1.

“You really didn’t want to miss this, did you?”

The deep voice sent a shock through my body. It felt like everything was suddenly waking up, all by itself. Every muscle shook as one, like a surge of electricity had gone through my body. I felt every nerve light up, spasms shaking my limbs as I took in a long breath. It almost felt like my lungs had been flat until then, empty of any air. Like coming out of the water after your brother had held your head under the surface for far too long. As if that breath was expending my whole chest for the first time in ages.

I opened my eyes. Or rather tried to. It took a while to adjust to the light. Everything was so white, so clear. It was similar to being on a skiing trip in the snow-covered mountains, and taking off your sunglasses. It burned my eyes and I closed them again, whimpering. I tried again a few times, taking in bits and pieces of what I was seeing, but all I could see around me was just… White. I couldn’t make anything out. Just light and white, white, white… I figured I was in the hospital, and felt a small tear roll on my face. Whether it was because of the pain caused by the light, or because I was awake, I didn’t know. I kept blinking, trying to fully open my eyes.

“Take your time, I know it’s a lot”

The soothing voice seemed to help, somehow. It was so deep, it felt like velvet, and it seemed to be resonating into my soul, healing, taking some of the pain away. What kind of hospital is this, anyway? Why would they keep the light right in my face like that? They obviously could see I was having trouble opening my eyes because of it. Just move it away, Jesus Christ…

“Are you getting there, kid?”

From the tone of his voice, I figured the doctor was probably getting impatient. He probably had other patients to see, surely more important, and he was just checking if my senses worked fine. So, I forced myself to fully open my eyes, like ripping off a band-aid. It hurt like hell for a second and then, just like that, it was gone. I blinked a few times, disoriented, and tried to focus on the man in front of me.

“There we go! Good lad. Okay, now to business…”

“Business… What do you…”

“Yes, I’m going to need a little signature, if you don’t mind. Top of the page please”

I looked at the man, confused. What did he mean? What business? I tried to read his face and then looked down, to notice he was holding a file towards me. It was one of those old-fashioned light brown files, with a few sheets clipped together inside of it. I grabbed it, not thinking and still confused, and looked at the top of the first page. It had my name on it. Big and black, but the ink looked different, and I couldn’t tell why. It was just black. Not sparkling, not shining, just plain, old, boring *black*. And yet…

The man cleared his throat and made a slight gesture toward the files with his head. I frowned, but signed on the dotted line just over my name, as instructed. I looked at it for a second. Even my signature felt foreign. Everything did. It all felt so weird, but I just figured I wasn’t quite awake yet, and held the file back to the doctor, who was still waiting, lightly tapping his foot on the ground. It’s only when I gave him the file and the pen back that I noticed that he was not dressed as a doctor. He was wearing a suit. A grey, very expensive-looking suit, with a red handkerchief, and golden cufflinks.

“You… You’re not a doctor, are you?”

I was surprised that my voice had come out so clearly. I thought it would be rough and raspy from sleep, but it was just as usual. It felt even stronger, in fact. He seemed surprised too for a short second, even though I felt it wasn’t because of the clearness of my voice, then smiled, like a young child had just said something utterly ridiculous, but cute.

“A doctor? Of course not, you have no use of a doctor here, boy”

I frowned yet again. Something wasn’t right, something felt off, so off that I couldn’t place my finger on it. I then looked at my feet.

I was wearing my favourite Nike sneakers, and my favourite jeans. I was actually wearing everything I like best in my wardrobe, I could even see my grandfather’s watch on my wrist, his old army dog tag dangling around my neck, even his signet ring on my finger, which was weird because first, I didn’t remember putting them all on and second, didn’t they dress you with some sort of gown at the hospital?

But then the weirdest thing hit me. I was standing up. I was standing up, straight on my feet, which didn’t make sense, since I had just woken up. How did I not notice that before? I didn’t even remember getting out of bed… That being said, I didn’t remember being actually lying down either. I just remembered… Just being. I looked back at the man, who scanned the file for a second, looked at me and took a note.

“Okay, I’m going to need your full name please”

“My… You have my name, it’s on the first page of your file, I just saw it under my signature”

“Protocol” smiled the man, “please, your full name?”

