chaotic Good

~~Reaper~~ Fate of the Month

Constitutional Evaluation:

Grim or "Death" (they/them) as they're currently known, is a Takeover line reaper who never wanted or asked for **Fate's** power, but accepted the role in order to relieve them of their **struggle**. They were entirely content **with** their life as a reaper, understanding that inherently **life and death** require balance, even if it sucks sometimes. Though the two definitely did not agree on everything, Death and **Fate** got on well. **Fate** was fascinated by them and their penchant for philosophical discussion, and the two talked a lot. **Fate** being gone has hit them hard, and though they never wanted th**is** they are stubborn to succeed in the face of Highest Management. They didn't sign up for this, but they'll be **danned if they fail**.

ACCEPTANCE



"You will never accept gratitude as a solution to your problems, until you have reached the last stage of grief--acceptance."

-- SHANNON L. ALDER

UNSALVAGEABLE

By Betelzebub

I'd spent my life living in the shadow of the Office building on Mortimer Drive. First in my mother's home, then in the alleyways when I'd been kicked out, and finally in the dorm rooms of my college where I'd gotten a roof over my head again. My living situation had changed a lot, but the building never did. When I'd had to sleep outside, the garbage bins made for good shelter.

That's when I'd started to notice some oddities about it. The garbage was almost never filled. When it was, the things inside were out of time. A phone from the 20s. A clock that had too many hours. A calendar full of months with only twenty-eight days. The gargoyles and stone details that I'd explained away as building preference became unexplainable again.

What really got me obsessed, though, was a piece of paper in the garbage. It had a photo of my face. My name was misspelled. There was a short description of my life. At the bottom were checkboxes - one marked Live, one marked Die. Like someone had to make a call about my fate. Like I was on some kind of hit list. Overall, it was the most horrifying thing I'd ever seen.

After that, I'd never been comfortable sleeping near it again. Still, I couldn't seem to stay away. One week I'd decided to play a game. Count the number of people who entered, and count the number of people who left. No one. Not a soul. My game lasted longer than the week it had originally been scheduled for. Every morning before school, I'd wait outside for people to count. Every night, I'd do my homework on the steps.

Nothing stirred. Not once.

Eventually, it became some kind of comfort to me. An odd building whose inhabitants, if there were any, knew about me. Being seen was something I desired deeply, as

a kid whose parents hadn't even wanted him. It wasn't a healthy obsession at all, I realize now, but it was something.

But everything changed the day I saw him.

Lemon Boy.

He seemed like the kind of man to bite someone's head off for a simple hello. His footfalls loud and harsh, his face standoffish. Every line of him, every shift of his person, spoke of a man who did not want to be bothered. And yet, I couldn't stay away. I tailed him, and lucky me, he was so hyperfocused on whatever enraged him that I didn't need to worry about being caught.

At first I was annoyed because he was just... going to the supermarket. This was a man from a building that had produced a detailed paper about me. A kid who was so nondescript that not even my teachers remembered my name, and I meant something to him. And he was shopping for lemons like a normal person. I had expected him to be some kind of spy, or secret government agent, or something.

I grabbed a basket. Pretended to shop. I even grabbed a jar of peanut butter. I watched as a woman bumped her cart into him, his frustration shifting into a fearsome hatred that could have ended the world. I followed him back. He opened the door with his bag of lemons, and I stuck my foot forward to stop it from closing. Just like that, I was in.

Half of being undetected was just confidence. I tried to keep moving, but when I pushed my way inside, I couldn't help but panic. The lobby was busy, but the people were - well, they weren't people. Some looked like normal humans, like Lemon Boy, and some people had bird heads. Or cat ears. There were a LOT of skulls with empty sockets and glowing orbs for irises. It was enough to set my skin crawling. Everywhere I stepped was a new horror. Everywhere I glanced was a strange visage of death. Forward, back - I lost track of the door. I was surrounded. And then -

"Well, you're new." I leapt out of my skin at the stale words. Behind me stood a short, narrow-faced person with red eyes and black scleras. Their hand caught my shoulder, desperate, clinging.

"Started yesterday," I told him with the confidence of a young adult who had walked out of more than one supermarket without passing the self-checkout.

Their smile was horrifying. Something about it was practiced and uncanny. I smiled back, a grimace that surely seemed just as uncomfortable.

"That's good. Tell ya what. I'll show you around." It wasn't an offer. There was no need to accept, but I nodded anyway. They smiled wider, their dimples cutting deep into an overplayed face. Their fingers dug into my skin as they dragged me deeper and deeper into the place. At this point, Lemon boy was out of sight, and so was the door. I didn't have any option but to trust this maniac.

The Elevator felt claustrophobic. We stood, hardly an inch between us. Everything about them was contradictory. Smooth, human-looking skin, impossibly inhuman eyes. They were high-strung. It lay in their microscopic pupils, their tight smile, their voice. But their demeanor was otherwise relaxed. Their hands were in their pockets. Their posture was confident, like they owned the place. Did they own the place? I had no way of knowing.

There weren't floor numbers in the elevator, just up and down. They held Up. I supposed jumping out the window was still an option, albeit increasingly less survivable. I didn't know how much less survivable, of course. There were no windows in the elevator, no ventilation. Just heavy, dusty air and exactly person breathing it.

"What's your name, human?" They asked, their voice tossing my mind into further chaos.

"What?"

"Humans have names, right? It'd be odd to call you by

your species in front of the others. I'm hoping you can go undetected for a while."

Clearly, they wanted something. I didn't really have a choice but to roll with it. "I'm Jared. You?"

"Thirteen forty-eight and counting."

"Okay. And your name?"

"That is my name, Jared." They released the up button without elaborating, and the door opened. The carpet of the elevator hung two inches above the tiles of a powder room. They stepped down onto them, where soft, fluffy clouds of steam whispered about death and taxes. They cleared them with a calculated wave, then gestured for me to follow. A blue bedroom lay beyond, small as a shoebox, with only a wardrobe, a bed, and an end table. They shoved me onto the mattress, their eyes glancing me over. "So. You're not supposed to be here. Now - I'm not judging. There are a lot of people I'd prefer not to be here, and you're not one of them. That's why I marked your profile to 'live', after all."

