

REALITY SHIFT  
PREVIEW

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# REALITY SHIFT

*PREVIEW*

Ronnie Hill



## PREVIEW IMPOSITION

To Jason, the town in the daytime may as well have been a different place. Shining sun, bright colors, singing birds, the warm air against his skin—a far cry from the previous night of wandering turmoil. However, he didn't recognize any of the streets or any of the people walking on them. And he didn't exactly know where he would end up, as if an unknown force was pushing him toward his destination. After some time, his legs came to a stop.

“Casser High School. So, this...is the school that I supposedly attend? Have I been here before? I don't know... After all this, why did I expect it to be familiar?”

He stepped inside the moderate-size, two-story building and walked down a long corridor, receiving curious eyes from about everyone he passed.

*From the looks of things, I suppose these people don't know who I am, either. Great. Immediate failure. Why did I come here? I should've just gone for help...shouldn't I...? No...wait...*

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The voices inside of his head then led him to his locker. But they were strangely silent about the combination.

*I hope this actually is my locker.* He tinkered with the dial and found himself to be lucky on his first attempt. *Well, that's... unsettling. I think I'd rather have had to try a little harder. Default combination? Even then, how would I...?*

A conversation from across the hall reached Jason's ears. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see a group of girls.

"Is that guy new?" one of them asked.

"I think so. He must be. I sure haven't seen him before."

"Look at his hair! It might be longer than mine. He's cute, isn't he? Should I go talk to him?"

"Pfft, way to be desperate. But, I do wonder what his story is."

*...Me, too,* Jason thought. He shut his locker and continued down the hallway.

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Lisa shuffled down the hallway, also overhearing pieces of the girls' conversation. She could see to whom they must have been referring in the distance.

*A new guy, huh? That's kinda random. At this time of year? In this town? Suspicious. Very, very suspicious. But...interesting. I suppose there's a chance he might just be another asshole, but... You know, maybe I could... Nah, he probably wouldn't... Man, I could really end up screwing this up, but...*

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After some digging through his backpack, Jason found his schedule. He located his homeroom number and his first class: chemistry. It was then that he noticed the name printed near the top of the paper: Smith, Donovan.

*Donovan Smith? Donovan. So, that is me. Well, that's not my name, but... No, I'm sure that's not my name. But, I... That name...* His breath quickened; he wasn't sure what to do about this. Was he assuming someone else's identity? *Should I tell the front office? How well is 'I don't think I am who this says I am' going to turn out...?*

The school bell rang out in the halls, startling him.

*Now I might be a spy? Maybe I can talk to the homeroom teacher, but...what should I say? Ugh, no time...* He shoved the paper back into his backpack and sped down the hallway.

The first person Jason saw when he walked into his homeroom he could only presume to be said instructor. A middle-aged man with thick-rimmed glasses wearing a white lab coat, he embodied chemistry's aesthetic. He sat at the desk at the front of the room, scribbling notes of some kind. From looking at the man—his pale skin, the bright-red hair and beard—Jason's ongoing headache started to worsen. He inched closer, the vague form in a white coat from the night before crossing his mind again.

*Who...? Who is he...? Why do I feel so...?*

The teacher looked up. Jason thought he saw him grimace, but it was gone so quickly that he wasn't sure.

"Ah, yes, you must be that new student. I'm Dr. Sorensson."

"Do I...know you from somewhere?" Jason asked.

"Mmm...no, I don't think so. I think I would remember that scar, if nothing else," he said.

Jason realized the man was focusing in on his left eye and began feeling self-conscious. But he did his best not to display anything outward.

Meanwhile, sitting near the back of the class was one Lisa Tamashiien, studying this new classmate that had entered. She leaned over her desk, propping her head up with her palm.

*Hmm... He's in my homeroom, huh? Alright, the universe is*

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*clearly giving me a sign or something. Fine. Why not? Let's give it a shot. I'll have to act fast, though. If he gets too chummy with anyone else first, they'll probably ruin everything...*

"Class," Sorensen announced to everyone, "we have someone new that will be joining us. I trust you'll make him feel welcome. I'll let him introduce himself..."

"...Right. I'm Jason. Jason Malakhai." He then tensed, realizing he had blurted out the name while disregarding the one on his schedule. Too late to take it back.

"...Jason...Malakhai?" Dr. Sorensen repeated with some skepticism, halting Jason's breath. "...Interesting name you've got there. Well, go on. You can take a seat wherever you want. We'll get started momentarily."

Jason let out a heavy sigh of relief. "Right."

As he scanned the room for where to sit, the halo of empty desks surrounding Lisa brought a tiny smile to her lips.

*Oh, he totally has to sit near me, right? All according to my grandmaster plan...*

Jason wandered over to an empty seat. He felt there weren't many students here in the class, only about thirteen. He sat down and sighed again, unable to pay any mind to the morning announcements coming over the loudspeaker mounted on the classroom wall.

*So, I really have never been here before? This was a mistake.*

"Psst..."

*What do I do? Can I just up and leave? Just show up and...?*

"Psssst..."

*No, no, I can't do that. Wait. I can still at least find a computer and—* Jason's thought broke off as his head was gradually pulled back by his ponytail—the girl behind him now being more direct in demanding his attention.

"What's up, new guy?" she whispered, her face now hovering above his. "I'm Lisa Tamashiien."



"Um, it's nice to meet you, Lisa...Tamashiien?" Jason replied, arched backwards.

"Wow, congrats on getting my last name on the first go. But, you can just call me Lisa."

"Thanks, but... Do you think you could maybe...let go of my hair, please?"