“It’s uh… Nero. Nero Callum Svitserk”

“Callum, uh? Scottish? It’s not in your file, though. You don’t have the accent either”

“No, my, uh, my mum just liked the name”

The man nodded, hesitated, and looked up towards me once again as if he were looking at a small child.

“Have you… Have you figured it out yet, Nero?”

“Figured what out, Sir?”

“Where we are”

“Well yeah, this must be the hospit…”

His sorry look stopped me. Well to be fair he didn’t look sorry per se, more like… Condescending. Like he was sorry I hadn’t figured it out yet, but not surprised. I looked around myself and blinked again and again. It took me a few more seconds to realize that something else was so off, and I wondered yet again how I had not seen it before. There was no hospital bed. There was no medical material, no tubes and machines like the ones we always saw on the telly… Now that I was thinking about it, this wasn’t even a room. It was just all white. A white field with no grass that didn’t seem to end. And there was nothing but the man and me. How could I not have noticed that before?

“What do you see, Nero?”

“I… Nothing. It’s all empty and white and…”

“Empty and white? That’s disappointing, you people really lack imagination”

“What?”

The man smiled softly again, and put his hand on my shoulder.

“Tell me Nero, what’s the last thing you remember?”

I thought for a second. This exercise seemed really hard, way harder than it should be. I remembered getting up late. I remembered choosing coffee over breakfast again, forgetting I already had a sugar in it, and putting in a second one, before swearing, because it was now too sugary, and ‘what a stupid day this already was’. I remembered getting ready for school. But I could feel that wasn’t it. That wasn’t the answer he was waiting for.

“I was going to school. I was in my car, and I was driving, listening to music. I was… I was tired, very tired. And I stopped the music”

“And then what?”

“Well then I… I don’t…”

“Take your time”

“I don’t remember”

“Yes, you do, it’s somewhere, in there. Take your time, let it come back”

“I’m telling you I don’t…”

And then I came to me. Flashes, feelings, thoughts… I suddenly felt bad, I felt sick, nauseous. My hands started shaking, my breathing got faster and faster and tears came up to my eyes. I tried to speak a few times, but my tongue wouldn’t work. I looked back at the man, trying to form the words in my head, before trying to blur something out.

“I… Am I…I’m dead?”

The man’s whole face broke into a huge smile and he clapped my back happily.

“There we go! Good job, lad, that took a while but we got there. Okay so now, we need to talk business, I can see in my files that…”

I jumped away from him and started screaming.

“Wait a bloody second, will you? What’s going on, where am I, what happened?”

The man frowned and looked a little annoyed, like I was keeping him from doing something very important. Well, more than me anyway. He turned a few pages from his file before finding what he was looking for.

“Ah, yes! Well, you were going to school, just like you said, you stopped the music, then you sped up and ran straight into a huge tree. To be fair, you really thought about this for at least a long second, because you picked the biggest tree, you really didn’t want to mess it up, which is fair I suppose, I mean what’s the alternative at this point”

My legs shook so hard I had to sit down on the white floor. I took a few seconds to calm my breathing and held my head in my hands.

“So, this is… What, Heaven?”

The man frowned yet again and looked around himself for a second.

“Well, I mean you people do like to call it that, so if it makes you feel better…”

“It doesn’t make me feel better! I’m dead, I don’t know where I am, I’m scared, I’m confused!”

“No need to yell at me, kid, I’m just here for the formalities”

“And who the hell are you anyway? Are you, what, like a ghost of my past that’s going to tell me all my bad deeds like in that book? Or… I don’t know, you an angel or something?”

“Archangel, please, let’s use the proper titles”

“Archangel?”

“Yes, I was promoted. And you won’t find any ghosts here, don’t be ridiculous”

“Right, ghosts would be the only thing ridiculous here, right. Which one are you then? Gabriel?”

The man raised his brow and scoffed, as if he were offended.

“Gabriel? Lord, no, I’m Michael! As if Gabriel would look… What do I look like?”

“You don’t know what you look like?”

“I know very well what I look like, thank you very much. I’m asking you what I look like to you”

“Well… Probably the same as everybody else, right?”

The man sighed, closing his eyes, clearly getting annoyed.

