
THE DECISION

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He lays under white sheets and tubes connected to various machines that beep or hum steadily. No one stands next to me. Or anywhere else around the wrinkled man, for that matter. I push my hand slowly into his ribs, grasping the feather-soft soul between my fingers. I tug, but he doesn't budge. Stubborn bastard.

“C’mon old man, it's time to go.”

I hear him speak through me, into my mind. “No. I...I can't. Not yet.” He pleads with me, struggling against my hold.

I sigh, wondering why the oldest are always so reluctant. He continues to beg, telling me that he's waiting for someone. He wants a little more time. But time is something I don't have much of, and I'm not willing to give any more to him. He's had enough.

He's afraid of death, I can feel it. It radiates from him, piercing my bones with the sharp metallic flavor of fear itself. I take as much of it as I can. I absorb his pain and give him images of the life he lived.

“It's okay.” I whisper, and finally he relaxes his hold. He lets me take him, and I pull the bluish orb into my arms.

I carry him out of the hospital room into the gatekeeper's office. It's set up like a waiting room, several chairs line a wall leading to a tall desk. Behind sits a tall, gaunt figure. He has large glasses framing his wrinkled pale face. Normally there are numerous other dream catchers that sit waiting to turn in their catch, but right now there's no one in the white-walled room but the gatekeeper and I. When I walk toward him he tilts his head up and produces a wide grin.

“Chayim,” he exclaims, “my favorite dreamer. What have you caught for me today?”

I pass the blue haze into his reaching hands, yawning, and return his greeting with a curt “Damon.”

I turn to leave, but as I walk away he calls out my name.

“Take a look at this.”

I stare at him in confusion for a few seconds until he waves me over eagerly.

“This soul has lived over a hundred lives.” He looks at me expectantly, as if I have anything to say about this fact.

“Interesting.” I say sarcastically.

“But that's not what surprises me.” He continues despite my disinterest. “This soul is still not content. After all of these lives, it's still not fulfilled.”

“Okay?”

“I'll be damned. The poor soul can't get it right. I have no choice but to send it back down. Hopefully in its next life it'll find what it's searching for.” He stares at the orb and fails to notice my loud sigh.

I turn again to leave, this time with no interruption. I walk out of the room and onto a boat that floats on a calm river near a tall bridge. I wait quietly here, watching various insects dart around the river bank. Chirping birds fill the silence until I hear a disturbance from the bridge above me.

There are several feet moving at once along with discernible voices. It escalates to stomping. Running stomps and shouting directly above me. There's a scream and the running stomps grow more distant until a sudden splash disturbs the water and engulfs any other noise. My cue.

I paddle slowly towards the dark figure bobbing in the water. I reach my hand into its chest and pull, but I'm met by an unexpected resistance. Just my luck to get a second difficult case in a row.

I roll my eyes and whisper to the figure. “But you jumped, did you not? Let go.” With my fingers wrapped around the feather-like being, I'm launched into the images from its life. His life. No, his future.

There's so much pain. I try to take it all from him, to calm him. I can feel hands all over me. I can't see anything but I can hear sirens and voices. So many voices talking to me and touching me and it hurts. I'm in a bed. I hear crying and more voices. There's so much pain. It changes and I can see again. I'm walking down a busy corridor. The voices stop and instead they all stare at me. I'm not walking, I'm being pushed in a wheelchair. There's more pain but this one blooms from inside as these strangers' eyes pierce me like knives. Now it's bright. Blue eyes, messy dark hair. There's a child on my lap laughing and singing. Mine. She is mine. The pain is replaced by warmth.

The being in my hand is warm and there are tears rolling down my cheeks. I remember the gatekeeper's words.

“You're not satisfied. But you're not ready to start over, are you?” I murmur gently to the orb.

I pull at it again except with much less force, yet I'm greeted by much heavier resistance. I unravel my fingers, carefully taking my hand out of his chest. I hear sirens and voices growing closer.

“There will be so much pain. But it's what you've chosen.” I've never done this before. I paddle away, watching large men fish the boy out of the water, watch them surround him, watch them put him into the back of a glowing ambulance. I've never done this.

I step into the gatekeepers office empty handed, this time met by the eyes of other dreamers who sit at the previously vacant chairs. Damon meets my gaze and his expression darkens. He stands and calls my name in a much more serious tone than the last time I was here.

“Follow me, Chayim.”

I quickly catch up to his pace and follow him into a hallway with my head down. He leads me into a small room with a hospital bed equipped with restraints that is centered beside a chair. I look up at the gatekeeper who, now standing, doubles my height. He looks at me with disdain, but also something else. He looks sad.

“Chayim your purpose is to bring me the souls safely. You are not to decide their fate.”

“I know this.” I say, my voice wavering.

“Your disobedience must be punished. Are you aware of this fact?”

I nod my head. “I don't regret my decision.”

“Your namesake is life, and you shall be given as much. You are sentenced to live one thousand lifetimes. After served, you may be considered a position as a dreamer once more. Is this understood?”

Once again I nod, determined to fulfill my purpose. I climb into the bed and he straps my arms and legs down. Life is what I've given and life is what I'll be getting. A calm washes over me and I look at my friend once more for a long time.

Then there is pain. There is so much pain.