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The Illusionists

Written by

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CHAPTER 1

WORLD

RUE

In her dream, Rue runs.

The dream is a game in a castle, but more than a game; and if Rue loses, she will die. The humming dread that drenches the walls of this place makes her neck clench and she can taste it, like blood on her tongue.

This place is death and the game is that they have to survive it.

The floor is made of cracked, uneven stone slabs, which makes her footfall echo so loudly, each separate noise a cacophony that she is sure will bring every horror this place has to offer right to her, pouncing on her like a ragdoll and tearing her to strips that they can gobble down.

She comes to an enormous king of a door that stretches up into the rafters. When she touches the handle, it opens

easily, despite its size. The room beyond is smaller than she expected, its floor made up of uneven slabs that slope steadily down towards a hole in the centre of the room. Like a wound it gapes, coloured in blackness. The floor slabs disappear into it as if they are being sucked inside.

There is only the smallest ledge of slabs up against the walls that don't slope downwards. She has a feeling that if she steps on any one of the sloping slabs, she will slide helplessly towards the crevasse and disappear into it forever.

Rue knows what lives in the crevasse. She can feel it in her bones.

She steps into the room. Her feet slide and slip. She shuffles along. The sense of danger grows so fast she can imagine very strongly that whatever lives in the crevasse is skittering, climbing up the sides of its hole, coming closer to the source of that smell – the smell of her and of human meat. She is halfway across the room. If she doesn't hurry, she will die. Someone enters the room behind her. Rue screams a warning over her shoulder.

Don't come in! Don't come in! Find another way around!

She knows the newcomer has put a foot on the first slab.

She can see it shifting its bulk from side to side as it heaves itself up the sides of the crevasse. The smell of meat is stronger now. Double the strength.

She makes it to the other side and wrenches open the door there. The newcomer is halfway across. Something slithers out from the blackness of the hole in the middle of the ground. Broken pieces of slab tremble and shift. It moves horribly fast, scrabbling upwards in a massive rush.

Don't come in! Rue screams.

The newcomer looks up, her mouth hanging open in terror. She has long, thin, dark hair, which shivers wildly around her shoulders as she looks rapidly between Rue and the hole, again and again.

I told you, Rue says, her voice clipped and gasping. *I TOLD YOU NOT TO CO—*

Rue woke, fighting.

It was too hard to breathe. The screaming had taken away her air.

It took a while to realise that wherever that place had been, she wasn't there any more; she was here, where things were real, and normal, and safe. The overwhelming sense of relief she felt brought tears to her eyes.

Underneath it there was the other emotion that she confessed to no one; the one that made her want to go back into the dream, nightmarish though it had been. A slick, slimy kind of fascination with the place she had visited. A desire to know more about it.

It was the second time recently that she had dreamed of that strange castle, each dream in a different room, but always with that sense of sick-hearted fear to it. The whole place was wrong, so why did she want to go back there? Was it a real place? A dream caused by her Talent? Or was it something she had made up? She wasn't skilled enough to tell.

That girl. She was new this time. Rue didn't know who she was or if she was real – a face that she had seen somewhere before, pulled from the back drawers of her mind and slotted into the dream. Just some girl.

Since she was little Rue could remember having dreams of real places she could not possibly know of but visited nightly, through no will of her own. Talent made you travel in your dreams, spy on people and places with your mind – and without them ever knowing you were there.

And if you were freakishly Talented, it also meant you could physically Jump your entire body, stripping away everything between you and somewhere else six feet or even a thousand miles away; treating distance and physics as a second's inconvenience.

Rue couldn't Jump yet, or at least not without help. She couldn't even control where she visited in her dreams; it happened randomly and without her input. She felt helpless, but there was no denying the thrill that rippled through her as she went to bed each night. Where would her mind take her? Would she learn a great, secret truth?

She stretched, feeling her back press satisfyingly into the bed, and turned on her side to switch off the bed comforter, which she managed on the third attempt. Wren had shown her how to do it but she still kept getting it wrong. Although the bed comforter mimicked the warmth and weight of sheets, it wasn't real in the same sense.

Rue lay, thinking.