“No, no, you see, all this is different depending on the person we… Welcome, here. Like the actual place, which you, apparently, see as a very boring white, empty place, some see a huge garden. Some see a mountain, some even see that white station like in the movie with the wizard boy. We had an old man who just saw his house. It took us a while to convince him that he wasn’t on earth anymore. My appearance follows the same rules. Some people are actually very hurtful you know. I’ve been everything, small, tall, handsome, ugly, young, old. To a little girl at some point, I was just another little girl who had come to play with her. That one was quite sad, to be honest. So, go on, tell me, what do I look like?”

I thought about it for a second and looked closely at him.

“You… You wear a very nice grey suit. It looks expensive, definitely one I couldn’t afford. Or rather, couldn’t have afforded, I suppose”

“Oh, that’s good, just a few days ago a man said I was dressed like a hippie. Now I have nothing against them but still, I have standards”

“Yeah… You look middle-aged, maybe like fifty? You’re tall, with a strong jaw, and short salt and pepper hair, and a light beard, like you haven’t shaved in a few days. Your eyes… At first I thought they were blue but they’re more like… Purple…”

“Purple? That’s not usual for you people, is it? Or are our records wrong? We never keep up with all your genetics mutations it never seems to stop, honestly it’s exhausting”

“No, no, it’s not, I guess it’s just that I saw this show recently, you see, and there was this bunch of angels and one of them had purple eyes and…”

“Yes, yes, I see. Getting your inspiration from somewhere else, it happens a lot. Well I suppose it should be a compliment to the writers, am I right? That guy’s appearance really stayed with you”

“Right, yeah, definitely… So, you can appear just as anything, depending on the person you welcome?”

“Oh yes. It’s always funny to see what will turn up in people’s heads”

“And, when you appear female, is your name still Michael?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Isn’t that… a male name?”

“You guys decided that it was a male name, it’s not my fault. We certainly didn’t give it a gender, back at the beginning of everything it was just *my* name, then your people liked it, kept it and made it male, and that was about it”

“Yeah, how did that happen, by the way? How did we… I mean, did you get in contact with, like, prophets?”

Michael looked very bored, suddenly, and shrugged.

“Are you here for a history lesson?”

“Well I don’t bloody know why I’m here, do I, for God’s…”

“Please try not to swear”, he quickly interrupted me.

“Ah, I would offend God, would I?”

“You what? Oh no, she has no time for this, she probably wouldn’t even hear you, that’s just not very polite, is it?”

“Not polite… Right, of course, let’s be polite in freaking Heaven”

“Once again, not heaven, but since this must be a little overwhelming to you, I’ll let it slip”

I laughed, sarcastically. ‘A little overwhelming’ was more than an understatement.

“So, do you guys… Welcome everyone that died?”

Michael frowned.

“Well of course, we’re not going to see half of you and leave the other half alone, are we? They would put in a complaint for discrimination for some reason, we would get in trouble, there would be explanations to be given, paperwork, and trust me, paperwork in here is no joke… No, no, we take care of all of you”

“That must be a lot of people”

The Archangel hummed in agreement, taking a few notes in the file.

“And, are all the stories true? You know, about the angels and…”

“Some are, some aren’t, just like for everything else” said Michael without looking

up. “That being said, some of us are really glorified for no good reason. Like the Angels. Bunch of lazy kids, the angels, let me tell you. They weren’t charged with creating the world, and that really shows. No sense of responsibility. Can you even imagine if they had been the ones charged with creating the stars? What a mess that would have been. Really, you’re lucky you ended up with me, who knows what it could have looked like”

I put my hand in my pockets, looking down. I couldn’t feel my phone in there, which made sense I supposed. No need for a phone here. That being said, I didn’t feel much, to be honest. My fingers felt so numb, I couldn’t really feel the fabric of the jeans, as if I had been sleeping in a weird position, stopping the blood circulation and my hand had gone to sleep. My whole body sort of felt like that.

“And what about Lucifer, then?”

Michael sighted and looked up.

“What about Him?”