"My profile? You mean that weird page with my face on it?" I asked, mind racing. "Are you the one who wrote it? Then why'd you ask my name? I -"

"Quiet," they said. Their voice wasn't loud, but the matter-of-factness hid something I didn't want to see. My mouth shut tight. "I did mark your profile to 'live', but I didn't write it. Fate did. The man you followed in here? I'm surprised you saw it, though. Where did you find it?"

"The garbage," I admitted. "I used to live there."

"... Humans will never cease to baffle me."

"I think that goes for humans too, honestly."

"Right. Regardless, listen. I have a task for you. You're fond of Fate. I assume that's why you've followed him." I opened my mouth to correct them, but they

didn't give me the time. "You're going to dress like me for today. Or a couple days. And you're going to mark profiles. It's real easy. You read the instructions for the day, mark the number of profiles Fate tells you, and try not to end the world. It should be a piece of cake. Use the lamp to tell you what human's life will do to World Order. Use the snowglobe to tell you how the world is faring. It's nice and balanced right now. Don't blow it, thanks. I need it to survive in order for Fate to survive. Let me be clear - if you doom the world, I doom you. Got it?"

"I take it I don't have a choice in this," I ventured as they shuffled through their things. They removed their tie, tossing it my way. As they did, a classic black robe wrapped around them as though summoned.

"Not the slightest. Get dressed. Don't die, don't get caught. Simple."

"You only gave me a tie."

They rolled their eyes. Reaching forward, they snatched the tie back from me and pulled it around my throat, tying it with the expertise of an enby who had lived for thirteen hundred months. Like magic, and I suppose it was, my clothing changed. I was dressed like they had been. My head looked normal. The rest of me? Well...

"Perfect!" They said, their eyes holding a genuine spark of mirth. "You'll do perfect. The job is easy! Don't tell anyone where I am, and I won't tell anyone about you. Oh, and, don't go to the bar tonight. There's going to be someone who will absolutely peg you for what you are. Chances are, they already know you're here. Best not to wake the bear, as it were."

"Hold on - just, please explain what's happening," I begged.

"Alright. Fate is going to die in twenty-one days if I don't save him. It happens every. Single. Cycle. This cycle, you're here. You're new. You're going to help me save him."

"How?" I asked.

"I don't know. For now, you keep the world safe, and I'm going to go sow mayhem. As long as you're pretending to be me, no one should suspect a thing. Capisce?"

"O-Okay."

"When you're done with the day, you go come back here. I'll meet you when I'm ready. And we'll debrief. Bring the Snowglobe. You'll need it. And keep my pocketwatch. I always have it. People will notice if it's gone." They yanked me from the bed like a ragdoll. Honestly, their disregard for my autonomy was irritating. Tossing me into the elevator, they beamed.

"It's three floors down. Listen for the click. Good luck!" they called as the doors shut.

I stared at the closed doors for a long, long while. Long enough that, I thought, someone should have called the elevator.

Nobody did.

Eventually, I went down. Listened for the click. Stepped out into the noise and bustle of a busy, open office. I didn't even know which desk was mine. I scanned the maze of skeletons, beasts, and men until my eyes landed on the only desk with a snowglobe and a lamp. The whole top was busy, honestly. I shuffled over, sitting at the desk with wide eyes as I waited for the day to start.

A hiss, and then they were on my desk - photographs of a half-dozen people, their faces and names at my fingertips. A marker to make a decision about their destinies in my hand. I read their descriptions. It took a couple of tries. Somehow, at 19, I had never learned how to fucking read properly on one pass. Before me were Gardeners, Engineers - normal people. Average, normal people. And I was dooming them to die. I read the instructions for the day, hoping for it to say "Everybody lives, Rose!" but it didn't. It said to kill three liv-

ing, breathing humans. I gulped.

Surely, this was some manner of ruse. Surely, I wasn't marking real, actual people to die. But I had seen the scrapped, misspelled profile of me before. I knew the people were real.

And I knew I'd be killing them.

I turned on the lamp. The description disappeared, leaving only four symbols and a plus or minus. I marked one person to live. The house became a skyscraper. I marked the next one to live as well. The house returned to its house-like state, and the tree blossomed. They were connected. Neat! But... I couldn't kill any of them. So I marked them all to live. The globe looked about the same as when I had started the day, but there were little pluses and minuses floating all about. I hit a button on the fax machine, and the pages disappeared.

Hopefully, Fate wouldn't mind a day where no one needed to die.

Thirteen forty-eight entered the room that night, perfectly prim and proper. They spoke, however, with the kind of disappointment one might expect from a parent. "Please explain your actions to me."

"What do you mean?"

"You can't just let everyone live," They scolded. "Fate gets mad. And they get mad at me. So tell me why you did it?"

"Well what am I supposed to do? Murder people?"

"It isn't murder." Their stale voice grew taut. "If you do it again, I will personally end your world. And you'll be to blame. I don't lose anything either way. Capisce?"

"Y-yeah," I muttered.

They snatched the snowglobe, nodding. "Nothing broken

yet. Good."

Silence fell and remained as they got dressed, brushed their teeth, took off their own lace tie. Immediately, their clothing shifted, becoming a dark cloak. They took off an earring in their right ear, and their face became bone. Then, they threw up the blanket, holding one side up and looking at me expectantly.

"What?"

"Are you going to sleep?"

"I'm sorry, you're a homicidal maniac trying to get me to kill other humans, and you want me to sleep next to you?"

"I don't have a second bed."

There was nothing I could say to that, so I hopped in. Sleeping next to a skeleton was, surprisingly, not as traumatic as it sounds. They were cold and bony, but they didn't have another bed, and they weren't dead. Or, at least, not the way we think about it. And I slept like a baby.

The next day was harder. I had to remind myself that if I didn't mark the profiles the way Thirteen forty-eight wanted, they would end the world. Or maybe I would, all things considered. Their phone kept going off. At first, it was interesting to read. Closure for the lives I'd so carefully taken. As inspiring as the actions of the living were though, I couldn't handle the fates of the dead, so I put it in the desk drawer and tried to forget about it.

That night, I offered the globe to Thirteen forty-eight. They smiled. "Good work. I think everything is going just to plan."

"So... why does Fate keep dying?"

"A sadness runs through him," They said, sitting on the bed next to me without tearing their eyes from the

snowglobe. Their voice finally lost its sterility, becoming soft. "His fate, as it were, is to mark people for death. Day in, day out. Not a scrap of joy in that. I... I remember that my first time around, he was nice to me. A little perplexed by some of my thoughts, but encouraging. Sweet. He... really cares about his people, in his own way."