"Aww, some fun you are," she said as she released his ponytail. "You know, I normally don't do this, but I'm gonna show you the ropes of this school. Consider yourself lucky."

"...What makes me so special?" Jason turned to look at her.

"Ehh, I'll tell you later. But don't you go asking me for favors all the time," she said, pointing her finger at him. "Let me see your schedule."

Jason fished the piece of paper back out of his backpack and handed it over to her, again forgetting that the name at the top may not be his.

"Hmm... Well, look at that. We have a few more classes together. That makes it easier for me." She moved some of her hair out of her face.

"Could you tell me something about the teacher?" Jason still couldn't shake the feeling he had met him before.

"Sorensson?" Lisa started, raising an eyebrow. "Oh, he's a total asshole, and a strict one at that. And even his smile is beyond creepy. Most of his lectures are so boring that you'd wanna fall asleep. Chemistry is just so *riveting*, after all..."

Jason's brows furrowed. "I see."

"Yeah, but don't worry too much about it. Even if you had the IQ of pasteurized butter, I'm sure you'd be fine in this class. You'd think it'd be harder with it being chemistry and all." A confident smirk graced her face as she returned her chin to her palm.

Lisa's smirk hit Jason in a way he didn't expect, and he was finding it increasingly difficult to turn away from her. Fair skin

contrasting with her dark hair and onyx eyes, her features set her apart from the rest of the class. Taking note of her padded, fingerless gloves, he couldn't be sure of the reasons for her wearing them to a chemistry class. He considered she may have been trying to protect her hands from something. Or they could have been for a school sports club or other activity. At any rate, they contributed to an overall athletic appearance.

Located in the center of her blue t-shirt with purple trim was a large, shimmering butterfly, next grabbing Jason's attention. Mauve, black, and gold colors intermixed on its wings, stretching around and accentuating her prominent bust.

*...No! Stop staring at her chest, you idiot! What are you doing?!*

Jason snapped his head upward as Lisa leaned forward, her gaze peering into him. She seemed to have no qualms about invading personal space.

"Uh... Is something wrong, Lisa?" he asked with a gulp, hoping she hadn't noticed where his eyes had recently landed.

Her gaze narrowed. "Your eyes... They're so cool. They sort of flash different colors. You got colored contacts or something?"

"Um...right... Colored contacts. How did you know?"

She then frowned. "Where did you get that scar?"

"Well...I--"

"Hey, you two," Dr. Sorensson interrupted, now trying to teach. "It would be in your best interest to pay attention. This is all important stuff, you know? You can do your small-talking after class." He folded his arms. "Or should I just kick you two out right now so you can get to it more quickly?"

The conversation with Lisa ended, much to Jason's relief.

"You've only just arrived here, Mr. Malakhai," Sorensson continued. "Perhaps you shouldn't allow yourself to fall prey to such...*unfortunate* influences so soon, hm?"

The quiet hiss of other students snickering filled the room. Lisa thought some choice words toward the teacher, but did

not speak them aloud. Jason stared down at his desk, trying not to make eye contact.

After chemistry was over, and thus able to talk freely, Jason and Lisa walked down the hallway as she gave him an overview of their other shared classes and the teachers involved—her ratings of whom never seemed to venture past ‘acceptable’.

“So, Lisa, do you do well in all of these classes?” Jason asked, hoping it was a natural line of conversation.

“Well, I could probably do a little better. But, I could do worse, too. What type of student are you, huh? Let me guess: straight-A’s, right? You seem like the type.” She congratulated herself on keeping most of the resentment out of her voice.

His teeth clenched. “‘The type’? Well, I...”

They turned the corner and were met with the sight of someone crashing against a wall of lockers.

A burly student had shoved another student. It seemed like the more average-sized of the two may have somewhat been able to hold his own under different circumstances, but less so against this particular opponent.

“You’re gonna pay for what you did!” the bulky one spat.

“Look, man, I tripped. It was an accident. You shouldn’t make such a big deal out of it,” the smaller one said, composed.

“No one, and I mean *no one*, throws food on me! If I just let this go, what kind of example would I be setting? Can’t let that happen, now can I?”

Jason said to Lisa, “Someone should do something.”

She exhaled. “Trust me. It’d be best not to get involved with that tool.”

He frowned and stepped forward, but Lisa pulled him back.

“Listen, I know this guy,” she continued. “That’s Max Hodges. He’s one of the few people I don’t like to pick a fight with. You’ll regret it if you get in his way, new guy. Don’t be stupid; keep walking.”

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“...I can’t just ignore it. I’ll be fine,” Jason responded, prompting Lisa to roll her eyes. She figured he would learn his lesson the hard way.

Meanwhile, the assailed student responded to Max, exasperated, “I already said I was sorry.”

Max cracked his knuckles, his sleeveless shirt displaying his muscular arms. “Oh, it’s far too late now. Don’t worry; it’ll only hurt...for a while.”

“Is there a problem here?” Jason cut in. Though he addressed both students, he was more focused on Max.

“Huh? Tch, who the hell are you? You stay out of this,” Max said, sizing up his new adversary. He proved to be a couple of inches taller than Jason.

The other adjusted his glasses. “You don’t *have* to stay out of it. I mean, I wouldn’t hold it against you if you didn’t...”

Max’s fiery aggression could be felt across the hall while this other young man remained rather unfazed. And with his rich, brown skin and short, dark hair versus Max’s peach skin tone and blond, gelled spikes, it could be said that the two were opposed in several respects. And here Jason stood, between these two poles.

“I...think I should try to defuse this situation before something bad happens,” Jason decided.

Max responded, “Oh, we got ourselves a big hero here. Fine. You had your chance. I’m pissed off right now...”