The small room around her was a dull, metallic grey. The walls were grey. The floor was a soft, fuzzy grey. The bed she lay on was grey. The ceiling was actually white – Wren had told her why it was a different colour, but she couldn't quite remember the reason. Something about how Life worked when you looked upwards. There was a lot from the last few days that

she couldn't quite remember. Strangeness upon excitement had taken its toll.

Rue had come to realise that many of her reactions to things were considered, by general people, to be odd. It had taken a while as a child, but eventually she had understood why people pulled faces when she said or did certain things. So finding out that she had a mysterious, rare ability like the Talent had failed to surprise her one bit. Of course she did. It explained everything. It explained the fascinating, frightening dreams she had that were rich and thick as velvet and felt so real it was like living another life while she slept. It explained her constant itch, the craving she had to be away from here, wherever here was. To be doing extraordinary things.

So being recruited to train in the Talent at Angle Tar's premiere university seemed obvious to her. Why have such a skill if it was never to be used? She had gone willingly, leaving her old life of routine and learning and banality behind, the dull ticking of hours and days and weeks.

And everything would have been fine if she hadn't met White.

When she thought about White, her former tutor, she felt a burst of pain, and humiliation, and a horrible, embarrassing, overwhelming desire to be near him. To have him think well of her.

Want her.

But he didn't want her. He probably, all things considered, hated her. He thought she was a rude, stupid girl. Rue knew he was a liar. She had pushed, and she had broken something past repair, and part of her was glad, because if there was one

thing guaranteed to make her lose her mind in rage, it was being lied to. It had happened too many times in the recent past. It would not happen again.

So she had left Angle Tar, her home, and come with Wren to World. She hadn't seen it as treason at first, but now she'd had time to think, she knew that Angle Tar probably would. It was illegal for Angle Tarain citizens to travel outside the country. Probably to keep them ignorant of how amazing it was everywhere else, Rue decided. But the point was that she had crossed a very thick, unyielding line.

Maybe, just maybe, that meant she could never go back.

And maybe you'll never see him again, said a small, treacherous voice in her mind.

Rue's reasons for leaving had seemed so clear at the time. The sense of betrayal at discovering the truth about the world outside Angle Tar, and the awful inequality within it, had left her breathless and impulsive. And now she'd left everything she'd ever known behind. No one knew her here in World. No one cared for her here. But she had to make it work. She could leave no space in her head for dwelling on the past. She was already sick of waking up to that chest ache every morning as the memories of what had happened punished her again. She had to put it all away.

When she had come out of the Jump from Angle Tar with Wren that first night, head spinning, she noticed something odd about the light. Wren held her in his arms until the nausea passed and she could stand up straight. They stood on what was clearly a street, though it was starker and cleaner than any in Angle Tar. The buildings were flat and strangely angular, made

of smooth, colourless surfaces. The street itself was so wide, a grand and airy stretch of space. Nothing like the tiny, penned cobble mazes of Capital City.

And all the while she looked around for a source of light, but there were no street lamps to be seen. When she glanced up into the sky, she couldn't see the moon, despite the fact that there were no discernible clouds. But she could still *see*. It was dark, like it should be at night, but then it wasn't, somehow.

Wren was smiling. 'It's strange,' he said. 'I know it. But you're not seeing World how everyone else sees World. This is just the platform for World.'

'The what?'

'The platform, the basic "real" version. When you jack into Life, you'll see it very differently. You'll see a sky filled with stars, and a moon. Over there, those long stretches of ground with nothing on them? In Life they're covered in trees. The buildings here, look. To you they're just blank, right? Well in Life, that one is covered in a ten-foot-high mural of a rabbit. And that one, there, it has an advert for *Lost in Time* – it's a Life game. It's got a train exploding on it. I mean, the train is actually exploding, right now.'

He threw his hands wide, and Rue looked around, fascinated. There were no trees anywhere. And there was nothing on those buildings. Nothing at all. But she could almost believe there was, if she watched him.

'I'll be honest with you. Out of Life, it's pretty dull,' said Wren. 'They whine about the sociological problems Life causes, but then they offer us the platform as an alternative. So our choice is trees and beauty and colour and amazing, *amazing*

things. Or this grey nothing of the real. Like a dull, blank canvas. It's astonishing that they think that's actually a choice.'

An uneasy frustration crept over her. She couldn't see what he saw. She couldn't understand this place yet. She needed to know how it worked.

