

Golden Moments  
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I let my focus drift to the once-upon-a-time fantasy I've built for myself in my mind. Fragments of rumors and history lessons build a palace of dreams I visit when my grisly reality gets too depressing to bear. Dreams of sunny golden meadows and true love help warm the constantly hollow feeling in my gut.

Until a cheery voice snaps me out of it.

"Dearest?" Mother smiles, her perfectly white teeth lined up perfectly in her mouth, stretching into a perfect smile. Father, Sister, and Baby Brother all turn their heads in sync to smile at her.

"Dearest?" Her sweet voice developed a newfound firmness. Her smile stretched even wider. I wondered if her porcelain-like skin could crack from the pressure.

"Deepest apologies, Mother." My tongue scrambled to formulate the perfect sentence before my brain could catch up to what was happening. Mother sat down, but even between bites of grey nutritional supplement, the smile never left her lips.

"How was work today, darling?" I knew the question was directed at Father, but her black eyes were still boring into me.

"Habitually first-rate as always, darling!" He stuck out his arm awkwardly to pat Mother's shoulder. "And I must say, you've exceeded yourself yet again with our meal!"

"Thank you, Husband!"

"Any time Wife!"

The conversation that I'd been forced to listen to with a smile every night was somehow even more unbearable than the last few hundred times I'd heard it. I knew the responses before they were said. Time was frozen in cement. The methodic clock constantly ticking in the corner

was sliding through the silence painfully slow. My hand lifting the fork into my mouth felt heavy. I felt my mind wandering yet again, to the place where the unknown beauty of things is what made sense there. I pulled myself out of the forbidden waters just in time to retell my day.

“My day was as bright as your smile, Sister!”

“How kind, Brother!”

Just as I was about to pat myself on the back for not messing that up, the clock finally let out the eight o'clock warning.

“Oh my dearests, it's time for bed!”

Baby Brother gurgled a few sounds out, and our laughter reverberated in sync with the chiming clock. After shooing us out of our seats, me and Sister walked to the washroom. I wasn't in the mood to go through the ritual of politely insisting the other one goes first, so I just stepped in and locked the door behind me. I felt my face relax and all tenseness seep into the floor. Glancing in the mirror, nothing surprised me. I looked the same as I had for the past seven years, since I was eight. Dark grey hair in a bowl cut, slate eyes set in a pale chalky face. I didn't look bad I guess --- but how *can* you look bad when when I walk through the streets, countless reflections of myself stare at me from the sides? Here everyone looks the same. I don't know why. Maybe it was to discontinue body issues or bullying or whatever.

Sometimes, when Mother wasn't looking, I tried to change the little things about myself to just --- I don't know. Maybe get some sort of sense I mattered in this sea of look-alikes.

A rhythmically polite pounding on the door reminded me it was well past overtime. Without even scrambling to brush my teeth or comb my hair, I swung open the door and recited, “Deepest apologies Sister for taking much too long in the restroom. I assure you it shall not happen again.”

Sister smiled. I stared at my face set in her 11-year-old body. At this point, I never knew whether she actually meant it, or was just trying to tell me, “Better not happen again you screwup”. Sometimes, I really wished she just said that. The way we acted you'd think we were less than amiable associates stuck in a job neither of us liked. Brushing past her, I stuck my

head into my parent's room to give them the customary "Good night, dearest Mother and Father." My body was on autopilot now. I wished Baby Brother goodnight, hooked the wire into my neck outlet, and slipped into bed. No matter how hard I tried, I never could seem to stop the wistful longing to be in a better place. I eventually drifted off to sleep, after finally succumbing to the want of wrapping myself in a comforting cocoon of dreams, its warmth melting the worries of the world away.

Pale grey sunlight braving the dawn clouds broke its way into my bedroom window. I could still hear my sister's slow rhythmic breathing below my bunkbed. I rubbed my eyes, almost imagining the sunlight was golden like in my dream. No, that couldn't be right. I glanced towards the clock in the corner of my room, and my heart almost fell out of my chest when I saw it said 5:32. No. No, no, no, no. I've never woken up this unpunctually. Even when my sleep cycle left sync with the rest of the family, it was only for a few minutes. I was a whole two hours early. I squeezed my eyes shut, but it was too late. The wire detached itself from my neck, and the blariness behind my eyes dissolved, and I was as attentive as ever. Let me explain.

Every person in District XXVII needs to connect themselves to the Eneter, as to ensure full sleep in the night. If for any reason they unhook themselves any earlier, they would pass out before the last few hours of the day. At least theoretically. That's what my parents drilled into me, so I've never tried it out before.

