

PROLOGUE

“Please remove all clothing and jewelry.” The voice came from above. “Dispose your items in the chute to your left.”

An illuminated slit opened in the wall next to Gerold. He undressed, folded his clothing—a habit—and dropped them in the slit. Naked, he rotated the piercing in his eyebrow, clockwise and then counter-clockwise, before pulling it out. He did the same for the one in his lip. The two silver piercings rolled down to the tips of his fingers. He held them there for a moment. He scissored the piercings between his fingers, appreciating the sharp, cold edges pressing into his skin. Without them he didn’t feel right. Was there nothing else holding him back? The thought discouraged him. He let them fall away.

A laser scanned his naked body from toe to head. The wall across from him slid open, revealing the Transfer Portal. He entered the cylindrical chamber, placed his feet on the foot markings, and leaned up against the flat padded backing of the pod. A seat rose between his legs until snugly pressing up against his crotch. Straps automatically secured around his chest, holding him firmly back.

“Rest your head,” said the voice.

Sensors attached to his temples. Foam expanded around his head to hold it motionless and filled his ears with silence. An opaque visor blocked his eyes. He closed them—it changed nothing. His naked body shivered and shook. Goosebumps covered his forearms. An electric pulse shot through his temple; his fingers twitched. He was transported to his meeting.

He was in a bright yellow room, wearing jeans and a T-shirt. Across from him, at the far end, a businessman motioned for him to come and sit. The man sat erect behind a large oak desk covered in neat piles of yellow folders. He wore a gray pinstriped suit that matched his precisely parted gray hair—the gray hair a statement of style, not of age. He appeared to be in his early thirties, no more. His symmetrical face had a strong jawline and a narrow nose that mismatched his rounded, dimpled chin.

“Gerold, please come take a seat,” said the businessman, inviting him with an open hand and a corporate smile.

“I prefer standing.”

Gerold walked to the floor-to-ceiling window on the left side of the room and examined the garden filled with flowers of vivid reds and pinks. A tiny bird hovered over a lush vine of mini cone-shaped flowers. The bird rocked with a hypnotic motion, working the vine, its beak darting with precision in and out of the cone flowers.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

What do you know about beauty? thought Gerold.

The businessman leaned forward, searching through the folders on his desk. He opened a folder and leaned back to read the file inside. “Gerold Thomas Jones, fourteen years old. Is this correct?”

Gerold stayed silent; the scan at the entrance would have provided all the information he needed. Why these games? With his tongue, he played with the piercing on his lip. He raised his hand to check the one on his eyebrow. A nice touch to have the piercings back—he hated to admit it.

“According to our documents, you have no legal guardian?”

Gerold kept a blank face and walked toward the businessman.

“Your father entered Replika; your mother has passed—”

Gerold grabbed the folder from the businessman’s hands and pitched it across the room. The pages scattered in the air and dematerialized before they reached the ground. He leaned over the desk.

“Why this bullshit?”

The businessman leaned back in his chair, crossed his hands on his desk, and with a tilt of the head asked, “Which bullshit exactly?”

“The folder, why do you pretend to consult a folder?”

“Familiarity, it offers a point of reference for you. To make everything world-like.”

Gerold walked around the desk and pressed his index finger deep into the unblemished skin of the businessman’s left cheek. He hated how it not only looked so real, but also felt real. “You think a businessman is suitable for this task? An undertaker would be more appropriate, wouldn’t it?”

The businessman gently grabbed Gerold’s finger and removed it from his cheek. “Going into Replika is irreversible. My position is to inform you about this choice. The legal implications, if you will. I’m not here to embalm you, as you suggest. If the businessman persona bothers you, Gerold, I can try something else.”

The businessman's body blurred, and the colors shifted for a few seconds. Sitting behind the desk was now a large woman, wearing a black dress with large red flower prints. She wore large half-circle ivory earrings. Her cheeks were plump, her eyes generous, and her lips a smacking red.

Gerold admitted she was more pleasing than the plastic businessman, but he remained unsatisfied. "Stop being misleading and show me who you really are."

"A sequence of organized quantum jumps is not an interface that can easily interact with humans," the lady said in a deep, soothing voice.

"Stop trying to be human, that's all."

The body blurred again and morphed into a metallic body with a steel box for a head and tiny red blinking lights for eyes.

"Is this better?" asked an electronic voice.

"It will do."

"You have agreed on entering Replika. Is this right?"

Gerold agreed with a nod. He sat in the chair across the desk from the robot.

"Legally, I must inform you of the following parameters of your decision. Once your existence in Replika begins, you will not have any recollection of this life or of this world. Replika will become your only existence, and some memories will be fabricated to support the coherence of this new existence. Second, your body will be stored in a secure, sterile environment, and will be fed with a continuous feed. This is to preserve your mind, which is the lifeblood of your existence in Replika. Anything you experience will be real according to physical laws that apply in this universe. At death in Replika, your physical body in this reality will be disposed of by incineration. Do you agree with these irreversible terms?"

"Why must you erase everything?" said Gerold.

"Otherwise, you would be aware that Replika is only a simulated world."

"But that's what it is."

"Not once you are in it. Replika will be your reality. The Founding Forty understood that Replika would be unfulfilling if people knew it was a simulation."

"Will I still be me?"

"Your existence in Replika is a complex construction that is built according to your genetics as well as the current thought processes of your mind. Your memories will be erased, but the neural

pathways that have been formed in your mind will continue to exist as they do today. You will remain you, without the memories.”

Gerold shook his head, not wanting to understand how easily his reality could be manipulated. How much more real was this life if it could be erased in a mere instant?

“Will I be the same age as here?”

“A mental age will be determined from the current structure of your brain and the health of your body.”

“Will my name be Gerold?”

“I don’t know the parameters of your future existence.”

“Gerold sucks.” He twisted the piercing in his eyebrow. “I would like a new name.”

The robot stayed silent. The red eyes blinked with a slow and regular frequency. Gerold understood that he had not technically asked a question.

“I want a cool name.” Gerold paused to think of the possibilities. “Can I be named Catch? Catch is a pretty cool name, don’t you think?”

“I’m not qualified to determine if Catch is a cool name.”

“Right. Can I request to be called Catch?”

“The request has been added to your file.”

Gerold hid his face between his hands, overwhelmed with the whole ordeal. His shoulders quivered. How was leaving one’s existence behind, no matter how shitty it had been, any different from dying?

A hand rested on his shoulder radiating a gentle warmth. He looked up. Before him was the woman in the flower-print dress with her soothing smile. She opened her arms wide. He leaned forward to accept her embrace.

“Will Replika be better than this shit hole?”

“Better.” She cradled his head gently. “Not perfect, but better.”