"Losing him must have been hard. I'm sorry you -"

Their demeanor snapped back to prim and perfect, and they slammed the snowglobe on the bedside table. "I didn't lose him. I'm going to save him."

There was no point in arguing. I dropped the subject. We curled up in bed, facing away from one another, minds focused on a tomorrow we desired to change. One day after another, deciding who should and should not die. It was draining. And every night I learned a little more about them. About Fate. They weren't a bad person. Just incredibly single minded. Fate too, it seemed like. But it sure was rude to just drop the entire fate of the world on the shoulders of a nineteen year-old.

They were at their happiest when their Fate was out and enjoying a vacation. They told me how he gushed about the world. How he seemed at peace with humanity when he was out there experiencing it. And that gave me hope. But it was ever so brief. A single week. Then, things started to fall again. Fate came home. He was desperate, apparently. So were they. Thirteen forty-eight raced against time, and the countdown had started. For a moment, their confidence soared. They were so sure this time that things would work. And then, it all came crashing down on the final day.

That day was brutal.

They entered. I set the globe on the counter with pride. "Perfectly Balanced!" I informed them, chest out.

They were silent. Stalwart. They didn't look at me.

"It's balanced. So we saved him, right?" I asked softly.

"No," They said. "He'll be dead tonight."

I sat next to them on the bed. Reached out to touch them. As soon as my fingers brushed their shoulders, the tears started. Real, actual tears. Black tears, but tears nonetheless. "I don't know what went wrong. I never know. Do you know how long I've been at this?!"

"Uh, thirteen hundred and forty-eight months?" I ventured.

"Close. Thirteen hundred and thirty-five." Their broken laughter through the room, as though just realizing how long it had been. "Thirteen hundred and thirty-five months, and I can't save him. I've tried everything. I've spoken to the Curator. I've begged higher management. This time I even got to Highest Management. Nothing. Ever. Changes." Their sterile facade had broken. The sound of their sobs tore viscerally through my chest, digging out my heart and crushing it. The sound shook the room, shook the walls. Their hands wrapped around the snowglobe and they tossed it, shattering it against the wall. "One hundred and eleven years of repeating over and over. Being born. Living. Dying. Repeating. Over and over and over again. Crying. Healing. Repeating. And here I am. And there he goes. Again."

Slowly, carefully, I collected the sorry creature into my arms. Their bony limbs wrapped around me. I ran my hands through their hair. "Maybe... maybe they can't be saved," I ventured after a while. They glared up at me.

"No. I can't fail. I won't fail. I--"

"It's not failing to admit it's out of your control," I told them.

"I--"

"When I was sixteen, my mom kicked me out. I thought I'd failed to be a good kid. The truth is, she'd failed to be a good mother. You're stuck on the idea that you failed to be a good Spawn. But maybe it's not your

fault. Maybe it's too late for Fate. Maybe his destiny was already decided before you were even spawned. But maybe, just maybe, his death doesn't have to be the end for him. You love him, right?"

They nodded, their red irises obscured by onyx tears.

"And he loved the world. I mean, you were happy and so was he when he was out there in it."

"What are you getting at?"

"Maybe... maybe the issue isn't you. Maybe he failed to take advantage of life. Didn't take breaks, didn't -"

"You don't get it," they growled. "We don't get breaks. We don't have weekends or vacations. We're born. We work. We sleep. Repeat it until we break and disappear."

I was quiet a moment, then pulled away. "Thirteen forty-eight... Who's gonna take his place as the keeper of world order?"

"No one. I'm trying again," They whispered.

"No. I think you should turn your eyes forward. How many Spawn have been lost over the years?"

"I-I don't know," they said softly. "Countless?"

"And how many of those people got a break?"

"None."

"Got to change positions?"

"None."

"Got to choose what their role was?"

"... None."

"So maybe Higher Management is the one who failed. Or Highest Management, or whatever. Maybe the answer isn't

torturing yourself by fighting to save someone who cannot be saved because neither of you were the ones who failed. Maybe the answer, in the end, is turning toward the future."

They were quiet, pensive. They wiped their tears. They looked at me. "And just... let him be dead?"

"Yes and no. Keep his memory alive by fighting to keep anyone from suffering like him. And if nothing changes? Take the whole office down with you."

They stared at me, then at the broken snowglobe in the corner. Their face was taut with grief and sorrow. They stepped away, seeming somehow smaller than before. Clinging to themselves. Shaking, they picked up the shattered remains and held them like a baby.

"Thanks, Jared. I'll... I'll think about it. But, what about you?"

"I mean, the world's lookin' pretty lit after I managed it for a bit," I laughed. "I was building a future from nothing when I got stuck in here. I'm sure I'll be able to build a new one when I step outside again. I know the world, and I know how to survive."

They smiled at me, then hugged me. "Thank you. Good luck."

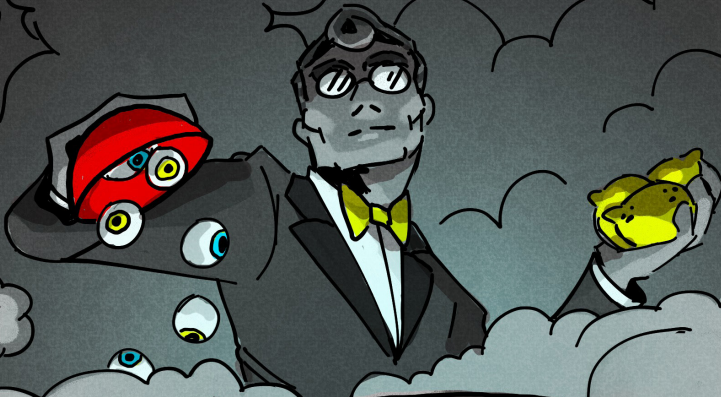
"You too, Thirteen."

They laughed, then took my hand. We descended the office together, down and down until we found the lobby once again. They led me to the exit. I stepped out into the light, and they turned towards the shadow. Whatever awaited us, we were ready for change.

"it will be done."



