

Temporal Disturbance

By Devilizer

“Don’t forget to turn in your assignments by Sunday!”

My reminder elicits a few groans among my students as they file out of the room. These guys never fail to make me feel older than I actually am...

“I’m just saying! I don’t want a repeat of what happened last time!” I put on a jovial tone as a few stragglers roll their eyes and sigh, mouthing a tired ‘we know...!’

Oh, sure. I’m the bad guy now, but they were singing a different tune when I gave them extensions after extensions... It’s not like I don’t know what they’re going through. I was in their shoes not that long ago.

And in some ways, I still am.

Medicine can be many things, but easy is not one of them.

Grinning to myself, I step around my desk, hand brushing through the disorganized mess of papers scattered across it. The classroom has fully emptied out by the time I take a seat. Tears prickle the corners of my eyes, letting out a yawn I’ve been fighting back for a while now.

“Damn, I’m exhausted.” And the day still isn’t over...

As I clean up the chaotic mess I left on the table, the sight of my reflection in the window next to me catches my attention.

“Shit, Kai. You even *look* exhausted.’ I stare at myself for a brief moment, running a finger down the uneven and rough texture of the scars covering the side of my face. They’re a lot less stiff than they used to be, thanks to all those surgeries I’ve been through, but I’m not winning any beauty contest any time soon, that’s for sure.

A knock on the door brings me back to reality and I finish picking up all the loose papers on my desk, squaring them up together against the desk.

“I-I’m here...!” A faint voice I recognize comes from the other side of the door.

“Come in.”

The door clatters open, and a large blue dragon wearing a hoodie hurries inside, closing the door gently behind him.

“S-sorry, Mr. Iha. I wasn’t sure if I should have waited outside.” The young dragon’s tail wraps around his front in an almost protective manner.

“You’re good, we might as well get started now, right?” I motion to the seat in front of me. “Sit down, please.”

He nods, walking timidly towards the chair I’m offering. I glance down at the stack of graded papers in my hands. All of them belong to ‘Zachariah Harris’, the young man now sitting in front of me. That’s not the only thing these have in common, though. Looking back up at the dragon, I catch his eyes wandering around the room as he does his best to avoid any eye contact.

“No need to be so nervous!” I smile at him, trying to seem as reassuring as possible. Truth be told, he’s right to be worried but I’d rather avoid voicing any suspicion I have without evidence to back them up. “I just wanted to catch up with you, see how you’re holding up.”

“O-okay.”

“After all, I don’t see you very often.”

His eyes fall at my remark, and he bites his lower lip. “Sorry.”

I expect him to continue and justify his numerous absences in lab, but instead he stays silent. He doesn’t even look at my scars, something most people can’t help but do. I do my best to hide the rest of them, but there’s nothing I can do about the ones on my face. It usually takes quite a while for people to get used to them and not stare. And yet... this dragon, who hasn’t seen me much, doesn’t seem to care at all.

It would be refreshing, if it weren’t unsettling.

“You’re the one paying to be here, you don’t have to apologize to me,” I put the papers down on the desk. “Especially when you’re doing so well.” Every last one of them proudly bears a red A on them.

Zachariah’s posture shifts, and he seems to relax. “Thank you,” he says with a smile. Not all the reaction I was expecting.

“Those grades are very impressive. You’re well above the average.” That’s an understatement. I have colleagues in the grad school program that aren’t doing as well as he is. “Is medicine something of a passion for you?”

He seems a bit dumbfounded by my question, and he takes a moment to reply. “I guess you could say that? I’ve always wanted to be a doctor. I-I think.”

“Okay?” Talk about non-committal. I clear my throat and continue. “I was looking at your records earlier today, and it seems like you switched majors. You were in Music before, right?”

He nods, staying quiet.

“I’m curious, why did you pick Music if you always wanted to be a doctor?”

The dragon’s eyes narrow in confusion, shifting his gaze away from me. “I really like music too.” I keep silent, urging him to keep talking. “I’m not sure I could... make a living off of it, though. Medicine’s a safer choice.”

That doesn’t sound like a passion to me...

It’s hard getting a read on this guy. He seems completely inoffensive, but...these perfect grades? With this many absences? Something’s fishy.

“Alright, that makes sense.” I reach into my bag to pull out a sheet I hand over to him. “I wanted to go over some of the material we’ve covered so far, make sure you’ve got a good grasp on everything.”

To my surprise, he smiles back at me. “Alright.” This is the type of situation that would be a cheater’s nightmare.

It takes us a little under an hour to go over what I’ve prepared. Zachariah took all my questions in stride, answering with full confidence every single one of them.

“W-well! I think that covers everything!” Everything is another understatement. I even went over material we haven’t covered in lecture yet, just to trip him up. How the hell would he know that too? One thing’s for sure, he’s not cheating.