He threw two punches. Jason parried one and snagged the other, twisting Max’s arm behind him into a shoulder lock.

“It doesn’t have to be like this,” Jason told him. “Let’s talk about what happened. Fighting isn’t always the way to solve—”

“Get real!” Max replied.

He broke free and threw several more punches. But Jason parried them all and managed to sweep out Max’s weighted leg. Max stumbled and fell, but sprung up from the floor

before long. He tried harder and harder to hit Jason, throwing successive jabs, straights, and hooks, but found his opponent's speed in dodging to be extraordinary.

Then, in a swift counterattack, Jason shoved the extended knuckles of a half-fist into Max's throat. While Max staggered, clutching his neck and grasping for breath, Jason threw a powerful spin kick into his side, slamming him against the lockers.

Applause broke out among the small crowd that had accumulated around them. Lisa couldn't hide the shock on her face. Jason tensed and stepped back.

"I'm sorry," he said sheepishly. "That was a little much."

Max, rather shocked as well, winced as he regained himself. "I see how it is... I'm gonna have to take you seriously, huh? You're fucking dead." His eyes narrowed and he raised his fists.

"Hey, what's going on over there?!" an authoritative voiced called out, startling the crowd and causing it to disperse.

Max dropped his fists, his posture shifting to be more congenial—his words, less so. "Ah, shit. This ain't over. You and that nerd better watch your fucking backs..." He strolled away.

Jason caressed his forearms, sting from blocking punches lingering. The student he'd intervened on behalf of also remained.

"Are you okay?" Jason asked, turning to him.

"...Fine," was his response.

"What did you do to warrant him trying to attack you like that, anyway?" Jason asked.

"Yesterday, I kind of accidentally tripped and spilled my lunch on his shirt. Well, maybe it wasn't so much an accident... as he was being...a dick, really. Per usual. Look, you had to have been there. Anyway, I had been trying to avoid him since then, but it's not exactly the biggest school..." He shrugged. "I'm Robert Frazier. I don't think I've seen you around here."

"I'm new...I guess. I'm Jason Malakhai. I'm glad that I could help out." He extended a hand which Robert then shook.

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"Yeah, I owe you one. It would've sucked to have to deal with that. Though, I suppose it's not quite settled... Eh. Oh, well."

Lisa approached Jason's side. Her eyes meeting with Robert's, a noticable unease crossed his face.

"Uh...right. Catch you later," he said as he took his leave.

Lisa exhaled and disregarded the exchange. She gave Jason a playful punch to the shoulder. "That was pretty awesome, new guy! You really knew what you were doing after all, huh?"

"I...don't know."

Her eyebrow raised. "Whaddya mean, you don't know?"

"It just...happened," he said.

"Yeah, well, you're not quite as good as *I* am," she said, reassuring herself, "but good job." She patted him on the back. "Now come on, or we're gonna be late."

Jason thought, *I really, really don't know. I really did a number on that guy. But... What is going on with me? I feel like this all can't end well...*

Lisa guided Jason into their next class, trigonometry. A good number of people met them with strange expressions when they walked in the door.

"Well, um...I guess they heard about your fight," Lisa said.

Jason grimaced. "That quickly?"

"Welcome to Casser High, where everything is known by everyone at all times."

"I see..."

Jason sat down, but couldn't ignore the whispers going on around him. The conversations were all simultaneous, but he could pick out certain phrases. There were excerpts like 'the new guy' as well as the 'resident psycho'. He figured the 'resident psycho' could have been Max, though Jason thought the nickname seemed harsh. But the first impression hadn't been great, and neither Lisa nor Robert vouched for Max's

personality otherwise. Also, Jason realized eavesdropping was impolite, but he didn't know how to stop. He tried to drown everyone out in his mind and not let on something was amiss.

The teacher called roll. A brief silence came about when the teacher called the name 'Donovan Smith'. Upon hearing it, Jason's mouth involuntarily opened. However, he caught himself before his vocal chords betrayed him as well.

*That really is supposed to be me. What should I do? It's like I'm caught in some sort of lie. ...Is it a lie? No, I'm Jason Malakhai. Then, why? Why am I supposed to be this...Donovan person?*

"You, there," the teacher spoke, startling Jason.

"Y-yes?"

"I'm pretty sure I haven't seen you before," she said.

"I'm new. My name is... It's...Jason Malakhai. My schedule says that this is my class," he said hesitantly.

"...Is that so?" the teacher responded. "I'd heard about a new transfer student, but...wasn't it this Donovan...? Well, maybe the name got mixed up somewhere. That's okay. I'll write your name on my list."

Jason slumped in his chair, feeling no relief even after clearing himself of the situation.

Lisa looked over at him from her seat. *Donovan, huh...? That's a hokey name. Must suck to be that guy...*

Jason's next class, one that he had without Lisa, was physical education. Upon learning Jason didn't have any other clothes, the teacher gave him a towel, a pair of red shorts and a gray shirt with the initials "C.H.S." printed on it.

"Just throw them in the clothes bin in the locker room after class," the teacher said.

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

Jason approached the boys' locker room, seeing a few other students enter before him, carrying bags, paying him no mind.

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*Am I just going to carry on as if everything is normal? As if I'm fine? As if... He felt a twinge in his head. Everything is fine. No... No! No, it's not. But what happens if...? Maybe I should lay low for the time being...*

Jason walked into the locker room and was stuck by dizziness, the dank smell requiring some adjusting. Next to strike was what this current setting entailed, bringing heightened nervousness along with it—undressing in front of others was very different than undressing alone in a bathroom.