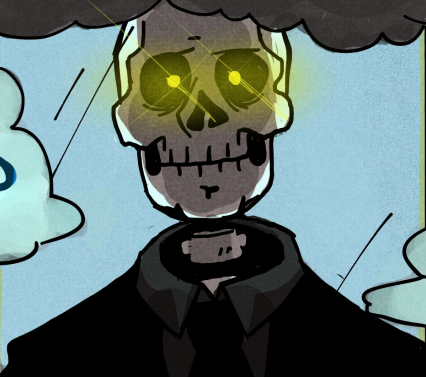
WELCOME
TO YOUR



LIFE.

THERES

BACK.



NO TURNING

EVEN
WHILE

WE

SLEEPS

WE WILL



FIND YOU



ACTING

ON

YOUR

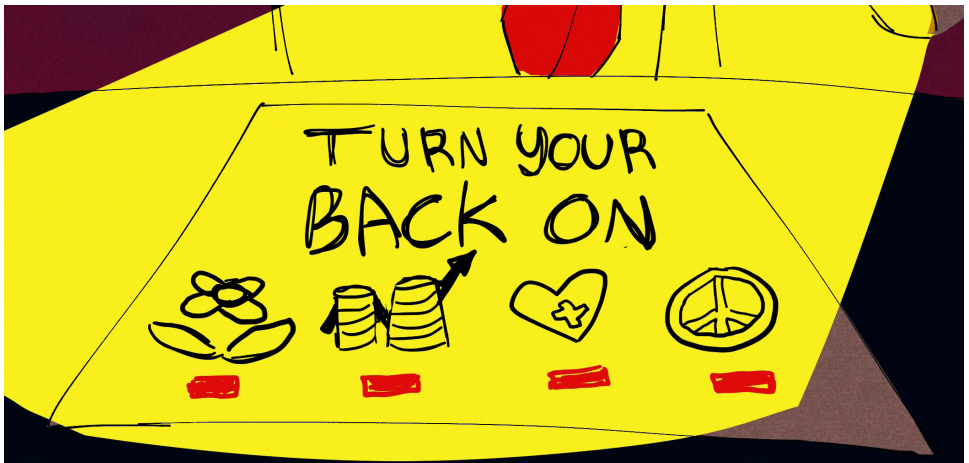


BEST



BEHAVIOR



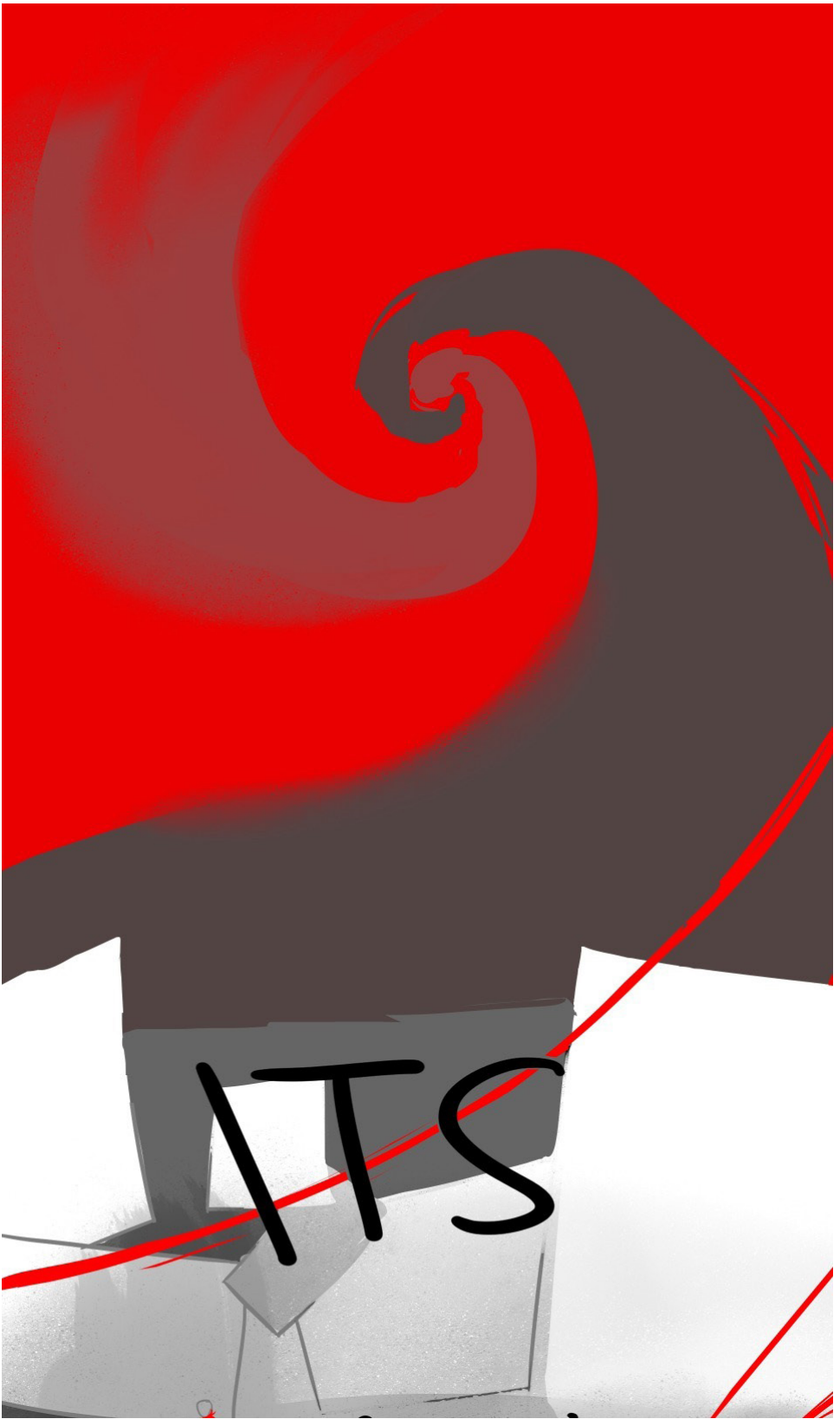