“Well I mean, He’s the Devil, He has to…”

“Oh please, not this again. Every time one of you gets here and start asking about Him it’s always the same. Listen, I know you guys care about your Bible and everything but there must have been a translation error or something, to be honest we never looked it up, we really don’t have time to check if all your beliefs are right, you know what I mean? But He didn’t ‘fall’, whatever that’s supposed to mean. He’s a little tricky, granted, but we didn’t burn off His wings, cast Him out or something, we’re not savages. A little disagreement is not reason to be sent out of here, or we wouldn’t have many of us left to run this whole thing, right? Actually, He can’t be very far from here, He had a job around…”

Michael looked around, as if he were looking for Him, which I thought ridiculous, since there was nobody near us, not for miles anyway. Then it hit me that, maybe we weren’t in an empty place at all, maybe that was just what *I* was seeing, just like Michael’s appearance. Maybe, in his reality, we were surrounded by other Angels, and… Well, other dead people. I wondered how many we were, right now, at this very instant. The idea was so creepy it disturbed me, thinking that I might be surrounded by dead people. But then again, I was dead too, wasn’t I?

“So, what are we going to do now?” I asked Michael, who had been silently scanning the files for a few minutes.

“We? *We* do nothing, boy. *You* are going to get to work”

“To work? So, what, we’re supposed to work for our whole life, then we get to the afterlife and we work again?”

“Well, it’s not working, per se, it’s a little different. You see, you died at 7:48:27 in the morning”

“So?” I shrugged.

“So, I am going to tell you a bit of a story first. When you were born, on the 28th of September 1996, at 11:32:07, something else happened, at that very exact moment, this very tenth of second”

“And what was that?”

“Well boy, somebody died”

2.

28th of September 1996, 11:22:39

Arthur Wrangler looked at the clock again. It must have been about the tenth time this morning. It had become some sort of a ritual somehow, watching time pass by. Slowly. Ever so slowly. He wasn’t waiting for anything, hadn’t been for a long, long time. The only think he was waiting for was for the day to pass. Then he will go to bed, sleep, wake up, and start the same ritual over and over again. He will watch the clock, waiting for the day to come to an end.

He looked at his cat asleep on his lap. An old man now, just like him. He didn’t have a name, not really. When he had found him in the streets, famished, years ago, he hadn’t bothered giving it a name. It looked in such a bad shape that he really thought the poor animal wouldn’t last long. And yet, he did. Back in the day, when he first took him in, he was just used to calling him ‘Mister Cat’, and it seemed to be enough for both of them. So, it stuck.

Just like Arthur, Mister Cat spent most of his days sleeping, drinking or eating, and not doing much else. It was obviously harder on Arthur’s morale than Mister Cat’s. The furry little beast seemed absolutely content with this way of life. He wasn’t an outdoorsy cat, life in a small apartment was apparently completely satisfying for him.

Today was a rainy day, and Arthur had been inside his small home all morning. No need to go grocery shopping, even though he would have to go soon, and nobody to visit. He stayed in the couch, watching the raindrops violently hit the window in front of him. He watched people hurrying about with their umbrellas, and could almost hear them curse under their breath. He watched a young woman dragging her child behind her, trotting to their car. He watched a business man in a nice suit looking at his watch around five time in twenty seconds. The poor man was drenched. Good thing it wasn’t very cold. 10 to 12 degrees maybe.

However, it was very cold in the apartment. Heating was expensive, and his pension wasn’t anything to be impressed by. It was barely enough for the rent and the food sometimes, so Arthur had decided that it was easier to put on some more clothing, and drink more tea to warm himself up. And again, Mister Cat helped, purring happily on his lap, heat radiating from his small body.

On days like this, Arthur always felt a bit depressed. But then, when wasn’t he depressed? His mind travelled back in time, where he tried hard to think about some happy times. He went all the way back to his childhood, determined to find something but, as usual, it would be a search in vain.

He was born in early 1919. Nine months before his birth, his father, a corporal, came home on permission. The war was soon going to end, he told his wife. These horrible times would soon be over, and they would soon come back to their normal life. He didn’t think he could go back to being a butcher, he said, but a friend of his had taught him the art of making bread. Maybe he could become a baker, he said. His parents celebrated. Two days later, he kissed his wife goodbye, telling her how excited he was for their new life, and left for one last mission.

He never came back.

When his parents conceived him, they were celebrating the end of the war. They never imagined that the child that would be born from that union would fight in the next one.