My bedsheets up to my nose, I lay frozen in fear imagining what to expect. After several tension-infused moments, the blood throbbing in my ears calmed down, and I started to reason with myself.

It's not like I'll die, right? It's not like if someone knows, gonna swoop through the window and throw me into jail. Those stupid little voices in my head were pestering me again with several versions of a grisly execution.

Once, my classmate, Male 2377-d, had a malfunction with his Eneter, and he passed out in class. A Caregiver arrived to clean it up and called it an "insignificant little accident." Two days later, when I brought it up again, no one even knew what I was talking about. They blinked right through my endless rampages like I wasn't even there.

I never saw 2377-d again.

“How did you sleep dearest?” Mother asked, placing a piping hot plate of grey nutritional supplements before me. I grinned so wide my face almost hurt. “Fine.”

Her meaningless smile was colder than her eyes.

The nutritional supplement she warmed up tasted like nothing. Like usual. Everything going on as usual. I hadn't experienced a different day, or a different feeling in so long. After exchanging monotonous sentiments with my family, the clock struck eight --- time for school. Woohoo. Another six hours of mind-numbing stuff I know better than my designation.

“Goodbye, Husband!” Mother doesn't even tilt her neck to peck Father on the cheek. “Enjoy work!”

“Goodbye, Wife! I expect a delicious meal when I come home, although they get better each day!” They laughed in sync with Sister. I was too tired for this.

Nothing much happened on the bus. All the kids sat with their assigned Best Friend, sitting perfectly straight, not making a sound at all. As I sat down, I wondered if I was the only one who found that unnatural. Assigned Best Friend 2158-d, smiled, and asked how I was. I didn't like looking at him, because it was like talking to a creepy reflection, so I replied to the window, “Good.” Oftentimes, I had tried to start a conversation with 2158-d, but he just smiled at me like he didn't speak English --- like I was an overly complicated piece of art he only pretended to understand.

After all the pre-chosen discussion was tired out, the entire bus sat in complete silence as we rolled along to our school. I broke protocol, and leaned my arm against the window, staring wistfully out.

Even outside there wasn't anything different.

Tall grey trees, all probably with the exact number of leaves and branches, lined up faithfully alongside the road. Small cars, all the same size and built drove each of the men to the one place where work happened. When I was a small child, I often strained to find my Father, a single brick in a ten-story high wall of. I soon realized that it didn't matter --- some random guy I'd never even encountered before could take his place and I'd never know.

Bored out of my mind, I debated with each of the conflicting thoughts nagging me inside of my head. Could there be a world where everything was imperfectly perfect? Like siblings who fought with each other, weather that was sometimes hot and sometimes cold? Teachers who cared to teach you? These ideas were bordering what the Collective called “impure”, but I was so out of place already would it hurt if I had a few idea-inspiring revelations?

When we arrived at school, the autopilot clicked in. I was so used to the same schedule every day, that it felt like I was just floating just outside of my body, watching myself act. The hours blur together so that you're not even sure if it's been minutes or days. We learned the same things we had been learning since preschool. History of our Caretakers, of our hierarchy, how we must all be faithful to its ways. Our Professor (an automaton) was lecturing about the liberation of our people (for like the thousandth time), and while the rest of the class was intently scribbling notes in sync while the Professor droned on, I tried resisting the urge to look out of the window. There wasn't much there either, but at least more interesting than this.

After listening to the little choir of voices in my head for a while, I picked up my pencil and started pretending to scribble some notes. My pencil drifted off the lines, and I started drawing my face. It wasn't that hard honestly, with seeing my face on every single person I met. Round face. Small pointed chin matching the nose. Large round grey eyes set on a pale grey face. I hesitated when it came to my hair. I hated my bowl cut, but it was one of the biggest regulations. I gave myself long swoppy hair, covering one eye. That looked pretty cool. Then a made my pitifully thin eyebrows bushier. I wondered if it was possible to look handsome with a stronger chin, so I set about it, large bold strokes--- Professor grabbed my wrist assertively with spindly metal rods. “What is male 4031-d doing?”

“Um...” The cogs whirring in my brain suddenly froze.

“Not a recognized response. What is male 4031-d doing?”

Panic engulfed me. Conflicting thoughts telling me to run away or punch him in the face made it hard to think.

I scrambled to remember one of the programmed responses. “Relinquishing focus.”