*I don't think anyone's really paying attention, anyway,* he told himself, removing his clothes.

He pulled down the school t-shirt over his head while pushing down his anxiety. He then vaguely recognized a particular scent profile. He wondered where in this otherwise musty room it could be coming from, but he finally placed it as something he was recalling from his earlier altercation.

"Well, look who it is," said Max's sudden voice from behind.

Jason nervously turned his head. "Oh, it's...you. Max, was it?"

"This is so great. I was startin' to think I wasn't gonna be able to kick your ass until tomorrow. Let's do this for real. I ain't holdin' back, this time."

"Right... Um, I'm new here, so I'd rather not get suspended on my first day," Jason responded. "We were lucky that teacher didn't catch us earlier."

"Man, you talk too much." Max threw a right hook aimed at Jason's face; Jason swiftly ducked.

"Maybe we got off on the wrong foot. I'm Jason. Let's be fr—"

Max, uninterested in Jason's olive branch, threw a second punch. Jason evaded once more, closed his locker, and took off for the gymnasium.

"Get back here, you son-of-a-bitch!" Max yelled after him.

Jason now had to get used to the air in the gym. Though



not as bad as the locker room, it was muggy and thicker than he would've liked. As Max still had to change, Jason at least received a temporary reprieve from danger.

Following the start of class, the P.E. teacher had the class warm up by running laps around the gym. The heavy footfalls and echoing sneaker squeaks bit at Jason's eardrums, and it had become even more clear to him how sensitive—bothersome—his nose and ears were. With his attention scattered, he didn't notice Max cutting through the group, closing in. Jason then felt a strike to his shin, sending him into a sudden forward fall. But he contracted into a shoulder roll and instantly sprung up and back into his previous jog.

"Hey, you guys tripping over your own feet over there? Be careful!" called the gym teacher.

Any inclinations by the class to laugh at Jason stumbling were canceled out by his smooth, rolling transition. Max frowned at his failed ploy, but supposed that further attempts to hassle Jason brought risks of being spotted by the teacher. If nothing else, he would settle for making it clear he was the faster of the two. Max picked up his pace, passing Jason by. Yet an uninterested Jason paid him no more attention than before.

*This blasted...squeaking*, Jason thought. *I have to tune it out...*

Following the trill of a whistle—another attack on Jason's ears—the teacher announced the sport of the day: dodgeball.

"Dodge...ball? Great. I can't seem to remember what that is," Jason muttered, though he assumed he'd be able to catch on.

The teacher said, "Alright, everyone line up and number off."

Likely a product of Jason's luck, he and Max were put on opposite teams. Six colorful, rubber balls were placed in the center of the gym, followed by another blowing of the whistle. Jason watched as his teammates ran to snatch them before anyone else, and a melee of balls being whipped around ensued.

*Simple enough. I can manage this...*

Jason picked up a stray ball and threw it at a random adversary, soon needing to evade himself. The pace began to quicken, but Jason could still discern everything. And dodging the projectiles came naturally to him.

"Hey, Hair-boy, take this!" Max yelled.

Jason, attempting to pick up another ball, rose and spun around to find two balls rushing toward him. His body cartwheeled out of the way on instinct. Standing tall, he grimaced.

*How does he have the nerve to call me something like that?*

And via his honed hearing, he could've sworn Max grumbled under his breath, "Who the fuck does this guy think he is?!"

As Max ran for more ammunition, he was hit in the back.

"Who threw that!?" he boomed, voice echoing throughout the gym. All of the other students froze.

"...Oh, I'm sorry," Jason said, holding up his hands. "This...*is* how you play the game, right? I thought the back was a valid target. I didn't do anything wrong, did I?" He looked around at his classmates; they appeared to not want to get involved.

Following the spirited period, the students began returning to the locker rooms. Though the small number of boys made it near impossible, Jason wanted to do his best to avoid any further contact with Max. Yet, a few disconcerting looks persisted from his other peers. The evasions and acrobatics he had effortlessly performed, as well as his bold faux-antagonizing of Max made him quite the conspicuous character.

Furthermore, unfortunately for Jason, his discomfort at changing clothes in front of the other students was now going to be outdone by the fact that students at this school showered together after P.E. class. He stood bewildered at how quickly and casually the boys were shedding all their attire.

*Ah. This is what the towel was for, isn't it? Makes sense...*

"Woo, yeah! Take it off!" someone shouted.

"You better not swipe my underwear again, you little bitch!" came a response.

Jason glanced into the shower room as the others ran in—an open one, with scattered metal pillars holding multiple shower heads. He thought about foregoing it, but he had become quite sweaty. And surely, everyone would notice his absence. What consequences would that bring? He gritted his teeth, and decided to make it quick. Any display of nervousness would likely bring unwanted attention as well.

*Arrgh... Just think, I'd have this to look forward to every day...*

Avoiding eye contact with everyone there, Jason positioned himself in the corner and hoped Max wouldn't choose this setting to continue his vendetta. He tried focusing on the peaceful sound of the water hitting the floor, but others in the class felt comfortable enough to carry on conversations.

"Hey, Max," someone shouted over the running water.

"What?" he responded.

"Just how many times are you gonna get owned today, man?"

"Shut up!"

"You just gonna let it go?"

Max yelled, "Let it go? Who the hell do you think I am, huh?!"

Jason longed to blend in with the wall, but its bright, lemon color made that very much futile. Any false movement could bring everyone's focus toward him—unacceptable.

Max continued, "Like hell, I'm gonna let it go! I've got plans..."