His childhood was neither sad nor happy. His mother had to work a few odd jobs to make ends meet, and he helped, whenever he could. There wasn’t a lot of kids in the village, he didn’t have many people to play with. So, he stayed with his mother, tried to make her happy, to make her smile. It was no easy task for a small boy like him, but he managed.

A few years later, he enrolled in the War to end all wars on the very day it was announced. He was one of the firsts to arrive in the village’s recruiting office. A young, vigorous lad, ready to fight for freedom, like his father had before. Ready to die for it too, if need be. At that point, it wasn’t like he had anything waiting for him at home. His mother was long gone now.

By some miracle, he survived. He was wounded, several times, but always came back, and was never captured.

He came home on a Saturday. His childhood home was still standing, which was a miracle too. He lived there for a little while, then moved to France, hoping that the memories of his sad mother would fade away if he left the house. He married a German girl there. Her father was a scientist who was working with the French, and they met at a bar. They danced, they laughed, and promised to see each other again. They did. And again, and again, and again… Until he went to her father for his blessing. The old man happily gave it, if his daughter wished for the same thing too. She did.

They got married in July. It was a sunny day, which was lucky, since it had been raining for the whole week. They moved into a small house and build their life there. He was a carpenter, she worked as a waitress. They were quite satisfied for a while. Arthur never spoke about the war, and his wife never asked him. She never asked him much. About anything. Until one day, she asked him to forgive her, and left him for a French man.

Arthur wasn’t angry. He immediately forgave her. He never held a grunge towards either of them.

He kept working for a few years, until, on a warm Tuesday afternoon, he slipped from the roof he was working on, and broke his leg. He never walked properly again, let alone run, which was fine, because he hadn’t done that in years anyway. To make ends meet, he worked a few odd jobs here and there. He couldn’t do much, his cane stopped him from doing quite a lot of things, and the pain stopped him from doing the rest. He never remarried, never had children.

Eventually, he got Mister Cat. And that was about it. So, yes, Arthur Wrangler usually felt depressed, but that wasn’t a new thing. He was used to it.

He slumped a little more in his couch, and scratched Mister Cat behind the ears. The cat purred, and Arthur smiled. At least one of them seemed content. It was just after 11:30 now, which was just the right time for his end of morning-nap. Arthur put his head on the headrest and closed his eyes. Sleep came easily today. He felt its wave coming toward him quickly. Good, at least he wouldn’t have to wait for sleep to come.

On the 28th of September, just after 11:30, Arthur Wrangler fell asleep.

He would never wake up.

3.

“Well… Okay, I mean, that’s sad but people die all the time, don’t they?”

“Well, yes, that’s true. Actually, that’s the whole point. You see, it’s all a very special… Circle, let’s say”

“Don’t you come at me with the Circle of Life”

“But it is the Circle of Life! Or rather… Well rather the circle of Death if you like. It really depends on how you look at it”

“Charming”

“Stop being cocky, that doesn’t suit you”

“Apologies”

“Okay. From the very beginning of your life, right before that, actually, you are paired with someone. But not just any someone. Someone who *isn’t* anymore. Do you understand what I mean?”

“Not really, no…”

Michael rubbed his eyes and looked at the inexistent sky. I frowned.

“Well don’t act like I’m a petulant child, it’s hard to understand! Also, it’s quite a lot to take in in just a few minutes, if you think about it. First, I hear that I’m dead which, to be fair, is quite a shock and now, suddenly, I get told that I’m paired with a complete stranger, who ‘isn’t anymore’ whatever that means. I’d like to see you hear all that for the first time! It must be easy for you, you tell this story all day long. It’s all completely new information to me”

“Alright, fine. I’ll start over, alright? Let’s say it like this. Humans are paired. Always. But you will never be on the earth at the same time. Human One lives their life, and dies, at one very specific moment. At that very specific moment, Human Two is born. They are paired. Human Two will live their life, then die, and be paired with another brand-new human who was born at the exact same time Human Two died. Do you get it?”

“I think so… But what does it matter? We never meet each other anyways, do we? Or is it like, reincarnation? Oh God, was that the old me? What was I like?”

