

Day Job

The sky over Altofair was the dull pink of a medicinal tablet. From his dunerider atop the distant cliffs, Jeromin sniffed as he looked down upon the city and silently reloaded his rifle. Three Malekovians had been sighted in the highlands nearby, and while most locals couldn't handle the thought of their claws, much less the sight of them, Jeromin relished an opportunity to get out from under the Empyre's grunt-work thumb and get back to what he did best: laid-back mercenary work. But the sun was setting soon, and his work would get a whole lot harder along with it.

The moon twinkled from on high. Jeromin cricked his neck and...

Tyler growled and clicked his drying pen. Moons didn't twinkle, stars did. And only in about a million other stories everyone had read before. And what was that "medicinal tablet" opener? What, like a Tums? As if something like that ever existed in the kingdom of Millennius.

But what bothered him most was this wasn't who Jeromin was supposed to be. When Tyler first envisioned the character three years ago, staring at twilight from the backseat window as his parents drove him and his older brother to dinner at Applebee's, Jeromin was a scholar. A lean, bespectacled young man like himself, who reluctantly embarked on a quest with a band of former soldiers to collect the four Daemon's Totems and undo the curse that'd turned the royal family to ice. But now, with that riding crop of continuity and character development herding him through the plot, he had slowly become another cool guy with a gun. It was just easier for everyone.

Tyler's phone vibrated on the tabletop. *Almost here*, the text notification read.

He scratched out the last few lines in his notebook, vicious gouges of ink that tacitly dammed his stream of consciousness. He swiped his screen open and texted back. *Ok, I'll keep a look out.*

Tyler gulped, but the lump in his throat wasn't going anywhere. Could he really do this again? The first few times, it was terrifying, but now it was just uncomfortable. Necessary, for what he wanted in his life, but uncomfortable. Despite what pop culture would have him think, being a guy didn't make it any easier.

Time to start paying attention. Tyler flipped his phone over and looked around the coffee shop. For better or worse, after ten minutes of waiting, his surroundings were already familiar. Fat, tubular air ducts wove beneath the lofty slanted ceiling. Ten thin, high tables surrounded by narrow chairs dotted the floor, all made of the same faux-worn wood as the walls. Every one was occupied by couples or groups of friends, chatting or flicking their phones. The tang of fresh coffee grounds wafted from the front counter. A blender whirred, drowning out verse two of "Another One Bites the Dust."

The Dutch Leaf, the sign swinging out front read, as did the crumpled napkin near his foot, twitching in the breeze from a steady stream of entries and exits. A comfortable name, evoking both nature and class. It didn't make sense, but hey, whatever it took to stand out among the hundred-something cafés in this city. Ordinarily, Tyler would want to stand out himself, but right now everything depended on just blending in.

The door jingled behind him. He turned to see a short woman in her twenties with a blonde bob-cut stride inside. She had a roundish face from which her liner-sheathed eyes flicked around the café, a clinical yet curious inky brown. She wore a red blouse and black pants, with

low heels to match the latter, and Tyler noticed a hint of an indigo anchor tattoo peeking out onto her half-exposed shoulder. He inhaled generously. He always did when a date's photos did her justice.

Their eyes met. Tyler smiled, and she reciprocated. "Hey!" She slung her purse, a broad and stately maroon number, over the opposite chair and took a seat.

For a fraction of a second, he forgot her name, and panic clenched his heart. Her Tinder profile flashed in his mind. *Kristine*. Cat person. Raised in Albuquerque. Likes pizza and *Supernatural*. Not interested in hook-ups.

"Sorry I'm late," she added.

Assuage her concerns. "That's okay. It happens."

"Bus accident up on Forty-Fifth Street. You hear about this?"

Express worry. "I didn't. Is everyone alright?"

"Last I heard. Couple of cars are totaled, though. Driver was drunk, from the sound of it. Idiot."

Be sympathetic. "That's awful."

Silence sat on the conversation for a while before standing up. "Why'd you pick this place?" she asked. "Out of curiosity."

