

The Program

And so it came time for them to part, as people often do.

“You’ve been a great help,” the older woman said to the gentleman, “And a great student. I’m sure you’ll do well.”

The gentleman looks down at the woman, “It’s a shame that you can’t stay around for longer. I can see how much you’ve loved this lifetime.”

“Everything must come to an end, a lesson you, too, will learn. An ending is just an ending, but the beginnings, that’s why I’m still in The Program.”

The gentleman is surprised by this, and he isn’t sure how to respond. This is his first life, he is still unsure how he will handle losing it. A life that will include many people who won’t get the same chances he does. He gets it, he does, it’s why he joined The Program in the first place. Who could refuse? He could, he realized with a start.

“If I die, I mean, truly die-“ he starts.

The woman interjects, “We all have that choice at any time. No one is going to take that away from you. I believe in my purpose, and I believe in my next 80 years. That is enough to keep me going for now, and when I choose to, I will be reunited with everyone whose path I’ve crossed.”

“What happens if it doesn’t work, if we fail?”

“Then we fail. This is a weight that we all carry on our shoulders. This is our burden to bear.”

The older woman looks at her watch and shifts her purse to her other hand. She knows these questions well, she has been asked them many times before by many of her students. Her answers never seem to satisfy most newcomers. Everyone always comes up with their own conclusions, and that’s alright with her. But this one, he might not make it. This life isn’t for everyone, and his soul is the kind that can harden after too many centuries. He will fall in love too many times, lose too many people. Those souls turn into something ‘other’, something cold. They become shells. She isn’t allowed to interfere, she knows this.

She sighs, “I have something for you, Thomas.”

His eyes widen, “I think that’s the first time you’ve said my name.”

Smiling, she says, “Don’t let it go to your head. It isn’t your true name.”

“I suppose not.”

“Here,” the woman says after rummaging through her bag, “Don’t open it until after I’m gone, and make sure no one ever sees it.”

He turns the envelope over in his hands, “What is it?”

“Something only you and I will ever know about. May kindness light your path.”

With that, the woman disappears into the crowd. She wipes a tear from her cheek as she walks toward her train. It never gets easier to leave them, and after what she just did, she doubts she will see any of them again.