'Come, Rue mine,' he said, putting his arm about her shoulders. 'We'll take you home.'

She felt immense relief, and sank into his side as they walked.

'Where am I to stay?' she said.

'With me, of course.'

She stopped in surprise.

'It isn't like Angle Tar, Rue. There's no oddness involved in men and women of age living together without being married. And I live with many people; it won't just be us. You'll see.'

Wren's building looked just like every other building around it – it was a wonder he could pick it out. It was enormous, too; more like the tall houses in Capital City back home, which held twenty or thirty different families inside them.

'It smells funny here,' said Rue, sniffing the outside air.

'No, it doesn't smell of anything. It's a relief after the stench of Capital, right?' said Wren.

She inhaled deeply. That was what had been confusing her. There was no smell.

Wren walked up to what was presumably the main entrance, though the door looked just like any number of the others set into the wall that faced them. He pressed his face close to a flat, black decoration at head height.

'What are you looking at?' said Rue.

There was a series of quick beeps, a little like the noise of

droning bees, thought Rue, cut up into slices. Wren leaned back. The door opened smoothly, disappearing into the wall rather than swinging in or outwards.

'It's like a key,' Wren explained. 'Only you use your eye.'

'You use your *eye* as a key?'

'We'll have to get you registered to the building. Until you are, we won't be able to put your eye pattern on the door key.'

Rue was fascinated. Using your eye to open doors! She tried to swallow her nervousness at this strange culture and its magical way of living, tried instead to concentrate on the incredible things she knew it offered her.

'Where's the box? You said you had one,' she said, as they walked through a corridor coloured a uniform grey. He had promised her another world in that box, and she had not forgotten.

'Patience, Rue,' said Wren. 'We'll get to it. It's in my room.'

His room had turned out to be quite ordinary. The box he had shown her before – or one like it – was there, on a thin side table. She'd stared at it, but it was a plain thing and gave up no secrets.

He had insisted she sleep for a while. Though she protested vigorously, it turned out that once she lay down, sleep overtook her almost at once. She didn't remember if he'd stayed with her or not. She hoped that he had, at least for a little while.

She shifted on the bed. She had her own room now, just down the corridor from Wren's, though she hadn't yet stopped feeling like a visitor. It was warm in here, but she was much like a cat – a room couldn't be too hot. She had watched Wren touch the wall to control the temperature but was too nervous

to try it herself until she learned the skill of it. Wren called it technology, which was, she supposed, their word for magic.

Magic was so commonplace here that it had infiltrated every part of everyone's lives. They had magic devices set into walls that made food. There was no skill or understanding to it – you asked for and you got. It was so normal that it had become boring for them. Would it become boring for her, the longer she stayed here? Wren thought so, but Rue didn't see how that was possible.

There was a lot she didn't understand, and Wren didn't seem able to tell her how things worked. Where, for example, did the food come from? Was the food device like an ordering service? Were there vast kitchens underground beneath every block of houses in the district they lived in, which received your order and then sent it up by pulley? But how could that be, because the food arrived hot if you wanted it to, and how could they possibly know what you were going to order beforehand, and have it ready to go when you ordered it?

She knew these were stupid, childish questions, so she never voiced them; but when she quizzed Wren about the food devices, he spouted a lot of words that didn't translate into Angle Tarain and then became annoyed with her if she pressed.

That was another thing that had become very clear on coming here. She needed to learn the language they spoke in World, as quickly as she could. Then she could talk to some of the other people who lived in the house with them. They wouldn't seem so strange and distant from her if she could only talk to them. Wren had said there was a quick way for her to learn the language but it took time to set up, so she had held tightly

onto her patience and waited, meanwhile spending every day surrounded by people who chatted and talked with him and not her for hours and hours while she sat by his side, bored and trying hard not to show it.

In order to learn World, Rue had to jack in, as Wren kept calling it, to Life – that other world inside the box that teased her with its squat, ordinary presence on his desk. Although he had a box, it was not a common thing to be in possession of one, apparently; everyone else could access Life whenever and wherever they were through an implant – a tiny metallic device that lived inside them. The idea of something hard and cold like that inside her made her shiver, but no one here seemed to give it a second's thought.