“Was that all?” He looks up at me with hope in his eyes. It’s hard not to let your guard down around him.

“Yeah, I’m satisfied.” I smile at Zachariah as he stands up, slinging his bag over his shoulder. A moment of recollection flashes across his face, and he pulls out a notebook from deep inside his bag. “I finished the assignment you gave us.”

“The one I gave yesterday? You sure work fast.”

He scratches the side of his face. “I prefer to do my work the first chance I get.”

I grab the worn down notebook he’s handing me, taking a cursory glance at it. “I wish the rest of yours peers had that kind of discipline.” I pause, shifting through the pages rapidly, before looking back at him. “Though, if I’m honest... I wouldn’t mind if you applied that to your presence in class. Even with your knowledge of the material, practice never hurts.”

“O-okay.” The chubby dragon nods once more, a blush on his face.

“Throw your Teacher’s Assistant a bone, won’t ya? With those kinds of grades and your absences, I’m starting to feel like a dusty relic.” My little joke manages to get a chuckle out of him, the first real breach in his stoic facade so far.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Iha. I’ll try and be present more often.” Zachariah stands up from his chair, bowing slightly.

“You seem like a busy guy.” He stops, turning back to look at me at the sound of my voice. “Don’t let your youth pass you by, okay?”

The blue dragon stuffs his hands in his hoodie’s front pockets, his shining violet eyes looking into the distant scenery past the windows of the classroom. “Yeah. I’ll try.” He steps out the room, closing the door behind him.

What an odd one.

I check my schedule on my phone. I still have some time to grade his assignment... and then it’ll be my turn to do some homework.

I wipe the sweat off my brow in satisfaction. “Phew.” Not going to lie, this experiment took a lot out of me. Mitochondria has never been the easiest thing for me to grasp, but I think I’ve been getting a lot better at this. Still... who thought it was a good idea to force grad students teach their own classes too? Sure, teaching people does help memorize the material for myself, but it feels like I’ve barely got any time to spare these days.

Looking at the assortment of beakers, vials and chemicals strewn about, I’m going to have my work cut out cleaning it up. I make a note of my final observations on my notebook.

“Chalk one more down for my thesis...”

About half an hour later, I start preparing to lock up the Chemistry lab for the night. By chance, I glance out the window and notice it’s gotten pretty dark already. My gaze moves over to the clock hanging over the exit door.

“A little after 7 PM, huh?”

I don’t remember it getting this dark by now. Not until daylight savings, at least.

“Hm?” I blink a couple times at the door’s window. I could have sworn I saw someone just now. It’s pretty quiet though. I doubt there’s a lot of people left in the building by now. And I’m the only grad student who had a lab rented out tonight... maybe a janitor? I feel the fur on the back of my neck stand on end as a cold chill runs down my spine.

Okay, take a breath Kai. It’s just the rabbit instinct taking over. You’ve got nothing to worry about. Plus, it’s past curfew. We all know how *seriously* this school takes curfew.

Still... I can’t shake the feeling... like I’m being watched.

“Is someone there?” I open the door and peek down the hall. “Hello?”

Nothing. All the lights are off as well. Only the faint glow of the streetlights stream in through the windows. I know I’m supposed to be alone, but this doesn’t feel right. I hurry back inside the classroom, grabbing my bag and throwing it over my shoulder. Stepping out into the corridor, a freezing chill seeps through my veins, cold enough to feel almost searing. I tighten the scarf around my neck. I never leave home without it, and moments like these only serve to validate that decision further.

I listen as the sound of my footsteps echo throughout the empty building. The narrow corridors of the Chemistry building aren’t exactly comforting during the day, but right now they feel downright threatening. My imagination drifts back to the person I thought I saw by the lab’s door. How long had they been standing there? I’m pretty sure of what I saw, but the more I try to recall, the hazier it gets. It’s like my own mind is trying to avoid the topic entirely. All that news of a serial killer on the loose aren’t helping my nerves either. If this were a horror movie, this would be the perfect moment to —

A loud clang on the other side of the corridor causes me to turn on my heels, arm raised.

“Don’t move!” I shout into the dark. I stand there, my arm pointing at the other end of the hallway, for what feels like minutes. Just my luck. I’m not *actually* alone, am I? I quiet my internal monologue, focusing on what’s in front of me. Despite having been in the dark for a while now, my eyes still haven’t adjusted to the darkness around me. It feels almost physical. Like wading through ink. When did it get this damn dark? I take a few blind steps back, the taps of my steps bouncing across the corridor and dying soon after, as if drowned by the jet-black ink. That’s the least of my problems, though.

The once dark corridor is now bathed in a bright red light. “What the fuck?” Outside the building, the sky burns red, the crimson light flooding in through the windows. The sun, or whatever took its place, has gone dark, as if a gargantuan astral body stood between us and it, bleeding into the sky. The sensor on my belt starts emitting a series of beeps and static screeches.

