

It was the sound. It was the only thing to be heard, and it awoke the senses, bringing everything else to life. The vibrations from that solitary noise echoed into the very core of Aven and shook her into consciousness. It was her hand that had braced against the wall and created the dissonance. After hearing the noise, she could feel the solid, smooth panel on which she supported herself. A shuddering breath escaped her lips, and at the first intake of air, she could feel the chill of the air. Her limbs were deadened with a numb tingling sensation. It kept her from moving any further.

Finally, she opened her eyes. Her pupils swiftly contracted as the white light flooded her vision. She blinked away the blurriness until she could make out figures. There were none to be seen however. Aven was in a long hallway. The walls were white; the floor was white, and the ceiling was white. Bright yellow lights lined the ceiling evenly all the way down the hallway. There was absolutely nothing in the hallway.

*Why wasn't there any noise? Where were the people?* Aven's slow thoughts could only ask these questions over and over. She looked down at herself. She was wearing a small white garment, covering only what was necessary. It wasn't a normal piece of clothing. It was thin, too. It reminded her of a—

"Where am I?" she whispered, her mind unable to come up with any words. Her question disappeared into the stillness, and silence was her only response.

Aven looked to her hand, the one holding herself up on the wall. On the side of her index finger was a slight smear of carmine. She assumed, with a slight jump in her heart, that it was blood. Her calm nature took over though as she wondered risibly how'd she'd been so clumsy as to hurt herself. A crooked grin twitched into place on her pallid face. It immediately vanished as she moved her hand to see a large stain of blood smeared underneath. Her palm was covered in it.

She crumbled to her knees, holding her trembling palm. Aven had no idea whose blood she had on her hands. *Why was there so much of it?* Her breathing hastened as her mind went through all the disturbing possibilities. One morbid thought of death after another filled her mind. There were many ways to inflict blood-letting wounds, some of which Aven didn't realize she'd even known about. As she went to turn around and further examine her environment for any more clues, something stopped her. For a moment, everything was black, and her senses stopped.

There was another sound. It sounded like a cough and a chirp all at once. Then, as though there had been a bolt of electricity sent into Aven's heart, she started awake, a brusque transition into consciousness. Her senses seemed to blur her into reality quickly as she realized someone was speaking to her. She was on her bed. In her hand, she felt the soft texture of her comforter; she could tell without looking. She realized her mother was the one speaking. Her mind was working quickly again, and she could make out the words that she was hearing.

"Aven! Are you going to eat or not?"

"N-No," was all Aven could manage.

Then, everything was quiet. Aven stretched her limbs and stiffly sat upright on her bed. She must have fallen asleep. She couldn't remember exactly what she had been doing. Her laptop was shut down on her desk, and there were no books on her bed. Her TV was off, too. Scratching her head, Alex tried to fathom exactly what she had been doing, nothing came to mind however.

She took a deep breath, placing a hand over her face and closing her eyes. Aven had a bitter taste in her mouth. She must have been asleep longer than she'd thought. Her legs were a bit stiff. She opened her eyes and glanced out her window. The sun was setting. She furrowed her brows and averted her eyes downwards, thinking about her day. She was starting to get frustrated, for she had no clue when she'd fallen asleep. It was as though the day hadn't even happened.

Aven let out a dry laugh and mumbled to herself, "I'm getting old fast; I can't even remember what I had for breakfast anymore."

She then moved to her desk and turned on her laptop. Aven glanced around her room as she waited for her computer to boot up. Her bed was halfway made, and her shoes were messily lined up underneath it. Her desk was covered in books and spirals, and her nightstand was littered with empty envelopes, mostly just pieces of mail from her college asking about tuition. Her scholarship would only pay for so much, and her student loans, well, they too would only pay for so much, seeing as she herself could only pay for so much. She'd have to make up the difference somehow. Aven was already living at home, and she had a job. What more could she do?

Aven was a strange young woman. She thought about that as she looked at her reflection in the computer screen. From her grey eyes to her introverted nature, she was different. She trusted no one, especially with her feelings—what few she had anyway. She liked to present herself as stoic and unfeeling to most. Truthfully, she didn't even believe in the idea of love. Sure, she enjoyed the company of males as much as the next female would, but she was incapable of having any true deep feelings for any of them. With her shy nature, guys weren't exactly clamoring around her, so she was unconcerned.

