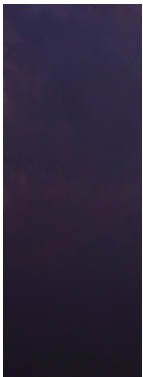




At first, everything was pitch black. I blinked. Okay, so my eyes weren't closed. Also, I had eyes. I patted my body and touched my face—all intact, clothed, and completely human. A lucid dream then? I pinched my skin as hard as I could and winced. Nope, definitely not a dream.



Next tactic: call for help. Cupping my mouth, I shouted, “Hello? Is anyone there?” I waited a few seconds, but I received no response. “I’d *really* like to know how to get out of here!” I added. My words didn’t echo. Silence and darkness seemed to be my only friends here.

My stomach twisted in a tight knot. Nothing else existed besides me. This could actually be the—
my—end.

Until an ornate door with deep and intricate carvings materialized right in front of me.

Without hesitation, I reached for the brass handle—oh, look, I could finally see my hand—and was relieved that it was solid, not a manifestation of my delusion. I didn’t question what would greet me once I opened the door, only that I’d rather not wander in oblivion for eternity, if that was even a concept in this plane of existence—or non-existence?

I stepped through, expecting to see a council of angels and holy light that would melt my eyeballs out of their sockets. Instead, I had entered a scene that was so ordinary and familiar that I almost dropped to my knees and put my palms together, grateful for avoiding Judgement Day *and* escaping oblivion.

A wooden bar counter lined with matching high back stools and a shelf full of liquor bottles welcomed me as the door shut from behind. The hanging light fixtures were dim, creating an intimate and inviting ambience.

The sound of a piano and bass duet was the heartbeat of the small space, though I wasn’t sure where the music was coming from—I didn’t spot a live band or speakers. The longer I listened to the slow jazz arrangement, the more it soothed my soul.

The only issue: no one else was around. I was still alone.

I sat in one of the empty stools and placed my arms on the countertop. Upon closer inspection, I realized the liquor bottles didn’t have labels. The drink glasses behind the counter gleamed, which meant someone had cleaned them. I swiped my index finger along the counter and rubbed it against my thumb—no dust.

“Is my bar to your liking?”

“Ah! Who—what—um, *hi?*” Monosyllabic words poured from my mouth in an attempt to respond to the voice that startled the bejesus out of me.

A person blinked into existence behind the counter, and while my brain should've registered the moment as defying all logic, I reminded myself that this place appeared out of nowhere when I was close to becoming one with darkness. Nothing made sense anymore even though I was sitting in a bar, supposedly ready to wash down my woes with alcohol.

But I didn't have any woes, least of all any memories of what had happened to me before I got here. I tried to squash down the panicked shrieks in my mouth as the person, who I would assume was the bartender, stared at me while donning a faceless white mask.

It went from a depressing reality TV show to a horror video game real quick.

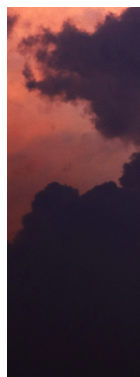
“Oh, don't be alarmed,” the bartender assured, pointing to their mask. “I do have a face underneath this but I'm not allowed to show you.”

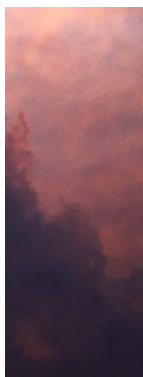
“I-I don't understand,” I stuttered, leaning away to put distance between us. My confusion grew the longer I stared at the bartender. Their voice gave no indication of their gender. I couldn't see any traces of skin; they covered everything up on their body, from the white gloves on their hands to the black, long-sleeved turtleneck that connected with their mask. Only their short, straight, vermillion hair, which covered their ears, offered a glimpse of their identity.

The bartender waved their hand as if swatting away a fly. “Don't dwell too much on it. Anyway, you didn't answer my question.” They spread out their arms. “Well? What do you think of this place?”

I couldn't read their facial expressions but I could at least understand their body language. The bartender was rather flamboyant in their gestures. Their casual words helped me relax just a little. If what they said was true about having an actual face, it was safe to assume that they were probably human, just like me.

But how to explain their sudden appearance out of nowhere? Could they be a wizard? Huh, a wizard who worked as a bartender—that would give them character





depth.

Questions crowded my head, but the one that slipped out was, “What *is* this place?” I realized I’d answered their question with one of my own, but they didn’t seem to mind.

They held up their index finger. “First, let me ask you this: do you remember anything before you came here?”

I shook my head. “I know I’m not dreaming, but none of this—” I gestured to the bar, “—feels real. Wait, can you see me with that mask on?”