Despite Jason's best efforts, some looked in his direction, his being the obvious target of Max's ire. Max was well aware Jason could hear him, right? Was he really planning something or was this only posturing for intimidation?

"You hear that, pretty-boy? You're in for it now," said someone.

*I suppose the pretty-boy is me...*, Jason thought. He chose not to answer aloud, but he looked up for a brief second and met a glance from Max.

"The fuck you looking at, huh? You wanna go?!" Max snapped. Jason's eyes returned to the floor.

"Oh, you know he just thinks you're hot, Max," the other student quipped. "He wants your body *bad*, man."

"Hey, fuck off! I said shut your mouth, didn't I?" Max returned.

"Come on. Just look at how pretty he is with those...*long, flowing locks*, dude." The student laughed. "He could give great head for all you know. You ain't even gonna give the poor guy the time of day? How cold can you be, man?"

"Oh, I'll give him *exactly* what he deserves. You can bet on that. He ain't gonna be so pretty anymore once I'm done with him..."

Jason felt his face burning. *The day's not even over yet, and I already seem to have made quite an enemy*, he thought.

Another student decided to join in, "Don't you have anything to say for yourself, pretty-boy?"

Jason paused before responding. "Um...I appreciate the vote of confidence, everyone. But looks...aren't everything, you know." He attempted to smile.

"Yeah, sounds like some shit a pretty-boy would say!"

Laughter broke out in the room.

*Oh, dear... Can this just be over?*

Jason forced himself to laugh along with them as he not-so-stealthily made his exit. However, he could gather that he remained the topic of conversation. He rushed to get dressed and leave the locker room before things escalated any further.

Exiting into the hallway, water from his hair dripping onto the floor and damp shirt awkwardly matted to his skin, Jason soon saw Lisa come around the corner.

"Oh, hey," she said to him. "We meet again. Gym class, huh? What did you guys do today?"

"...Dodgeball," he replied.

"Well, that should be fun, I guess." Lisa noticed that Jason was even more on edge than before. "Something wrong?"

"It's nothing. I just...may have made an error in judgment."

"...Huh?"

"Well...Max was in my class, and..."

"Ohhhhhh." She chuckled. "You two get into it again?"

"Well...a little, but...don't worry. It was nothing major."

"He most definitely is a pain in the ass, yeah? He still in there? What did he say to you?"

"That he has...uh, *plans* for me."

"Ew. Well, if anything happens, you have my express permission to kick his ass again. I do hope I'm there to see it, though." She grinned, her intensity causing Jason to look away slightly. "Well, I should head on in. Don't let your guard down, okay?"

Jason sighed. "Right. I'll remain vigilant."

Lisa chuckled again as she walked past. "Remain vigilant, huh? Yeah, you do that..."

While Jason had a number of things on his mind going to his next class, English literature, he couldn't help but revisit how much he stood out in his gym class.

*Flexibility... My hearing... Reflexes... Sense of smell...*

He had to admit it was hard to describe these elevated abilities as 'normal'. However, whether or not this was normal for him he could not say, with no previous metrics to compare it to at the moment.

He exhaled and sat down at an empty desk. And to his surprise, someone eventually walked up and began talking to him.

"Hey, it's the pretty-boy cartwheel guy! Jason, right?" the boy asked. "So, you beat up Max earlier, right?"

Jason now recognized this boy from the locker room and exhaled yet again. "I...wouldn't put it that way, no. I just...stopped him from...trying to beat someone else up."

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"So, like, you *didn't* punch him in the throat and then round-house kick him into a locker?"

Jason cringed. "I wanted to talk things out, but he... Well...I... didn't mean to do that."

"Didn't mean to?! Damn, man, you're scary. Anyway, uh... about earlier, no one wants to piss Max off and we all were... you know, messing around...laughing along. We don't really think you're...well, you know..."

Jason swept a long fringe of hair behind his ear. "I...don't think I do. What is it that you think?"

"Not that there's anything wrong with... Ah, I mean, uh... that you're...uh... With you looking like a girl and all..."

"I what?"

"I think it's the hair, mostly. It's way too long, isn't it?"

Jason frowned. Though he didn't have the particulars of why his hair had gotten to be this length, he rather liked it as-is. He replied with a strained smile, "Look, you show me the rule-book that says only girls are allowed to have long hair and I'll gladly admit my mistake. But I don't think it exists."

"Hey, I'm just saying. People might assume some things. So, uh...no hard feelings, right?" the boy asked, apprehensive.

Jason's eyes narrowed. "I'm not going to punch you in the throat if that's what you mean."

The bell rang. The boy chuckled nervously as he retreated.

*I see. This whole school is going to be so much fun for me...*

Lunch followed the English class, raising a pertinent question. *How am I going to pay for lunch?! And I seemed to be doing just so wonderfully today, too...*

"Well, if it isn't our newcomer?"

Jason turned and found Dr. Sorensson standing behind him. Once again, he felt uneasy looking at the teacher's face. "Dr. Sorensson. Um, hello..."

"Would you care to have lunch with me?"

Jason's anxiety spiked. "I...I'm sorry, but I s-seem...to have forgotten my lunch money."

"Then, how about I buy you lunch?" Sorensson said.

"...Are you serious?" Jason asked.

"Sure. Why wouldn't I be?"

"You might just be picking on the new guy..."

"No. Not at all. I wouldn't do that. Don't worry."

Following a tense and mostly silent stint in the lunch line, they sat down at a table in the lunchroom.

"Jason..." Sorensson started, "are you familiar with the Greek hero of the same name?"

"...I don't think so, no."