Some saw Aven as apathetic; she knew this. However, she wouldn't say that it was true. She was a calm person, and she didn't let her emotions get too ahead of her. Stress was the only "feeling" she really knew anymore. She was in her head most of the time, thinking in a faraway place in her mind. She simply didn't need people, or so she liked to tell herself. In a likewise case, she felt as though nobody needed her. Not even her family needed her really. She lived almost as a ghost in the house, completely unnoticed for the most part. Aven spent her time at home in the silent solitude of her room. She was like a hermit in her own home.

Aven's drifting in thought was stopped by a sudden throng of pain from the back of her neck. The pain was centered right at the bottom of her hairline. She winced in pain as she placed a hand at the back of her neck. She must have slept on it really horribly to cause that kind of pain. Heaving a small sigh, Aven glanced back at her computer, which had finally started up. Her eyes flicked to the corner of the screen that displayed the time. It was 7:59 PM. It promptly switched to 8:00 PM. Her eyes then widened.

"8 o'clock," she whispered distantly. Suddenly, she stood up, grabbed her car keys from off the nightstand and said, "I have a meeting at 8 o'clock. I'm late for it."

She put on a sweatshirt and rushed down the stairs. She flew by the kitchen where her mother, step-father, and two younger brothers were eating dinner. As she placed a hand on the knob, she heard her mother call her name. Aven's eyes shifted downwards.

"Where are you going?" her mother asked.

"I just remembered that I have a meeting to go to at 8 o'clock. I'm late for it," she answered, opening the door.

"What meeting?"

Aven froze. She had one foot out the door and the other inside. Her hand was on the door, holding her up. Her grey eyes were like stones, unmoving in the state of paralysis she was in. Everything was quiet; there was no noise. Aven did not have an answer for her mother. However, she had to get to that meeting; she was late.

She finally said, “An important meeting.”

That having been said, Aven left the house, a bit shaken by her blank moment. She slid into her car and pulled away from the place. As she drove down the road, she wasn't quite conscientious of where she was going. She simply rubbed the back of her neck and let her body go through the motions. She was trying to remember what meeting she had. Aven laughed a bit at her own forgetfulness. She simply blamed it on stress. There was a lot going on in her mind lately, so it was easy to lose track of things.

When she finally pulled into a parking lot, Aven had arrived at the Logan Center, a business complex. She turned off her vehicle and stepped out. As she looked up at the sign, she remembered exactly where she was going, D5. She still couldn't, for the life of her, remember why though. It was strange, but she trusted her instincts as she walked into the building and located the room.

She walked in to see a group of people varying in age. Some had drinks in their hands of different sorts. There had been quiet chattering until she entered. The room was some kind of parlor-type room, featuring a few sofas, coffee tables, and other furniture. On the wall on the left-hand side of the room was a whiteboard. There was a list of names on it written in green. At the bottom of the list in red was Aven's name.

“You're late,” a man said, staring at her with a none too friendly gaze.

Aven entered the room and closed the door behind her saying, “I'm sorry about that. I fell asleep and lost track of time. I don't know what happened—”

“—You don't know what happened?” another man inquired, a smirk on his face.

“Well, I mean...” Aven trailed off, biting her lip in uncertainty.

The man put his drink down as he stood up and said, “We all know what happened, all of UCOS knows what happened, *you* know what happened. You should be grateful we even—”

“—Enough, Terence,” said an older man.

He took a few long, smooth and slow strides towards Aven. He cradled a drink in his right hand, holding it inches from his face as he moved gracefully nearer to Aven. Once only an arm's length away, he stopped and looked at her. Aven wasn't quite sure what he expected of her. She kept her arms locked at her sides and stood still. Her eyes shifted from his face to the other faces and then finally back to his.

The aged man took a breath and said, “You came.”

“Yeah, I'm not quite sure why,” she answered.

“Impulse is a strange thing,” he stated. “It's something that drives man to do things he normally wouldn't. Science has only begun to tap into the vast and exciting realm of the human mind, but our most recent achievement, one which we are celebrating now, is the ability to control impulse.”

