Alone

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The clock reads 0, upright; a dog walking close to a cliff edge on all fours, its travelling sack tied to a stick clenched fiercely between its teeth, swaying over the edge.

Alone in a sphere of half existence, in an empty room containing only the drabbest of furnishings - a desk, a clock, a chair, a door – the Young Boy sat tiredly staring into the cosmic stretch of swirls and spirals and stars that created his only landscape through a glass-less window. Cities made of fires, each a million light years away, joining together to form new life; Leo winked to him, and Aquarius giggled. He reached into the eternity before him, wanting to be among his friends; to dance with Scorpio and hunt with Taurus, much he had in his forgone years.

Turning away from his friends, he looked towards the door. To his shock a Shadowed Man emerged from the darkness of the room's corners, obscuring the door behind him. Oozing in the spoils of human consciousness, his form created from wisps of black, he handed the Young Boy a piece of black paper, and a black inked fountain pen, but not before he moved his hand in a swiping motion, removing the door as though it never existed. The Boy looked at his gifts vacantly. The Man's hand took the Boy's chin, guiding his face to his. The elder's face was nought but the same eyes as the younger's, all four eyes the same shade of deep blue, the colour so pure the eyes seemed to melt together. The two entwined their fingers, then the Man relinquishing his grip on the Boy, he placed his pen to the paper.

Metal meeting paper, the pen kissed its partner, its black contents pooling around the tip as the Boy faltered; his words would be lost from the moment they were conceived, just as the ink pool was - camouflaged against the ebony sheet of nothing that was spread before him. The Man, showing not a flicker of emotion with the Boy's lack of progress, snatched the pen from him and, as though it were a cannula, slid it harshly into the Boy's forearm. Before the Boy could cry out in pain, the man's barely formed hand swiped away the Boy's mouth, rending his lower face into nothing but mere skin; much like the door, it was though his mouth had never existed at all. Without a mouth to scream with, all the Boy could do was watch as the pen seemed to throb and pulse, as it's ink blighted his veins into an unsettling purple. Looking to the Man, the Boy pleaded with him. With no hint of pleasure or sadness, the Man did that same swiping motion, vanishing the pen from the Boy's arm, and restoring the corrupted veins; the Man handed the Boy another pen. Resigned to his deathly existence, the Boy's writing began, silent tears leaking from his eyes for the words no one else would ever know.

Both sets of blue eyes remained transfixed on the indiscernible markings, so much so that even the Boy became dulled to his scribbles, his soul now immune to his own feelings. The Man glanced to the clock – its hands were missing. Then he watched the stars – they were dead, their fires burnt out, the cities all abandoned. The Man stood behind the Boy, and placed his right hand inside the flesh of the Boy's and did the same with his left. The Boy's feverish writing ceased as his hands stopped being his hands. Commanding the Boy's arms, the Man gave him back his mouth. Slowly, the Man lowered himself into the body of the Boy, replacing him entirely,

their autonomy as real as the words they were writing. He felt his hair, his body, his face, nose, lips and slammed his head on the desk, a violent thud reverberating through the room.

The clock reads 13 in reverse; the pale rider cries for Hades, as the people pay tribute for their sowing.

The room was different now. The Boy was inside a hall containing hundreds upon thousands of grey desks with identical black dial phones, and all with the same depressing layout of brown books with stacks of papers kept inside. For all he could see, was a nigh-infinite number of people like him, all with their heads down, their hands writing like they were running out of time. There were so many pens scratching against paper it was though he was inside a beehive, buzzing and humming everywhere all at once. With no other choice, he joined them, his pen yet another soldier among the colony. For what seemed like years he wrote tirelessly, his hand raw and bloodied, his head pounding; the sickening luminosity of the bright bulbs above him, his head recoiled back, his hand still scribbling maniacally. A sharp crack echoed through the hall and his neck was stuck at a right-angle. There was no physical pain, only the frustration of not being able to see what he was writing.

A bell rang, loud. It's voice carrying all through the hall, signalling the end. With not a drop of water, his role done, he was told to do the same thing tomorrow. He cannot do this again, he decided.

His body now merely a vehicle, he stood, walked outside, and killed himself by walking to a river rush, throwing himself into the brutal current, allowing his flesh to peel, bones to be crushed and lungs to fill with water.