"To prove his worth, he was sent on an impossible mission to retrieve a divine, golden fleece by his uncle, the king—who only wanted to get rid of Jason because he was the rightful heir to the throne. Jason gathered a crew of other heroes and set sail on his ship, Argo."

"Argo...? Maybe...that sounds familiar..."

"I must say I'd be surprised if you've never heard of the story. The men, the Argonauts, had many a credit to their names. But Jason never would've succeeded without the help of the sorceress Medea, who had fallen in love with him due to the influence of the goddess Hera's political machinations."

As he chewed his food, the names 'Argo', 'Medea', and 'Hera' bounced around Jason's skull, tingling something in his brain. "I... This all sounds very complicated."

"Yes. Quite common in Greek tragedy," Sorensson added.

"Tragedy...?"

"Ah... In the end, the golden fleece was guarded by a slumberless dragon. But Medea used a potion to put it to sleep. Though the hero Jason succeeded in his quest, and even

started a family with Medea, a later desire for a political alliance led Jason to betray her and marry someone else. It...went downhill from there, one could say.” Sorensson chuckled and grinned, confirming Lisa’s remark on how disturbing it was. “Well, you’ll just have to do the namesake better, young man.”

Jason struggled to reply, more unease settling in. “I... Thanks for the lesson...I think.”

“You’re quite welcome. Anyway, what brings you to this small, humble town, hm?”

Jason’s muscled tensed. “Well...you know...this and that...”

“I’m sure your family moved here for some reason.”

“I’d rather not say...” Jason’s teeth grit, knowing he was being overtly suspicious. But Sorensson’s face remained neutral.

The teacher continued, “Why don’t you tell me something about yourself, then?”

“Well, I’m...pretty good at dodgeball,” Jason said, it being about the only piece of information he had so far.

“Is that so? I never cared for it myself when I was your age. Wearing glasses makes you a preferable target and all. Is something wrong? You seem a tad pallid.”

Jason nerves hadn’t calmed any. His sight blurred, but he shook his vision clear. Not wanting to draw out further questioning, he said, “W-wow, look at the time,” pointing to a wall clock across the room. “I actually have to...go. I just remembered something I have to...do. It’s very important. I...um... I really am very sorry. Nice talking with you.” He got up.

“Before you go,” Sorensson said, “about class earlier...I was quite serious about you getting dragged down before you even get started. Make sure you’re careful around that Lisa Tamashiien girl. She really is quite the troublemaker. Maybe not on par with a sorceress, mind you, but nevertheless...”

“...Sure. Thanks for the lunch. I... Let’s talk again...soon. Good-bye,” Jason said as he grabbed his tray and sped away.



Indeed, something about Dr. Sorensen's forwardness put Jason off. The initial impression he had gotten from class made it seem like Sorensen wouldn't be willing to socialize like that. At any rate, Jason couldn't understand this consternation he continued to feel when near the teacher—it hardly felt rational. Jason then considered his warning.

*Lisa... What did she do exactly...?*

After finishing his lunch out of Sorensen's sight, Jason then ventured into the school library, supposing there would be a usable computer. Entering, the peace and quiet was welcome. He drew in a long, deep breath and slowly exhaled, trying to bring his mind to calm. The multicolored books lining the walls of the modest room sparked his curiosity.

*I don't have time to browse. How much time before my next class? I need to get to a...*

He fought off another dizzy spell and clapped the sides of his face twice. A row of computers sat along the far wall. And at a nearby table, Robert was hammering away at the keys of a notebook computer of his own. Jason approached.

"I don't think I've ever seen anyone type that fast before in my life." Of course, Jason couldn't verify that.

Robert looked up. "Oh. Jason. It's you. Yeah, it's just...practice, I guess. You enjoying your first day here?"

"Sure," Jason lied. "What are you working on?"

"...Just a little side project."

Jason took a look at the computer screen. "What the...?" The sprawling blocks of numbers, symbols, and equations across multiple program windows may as well have been a foreign language to him. "What is this?"

"In my spare time, I like...to code."

"To code? What code?"

"Computer programming, my man. You know."

"Right. I know..." Jason forced a chuckle. "You do this in your spare time? It looks pretty involved."

Robert paused. "Well, I just really like coding. It's relaxing."

Jason squinted at the screen. "If you say so. What does it do?"

"It runs a...let's say a drone."

"A drone...?" Jason tried to maintain a neutral face despite being unsure what Robert was talking about.

"Not the exploding kind, obviously."

"And this is...high school level?"

Robert shifted his weight in his chair. "...Not exactly. But I kind of...have a degree in this stuff."

"What? Degree? Wait, how?"

"Eh, it's not that big of a deal if you devote enough time to it. You can do pretty much anything online."

"Wait, wait. But you're...a student, right? What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be too smart for high school?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I guess I don't *really* have to be here, but..."

"So, you come for fun?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I wanted the full high school experience. You know, rumors, drama, hanging out, the whole nine yards. I help tutor some people sometimes... My parents are always on my case about how I'm wasting my time and I should be focusing on world-problem solving or something. But, there's more to life than just academics. Being here allows me to focus on...other things."

"...Right."

"Besides, as you can see, I have ways to challenge myself every now and again."

"Hmm...it does look interesting."

"It seemed like you were hanging out with Lisa Tamashien earlier," Robert commented.

"Yes. She's helping me to adjust."

"Really?" Robert's eyebrow raised. "She's really doing that, huh?"  
Jason's head tilted to the side. "Is that an issue?"

"...No, it's nothing. Nothing at all. But you maybe wanna watch your back around her. Don't just let yourself be lured in by her...assets."

"Assets? What do you mean, 'assets'?"