She wondered idly if she should get up and try to find Wren. She had no idea what time it was. Would he even be here?

Then she realised she was hungry, and that decided it.

She came out of her room. Much like Red House, her old university living quarters, everyone in this building lived in separate rooms but shared the 'communals' – the kitchen, bathrooms and the social room, where people ate and held parties. But the doors all looked the same, and everything was exact and placed just so; it made her shrink back from imposing herself so much on this place as to dare to move around in it as if she belonged here.

She pressed on a random door, hoping it would open. It did, and beyond it, to her relief, was the social room. Two people looked up as she came in. Neither was Wren, though she recognised them vaguely from the past few days.

Rue stopped, embarrassed. She did her best to smile at them,

though it must have come out crooked. One of them, a girl, jumped up and returned the smile and opened her mouth as if to say something, then closed it as she remembered.

Pressing a hand to her chest, she said, 'Sabine.'

Rue understood that well enough. 'Rue,' she said, pointing to herself.

Sabine smiled. She had gleaming caramel-coloured skin, and her hair was rolled into long, swaying tails, the tips of which grazed her elbows when she walked. She looked magnificent, and completely out of place in this dull, grey room. Rue wondered when she herself might be able to learn how to change her appearance like that.

Sabine's friend was a young man (or old, Rue reminded herself, as augmentation made everyone look young) with carefully placed ridges and bumps running the length of his face and neck, and presumably the rest of his body, in various patterns. He had a starburst of little bulbous ridges on his cheek. He looked her up and down quite openly, and inside she rolled her eyes. Wren had warned her of it – every Worlder would find her simple, unaltered appearance strange, but for some it might even border on offensive. Only Technophobes proudly displayed no augmentation, and they stuck out like a sore thumb.

'Oh, not the Technophobes,' Wren had said, when Rue pressed him about the word. 'They're this protest group who think Life is evil, or something of the sort. I think they're religious. They have their implants removed illegally and go off-grid. They attack people for no reason. All kinds of strange things.'

In the meantime, Rue would have to endure the stares. She returned the young man's gaze directly until he dropped

his eyes. Let him think she was rude – it was only a mirror of himself.

Sabine spoke. 'Lars,' she said, pointing at the man, who managed a sharp cross between a nod and a shrug.

Rue ventured a little further into the room, then looked around.

In the study at Red House where she was taught in Angle Tar, they had a huge array of books on shelves, a wicker chest stuffed with games, a cupboard full of art materials. But this room was as bare as could be, much like everything she had seen so far in World. She looked around at the walls for the black square shape of a food device, but couldn't see one, and stood uncertainly. Even if she found it she wouldn't know how to work it, but she didn't want to ask these two strangers for help. How would she even get them to understand what she wanted?

Sabine was looking at her, as if trying to work out what she was thinking.

Lars said something, speaking unintelligible World with a bored-sounding voice. Sabine answered him, and they talked for a moment. Rue slid awkwardly onto a seat near the door, not quite knowing what to do with herself.

Being around Worlders was strange – more often than not they seemed elsewhere. She knew this was because they spent most of the time hooked into the invisible, tantalising world of Life, a world she wouldn't be able to see until she'd learned how to use the box.

As Talented, it was easy enough for her to understand that Worlders could see a place inside their head where they didn't

physically exist. Rue loved that about World; more than the technology, more than the unfathomable things they did to their bodies, more than the incredible machines they liked so much to create that made their lives an effortless glide.

Sabine kept throwing Rue a glance, as if she was repeatedly considering trying to talk to her. Rue hoped she wouldn't. It was hard enough having to sit and listen without being able to join in, but when mime was resorted to, things became plain strange.

So there they sat.

She wondered if they both had a day off today, and where they worked, and what they did, and whether their parents looked as young as they did with all this augmentation floating around, and whether that bothered them. She was sure it would have bothered her if Fernie, her old hedgewitch mistress, had looked young and pretty. But thinking about Fernie and Angle Tar squashed her heart and gave her pain, so she moved on.

Wren had said he would introduce her to his manager; a woman called Greta Hammond, who sounded like she fulfilled much the same role as Frith had in Angle Tar. Greta was apparently part of a team responsible for the small but steadily growing numbers of Talented who were recruited to World's government programme and put to work using their special gifts. Wren was one of her star acquisitions – a Talented Angle Tarain lured away by the glittering promise of World.