“Male 4031-d, this is the twelve strike on the record. Breaking excerpt twenty-seven of the code, relinquishing focus, aggregated with other misdemeanors, we surmise the consequence is recollection to the Collective.”

I felt my heart stop.

That was what happened to 2377-d. And the day he was “recollected”, he was replaced with another clone. No. No, this can’t be happening.

I stood up forcefully, but its spindly metal hand sunk deep into my own and dragged me out of my seat. I struggled so hard to get out of the spider-like embrace, but its mechanical force was too strong. The rest of the pupils were still staring straight ahead attentively at the chalkboard, a wide earnest smile masking any reaction they might’ve had.

I struggle to escape the metal talons. My brain is so dissociated from my body that my throat grows hoarse with screaming before I even realize. I scream for my life, scream for the family I’m about to leave behind, scream so people can peel the masks off their eyes and face the brutal reality before their faces.

The Professor shoves me into a large truck that’s parked outside of the school.

The rickety little cage’s groans match my pained ones. I cry for so long that I turn too old to remember a life without this dread gnawing at my insides.

A sudden halt of the truck tells me I’m finally here. I’m so exhausted I don’t even struggle anymore. The want of a warm bed, food, and even my survival instinct have all been overshadowed by the shock of the sudden experience. I had lived every single day the same for so long, that I’d even forgotten there might be another world outside of the one I was stuck in.

Rough mechanical arms shove me into an even larger cell on wheels. I don’t even realize there are other kids in there with me until one of them nervously pokes me in the shoulder.

I’m so startled I press myself into the farthest corner of the dingily lit box. Fifteen or so round faces are all staring at me intently. These kids are all like the other ones ... except they're not. I can sense behind their grey eyes feelings. There is no mask hiding them from the reality.

“What ....” My throat’s so raw I can’t even choke anything out. My gaze travels from face to face. One of them, a girl my age, steps out.

Her sad eyes bore into mine with a kind of intensity I'd never seen. After so long believing I was the only one who felt anything, just the knowledge that there was someone more out there sparked a flame of hope that I hadn't felt in years.

"What..." My voice catches in my throat. "Who are you?"

"Ankiro."

"What?" That wasn't a designation I'd ever heard before. I slowly sounded it out.  
"An...Ankiro?"

"Female 4827-d, if you will."

My dull throbbing at the base of my skull intensifies so painfully that blinding flashes of light explode in my head. "What...who...?"

"We're defects."

The word didn't make sense. I could almost feel my thoughts short circuiting as I struggled to grasp the meaning. Defects? "You mean we're... basically, normal human beings?" Her face twists into a wry smile I'd never seen on anyone but my own reflection.

"Ironically, the opposite. We're not human."

It was at this point, from the combined exhaustion and my life being turned upside down, I passed out.

My eyelids were too heavy to lift. I lay there, on the cold metal floor, curled up into a comforting ball. I just wanted to stay in the warm envelope of my thoughts for a while. Just a while longer.

Memories I didn't want to think about, feeling about my life, were all piling up the more I thought about them. The voices that I always kept at bay in the back of my mind had finally

stopped talking. The steady lurching of the truck lulled me into some sense of being a baby. I don't know.

After several painful minutes debating to myself if I should turn over or not, I decided it'd be best to quit feeling sorry for myself, and face the real world. I slowly got up. The spiderwebs in the corners just barely held the small cavern together, dust coating my lungs with every breath. The only source of light is two ancient bulbs fixated onto the low roof, barely bathing the room in a jaundiced yellow wash.

I sit still for a moment of two, contemplating my fate, so I cough very loudly to get the attention of anyone. 4872-d comes over, concerned.

"What happened?" I ask, desperate for answers.

Without even saying a word, squats down next to me, and holds my wrist up. Apparently, my confusion is that evident, because she smiles. Wryly. "Look."

I stare at it. It's a wrist, I guess. Skinny. Pale grey, but now with an unhealthy yellow glow from the light of the room. Blood drips from the cuts.

4872 shakes her head. "What color is the blood?"

"Blood colored."

She isn't smiling anymore. "Black. Oil black."

"I'm not --- It can't be. I'm not a machine." I realize how stupid I must sound to her. The nagging voice at the back of my head I keep pushing down is getting louder, more insistent. "I-I can think for myself. I feel pain. I eat!"

4872's patient air is infuriating. She's treating me like a child. With a patient voice, she tries her hardest to break the haze of I'm floating in as gently as she can. "We all are. Automatrons."

*No.*

"Do you ever wonder why you've looked the same since ten?"