"Oh..." Tyler looked over her shoulder to the exposed second floor. A short, doughy man in a pinstripe gray suit and a salmon bowtie was taking his seat by the railing. He thought he'd kept steady tabs on everyone coming and going. Tyler must have had his eyes in his notebook or locked with Kristine when he arrived. How many entrances did this place have?

"I like it, I'm just curious."

Tyler shrugged. "Saw a promo for it in the paper last week and thought it looked like a good lunch spot."

"Works for me!" She regarded the growing line to the counter, where two pimply baristas feverishly tended to an array of sleek, steaming brewing machines. "Oh, you know what *I* saw in the news this morning? A big child trafficking ring just got busted in the south side." She fumbled for her phone and flicked up a CNN headline for him. "Can you believe that? In this city?"

Tyler's eyes darted to the second floor again. The doughy man had somehow obtained coffee in a proper china cup. He tapped his saucer like a telegraph, deep-set eyes staring into space then darting, as if tracking an invisible fly.

"Yeah, it's insane."

"I'm sorry," she said, "I just... one of my pet causes, career-wise. One day, we're going to get a bill passed to take those bastards out after strike one."

Tyler scratched his head and stared at the constellations of crumbs on the table. "No... no kidding."

Kristine gestured to the counter. A pair of gold bangles jingled on her slender wrist. "But anyway, shall we order?"

He mimicked her gesture. "After you."

Despite what he just said, Tyler ended up leading them to the queue, outlined by an angular "S" of rope. As soon as the guy ahead of him—skinny, clad in jorts and a plaid polo, and on his phone up until the Visa left his fingers—finished, Tyler stepped up.

"I'll have a medium mocha cappuccino, please. Hold the cream. And a spinach-tomato wrap."

"Black coffee and a croissant," Kristine said.

Tyler considered offering to cover her order, but thought better of it. Splitting the bill was preferred these days, right? Feminism and all that. Or was he just being stingy?

By the time he'd rationalized his decision, they were loitering by the pick-up line. She checked her phone. Tyler whistled, tapped a foot. From here, he could see there were indeed two main entryways at opposite ends of the café. Double doors, *PUSH* to *EXIT*.

"Tyler?"

"Huh?"

"I said, 'are you vegan?'"

"Oh. No, I just watch what I eat. Less meat is healthier. Better for the environment, too."

She nodded. "I used to be one, in college, but I couldn't stick to it. Just like hamburgers too much! But, my little sister is a vegetarian. She's always posting pictures of her cooking on Pinterest. So many stuffed peppers, it's not even funny."

Tyler chuckled. He didn't care about her sister, yet, but he could readily picture Kristine enjoying home cooking. Never a bad sign from either side of the kitchen.

They grabbed their orders and reclaimed their chairs. "So," Tyler said, setting down his cappuccino, "you said in your profile you work at 'Iconoclass.' Is that, like, a...?"

"It's an artistic tutoring start-up." Kristine unveiled her croissant from its pouch with a cautious crinkle. "We offer private courses in skills left out of the mainstream education system, to help nurture the creative intellect the world so desperately needs. Especially these days."

She was an artist! "That sounds... pretty neat. Do you teach painting, or writing, or—"

"Oh, I'm not one of the tutors. I'm in-house legal counsel."

Or not. "So what's that entail?"

"Paperwork, mostly. I'm on call for whenever the board needs advice to make sure they're not breaking the law. Otherwise, online shopping."

It was years into adulthood before Tyler ever had a "real" job. He took a few stints as a janitor in undergrad to chip away at student debt, but otherwise the ins and outs of a "profession" were new to him.

"And you said that you're..."

His throat clenched. "Public relations. For an interstate contractor."

"Not bad. Doesn't sound too nuts."

"Yeah, the hours are manageable. Pay is solid enough. And I get to travel a lot."

Kristine toasted his cappuccino. "Works for me!"

One side of his brain lit up like a firework at her grin. Just as quickly, though, clouds rolled in from the other side. "Eh. It's just a day job until my writing takes off."