Much like Rue.

She supposed if this Greta Hammond liked the look of her she might be enrolled in a school or training programme here, too, and meet another Talented group she would have to get

used to. At least here she would have Wren, and she wouldn't have to make a start in this place all alone.

Just as she was thinking of Wren, he walked into the room. She grinned and ran to him, throwing her arms around his neck.

'Really,' he said with a laugh. His strange silver eyes rested on hers. 'I wasn't gone very long.'

'Wren, I can't wait to learn the language here.'

'Then I have just the thing you need. Want to try it?'

'Yes! Right now.'

Sabine asked him something, her eyes flicking between them. He answered, and they laughed. Wren moved out of Rue's arms and wandered over to the seats.

'What did she say?' Rue said, following him.

'That Angle Tarain sounds like trying to gargle with water when your mouth is filled with glass balls.'

'Oh.'

'Oh, don't take offence – we like to joke with each other. I told her that to us, World sounds like pigs mating.'

'You're mean!' Rue barked a laugh, covering her mouth in mock outrage.

'I am, indeed,' he agreed.

'Where have you been?' she asked.

Wren shrugged evasively. 'Out. Work. You'll understand when you start yourself.'

'You mean when I start training. I can't work yet, I ain't old enough.'

Wren laughed, and draped an arm over her.

'Shall we?' he said.

* * *

They sat on his bed together, his little black Life box squatting in between them.

'For you,' said Wren, 'Jacking in is obviously a little harder. You have to have a box to do it, whereas normal Worlders can do it anywhere and anytime they like. They implant you at birth here. Obviously, you don't have an implant, so whenever you want to go into Life, you'll need to use the box.'

The box was black and nondescript. As he worked, his fingers flickering lightly over nothing, it seemed to her, the air popped gently above it and began to glow a faint blue colour.

'Wah!' said Rue in delight. 'A spell!'

'Of course not. This is an interface link.'

'Sounds like a spell to me. Intaface linque.'

'Your accent is atrocious.' He shook his head.

Rue rolled her eyes. She watched him push his hand into the blue shimmer. There were shapes dancing within the colour, but they moved too fast for her to make sense of them.

'And so . . . there,' said Wren, musing. 'Now you have to put your head in it.'

'Put my . . .?'

'Head in it.'

Rue looked at the box, and then the haze above it.

'Then what?'

'Too scared?'

'Shut up.'

'Okay, sorry. Then you'll be in Life. It'll take a moment, and you'll feel like you do when you Jump. There's a bit in between where everything is black and empty and hard to understand, but it only lasts a second. I'll be right behind you.'

'We don't go together?'

'I don't need the box.'

He touched the back of his neck, rubbing a little scar on his skin.

'They put an implant in you?' said Rue, curious, and a little repelled. Somehow, knowing that he had something inserted inside him from this culture made him more of a stranger to her.

'What?' he said, smiling. 'Jealous?'

Rue didn't know what to say to that. She wasn't, quite.

'Don't worry,' Wren continued. 'If you do well here, you'll get implanted, too, I'm sure. It's really hard to live without one, actually.'

How encouraging.

'The box is the oldest form of Life interface, and it's pretty clunky because it isn't portable. But the graphics are just as good, so don't worry about that.'

I'd worry about it if I knew what you were on about, she thought.

'We'll try surface Life, first,' said Wren. 'HI-Life we can tackle once you're used to things. Are you ready?'

Rue felt her stomach roll and flip lazily, like a basking seal.

'But I'll be all alone.'

'You'll still be in this room. Except you'll see it in Life.'

He curled his fingers around the back of her neck and she flinched instinctively. She hated it when he pushed her, but she had to trust him. He was her only guide to this place.

The blue light loomed in her vision.

'Does it hurt?'

'No,' came his voice behind her. 'Just strange, buzzy.'

Her forehead broke the light. It swamped around her skin and sizzled in her ears.

Gods, I forgot to ask whether I can open my eyes.

There was no way she'd risk it – she'd have to keep them shut. She screwed them tighter, afraid.

It was nothing much, at first. Almost as if she had drunk too much, her head slow and thick. Then there was a keening, yammering noise, like fighting cats. She tried to bring her hands up to her ears but couldn't feel them any more, as if the rest of her had somehow become detached, and all that remained of her was a floating head.