*No.*

"Tell me you don't feel that our society is unnatural?"



No.

“Everything the same. Always the perfectly same, never ---”

“No.” There are too many unasked questions, too many shattered fragments of answers floating around. I don’t have the energy to collect them all and piece them together.

I’d been trying for so long to be a piece that fits in the perfect puzzle, I just didn’t think to piece it together myself.

“Why are we here?” The question catches in my parched throat. She hands me a suspicious-smelling cup of water that tastes even worse --- but I was so thirsty I absorbed it in a second.

“We’re the defects of the manufacturing. Few in a million can think for themselves outside of the collective. Those few have a defect that overcomes the original pre-programmed thoughts the minds of others have. Any irregularity in their lives, and they error.”

The rusty cogs in my head started turning. Maybe they were literally, or my malfunctioning brain was finally starting to accept the truth for itself.

“Caretakers are human,” she continues. “They are just worker to the highest power in our society. We are just puppets in some sort of sick social experiment they’re recreating. The overlords, or whatever the majesties want us to call them, are trying to find the perfect formula for a perfect society. But those *imbeciles* can’t see they’re just failing miserably.” She pounds her hand so hard on the floor that it dents it. “They just don’t realize that humans have human tendencies. Wow, who would’ve figured? So they weed away the ones with actually any sense of individuality. There is a stage in every period of our lives where we get replaced. From baby, to small child, to teenager, to adult, then --- we get discarded.” The bitterness in her voice is so real, the stupid little voice insisting inside me that “this is all a dream” fades.

I finally come to terms with the question that I know I’ve been dodging: “What now?”

Any light of fire in her grey eyes was doused immediately. “We’re being discarded.”

Feelings I haven't felt in so long, being bottled up inside of me for longer than I can remember, explode. Anger, sadness, frustration. I cry for my fear of death, cry for the sadness of leaving my family behind, knowing they won't even know I died.

4872 sat beside me for a few more hours until I fell asleep.

And in those small moments, the holes of loneliness riddling inside me were being filled up slowly. Life was looking a touch more gold in a torrent of gloom.

Too bad mine was ending soon.

"We have to escape."

4872 gave me her trademark grin. There was no amusement behind it though --- just shielding her obvious frustration. "Don't you think I've tried? I've been here longer than anyone. Several months."

Frustrated by her lack of enthusiasm, I even wondered if she cared to live anymore. "We have to try."

She doesn't even blink. Her superficial smile only makes me angrier. I know she's probably been through this crap before. I glower at her. Her mask slips a little. I can only see her eyes now. "Listen, I know, okay? I know. I've accepted this fate long before you knew it was possible. It's going to happen to all of us. It's only a matter of time. You won't believe how many people--- just please don't try." Her eyes are begging me silently. I'm arguing with an older, wiser reflection of myself. One of the voices in my head tells me to listen to her. I tell it to shut up. "I can't. I'm sorry."

She sighs, sad but not surprised. "Okay. Just, get some sleep, okay? Trust me, you need it."

The next few months were a haze. It involved me fruitlessly wasting many hours trying to carve through the thin cracks etched in the wall, to screaming at the top of my lungs to get anyone's attention.

The sad thing is, it was the best time I'd ever had in my life.

We had all kind of collectively come to the mindset to live the last golden moments of our lives to the best we could. I made friends, got to know each of them better than the family I'd been stuck with for fifteen years. They named me Eywren. 4872-d, Ankiro, told me it was our sign of individuality they were trying to oppress. I just thought it was because it sounded cool. Maybe our names were unconventional. But then again, we'd never heard a name other than designations.

Every single night we went to bed talking about all our fantasies. The next morning, we woke up to each other's laughter. Every single day was a newer experience than any other day I ever had in the open before. Never did I know how much I craved companionship, people who talked to me rather than stare right through me as if I didn't exist. Imperfect things were always said here, and that made our imperfectly perfect home our own.

"Do you think sunlight could be any other color than grey?" I asked.

"I didn't even know any other colors existed," Ankiro replied. "And you woke me up, Wren. Not cool."

"Sometimes, when they open the doors to feed us, I imagine it's golden," I continue, looking through the microscopic crack running down the bottom.

Her face almost splits into two with a massive yawn "Golden?"

"Y'know, the color of the chariot our great protector vanquished our oppressors with."

"You actually paid attention in class?" She smirked. "Nerd."

"Idiot," I shot back, offended.

A huge jolt launched Ankiro face-first into the floor. I almost laughed, but then I realized something wasn't right. Cold air was seeping through the rickety hold we were in. It has never been cold in our world. Ever.