Kristine's brow rose. "Oh? What do you write?"

"Science fiction, mostly. Some horror. I'd say fantasy, too, but I could never get into all the elves and wizards stuff. It's too predictable. I want to create something really... *transcendent*. You get what I mean?" He realized he'd been gesticulating wildly and lowered his hands.

"For sure."

"I shoot for a thousand words a day. But... it's tough, you know? You spend years preparing for a profession because people say it'll pay the bills, and then you get so wrapped up in it that, when the evening arrives, the last thing you want is to hunch over in front of a screen. I dunno." He released a laugh that shrunk into a sigh. "Sometimes I feel like this job is just sucking the life out of me."

She frowned. "Ha, geez. Can you quit?"

He snorted. “Wish it was that easy. I’ve got... assignments. Deadlines, reports, all that. I can’t just walk away.”

“Well, what made you first get into writing?”

The options popped up before him like a multiple-choice test:

- A. Because I hedged my bets on a liberal arts degree.
- B. Because I’m more creative than the average person.
- C. It’s the cheapest way to get famous if I play my cards right.
- D. Did you just hear sirens outside?

B, as in *boy*. “Can’t really remember. All I know is I’ve been writing poems and stories since I was six. After all that time, I think I’ve got what it takes. Not saying I’m perfect, but if I don’t believe in myself, who will?”

She propped her chin up on a thumb. “I like that.”

He got that from a motivational meme on Twitter last Tuesday. He didn’t feel a need to cite it; surely other people had said something similar a hundred times before.

“I hear it can get pretty stressful, though,” Kristine added.

If she only knew. “It can, but I do what I can every day to push forward. The trick is to set a goal—say, those thousand words a day—and stick to it.” He’d been better at setting than sticking. “I feel alright about it so far. Got a couple of short stories published. And I’ve almost finished my first novel.”

“Nice! I started writing a book when I was ten, but I never got past the first chapter.” She looked at her hands, slender fingers with nails that gleamed a rusty crimson. “Thought I’d leave writing to the experts, stick to reading.”

“Oh, do you like to read, then?”

“Here and there. E-books, mostly. Audiobooks at the gym. What about you?”

A smile snuck across Tyler’s face. “I enjoy the classics, of course—a little Shakespeare here, a bit of Faulkner there. But I’m also into Neil Gaiman, Stephen King, Dan Brown—the exciting stuff. It’s like a balanced diet.” He took a sip of cappuccino. “So hard to find time for that either, though.”

She flicked at his notebook. Small stubs of gently torn pages poked from the sides like the ridges of a fossilized shell. “Do you write longhand?”

A tinny jingle arose from the second floor. Tyler saw the man in the pinstripe suit stand and look around. His hip twitched, and he whipped out his phone. Tyler could just barely catch the conversation which followed:

“Hello. Yes... no. *No*. We went through this. Get them off the boat, now. I’ll be there in twenty. Don’t call again unless it’s an emergency.” He thrust the phone back into his pocket.

“Uh, I’m sorry,” Tyler said. “One more time?”

“I said, do you write longhand?”

“Either. I mostly type, but I use the journal when I’m out and about. Depends on the story, the mood, the time of...” The man sat back down and checked his watch. “Day.”

A big bearded guy with a prominent messenger bag passed behind Kristine, bumping her shoulder. “M’bad,” he grunted, and trudged onward.

“Dick,” Kristine frowned at the man. Her expression softened when she looked back at Tyler. “Sorry. This place is getting pretty packed.”

“Yeah, rush hour.”

“You think we can go somewhere else?”

Tyler’s muscles tensed. “Theoretically. But, I really did want to try this place. Besides, we still have great seats!”

“Guess so.”

“No one’s bumping us out just yet,” he grinned.

She smiled, but didn’t look happy. Their matching expressions seemed to echo in the silence.

“So, see any good movies lately?” Tyler asked.