The noise faded. Everything faded.

The fear came, the one that told her she could be stuck here like this forever, nothing changing and nothing else happening, just herself all alone; a kind of death. It went on too long.

Then she felt something touching her arm, which was good news, because it meant that she at least still had one.

'Rue, open your eyes.'

She did.

Everything really had come alive.

'It's too much, at first,' said Wren. 'Your eyes need time to adjust to what they see. Like sunlight that's too bright. Give it a moment.'

Rue barely heard him. It hurt a little, yes. But it was too incredible; she couldn't close her eyes again in case she lost it.

The previously bare, grey walls of Wren's room were covered in people. Little, perfectly drawn people in beautiful colours, with flowing hair and dresses so vivid they looked alive. It was hardly a surprise to see they could move. As she watched, a

girl near her head on the wall winked at her as she drew water from a well. She was only six inches or so high.

'Grad take me,' she whispered. 'Is she alive?'

'It's only wallpaper,' said Wren, sounding amused. 'From *Old Times*. It's a Life game – we'll play it sometime. Everyone plays it in World, it's very popular.'

Rue looked up further. The people were all moving, two-dimensional creatures going about their business. There was a drunk man who kept falling over, his nose all red. Girls scattering grain for pigs. A boy that in a flash reminded her strongly of Pake – the pleasant but dull farmer's son she had once caught the fancy of back in her old village. He was lying on a wall, looking up at the sky, a smile on his face, until a man next to him walked over and cuffed him about the head. He fell off and rubbed his skull ruefully. Then, as she watched, he moved back to his wall, and the man moved back to his place a little further on. It repeated. The boy lay down, looking dreamily upwards. The man came along and cuffed him, his face twisted in annoyance.

'It's not so different to where I'm from,' said Rue.

'I suppose not.'

'Why do they like it so? They should just visit Angle Tar. T'would be the real thing.'

'Don't be silly. They wouldn't be allowed. And anyway, most people prefer a game to real life.'

'Is it a story?' said Rue.

'Not at all. It's just wallpaper, so it's not as sophisticated as the game. It's a set of pre-programmed clips, repeated. That's all. We'll play later.'

She turned her head, sensing that he wanted to show her more. It was annoying, though. There was so much to see and learn that she felt like she didn't have time to take it in. Wren was always moving forward, onto the next thing. At least she could count on never growing bored.

'How does it work?' she said, looking up. The ceiling had changed, too. It was an endless, textured black, peppered with small dots of light, stars that twinkled and winked. It was just as a night sky in summer would be, a clear one with a still wind.

Wren shook his head. 'I couldn't begin to explain. Some of the mechanics I don't even understand myself. It changes your perceptions of what you see, and hear, and touch. I don't think they've been able to do taste or smell yet. Surface Life overlays everything you see around you with Life. There are trees lining the streets, outside, now, and the buildings will have beautiful paintings on their outside walls. There are gardens that are bare of art outside of Life. A lot of World artists only make art that can be seen in Life, nowadays. The weather in the sky is simulated in Life, and changes with the seasons. Everything in World is more beautiful in Life.'

'But why not make all that real?'

'If it's not real, it can't hurt anyone or cost so much. Do you know how much credit it would cost to run a garden, the people to maintain it, the space? It's so much better for our environment to have the things people want in augmented reality, rather than really existing. So much less damage, so much less cost. And, you'll see, Life is how everyone in World connects. You can meet up with anyone you like in Life, people from three thousand miles away. You can talk to whomever

you want, and you don't have to take a ridiculous journey to get to them. You can buy anything, or learn anything, in Life. If you don't know the answer to something? Jack in, find it in Life. All the knowledge of its citizens, everything it's ever achieved, resides in Life. Isn't that incredible? Everyone with access to the same knowledge – no more elitism, no more barriers because of where you live or what family name you have or how much money you have, like in Angle Tar. Everyone with the same advantages, the same choices.'

It was a fairy tale. It was everything that Angle Tar was not.

'Let's turn to languages,' said Wren, lifting his hands and playing them on an invisible piano.

'What are you doing?'