“Clear as day,” they said. “You have long hair dyed in fuschia and a silver stud on your right nostril. The color of your eyes is murky brown, almost like someone tried to wash out a dirt stain on their t-shirt.”

I wasn’t sure if I needed to hear that last part but they convinced me of their ability to see, unsettling as it was when their mask had no eye sockets. I knew I had a nose stud when I touched my face earlier and the fuschia hair was evident as soon as I stepped into the bar. My doubts remained on the eye color.

As if sensing that they’d proven themselves, the bartender clapped their gloved hands together, startling me. “Alright then! I’ll say this right out the gate.” In a deadpan voice, they said, “You’re dead.”

My initial reaction was to let out an awkward laugh. Well, that would explain my amnesia, the abyss, and the bartender. If not a dream or reality, then the only possibility left was the afterlife. I’d known this to be true even before coming into the bar—I’d just hoped there would be a more...hopeful alternative.

My stomach started twisting in knots again, accompanied by cold, sweaty palms. My hands clenched in my lap. “How did I die?” I muttered, so quiet that I didn’t think the bartender would hear.

Oh, they heard. They tilted their head to the side with their hand tucked under their chin as if in thought. “Hmm. Does it matter?” When they leaned forward, I leaned further back. “The more important question is, do you think you deserve another chance?”

Well, now it seemed like we were playing Twenty Questions—except neither of us seemed to know how to play given that we only ever answered each other with more questions.

"How am I supposed to answer that when I don't even know if I'm a serial killer or a philanthropist?" My tone turned sharp as irritation kicked in.

The bartender tapped the side of their head. "You're thinking too hard. It's a yes or no question."

I paused, wondering if this was a trick. Would they throw me back out into the abyss if I said no? Or would they laugh in my face if I said yes and then proceeded to sentence me to eternal oblivion? But, the bartender did say I was overthinking.

The only clue I had about my past life was my physical body. I looked down at my clothes: ripped denim jeans, burgundy combat boots, and a t-shirt with a female anime character who had long, blonde pigtails. Someone with this type of fashion sense couldn't possibly be a serial killer, right?

After several moments of being at war with myself, I made a decision. "Then yes."

"Even though you might've been a serial killer?"

I gaped at them. "I just—you—"

Their shoulders started trembling with laughter. "Oh, this is amusing." Before I could say another word, they pointed down. "You being here proves that you deserve another chance and—" They jerked their thumb over their shoulder at the shelf of liquor bottles. "—I'm the maker of your next life."

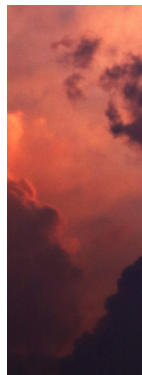
My brow furrowed. "So *you're* God?"

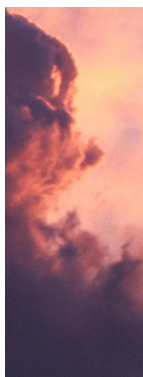
"Oh, don't call me that," they said, backhanding the title I'd just given them. "I'm an Arbiter. My role is to determine how souls like you will live in their next lives. Reincarnation—ever heard of it?"

"Of course I have."

"Well, this place? I call it 'Reinconcoction,'" they said while forming a rainbow with their hands along with the name. At my grimace, they reluctantly added, "Well, it's not official. I'm open to ideas."

I shifted my weight—my butt was starting to fall asleep, meaning this conversation dragged on too long and





didn't give me sufficient answers. I wasn't going to hold back anymore. "So, is your name Arbiter? Does this place look like a bar for everyone?" I glanced around at the empty tables and chairs before settling my eyes on the door. "Will someone else come in?"

"You can call me the bartender or Arbiter, but not that three-letter word," they replied, crossing their arms. "This place is sometimes a deli or an ice cream shop but most feel more comfortable in bars—and I mean *really* comfortable, like you." I wasn't sure if it was my sixth sense but it felt like they were giving me a judgemental look from behind the mask. "Lastly, it's just you and me."

The bartender—Arbiter—started moving around, reaching for a shaker and a stainless steel double-sided jigger. As I observed, I continued my interrogation. "Do you know my name? Or anything about my past life?"

Arbiter was rummaging through the cabinets but suddenly stopped and turned around. I could feel their gaze on me—were they sizing me up?

Before I started squirming in my seat, they seemed to have had an "aha" moment. They turned back around while wagging their index finger, plucked out a coupe glass from the cabinet, and set it on the countertop with a soft clink. "I know enough to determine how your next life will play out," they finally answered.

Somehow, their response prevented me from probing for more. It seemed as though I was better off forgetting about my past life so I could prepare for my new one.

Arbiter walked to the shelf and held out their arms in a "ta-dah" gesture. "And now the fun begins!" They picked up a thin bottle with ghostly blue liquid sloshing around inside. "Should we start with Hardship?"