“A couple. Been swamped the last few weeks. Friend and I are going to see that new Keanu Reeves flick on Friday, though.”

A male friend? Either way, he didn’t watch many movies anymore. In addition to keeping him busy at a moment’s notice, work had taught him that life wasn’t all Hollywood’s daring escapes and witty camaraderie. Every day, he had to make hard choices with no one to back him up. The individuality should’ve given him confidence. Instead, he felt like a sailor in a brittle yacht, approaching an ever-widening whirlpool.

His lower back was getting sore. He shifted in his seat.

“You *sure* you’re alright here?”

“You know? Not really.” He grimaced. “These chairs aren’t the most comfortable.”

She hiked a thumb over her shoulder. “I think that booth just opened up.”

Now that he noticed it, his view of the second floor was partially obscured by a wooden support beam from here. “Sure, let’s take it.”

The booth was tight but brighter, beneath a window to the parking lot. A clear line of sight in every direction. Good thing she noticed it when she did.

“But yeah, movie-wise—”

“I love this song!” She beamed as “All These Things That I’ve Done” by The Killers warbled into focus above. “Oh, sorry. You were saying?”

He cleared his throat. “Never mind. I... had work on the brain again.”

“That’s adulthood for you.”

“I guess. But it’s more than just the assignments themselves to deal with. There’s a lot of ethical dilemmas. And every morning I head out my front door, I think to myself, ‘what’s this taking away from my *passion*?’”

A small voice hissed that he was boring her. There was only so much worry he could let flow from himself at once without the risk of a flood.

He slurped some more coffee to calm himself. The sweetness balanced out his bitterness, if only for a hot second.

“I don’t think passion is something you can ever take away from someone,” Kristine said. “My mother always said it’s measured by how much you get out of something as much as what you put into it.”

Maybe. These days, it felt like something to just get out of doing. He’d rationalize—a rough day, a headache, a holiday—but canned excuses only had so long a shelf life. “I want to believe that. Because the work I do... I’m not going to be famous for it. I mean, I may not be famous for writing, either. But I gotta try, right?”

“Well, what do you want?” She noticed him blush, then blush at blushing, and she grinned. “Big question, sorry. I mean, what are you shooting for?”

He hoped his smile didn’t show as much as his red face. “I would say that I want... an easy target. Something I can know for sure if I hit or miss. One great book, one amazing

experimental poem, an awesome screenplay. No more in-between. Ambiguity is exhausting. It's not knowing whether every sentence you put down will bring you one step closer to fame or just to nighttime. Like a conversation where every word could either hype you up or bring you down."

"Are you doing that right now?"

He threw up his hands and chuckled. "Can you blame me?"

The man in the pinstripe suit rose again. This time, though, he departed for the stairs. The patter of his footsteps on the oaken stairwell against the café's back wall was like drumsticks on Tyler's gut. Finally, the coffee was taking effect.

"Hey," he said, "I've got to go to the men's room."

"Okay." She drew her phone closer.

"It's in the back, right?" He feigned an uncertain eyebrow.

She nodded, and he strode away. The man in the pinstripe suit's polished black heel turned out of sight past a placard of two gendered stick figures.

Tyler reached the restroom alcove and looked both ways. For better or worse, you didn't have to ask a cashier for a key here. He slipped on the black gloves from his back-left pocket. From his back-right pocket, he withdrew his lockpick.

Tyler knelt before the door. He'd been informed the security cameras had a blind spot here, as did the rest of the café. He hoped his trust remained justified.

He inserted the pick into the lock and jiggled until he heard a click. He looked both ways once more and slowly pushed.

Against the opposite wall, the man was zipping up at a urinal. Tyler reached into his jacket and pulled out his pistol, switching off the safety. Softly closing the door behind him, he leveled his aim at the man's back and pulled the trigger.

A muffled *ping* darted across the chamber, and the man dropped to his knees, clutching the back of his neck. Tyler caught him before he fell in full, but the man resisted, growling, throwing his arms up to grab Tyler's head.