Aven, without missing a beat, said, “You brought me here?”

“You sound surprised,” the man said before taking a drink from his glass. “Things won't end on your terms. If you thought that, you were highly mistaken, my dear.”

“Did they ever begin?” she asked, slight amusement in her tone. Things were getting weird now. Aven was feeling an odd quivering feeling of tension in her stomach.

Her mind wasn't quite digesting what was happening. She wondered if she were dreaming. That was the only possible explanation she could come up with. It was a bit of a lame attempt at rationalization, but Aven had to reach for something, anything to believe because things just didn't seem real.

The man laughed as he said, "'Did they ever begin?' Aven, the games you play are curious but amusing."

"Uh...games?"

"Is your memory gone?" he asked, sounding tired.

Aven shrugged and said, "I have been a bit forgetful today."

"That's not what I mean," the man snapped, anger now in his voice, "and you know it."

"How would I 'know it' if my memory is gone?"

One of the women in the group shouted, "Master Windsor, why is she even here? Just make her leave. She's made enough trouble as it is!"

"Quiet," he ordered.

Aven reached up and placed a hand at the back of her sore neck as she said, "They sure don't seem to like me much, maybe I should go."

Master Windsor slapped Aven's hand down from her neck as he replied, "You were invited here for a reason."

Another man stated, "Yeah, because Neils said so."

"Don't mind them," said Master Windsor. "They are simply jealous that UCOS has a new favorite toy."

"Toy...?"

"I didn't come here to refill your blank memory, young lady; we don't have time for that," Master Windsor said, agitation filling his voice.

A man from the other side of the room commented sharply, "Arrogant bitch."

"Then what *do* we have time for?" Aven asked.

"Our meeting."

"Which is about...?"

Master Windsor shifted his drink from one hand to the other as he said, "Well, let's just put it this way, Aven dear...we're making the world a better place."

"What, like recycling?" Aven asked as Master Windsor took a drink.

He choked on his drink but managed to swallow it before laughing and saying, "It's rude to make a joke while a man is enjoying his drink; you know that, don't you?"

"I didn't know I was making a joke," she answered softly.

"You could kill someone doing that," said Master Windsor, his eyes locked on Aven.

Three words caused her to lock up, *kill someone*. Aven froze again, like she had before. Those three words echoed in her mind. Something cold ran down her spine, and her left hand twitched. It was a strange, involuntary jerk. As she looked down at her hand, something came to her mind—the color red.

"Kill someone...I...killed someone?" said Aven inquisitively. The words seemed to have just fallen out of her mouth without much forethought. Her fingers began shaking as anxiety racked up in her body. Master Windsor then turned around to a man seated nearby.

"Eustace, time," he suddenly demanded.

“6:07:56,” reported a man from the couch, staring down at his watch. Windsor took a breath and said, “That is including recovery time?”

“Yes sir.”

“Fastest time yet,” he said with a smile. Turning to Aven, he said, “That is why you are UCOS’s favorite toy.”

“This was a test?” Aven inquired.

“Yes, but a data test—not a test of skill; you’ve already proven yourself in that regard.”

“I…” Aven was lost for words as she stared at the room, mostly filled with sneering, unpleasant faces.

Master Windsor said, “You’re free to go—or stay, if you please.”

“I’m going to go,” said she, quickly heading out the door.

Aven left the room and walked down the hall. She folded her arms over her chest as she headed outside. She was completely lost. Her nerves were fried, and all she could do was walk to her car and sit on the curb shaking. She placed her head in her hands and just thought. Her mind bounced around every single thing that had just happened, every word she’d just heard. None of it made sense.

She heard footsteps approaching from behind, but she didn’t look up. She assumed it was someone from the complex walking to his or her car. The footsteps stopped right behind her though, and she began to wonder who it was. Aven kept her head down though, making no effort on her part to see who the person was.

“Aven DeViginti,” said a male voice.

Without even shifting her head in the slightest, Aven said, “What?”

“I’m Devon James with BEL,” he introduced, “and well, I was hoping you’d join me for a short while.”

“Why are all these people talking to me? What do they want with me?” she whispered.