The air in the room suddenly grew heavy with apprehension as each of us sat up, tense. It became dead silent, with only the occasional sound of footsteps puncturing the frozen air.

A small voice pressed into the shadows whispered, fear dripping from every syllable, "This is it."

This can't be it. No.

I could hear the clicking as a person outside slowly undid each of the heavy-duty bolts trapping us inside. A hand slipped into mine. I didn't even feel embarrassed. I was just glad to know someone was there with me.

"Get out." The mechanical voice doesn't even hide it's not human. We filed out one by one, and each time, it stuck a rod in the Eneer port in our neck, and we passed out instantly. Every single time one of our friends collapsed on the ground, twitching in pain, Ankiro's breath shortened, and her hand gripped a little tighter.

When it was my turn, I didn't want to let go of her hand. Was this it? I couldn't let my last words to her be "Idiot." Before I could even make up my mind, the stick was shoved into my Eneer port. Like a blooming tree, the electrical current shot from my neck through my entire body, I was on fire for a few seconds, until limb by limb I became paralyzed. The pain didn't subside even after he pulled it out. *It hurts*, I chant drunkenly to myself over and over. *Like I ate a firefly*.

I awake to groans of pain and sobs of desperation. The air is thick with tears, moans, and mildew. My face is pressed on hard gravel substrate. I can't feel my arms. Even my eyelids hurt so bad I don't want to open them. There's a dull throb coursing in my chest.

And I don't think it was from being electrocuted.

I struggle upright to find Ankiro in the courtyard. We're outside, cooped up with tall heavily wired fences. Each of the few trees they had so generously provided us were scragged and leafless, their branches bowing down to the earth, trying to escape the glare of the sun. It was such a blazing white it almost made me angry, as if it was trying to mock us. My eyes strained in the light to find her in the sea of clones. I shouted her name so many times, but it was only a pitiful cry drowned in the harsh wind.

My legs shake unsteadily as I force myself to get up to look for her. We might all look the same, but there were always certain characteristics I could tell Ankiro apart from. Her sarcastic little smile. Her short choppy bangs were only up to her eyebrows because, in a fit of insanity during the middle of the night, she sawed most of it off with nothing but a rusty nail. After tripping on body after body, a hot knife carving into the marrow of my bones, exhaustion overtook me. Lying beneath the weak shade of a dead tree, I decided to go back to my fantasy world to wrap a few things up before I left for good.

When I blinked my eyes open, it was so dark that for a few moments, I didn't realize I was awake yet. A cold metal snake was warped around my wrist, which was connected to the endless trail of children behind me. The conga line of death. I was being dragged forward the entire time because I woke up face down on the ground with half my face scratched off.

And there, in the blackness, a scream of pure terror shattered the placid stillness of the night.

And that's when I realized.

This was it.

The end.

Far ahead of me in the line, there was the steady beat of the execution. Screaming. Struggle. The dull thud of an axe on a surface. Repeat.

With every repetition, the knot in my heart grew tighter. I felt sick. Could robots even feel sick? I don't know. Maybe it was like oil or something. Oil tastes bad, right? My mind, scrambling to distract itself, played ping pong with itself.

I desperately strained to find Ankiro in the line of heads in front of me. Even if I could see three feet beyond my nose, I knew already it was useless. She might be dead by now. Or not. But she will be tonight.

Useless escape routes started playing in my mind at high speed, each more far-fetched than the last. As I inched nearer and nearer, the inevitable destiny settled heavier on my shoulders. Every single one of the voices in my head were screaming no. Tears of regret, anger, and heartache sting the cuts on my face.

There's only one person ahead of me now. Time is trapped in honey as I watched horrified, unable to peel my eyes away from the scene. An automaton, skinless so his metal skeleton is exposed, chaining the person on the pedestal. His pleas fall upon deaf ears as the blood-covered sickle is raised higher and higher into the air. *Swish*. Someone screams. I can't tell if it's from them, or me. Another automaton collects the body. With its programmed fingers, it swiftly pulls apart the massacred remains of a now-empty shell.

The executor looks me in the eyes with those feelingless orbs of blackness. He doesn't even need to grab my arm and restrain me. I kneel forward, my knees pressing into the damp ground below me. I close my eyes. I say goodbye to the voices in my head. The characters I grew to love as my friends over the lonely years. I say goodbye to Ankiro.

I don't even hear the swish of the sickle as it's raised over me.

I see a light. And it's golden.