The Boy awoke, back in the drab room. His head was bloodied and pounding; he stood up stumbling, crumpling the black paper as he did, throwing it into the stars. He attempted to leave, but forgetting what he had done previously, sank to his knees at the lack of an entrance or exit. Performing the swiping motion he used to erase the door, he tried it again to bring it back. Nothing. He tried the motion in reverse. Nothing. He scratched at the wall. Nothing. For years, he bit, clawed, bashed, and threw himself into the former doorway, doing anything and everything he could to get out. Nothing. Eventually the Boy lost himself: his fleshed decayed and rotted into the floor, his bones disintegrated into a white powder that eventually became one with the dust, until finally all that remained was a shadowy man made of black wisps with deep blue eyes.

Finally, his destiny fulfilled, the Boy who had become the Man, turned around. As he did, a new boy sat in his chair, looking out into the sea of stars and constellations beyond. The Boy looked into the eyes of the Shadowed Man, and then, instinctively, the man handed him a piece of black paper and a black inked fountain pen. The Boy vacantly went to accept the gifts, but the Man didn't relinquish. The Boy tugged and pulled at the Man's gifts, desperately trying to pry them from his hands, but the man was unmoving. He simply would not allow this to continue; the Boy would not suffer the same life he had.

Having no other option, the Man shook the Boy off violently, throwing him against the wall. There was a stiff unmoving air in the room as the two stared at each other. Eventually, the Man threw the pen to the ground and began tearing at the paper. With every rip, his body became more

formed – his tibia, femur, hip, spine, ribs, muscles, ligaments, skin – they all returned to him, his wisp of a body gradually reverting. With his flesh returned, the man slowly sank his teeth into his right hand. His blood was sweet iron, and it pumped rapidly out of his hand and into his mouth, staining his teeth a deep crimson. He relished its taste; his pace quickened, mauling at his hand like a feral hound. His flesh was quickly rended to ribbons, thin strands of black-red flesh as his hand was annihilated; the bones of his fingers crunched and snapped grounded to fine powder between his teeth.

His right hand now nothing but a pile of viscera on the floor, the Man turned his attention to the pen, which the Boy had picked up quietly and huddled in the corner closest to the desk, clutching the pen close to his breast. The Man walked over to the boy and crouched in front of him. The Man looked somehow less human than he did when he was just shadow, with his blood dripping down from his chin. The Man held out his left hand and the Boy looked into the Man's eyes; in them, he could see his future, that his fate was to become this same man, unless something changed. Understanding at last, the Boy handed over the pen. The Man took the pen from the Boy in his left hand and used his teeth to remove the tip, keeping it held between his teeth. He emptied the contents within, stamping on the ink callously. His foot now coated in the black liquid, and his life quickly slipping from him, he plugged the now empty pen over the orifices of his veins, filling it with his blood. Carefully, he pushed the tip into the main body of pen with his teeth. As he did, the Man collapsed, nearly dead.

He extended his left hand, the pen in his grasp, to the Boy and he took it.

The clock now reads 13 in upright; the pale rider plays a mournful tune on his scythe.

The Boy looked outside into the stars. His friends had been watching, their faces smiling with understanding. As he continued to watch them, the Boy noticed a newer, smaller one among them: a ram. It nodded to the boy. With the ram's blessing, the Boy immediately stabbed the Man with the pen in his neck. With the last traces of life leaving his mouth, the Man gently grabbed the Boy's face, pulling his head to his; the two touched their foreheads together, and the man slept peacefully.

The Boy stood and walked to the desk. With the pen, the Boy carved two bloody words into the desk: "I'm alive." At that moment, the clock which had never sung, rang loud but soft. It read 21 in upright. It rolled itself to the wall that the doorway previously occupied so long ago, widening, and stretching to create a new circular entrance, adorned in a floral wreath, with deep purple sashes of silk hanging over the opening. The Boy stood in awe at the clock, but was stunned when his four friends – Scorpio, Taurus, Aquarius, and Leo – shrank down to meet him inside the room. They gathered around him, their light filling his soul, warming him, and enveloping him.

Her friends stepping back from her, the Girl rose. Looking around at the room she had been trapped in for eternity, she gladly turned her back on it, faced the open door, and left the room.