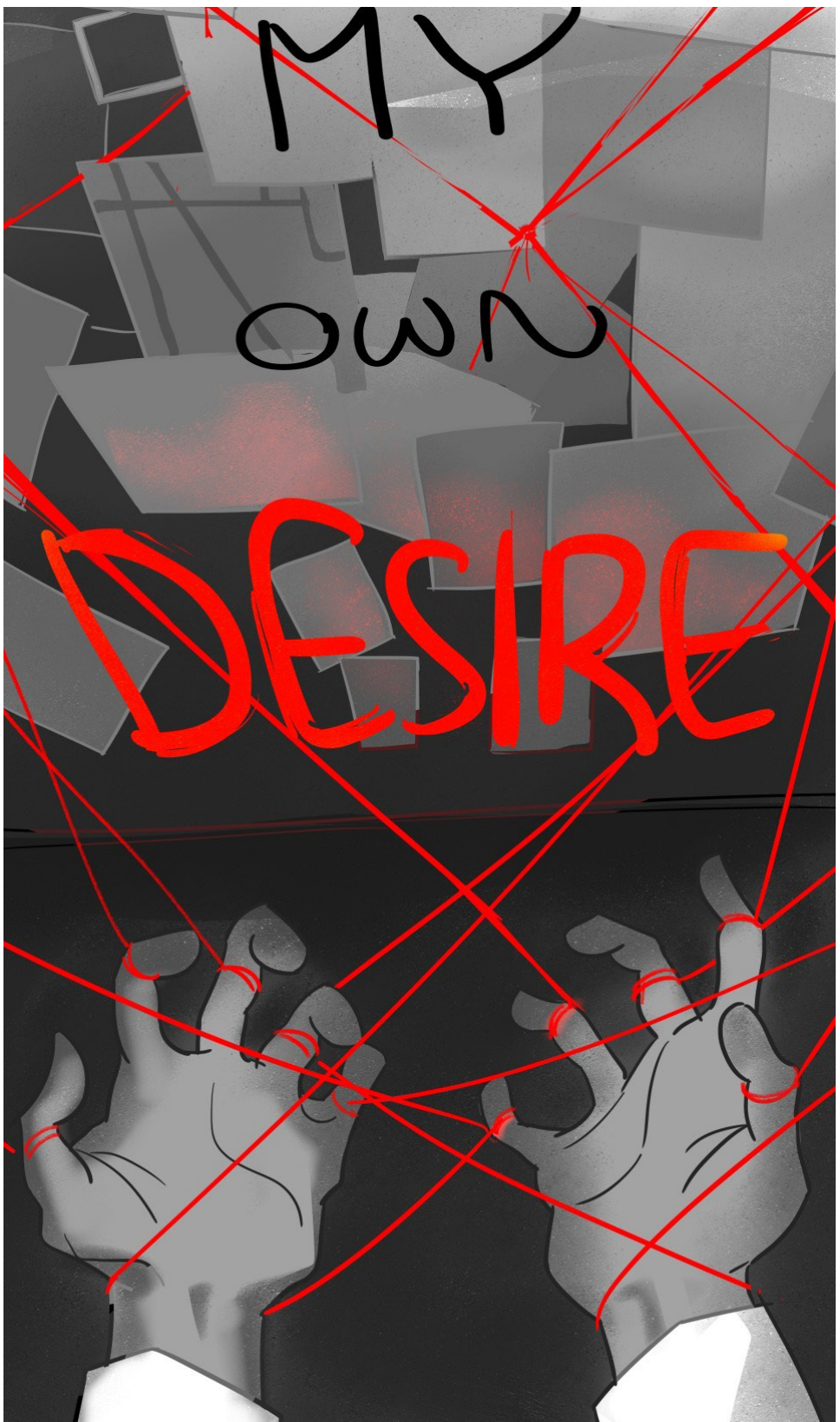


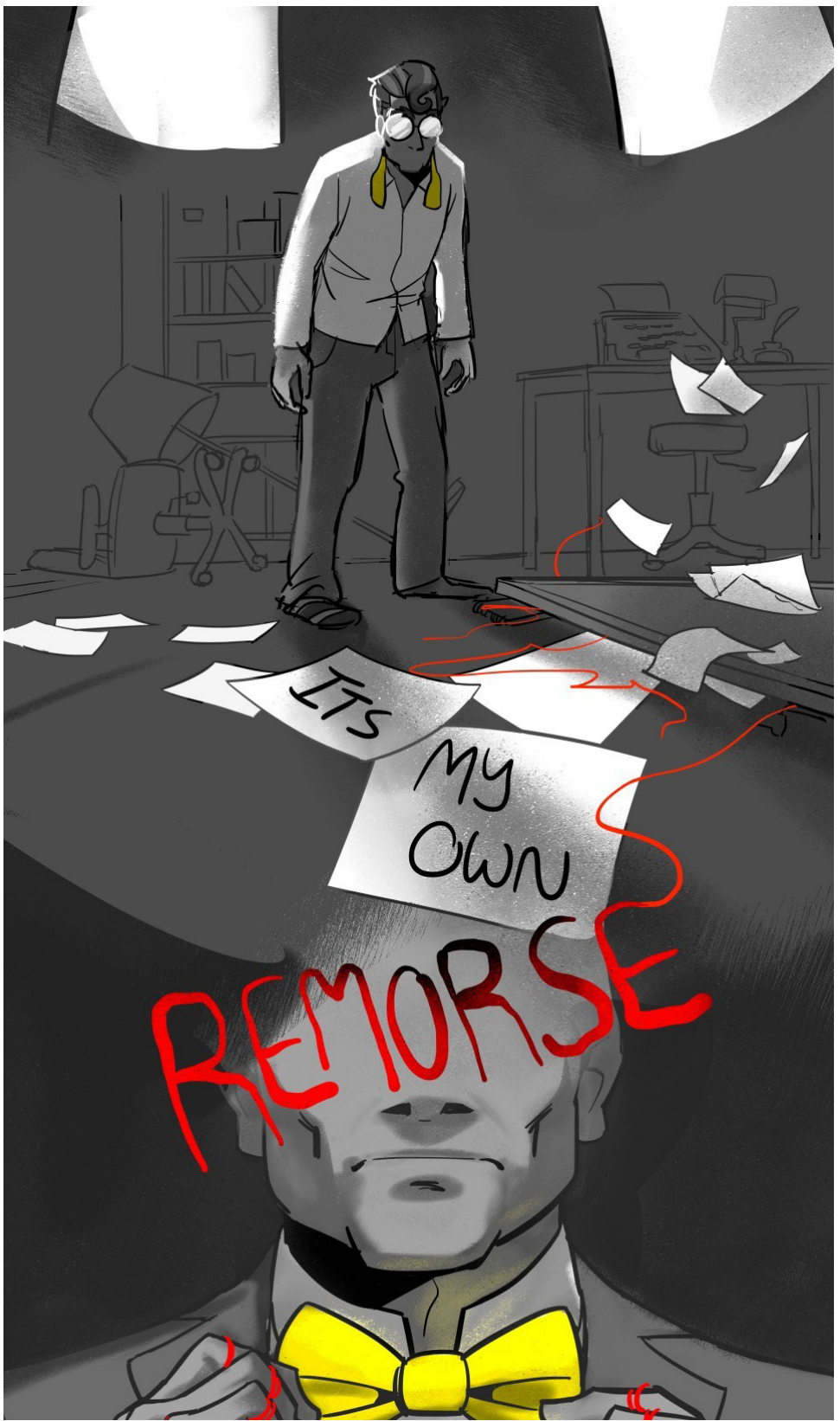
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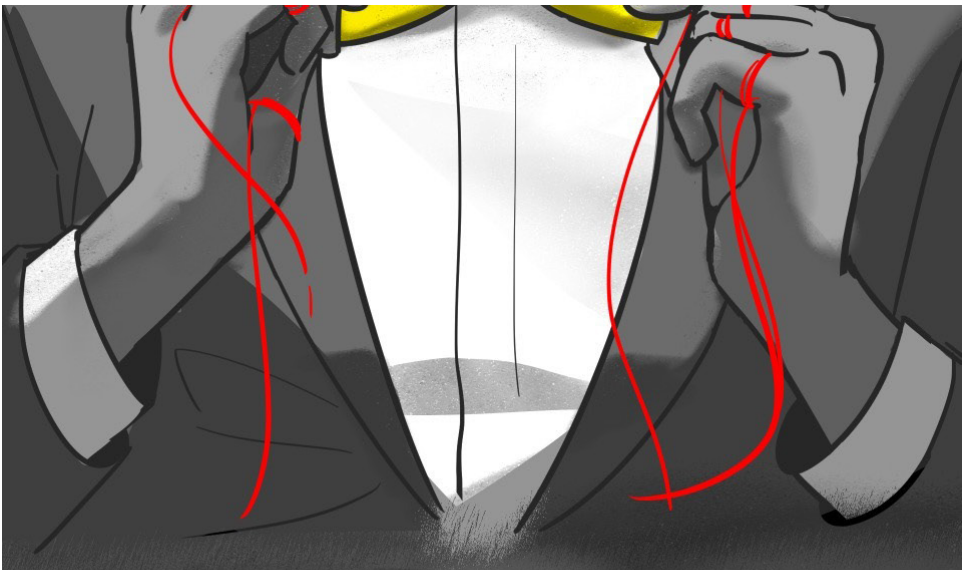
WANTS
TO RULE

THE
WORLD

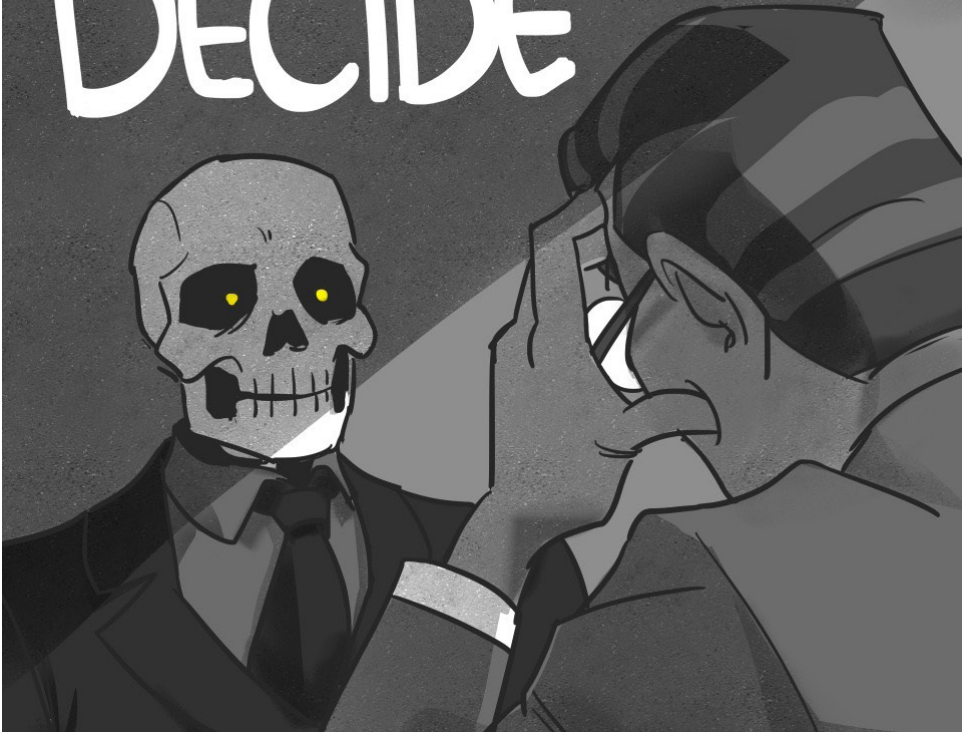








HELP ME TO
DECIDE





MOST

OF

FREEDOM



AND

OF

CHANGE OF OWNERSHIP REQUEST HUMAN DEPT.

Incomplete forms may be returned or rejected

SERVICE NAME AND LOCATION

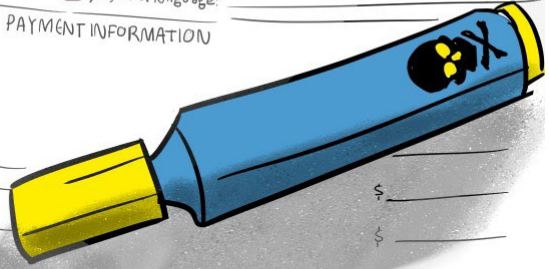
NEW OWNER MAILING INFORMATION *REQUIRED*

Has this been done?

PLEASURE

on-site visits yes, what language?