I stared at them, incredulous. "*That's* how it works?"

"I told you, didn't I? I'm the maker of your next life." Arbiter tossed the bottle of Hardship in the air, letting it spin once before catching it. "And *this* is how I make it."

I hesitated to ask the next question but I figured I'd already asked a million so a few more wouldn't hurt. "Do I just get one drink?"

They twisted the cap off and picked up the jigger with the other hand. "Just the one."

I watched Arbiter pour Hardship into the one-ounce side of the jigger, filling it to the brim. "Considering your past life, I don't think this is enough," they said, dumping the liquid that would be in charge of my suffering into the shaker. "Maybe another?"

Internally, I was screaming. What was the standard for light, moderate, and extreme hardship? Even if I asked, Arbiter wasn't going to tell me. This was their bar, their job, and I was solely watching them brew my fate.

Arbiter flipped the jigger and filled half an ounce of Hardship before pouring it into the shaker. They closed the bottle, set it back on the shelf, and searched for the next ingredient. A dense, square bottle that looked like it was full of piss ended up in their hand.

They poured half an ounce into the shaker. "This is Happiness."

"You've got to be kidding me," I said, hunching over.

Arbiter set the bottle back on the shelf and picked up a tiny vial. "Next up, Love." The liquid inside the vial looked like blood. How appropriate.

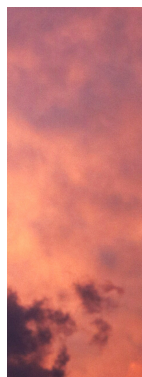
They uncorked the vial and tapped it three times into the shaker. "You'll be very loved in this life. Happy now?"

I didn't respond. Instead, I swallowed, wondering how the drink would taste. It couldn't be poisonous—I was already dead—but that didn't mean it wouldn't taste like shit.

"Last but not least," Arbiter said, opening the mini fridge and taking out a purple plastic bottle, "Health, or as I like to call it, the Mixer of Life."

At this point, I'd rather down the cocktail than stand to hear another one of their awful puns. I suppressed a groan and instead watched as Arbiter poured a fourth cup of Health into the shaker. Once they returned the bottle to the mini fridge, they scooped some ice cubes from the ice bin and transferred them to the shaker.

Arbiter shut the lid on the shaker and began their performance. They shook the shaker to their own rhythm and tossed it in the air while spinning once





before catching it. Not one drop of my cocktail leaked.

I would be impressed, if not for the inevitable fact that I was going to drink something highly questionable.

As Arbiter popped off the cap and strained the concoction into the glass, I asked, “So, what happens after I drink it?” My eyes widened—the color of the drink changed from vivid orange to pastel pink. It reminded me of a sunrise.

“You will be reborn, of course,” Arbiter said, adding a sprig of rosemary as a finishing touch. They pushed the glass toward me. “Enjoy.”

For a moment, I sat there, frozen, staring at my drink—my next life. It was now Arbiter’s turn to watch me.

I kept my gaze on the cocktail. “Will I live longer if I finish this in one go?”

Arbiter sputtered out a laugh. “You and your questions. Lucky—or unlucky—for you, I’m not the one who determines how long you’ll live. I only set the foundations. You’ll make my day if you drink it all, though.”

“Then who does?”

They lifted their finger to where their mouth would be. “That’s a secret.”

I sighed in resignation. This was it then—a new life, a new me. I took one final look at Arbiter and their bar.

In the beginning, I’d been all alone in the dark. I didn’t even care that I’d lost my memories; I just wanted to escape from the abyss. When I’d stepped into the bar, I was still alone, but the familiarity and coziness of the environment comforted me. The slow melody of the piano and bass, the rustic aesthetic, and the empty stools that invited me to take a seat—all of that was normal.

Then, Arbiter appeared.

Looking at them now, I realized I was going to miss them. All this time they seemed human, but a part of me knew that they existed on a different level than me. Once I drank the cocktail, I would leave their bar and they would stay here, waiting to greet their next

customer—for eternity.

I mustered up one last question. “Do you love being a bartender?”

Arbiter’s body stiffened. The tension released when they tilted their head up at the ceiling. “No one has ever asked me that before.” They returned their gaze on me. In a gentle voice, they said, “I do.”

Smiling, I picked up the cocktail glass and raised it to Arbiter. “Cheers,” I said, drawing out the moment before my lips touched the rim.

With one last look at them, I downed the drink. The heat in my throat spread throughout my body, melting away any last traces of my current self.

My hands started fading before the rest of my body followed suit. Instead of reuniting with darkness, bright light filled my vision. Warmth enveloped me, causing sleepiness. As my eyelids fluttered, Arbiter’s silhouette was the last image I saw before I woke up to a life renewed.