"Oh, don't act like you don't know. Her—" Robert stopped himself. "Eh, never mind. You'll find out what the deal is eventually, anyway. Good luck. You'll need it..."

"Hmm...thanks, I think? Well, I'll let you go back to your... coding. Students can use those computers over there, right?"

"Yeah. They can kick you off if you're on one for too long, and they monitor what you're doing. Eh, probably not that closely, but I wouldn't try going anywhere too 'fun' if you know what I mean. Let's just say...there was an *incident* last month."

Jason blinked. "...Okay, then. Thanks." He started for a computer and paused, a flush coming to his face. "Ohh, her 'assets'. Right. You mean her— I get it. I'll be careful."

Robert threw up a hand in acknowledgment followed by chuckling to himself, "Nah, he's toast." It still reached Jason's sensitive ears, however.

Jason sat down at a computer, his pulse slowly becoming louder in his head.

*Okay. I'll just start with...my name...*

He was struck with the chilled fear of what he might find, but willed his fingers to type 'Jason Malakhai arrest warrant' into the online search bar before they seized up on him. He could hear a few more whispers clawing at his brain as he drew in a deep breath and pushed the enter key.

However, nothing seemed relevant—some other persons named Jason scattered throughout various parts of the country along with a few alternate spellings of Malakhai, but mostly as given names. In the end, nothing with a full name match.

## REALITY SHIFT

*I probably should've narrowed the search...*

But adding 'Casser' into the mix did him no good, either. He sighed, wanting to feel relieved. Yet then came a realization.

*I'm...supposed to be Donovan Smith. Is that who they're after?*

Fear spread anew within as he typed in the name. He then considered the repercussions if the school were indeed to notice his searching for his own arrest warrant.

*I don't have a choice. I don't actually belong here, regardless. I have to at least figure out why those men were chasing me. They were chasing...me, right? No, I... Wait...no. Everything is fi—not fine! Snap out of it! What's wrong with me!? The edges of his sight began to blur and his thoughts descended into disorder. More confused, flashing images followed. Run... I have to get away from...where...? It's no use. I can't remember... What am I afraid of? There's nothing to fear. I live in the city of Casser at 263 State Street. I am sixteen years— Oh, no...*

Another twin clap to the sides of his face sharpened his vision again. His mind began to quiet some, but his body now felt a sudden fatigue. The alias still sat in the search bar. His pulse felt louder than ever. Only one more, terrifying keystroke—what did he have to lose?

He pressed down on the enter key. Yet, there was nothing to find, or at least, no warrants. All of this paralyzing reluctance for nothing, it seemed. Jason's teeth clenched. From whom was he running away? The idea of going to the police wasn't seeming any more palatable.

*No...everything is fine... If I go to the police...something bad is going to happen. I just have to wait for...for...*

In the halls, the various students passing Jason by seemed free of any grave worries such as his own. And with his mind exhausted after a number of confused cycles and contemplations, he began craving some sense of normalcy. He checked

his schedule and was pointed to a world history class, where he reunited with the much-alluded-to Lisa.

Jason now couldn't help but notice a strange apprehension developing within him upon seeing her again—something other than the cautions he had received. Differing from the unease brought on by Dr. Sorensen, something lingering in his mind was telling him he should distance himself from her. However, he was long tired of what likely were irrational impulses. As far as he could tell, the warnings about Lisa didn't even seem to hold merit. She was frank and boisterous, perhaps, but hardly off-putting overall.

*Lisa...*, Jason thought. *How much of a hard time does she have at this school? Is everyone just picking on her for no reason? I hope not, but...what should I do? No, I...can't get involved, but...*

"Hey, you, did I see you eating lunch with Sorensen?" Lisa asked him, eyebrow raised. "What the hell's up with that, huh? You two friends now or something?"

"Ah... Well, he... I forgot my lunch money and he...offered to treat me."

"He did what, now?"

"He bought me lunch and we..."

It seemed as if Lisa's entire worldview had been upset. "Why would he...? You've gotta be kidding me. What?!"

"He told me about this story from Greece and it was...awkward, let's say. I didn't stay for very long. Oh...sorry. Had you wanted to eat lunch together...?" He then looked away, embarrassed. "N-no, how presumptuous of me, sorry. I'm sure you had your own group of friends you'd rather eat with..."

Lisa let out a nervous laugh. "Yeah, I mean...I probably could've fit you in somewhere. But if he bought you lunch and all...I definitely need some details."

Jason again recalled Sorensen's warning. "Ha, ha... Maybe a little later."

## REALITY SHIFT

Lisa chuckled as she sat down, "Yeah, that sounds about right. Welp, time for the daily dose of how much people suck."

"What do you mean?" Jason asked with another head tilt.

"Right now, we're going over Britain and China back in the day. Basically, Britain was selling drugs in China. China told them to cut it out, but they didn't. So, China arrested a bunch of British opium dealers. Then, Britain blew them up."

"...Huh? That doesn't sound right."

She crossed her arms. "I told you. People suck. It's all about money and power. Who cares who the hell gets in your way when you can just kill 'em all off, right?"

"I..." Jason felt a sudden bolt of pain in his head. More images flashed through him.

**"Kill them..."**

"You alright?" Lisa asked.

Jason felt a chill down his spine. "I'm...fine. Don't worry..."

This history class, and the following computer class, seemed to be subjects Jason could be interested in. He could start to understand what Robert had been doing, he supposed. However, the fact he had entered the school so late in the curriculum left him feeling disconnected from everyone. And every so often, another mind whisper would appear, breaking his concentration. He tried to immerse himself in the material as best as he could, still wanting to pretend he was just another student for whatever amount of time possible before reality inevitably forced its way in once more.