PAYMENT INFORMATION



Total Due

\$ _____
\$ _____
\$ _____

TO: NAME (print)

FATE

OFFICE USE ONLY

SIGNATURE





WANTS

TO
RULE



WORLD

FINDING FATE

By Sketchy, edited by Mich

The hours of quiet before the city rose from its slumber were always their favorite. The shop was the coziest in the quiet. The shopkeeper had just finished getting ready early, as always, when the bell over the door rang. It was too early for a customer, yet there they stood. This was a stranger, a first-time customer, yet when their gazes met something was familiar. It didn't make sense, but then again there were many little mysteries in life.

The stranger indicated a choice of tea with a request to share a cup with a friend. The shopkeeper contemplated the question as the kettle was filled and set to boil. It wasn't the professional thing to do, but this was their store. They made the rules here after all, and lemon was their favorite. The whistle beckoned, leaving the customer alone for a moment. The next moment, their company returned with two cups and steamed over glasses. "Can you see?" They asked, amused at the sight and smiling fondly. "Well enough after all these years," the blinded server replied and, true to their word, found a table to set the cups down.

It took a few tries to restore their lenses; a window for conversation their customer was quick to take advantage of. "I know someone with eyes like yours." "Oh?" "Yes, we used to meet after work and chat. They'd laugh if they saw the suits I'm wearing now." A gesture towards the distinct outfit of solid colors, alternating between 2 distinct hues every other section. The shopkeeper chuckled, their own uniform below the cinnamon-stained apron, was mostly off-white with a gradient of yellow upwards towards the buttercup collar. "It suits you perfectly. That being said, it is the brightest attire I have seen since the last local convention."

That statement earned a smile. The quiet moments spent on the lemon tea were comfortable. The mention of past conversations had the shopkeeper reminisce on an anecdote.

dote of their own. And yet they wondered. . . what did they do before this? They always knew they wanted a quiet place, somewhere they could organize and dictate the rules. They had experience with that, they knew what steps to take, all the paperwork it took to open up a shop in such a busy city. It should have been simple to recall the past, yet the attempt only brought vague examples, as it always did. There was one detail the shopkeeper was certain of, however.

"I once worked at an establishment with a cat. The most sweet, clever little Lady." The customer stopped as they raised their cup, looking into the shopkeeper's face like one would a page of Walden. They in turn spoke again of their work, where there was also a cat- a right handful who would steal paperwork and played librarian. The shopkeeper could so clearly picture the mischief maker; her blue collar standing out against the view of the sunset- Had they had such a nice view before? What job did they have that had a view of the skyline from above?

That train of thought was interrupted by one more pressing. Neither of them had yet been introduced. "Ah, it is so early that I have forgotten to properly say hello! My apologies. My name is Lance, Lance Destiny." The surprise of forgetting basic greetings hit the customer hard as well. They held a hand out as they coughed down their drink. "I always wondered. . ." they trailed off for a moment in thought, "Well, I go by a few things. Mostly nicknames off of books, being one of the younger workers and all. If I had to pick, I'd say my old friend's choice still fits like a glove. My name of choice is Grim R. Fate."

It felt like seeing a constellation for the first time in the night sky for the shopkeeper when they said that name, the world around the table becoming hazy as their mind raced. While it still felt distant, the life they once had became real in technicolor detail. Faces of Reapers, Accountants, the Archivist- Grim. They blinked back to the present, the lack of a visible skull no longer enough to hide them now. Of course. If anyone would find a way to make this situation reality, it was

them.

"Grim. . . I, must admit I do not know how long it has been. Time is, ah, catching up with me out here I'm afraid. Changing my perceptions, and all that. But it is good to see you." The new Fate of the World returned the smile, blue eyes as bright as the first time they'd been ignited.

"I knew you remembered! Mortimer figured it was a long-shot even if I did find you." They paused, uncertain for the first time since they'd entered. "I know I took the name when you stepped down, but. . . could I still call you Fate?"

The laugh of the shopkeeper was so full of life, eyes creased in a smile never seen by any employed Reaper. "Only if I can call you Grim as well."

"Of course!" A long sip was taken, followed by a content sigh. "Thank goodness, I don't think I'd be able to get used to 'Lance'- ah! Speaking of!"

The grin on their face would make Lady Pawdington proud. "You know, even though they always gripe on and on in such distress, I think Frank misses your pranks. Thrasher."

Of all people to have caught on to the old ruse, it would be Grim.

"You have no proof, Grim. Such accusations wound me." A grin befitting their favorite cat said otherwise, as they dramatically put the back of their hand to their forehead in mock-distress.

"You had the time management savvy to get all those balloons."

"Without being seen?"

"You look like a strawberry jam fan."

"I cannot stand that spread, do take care not to strain yourself whilst reaching so far."

"I suppose you're right, you probably couldn't have been the Being who did a cartwheel on a desk."

"Hmm," Fate took a long sip of their tea, keeping a straight face for as long as they could. "Of course not. It was a handstand."

Neither lasted 5 seconds before the shop was filled with laughter at the convoluted saga of Frank Whittle.

The early morning began to lighten and grey outside as old friends shared what life had been like since they parted, how they'd grown. Grim had made changes Fate had never considered possible, continuing to lead the mortals towards prosperous times. Fate had seen firsthand, giving feedback from their now mortal life. How so much had surprised them. How small acts that hold no intrinsic meaning helped make the hours distinct, or made a stranger smile.

Fate had found peace in losing the purpose they had been made for. But something still made their smile hesitant when asked if they were happy. It didn't take long before the patented Lady Look™ from Grim revealed what it was. "I am well aware of the irony in this..." Fate began with an uncertain and almost embarrassed air to their tone, "Yet even when the specifics are hidden, it is the 'one fear', as the youths say, of which I still have," Fate looked away, adjusting their sleeves and collar a tad restlessly.

"I. . . I could die at any moment." Fate paused in thought. "All it would take would be my file appearing on any Reaper's desk. For how long I searched for an escape, for nothingness over eternity, for freedom... and said freedom, I have found, is so short. . . I understand that, in consideration of how long I have lived, how many humans have become numbers on my desk- I am, unequivocally, being selfish. Silly even. I know how the system works. I have never been exempt from its rules. But being on the other side, now. . . is the anxiety not, perhaps, misplaced?"