"What the f—"

Tyler whipped an arm around the man's throat and pressed a hand to the base of his skull. The man kicked and flailed as Tyler lowered him to the ground, tightening his grip.

After ten seconds, the man's spasms grew further and further apart, and his pulse followed. When it felt more like he was squeezing something instead of someone, Tyler let go.

The body slid to the floor. With a practiced hand, Tyler plucked the dart from the back of the man's neck and pocketed it. He wiped away the pinprick, leaving only a faint welt, like a mosquito bite. Combined with the sleeper hold, the poison would make it look like he'd died of a heart attack. All the efficiency of a bullet, none of the forensic breadcrumb trail.

Tyler flipped the body over. *Come on, where is it...*

On the suit's left lapel shone a gold pin in the shape of an unrolled scroll, speckled with a bubble of saliva.

There you are. Tyler plucked the pin and held it to the thrumming fluorescent light. He pulled out his phone and snapped a picture. He texted the picture to his contact.

The response arrived in seconds, just below its predecessor, "*Almost here*":

Who is this? You have the wrong number.

Tyler heaved a sigh of relief. That meant \$8,000 in the bank, thoroughly laundered. He was set on groceries and utilities for this month, and could finally get that crack in his bathroom mirror repaired. Which reminded him...

He turned to the long mirror behind him. *Whew*. No stains this time. He was getting better. He tiptoed to the sink and wrenched the water on full-blast. Cold. He shivered as he splashed his face, then stared at himself. He was still tired, even after the caffeine. Last night, he'd fallen asleep at his computer and woken up at half past midnight, with a nagging stomachache and eyes pink from dehydrated contact lenses.

It's just work. He shook his wet head. *Don't let it get to you*.

He regarded the reflection of the corpse behind him, sprawled across the tiles in grotesque repose. *Francesco Day*. An international criminal, the Agency had told him. He owed the wrong people money, but he also stole things far more valuable from the right people. Tyler suspected they liked to dramatize the biographies of some targets. But even if the man slumped under the hand dryer wasn't the ringleader of a human trafficking operation, he'd at least partaken of its product over the years. Lucky for the powers that be with a disdain for either alternative, he had a private fondness for a certain two-level coffee shop within a brief bus ride of their top asset.

Drool dribbled from Day's slack jaw like a... *Like a...* Tyler's breath caught. He whipped his phone back out. *Like sap from a felled tree*, he typed in a note. He nodded. *Good simile*.

...

Kristine was staring out the wide café window, people-watching the bustling intersection, when Tyler returned to the table. "Sorry for the delay. Plumbing was busted." He patted down the pinky of his glove in his pocket. "The women's room looked fine, though."

She laughed. "Excuse me?"

"Ha!" His brow prickled with sweat. "From the hall, I mean."

Shit. What did he just say?

Tyler resumed his seat and flicked away some more crumbs that'd accrued in his absence. Or maybe he just didn't notice them before. "Anybody try to steal my chair?"

"Nope." She didn't smile as much as he expected. Had he come off as too serious, swinging too hard the other way to counteract that horrible flub? No, surely anyone could tell he'd just misspoke. *Relax. It's your heart rate talking*—whatever the cause was.

Enough about writing then. "Hey, do you watch... what kind of sports are you into?" His eyes kept darting back to the alcove. He didn't smell anything from here, yet.

"I like badminton and bowling. My brother and step-dad are all over football, but I'm whatever about it. I dated a guy once who was way too into it; he dumped me when I said I could care less about the NFL playoffs when we hadn't gone out to dinner in months."

"Couldn't," Tyler blurted.

"Hmm?"

"You said could care less, the phrase is... couldn't. Care less." Hot face. He cleared his throat. *Not again*. Were there security cameras outside, too? He still couldn't believe Day came here alone. Either way, it sounded like he had a schedule people expected him to keep.

Relax. The Agency takes care of that.

Kristine looked at her phone. Tyler didn't notice anything besides a colorful column of app notifications.

"Tyler?"

"Hmm?"