*Fine... Everything is...fine...*

And with that, Jason's first day at Casser High School had come to an end. He ran into Lisa one final time in the hallway.

"You made it through! Congrats on not dying," she said, again with a playful punch to Jason's shoulder.

He grimaced. "...Dying?"

“Well, I guess there was only a small chance of that, but you never know.” She smirked. “And Max might be hiding around a corner somewhere. You gonna be okay going home?”

With that word, ‘home’, his reality was again rearing its head.

Jason answered, “I should be fine. Um... Thank you...for helping me today.”

“It’s cool. I gotta get home, but see you tomorrow?”

“...Right. See you tomorrow.”

Lisa sped past him, leaving Jason to reflect. Was this school excursion fruitful? He did have some bits of new information, but overall was plagued with even more questions.

*Dr. Sorensen... He claimed to have never met me, but still... something about his face... He really doesn’t want me to hang around Lisa, huh? And then Robert, too, he... Whatever she might have done, she seems nice. Wait. Didn’t Lisa say something about picking fights with people? And I did neglect to ask her about those gloves... No, forget it. I’m sure that such a beautiful girl with butterflies on her clothes can’t be all bad. Everyone has the potential for good and evil, after all...*

He paused, a twinge in his heart.

*‘Potential for...’ Did someone say that to me? I know I’ve heard it. But, where...? When...? Arrgh!*

Jason arrived ‘home’ and looked around in case anyone else had returned. Still no one—no sign anyone may have entered in the time he had been gone, either. Aggravation flooded his brain; nothing seemed any closer to coming together. With a sharp exhale, he decided he couldn’t avoid it any longer—he had to get the police involved. He ran into the kitchen and touched the phone receiver, but that only summoned yet another strange pain in his head. His heart began pounding.

***“Don’t worry, Donovan, we’ll be right back. Then, we’ll have a nice surprise for you...”***

*Surprise? Who...?*

This voice belonged to a woman—it did nothing to put him at ease.

***“Don’t worry, Donovan...”***

*My name...is Jason...right? It is...*

***“Over here, Donovan...”***

***“Be good while we’re gone, Donovan...”***

*No! Jason! My name is Jason. Jason...Jason...*

His breathing had become irregular. His hand was still on the receiver. Something was stopping him. Fear? Anxiety? He didn’t know, but finally opted to wait a little longer if only to rid himself of the unsettling chorus of whispers in his brain.

“Jason...Jason...Jason...” He muttered the name aloud, hoping to solidify it further.

He began a slow shuffle to his bedroom, trying to settle his heart. Sitting down at the desk, he gave it a more rigorous inspection than he had before. The drawers were empty barring a pack of pencils—unopened.

*Why would I expect anything else?*

After a few more moments of general restlessness, Jason started on his homework—perhaps another play at normalcy. He was forced to take note of the substantial amount.

*For a new student, they sure are making me jump in...*

Though his focus was strained, Jason managed to finish it all with time. Struck by an impulse he was still overlooking something, he trekked around the residence again, looking for clues to anything. No matter how much he searched, this was not where peace of mind lay.

He ventured into the living room and chose to turn on the television, hoping to catch a news report or ascertain any useful info regarding the town. But it quickly proved to be an unfavorable time to find any local news. He clicked through a series of bland commercials, not finding much of interest. He



happened upon a game show that looked worthy of watching. And yet, in under an hour, restlessness overtook him.

Through the back door in the kitchen lay the backyard. Jason went out and figured he wouldn't mind lingering for a while, under the favorable temperature. As expected by this point, next to no adornments graced the yard. But a small garage stood at the far end, a cement driveway leading from it off the property.

*I didn't notice it before. I have to at least take a look...*

The door to the garage was locked. Peering inside the window, he didn't see any cars inside.

*Empty...just like everything else*, he thought in mild disappointment. Though, he again wondered how his expectations had been elevated at all.

Extending behind the garage and encasing the yard stood a tall, wooden fence. Jason walked along it for a brief moment, only able to somewhat see over it via tiptoes. Evidence of other human life nearby was indeed reaching his ears. Surely, there must have been neighbors on all sides beyond. But the brief impulse to consult with them regarding who he may have been was soon overwhelmed by more haunted whispering and deep-seated unease.

Trying to calm his mind, he studied the grass beneath him—decently maintained. A sudden thought then sparked.

*Needs a garden, maybe. A garden... Garden...?*

Yet another inkling pulling at him. The dream woman in the cloak, surrounded by flower petals, appeared in his mind. He now tried to recall the song she had sung, but it had already faded. He could feel synapses in his brain firing on their own, doing their utmost to bring the song back, but still failing. Desperation began to invade his thoughts, but it wasn't clear to him why. What about the song was so important?

*That woman...*

## REALITY SHIFT

Jason's hands shook. He drew in a deep breath and tried to exhale out his agitation, but it was no use. He couldn't relax.

*What am I doing?! What have I been-? What's wrong with me?! I don't have the luxury of just idling here! I have to do something. I have to... I have to... Ah!*

A sharp pain shot through his stomach. At first, he thought it was something that he had eaten. But within seconds, biting pain had traveled throughout his entire body. Skin, muscles, internal organs, bones—one by one, every body part affected. And before long, the pain forced him to the ground.

“What's...hap-happening...to me...? I...I...”

The excruciating pain grew, paralyzing him. His body wouldn't respond to his mind's commands any longer and even complex thoughts soon became impossible to form. The edges of his vision began to fade. Unable to fight, he slipped into darkness.

*THE TRUTH WILL SOON BE UNVEILED...*

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