A hand entered their field of vision, holding their palm up on the table. A gesture of support taken without hesitation, the discomfort of the topic replaced with surprise at Grim's warmth. It shouldn't have been a surprise that they had the strength to take on a heart, but it was grounding. Fate nodded a thanks before clearing their throat and letting go, only for Grim to keep them in place. "Actually, that's why I came. Aside from visiting my favorite former manager of course."

"I was your only manager."

"An uncontested favorite indeed." Grim let go as Fate tried not to laugh, and instead went to pull a small item from their pocket. They held it for the light to catch it, drawing all attention to it's gleam at once. A golden coin with the symbol of a skull on both sides. Even if Fate had no context, the coin would have made the impression of importance all the same. The doubloon wasn't cursed per say, but it had a magic befitting of its iconography. They had opened their mouth to ask when Grim presented the answers.

"It took some legendary dealmaking with Mortimer, which will go down in no documentation, BUT!" The coin was placed in Fate's hand, fingers gently closed around the disc. "I know what it was like. I have seen what a life without hope and futility is, and this chance you have now should never be clouded by those what-ifs. They've had their time. This is yours." Grim looked up at Fate intently, blue eyes flashing, "Use that coin when you're ready, and I will file it myself. No sooner, no later," They held Fate's hand, their sincerity impossible to doubt. "No one else will take this away from you again."

If their hand wasn't held, they may have dropped the gift in that moment. The wave of relief and gratitude overwhelmed any concern of keeping appearances or coherence. Fate's body moved on it's own as the chair was pushed back, steps were taken, and in a blink Grim was in their arms and Fate was in their embrace. Time looked away and let the moment linger for as long as it needed.

When they finally let go, the sky had begun to find its color. Morning for most of Cosmopolis would be starting up soon, the frost on the windows having melted in the dawning sunlight. When the day started, Grim had to be back at the Office, and Fate at the beck and call of customers. Though they had to part ways, it wouldn't be forever. Fate knew as much when they saw Grim out, watching as they vanished in the first, brightest beam of orange light. Mid-step, of course. They had to laugh as tears caught in their smile. Always so dramatic, their Grim.

Fate knew the past would blur again, as the bell started

to chime like it always did. They would still be themselves, whether or not they knew what it had been like during ancient Rome, or what "mixtapes" were. The coin was an anchor to that morning they could never forget; of the name of who they had been before they'd started anew. There was a worry that Grim might become a stranger one day. Fading into that same grey haze as all the faces and names from life did. A worry unfounded, as the day came that the coin was flipped and disappeared into thin air. Fate knew Grim when they came at that early hour, to see one last sunrise. Friends in Life and Death disappearing as they talked, fading into the ornate doors of The Office one last time.

CHAOS



"Chaos is the score upon which
reality is written."

-- HENRY MILLER

DEDICATION

There are a great number of who could be thanked for the success of this project. The many artists who worked on it were caring, dedicated, and kind. They supported one another through thick and thin over the course of 11 long months. Some of us came of age, others experienced job loss, but no matter what, we found community in a game which spoke to us, one and all. Which brings us to the developers, artists, writers, voice actors, and storytellers of Death and Taxes.

This Zine is dedicated to you. Thank you for bringing us together. Thank you for cultivating a community that loves and accepts all of its members. Your work asks thought-provoking questions, and helps us to realize our place in a complicated and chaotic world. You made a story that is as engaging as it is relatable and humorous. You made us laugh, made us cry, and made us theorize about a great many things. Thank you for offering safe harbor. For some of us, that is the greatest gift of all.

--THE ARTISTS OF DEATH

MEET THE GRIMS

PURVEYOR OF PEP



Name: Liam/Cecil/Asterion.

Pronouns: He/him/they/them, really anything that's not she/her and/or it/its.

Where to Find You: SweetSugaryStars on Tumblr, Instagram, and Newgrounds.

Fun Fact!: I run a Monster Of The Week TTRPG game about eldritch fish and morally grey pirates!

THE LIBRARIAN



Name: Tolpen (Tolp)

Pronouns: she/they

Where to find me: squadron-of-damned (tumblr), Tolpen (AO3, DeviantArt)

Fun Fact: If I was a necromancer, I'd live in Dover.

HARBINGER OF CHAOS



Name: Tad (Thaddeus)

Pronouns: He/him

Where to Find You: PersimmonPollywog on tumblr and @Lillysketchpad on twitter!

Fun Fact!: i love boxing and recording shitty song covers haha

HEAD OF MORALE



Name: sal

Pronouns: they/them

Where to Find You: @skoib on tumblr, @ghost.nook on instagram

Fun Fact!: no thoughts head empty </3

DEFILER OF WORLD ORDER



Name: Al
They/Them

Where to Find You: @Betelzebub on everything

Fun Fact!: I once got hit by a car and that's probably the closest to death I've ever been irl. As thanks for marking me to live, I made the first known rule 34 art of Fate.

BUSIEST HANDS



Name: sam

Pronouns: he/they/she

Where to find you: sealbatross on tumblr/
youtube/ other places

Fun Fact: tad's song covers are not in the least shitty

STEADFAST AND WILLFUL WARDEN



Name: Mich

Pronouns: they/them

Where to Find You: IG | starvingfartistt
Tumblr| sarge26writes (fic)/sgtbeatlespotter
(bullshit)/sgtfartist (art) AO3| sarge26

Fun Fact!: I am literally the President of my campus' DND club I am the biggest nerd on the face of the godforsaken earth

SHENANIGANS SCRIBE



Name: Sketchy (nicknames welcome)

Pronouns: he/she/they, any of those work

Where to Find You: Here on Discord and OctagonsRule on Ao3 (nothing written recently but still)

Fun Fact!: I can do a va impression line of Barbie that will impress and/or absolutely disturb just about anyone who hears it!

MEME FATE



Name: archie/mothership/whatever you may know me by! spawn 69 is also cool B)

Pronouns: any but they/he/it are preferred!

Where to Find You: i'm @/enbyfroggy on twitter and @/sodafrog13 on tumblr!

Fun Fact: i really like birds and tf2!

MOST EFFICIENT



Name: Graham

Pronouns: He/Him

Where to Find You: @standardundead on twitter

Fun Fact!: every story ive ever written has some element of death or ressurection as a plot device

PARTY KITTY



Name: Azumei

Pronouns: she/they

Where to Find You: azumeowth on tumblr and A03

Fun Fact!: I have 3 spoiled cats