'Looking through my personal account. You won't see what I see because Life recognises my signature and shows some things only to me. I'll show you how to access your account, though it'll be empty at the moment, of course. Ah!'

With a pleased look, Wren lifted his hand up and withdrew, from thin air, a long, blue rod that glowed pleasantly.

'This is the World language. My manager got it a few hours ago and sent it through to me.'

Rue stared at the rod. It looked alive.

'What do you do with that?'

'It's just a data stick,' said Wren, waving it. Its glow left blue trails in the air. 'It only exists in Life. I want you to take it, and push it into your head.'

Rue laughed nervously.

Wren nodded.

'No,' she said. 'That's . . . stupid.'

'I know it sounds it, but trust me. I can't push it into my head to show you – I'd use it up and we'd have to get you another one, which would be impossible anyway. Just . . . take it. And press it against your head. Then slide it in.'

'You do it,' said Rue, feeling a horrible urge to laugh again and swallowing it. She had a feeling Wren wouldn't appreciate it. His face was quite serious.

'All right. If you trust me.'

'I do, of course I do.'

Wren shifted up closer to her and she gazed at the rod.

'It's humming,' she said. 'Is it meant to do that?'

'All data makes a sound in Life, don't worry.'

'It's warm.'

'That's so it feels pleasant when you have to absorb it.'

The sensation of the rod next to her skin was strange because it didn't correspond to what she was seeing. Against her, it felt like a leaf of paper, but when she looked at it, she could see its thickness, its weight.

'It tickles,' she said.

'It will do a lot more than that. Ready?'

'Yes.'

It slid into her head.

The blue glow that gently suffused the room sharpened to a point, and the point was piercing the side of her skull. It was not painful, exactly. It was more as if her brain had been thrown into a jug of bubbling water. The shock shut her down. She couldn't remember with any certainty afterwards whether she had been able to think throughout the whole thing, to wonder at what was happening. It was a shame, somehow.

She felt a hand touch the side of her face.

'What?' she said. A part of her was momentarily delighted that she still had the ability to speak.

'That's it.'

Rue looked around. Her head was too slow, as if it had trouble catching up with the rest of her.

'Thassit?' she said.

'It'll take a few hours to integrate properly with your brain. And it'll work a lot better after you've had some sleep.'

'Can we talk World now, then?'

'Not yet, my Rue. But very soon. A few hours.'

'I can sleep now.'

Wren grabbed hold of her arm. Without really being aware of it, she had started to fall sideways towards the bed.

'No, no,' he said. 'You shouldn't sleep yet. It might not sit right. You need to stay awake as long as you can.'

'Sleep,' she insisted without any strength. Her head felt enormously heavy and unbalanced. It was the weight of all that knowledge, she thought, and resisted the urge to giggle. She felt Wren squeeze her to his side.

'No,' she heard him say. 'Come on. Let's take a walk.'

CHAPTER 2

WORLD

CHO

Cho slid into Life, easy as thought.

It began, as always, with a feeling like listening to the opening bars of her favourite song.

A tingle.

A long, wavering note of anticipation.

A sudden, gentle rush.

Underneath, there was relief, crashing waves of warm comfort. And guilt that she had succumbed again.

It took its moment. There was always a boot-up time, a black lag from the surface Life that everyone used; the virtual reality that made trees appear and buildings look beautiful, made a fake sun shine in a fake sky. Surface Life took no time at all – the entire population of World was walking around in it, pretty much all the time.

But full immersion into Life stole a black lag from you. Some people hated that moment of darkness and nothing. Cho loved it. Anticipation.

They called it High Immersion Life, or HI-Life. In HI-Life, you could create and explore entire virtual worlds while your body stayed in reality where you left it, unresponsive, as if you were sleeping. You could hide yourself in a fairy land if you wanted to, or a house made entirely out of cheese. There was a place and a party and a game for everything, somewhere, no matter how strange.

But the one thing you couldn't hide was your identity. It was understandable. How would you know anyone's agenda in a virtual reality if they couldn't be tagged and recognised? There were many, many games and social simulations where you could cloak yourself in an avatar, a representation of you that would look as bizarre or as normal as you desired. But your identity remained the same. Anyone could see who you really were and what you looked like out of Life simply by accessing your profile info. There were no disguises.

Unless you were a hacker, of course.