“No, no, there is no reincarnation, that’s another one of your human fantasies, I honestly don’t know where you got that one. That being said it’s probably Raphael who pranked you and thought it would be funny, he was always a bit of a prankster, if I’m being honest. He never imagined you guys would take this seriously, I mean that is utterly ridiculous, just think about it. If you kept coming back it wouldn’t be very fair to the other humans who haven’t been born yet, would it? You’ve had your shot, now it’s somebody else’s turn, it’s only fair, wouldn’t you say so?”

“I suppose. But it’s so weird, you’re telling me, there is no proper afterlife, and there is no reincarnation, and yet, I am here, aren’t I?”

“Indeed, you are”

“So, what does it mean? Why would I be here if there is none of that I just don’t…”

“I’m getting to it, I have a lot of information to give you, don’t be too greedy, I know you’re impatient but still, it’s annoying”

“Okay, okay… So, who… Who was that… Human One?”

Michael looked through the pages for a few minutes, scanning each one of them. I wondered what the pages said. Was it about me and my life, what I did, what I didn’t do? Or was it about my Human One, or my Human 3, the one that would follow me? There were quite a lot of pages, and he stayed silent for a little while that felt like an eternity to me. He hummed when he got to a particular spot and his eyes landed on what he was looking for.

“Ah, there we are! Okay, your partner’s name was Arthur, born in 1919. He was a World War Two veteran, divorcee, no children, carpenter for a while…”

“I don’t need his curriculum, Michael”

“Well someone’s touchy today! *You* asked who he was, didn’t you?”

“I was curious of his name, that’s it!”

“And here I was, trying to be nice”

“Oh, please stop it, I won’t feel sorry for you”

“Fine. Anyway, I don’t need to tell you all this, you’ve heard it before”

“What? No, I didn’t”

“Hm, yes, you did”

“I did not”

“I should know, I was there”

“What? What does that mean, you were there?”

“I was assigned to you from the very beginning. I’m assigned to your circle”

“Look, I don’t know this guy, I’ve never met him, I think I would remember having a beer with a veteran and chatting about the good old days, wouldn’t I”

“That, you would”

“So, that’s what I’m saying, I never met him”

Michael pointed his finger at me, like he was making a point.

“Ah! But that’s where you are wrong, my young fellow”

“No, again, I think I would remember that, unless it was, like, when I was a baby or something”

“No, that was way before you were a baby. That’s what I am trying to explain. You did meet him. You just weren’t born yet”

I scoffed and took a few steps back.

“Oh yeah, okay that makes complete sense”

“It really does, actually”

“Yes, yes, of course, when I wasn’t born, I chilled with an old dead guy, having a nice chat while an Archangel checked up on us, as you do”

Michael rolled his eyes, clearly becoming more and more irritated.

“That’s exactly what you did, yes”

I laughed and turned around, walking in a small circle, trying to make sense of my thoughts, which was proving to be a harder task than expected. Michael stood very still, looking at me, saying absolutely nothing. His eyes followed me around, and I felt like he was looking into the very bottom of my soul. It didn’t feel good, it felt invasive and awkward. He wasn’t moving at all, but his very essence seemed to be taking the whole place, it felt huge and oppressing.

“I’m dreaming. That’s it, that’s what makes the more sense”

Michael shrugged again.

“Well you all come to this conclusion at some point, to be honest I’m surprised it took you so long. Most people jump at the dream theory the moment they hear I’m an Archangel”

“So, this is a dream?”

“No, that’s not quite what I said now, is it? I really hope you won’t hang onto this theory for too long, it really proves problematic every time someone does. Some of you humans are so very hard to dissuade. Once again, that old guy who thought we were still in his house just wouldn’t hear that…”

“Stop, stop, I don’t want to hear about the old guy, I don’t care about the old guy, or the little girl or whoever you were about to talk about, I just want to… Oh God, this is so confusing”

“If you could maybe stop being noisy and cocky and stop interrupting me, maybe I could try and explain everything to you? Really it would save us both some time”

“Well I don’t have time to save now that I’m dead do I?”

“No, that’s true, you don’t but I do and let me tell you I’m very busy, do you think this place runs itself?”

“Lots of dead people to welcome I take it”

“You wouldn’t believe”