"I am *so* sorry, but something just came up. I've got to get back to the office."

“Oh.” Something deep inside his chest deflated. “You... you sure?”

“Yeah. End of the month, coworkers out, got to cover all these projects.” She lifted her purse from her chair back and cricked her neck. “But, this was fun.”

Tyler crumpled his napkin and stuffed it in his pocket to compost. The lockpick scraped his finger, and he told himself that was why he winced. Time to leave the scene anyway.

“Yeah—totally! You want to do something again?”

“Sure, maybe.” Her smile was tight behind thin mahogany lips.

Sure, maybe. He smiled back as they headed outside, to exchange cordial farewell waves and spread in opposite directions across the city, like stray candy wrappers in a gust of wind. And he wondered about her inflection.

When he held the door open for her to the sidewalk.

When he got on the bus back to his apartment.

When he put on *Aliens* on Netflix and made dinner, spaghetti slathered in pesto and a side salad torn from bagged lettuce.

In bed, trying to finally finish reading *I, Robot* but mostly staring past the pages at his gun cabinet.

Sure? Maybe.

Sure. Maybe?

Sure maybe.

Sure. Maybe.

...

Tyler sat at his desktop PC. The wide glow of dual monitors illuminated the slim, dim bedroom, single shade drawn. But his phone seemed to darken it the most.

“Hey, want to go to this outdoor theater next week? They’re playing ‘The Birds.’ 4K restoration!”

Two days later, the text, and web link below it, lingered in his outbox like a fading echo. He couldn’t say he didn’t see this coming. He told himself he was used to it by now, but that was different from *being* used to it.

He was so sure Kristine and him would click, compared to his last three or four online dates. She didn’t have the marijuana habit of Marianna from downtown, or the hunchback that Liz had obscured so well in her photos, and she didn’t straight up stand him up like Caitlin and Aubrey. Especially after what she said about Day. Well, implied.

She seemed happy in her pictures. Hugging a Great Dane in her kitchen. Rocking a pantsuit and sunglasses in front of some steel government building. A close-cropped bathroom selfie, #nofilter. And she *was* happy, but there was a tint of prideful indignation to it. A dimension that words and pictures couldn’t capture. It was... *real*. He didn’t like it like he thought he would, but then maybe he could’ve grown to. Learned to. It could be like a challenge in a game, and the prize would be not her but the satisfaction of knowing he understood her. Now, he’d never have a chance to find out for sure.

He tossed his phone on the bed. It took time, but he was getting rejection down to a ritual. When you feel the rationalizing and the dwelling well up, just shoot it down and choke it out.

Forget her. Time to concentrate, already.

Say it enough and it’ll be true.

He'd given a novel enough attention this morning. In another browser window, he opened "The Grendara Solution." Fifteen pages single-spaced, so far. He'd have to cut at least a third of that for publication in any decent trade journal. Still, of the four short stories he was juggling right now, this one felt like it had the most potential. "24 Hours Later..." hovered over sparse paragraphs that dared him to augment them with something substantial.

Michael gazed across the surface of Planet Argia in awe. The red rocks were veined with rivers of cool green water that poured from fist-sized clouds mere feet above ground. Small, holly-like bushes crawled with insects that resembled olives with spider legs. And far ahead, a city of metallic spires and pyramids shone beneath a dome of light.

"This is incredible!" he expounded. "Why did you even want to come to Earth?"

"We understood how to prosper on our own world well enough," T'mea said behind him, his tall and craggy frame casting a comforting shadow over Michael. "We needed to understand how others prospered as well. And..."

Michael looked back. "And what?"

T'mea only continued to stare, at the dark violet cloud, rimmed with emerald sparks, that pulsed in the sky just past their second moon. "And, just maybe, to help save us from the scourge of the Grendara."

And then what?

And then what. Motivation. Natural plot progression. *Showing versus telling.* The bullet points whipped up in front of his mind like branches across a dark forest path.

Fifteen minutes later, he'd written three more lines. He realized that he'd not only put on ambient album in iTunes earlier but that the album had ended.