Cho accessed her Life account. It pulled together around her, manifesting as a small, comfortable room. She had spent a long time buying Life products to decorate her room. It was a sanctuary. No one could access it save her. No one could see it save her.

It was, she liked to think, the absolute opposite of her bedroom in the real.

Spindly tables had tiny jewelled boxes scattered on their tops with nothing in them. Marble figurines of extinct elephants

trumpeted at each other across swathes of red-and-gold glittered cloth. Five clocks hung on one wall, of varying sizes. One was completely transparent, so you could see the mechanisms inside it, but there were no cogs, just a series of tiny hammers poised above rounded nodes. On a table sat a group of interconnected glass candle holders, delicate and winding, and an old-fashioned set of scales. In a corner on the floor, eight marble balls clustered together on a little wooden plate, a couple of them as big as a fist. The kind of balls that looked like star systems or planets, with swirls and whirlpools of colour streaking their surfaces. There was a huge Chinese dragon by one wall, a deep mauve colour, carved and intricate and lovely and almost tacky but not in here, surrounded by this oddness, and it came up to the bottom of her ribs when she stood next to it. There was a thick glass jar of sand, and three keys – giant brass things that were heavy when she picked them up and played with them, which she liked to do. A telescope in one corner. To look at what, exactly? Yet she loved it. It didn't matter that neither the room itself, nor anything it contained, was real in a physical sense. It looked real. It felt real. That was the beauty of Life.

Fat icons hung in the air around her head, representations of all the games and social sims she had bought, all the shops she had an account with. They glittered and winked like jewels, enticing. She reached for one and it flew gracefully towards her. Apt because it was a flying game.

Her avatar in this game was a hawk. She had never seen a real one, and she had never met anyone who had. It was hard to imagine the kind of place where it was normal to have hawks roaming, flying about in the sky as if they belonged there. But

she knew there was such a place. It was a place her brother had abandoned her for.

Being a hawk in this game was a beautifully physical thing. When you took on the avatar, you *felt* your body shape change. Your torso tilted forward, stomach rounding. Your face elongated, mouth growing hard and sprouting outward. Wings pushed out from your shoulder blades, inch by giant inch. It was a delicate, complex, joyful piece of programming. Cho had contributed some of the code to it. Some people found it off-putting, feeling their bodies change like that. Others, like Cho, couldn't get enough of it.

You could play the flying game in multi mode, in a sky full of other avatars as people in Life from across the world played with you. You could compete for points, collecting small trinkets from hard-to-reach places. But Cho preferred single-player mode. Alone in a sky so big it felt limitless, dipping and swooping, and feeling the wind, and doing nothing but being absolutely free.

She loaded up her avatar, waiting as the code adjusted to her account details. Then she felt herself slowly tipping forward, feet spreading, legs tucking under her. Delicate itching across her back as if tiny mice ran over her skin, their claws skimming her nerve-endings. Sprouting wings and feathers.

When the avatar had loaded, she entered the game space. Her nest was tucked into a hole halfway up a cliff. She had done it deliberately so that the only way she could leave her starting point was by throwing herself into the sky.

She felt the wind ruffle her feathers as she peeked a clawed foot over the edge.

Nothing below.

Her heart was pounding. It didn't matter how many times she'd done it before; it felt as real as ever. That was the brilliance of Life.

She turned slightly, sticking her shoulder out, and rolled downwards into emptiness. She could see a patchwork of vague dark green forest far below. The wind whistled in her ears.

She fell.

Opened her wings, trying to catch an updraft.

For several long, horrible, wonderful seconds, nothing happened.

Then finally, one slammed up past her belly and buffeted her wings, stopping her descent.

She floated into the yawning, empty sky.

FREE! said her mind, ecstatically.

And then she let it shut off, thinking of nothing but wind and blue. And peace, just for a while.

In Life, you could become something else completely. You could live a second, third, fourth, seventh existence. You could play endless games and roam worlds that didn't exist outside of the implant in your head. It was endlessly amazing, endlessly inventive. The most incredible, celebrated artists in World were Life programmers. It was imagination made tangible, shared with millions upon millions of people, all living, working, gaming in it together.

It was better than the real. It was what the real *should* be.

The ultimate in existence.

And it was slowly killing them all.