As much as he tried to *not* try, to just let ideas flow and slide into the character's mind like a comfy pair of sweats, his thoughts kept tumbling back to that afternoon. To the way the light through The Dutch Leaf's panoramic windows glinted off Kristine's shadowy irises. To the death rattle of Day, a staccato beat to the frantic strings of his Oxfords scrabbling the tiles. And, in a flash, the throb in his shoulder from last month, when he pulled the trigger and sniped a Chinese businessman in mid-backdoor deal atop the midtown Chase Bank branch. It was a miracle that he'd escaped the parking garage without being seen.

Tyler still had the headlines of the city's top papers open across several browser tabs. The news hadn't picked up anything about Day yet. It would come, in some form. Always did. They'd call it natural causes, or a suicide. He felt bad for the janitor who probably found that mess, in any case.

Tyler's inbox jingled in the leftmost tab. He eagerly clicked back to it. "Greenbriar Press – Submission Response," read the subject line.

His heart leapt. *Click.* It seemed to take forever to load...

"Thank you for submitting your poems, 'Love Like Lightning' and 'Spectrum of Life,' to *The Greenbriar Review*. Unfortunately—"

Tyler clicked back out before he could take another breath. There was nothing else to read. He needed to set an automatic junk filter, already. Anything with “unfortunately,” “however,” or “future endeavors” was just a concentrated injection of futility.

He logged out and opened his secondary account. One new email with no subject, from a random yet familiar jumble of numbers.

Click.

“2 New Bluetooth Speakers 4 Sale! \$60 OBO. Left one slightly dented. If interested meet at Eaton St. & West Keller, 4pm.”

Tyler pursed his lips. If he was up to date on the code, that meant a pair of rising drug lords would be brokering a territory division tomorrow at the intersection in question. There was \$6,000 in it for him if he could “take care of” the one gunning for the west side.

“Ok,” he replied. *Send.*

The click reverberated in his brain. “It’s a living, not a life,” he whispered.

He went to his cabinet and confirmed his primary pistol still had enough bullets. His silencer rested next to it. He made a mental note to put in a request for a laser sight.

Shoulders hunched, he gazed back at the corkboard over his computer, a collage of motivational memes:

“Time doesn’t exist. Clocks exist.”

“What’s the best thing you could be working on, and why aren’t you?”

“Butterflies in your stomach? DIGEST THEM.”

Rent would be due soon, all \$1,500 of it. He didn’t know if Kristine ever believed in him or his story, but he hoped his parents did both. If nothing else, public relations was just easier to explain.

An ideal hitman, the Agency always told him. Not perfect, not one of the best. But, ideal. Muscular, tall, limber—but not enough to draw attention in close quarters. Young—unassuming, and with room to learn. Introverted—inclined to keep a distance, avoid being seen or heard. Whether he liked it or not.

Tyler wondered where his life would’ve gone after college if he hadn’t answered that LinkedIn promo from a group seeking men skilled in “professional headshots.” Waiting tables or serving back at The Dutch Leaf, probably. Maybe it was for the best; his family inspired him when they could, but everybody knew they could never afford graduate school. Still, who knew having some confidence in his photography skills would get him here?

In the placid glow of his twin monitors and halogen lamp, though, it all seemed perfectly alright for now. Not ideal, but *enough*.

Tyler sat back down and typed, breaking the dam and paddling down a stream of consciousness toward no clear destination, only a rushing cascade of hopeful images. A great blue-red planet swirling with metallic clouds. Tiny monsters like green golf balls with wraparound mouths and cycloptic eyes, scuttling across heavy boughs. A hijacked station wagon speeding across a bridge as the concrete explodes behind its indeterminate occupants. Anything to keep reality at bay — to hold up his hands to the trinity of expectations that orbited his every waking moment and say “just give me a second.”

Because the next words, the next successful submission, the perfect date, were right around the corner—they had to be. He just needed to work another day for the chance to see it all through.