“No fucking way.”

The voice that comes out of my mouth doesn’t sound like my own. My thoughts are jumbled as malevolent whispers dig inside my skull, scratching at my brain. I turn my head away from the apocalyptic sight, only to be met by figure at the other end of the corridor. Two piercing red eyes stare me down through the darkness, the same color as the red blaze pouring into the corridor. Somehow, the dark figure manages to be darker than the night around it. The voices claw their way into my brain, squeezing it like a sponge. It takes me all of the strength I have to keep standing. My sensor goes haywire as the figure slowly approaches, its dark shape impossible to focus on, like seen through a dirty lens. A red cloak is all I can make out among the bleeding shadows surrounding the thing.

“S-stay back!” I shout at it as it glides toward me. He talks his way into my mind, words I can’t make out or comprehend, but the command He’s giving me is clear. There’s never been anything clearer in my life than what the voice wants right now.

Death.

I take a deep, staggered breath, trying to wrestle control back of my own thoughts.

Just like Juno taught me.

Pulling up the sleeve my left arm, I raise it up once more, aiming my index and ring fingers like the makeshift barrel of a gun at the figure. I close my eyes, emptying my mind of the sordid whispers. Don’t fail me now.

“Focus...” The scar tissue on my face tingles.

Like arcs of electricity, the tingling bounces from the scars on my neck down to my arm. It follows them all the way to my fingertips. When I open my eyes, I'm almost blinded by the radiance of the light building up in front of my fingers. My scars are heating up now, coursing with energy. A sensation I've run from so many times... that I'm now using as my own.

It's almost too much to bear, but I hold on just long enough...

I fire the light into the encroaching darkness. The energy explodes out like a chambered round, piercing through the air towards the shrouded figure. It collides with it, digging a hole through the veil of shadows as it whizzes through it and lodges itself into a glass panel behind the figure, shattering it completely.



Standing still for a moment, out of breath, I wait to see what happens next. To my relief, the darkness dissipates, leaving behind no traces or remnants. Looking out the windows, everything seems to have gone back to normal. The sky glows orange as the sun sets on what should have been another uneventful day.

“Shit.” A droning buzz draws my attention to my belt.

The sensor has quieted down by now, meaning it's my phone that's ringing. Pulling my sleeve back down, I pick up my phone. Encrypted call.

It's her.

I answer.

"Apollonius, my readings indicate another temporal disturbance occurred."

"I know."

There's a second of silence. "Are you okay?"

I sigh. I'm still shaken up, but unharmed. "I had to use force, but I'm okay. It was just like —"

"Just like the last one?" She finishes the sentence I started.

"Just like the last one." I repeat. I hear her scribbling something down.

"Have you located the source?"

"No."

"We have to find it before they do."

I sigh. "I'm working on it." Reaching around inside my bag, I pull out Zachariah's notebook. Yet another perfect grade. "I might have a potential lead, though."

"Good. I'll let you work on that. Talk to you soon." And with that, the line goes dead.

I stuff my phone back in my pocket, and the notebook in my bag. I rummage around to find my Public Safety cap. I still have my job to do...

Shaking off the adrenaline of what just happened, I make my way out of the chemistry building. Cripes, I was already tired, but after using this... I can't wait to sleep. And I still have my Public Safety shift.

There's really no rest for the wicked.

Stepping out into the warmth of the sun, it's almost like nothing happened. The sudden darkness, the red sky, that *thing*. It happened, I saw it with my own eyes, and Juno felt it too. And yet... the campus shines a bright orange as the sun sets on the ocean. Another perfect Californian day coming to a perfect end for the people blessed with ignorance. Like worms living inside an apple rotten to its core. The worms don't know, or don't care, that the apple is rotting away. They just exist. And sometimes I wonder if it's preferable to... this. The students don't know the truth, and I feel like I'm lying to them by pretending everything's okay. I'd rather be anywhere but here, fighting a proxy war and jumping at shadows. I know Juno trusts me, but...

I'm the only one of us here.



I'm almost at the Public Safety department when I notice a commotion. A group of carts drive by the building, sirens on. Did something happen? I jog towards the last cart leaving the department, recognizing the person at the wheel.

“Carlos!”

The tiger stops his cart, turning to face me. “Kai. Have you heard?”

I shake my head. Maybe the incident wasn’t as localized as I thought? “What happened?”

He looks away, trying to find his words. “There has been a death.”

My hearts jumps in my chest. “On campus? What the hell happened?”

“I am not sure, but,” he pauses, a somber look in his eyes. “They say it was a suicide.”

“Fuck...” Jesus, a suicide? After what happened? That’s too freaky to be a coincidence. I hop on the cart, taking the seat next to Carlos. “I’m coming too. Where are we going?”

“Weishaupt Hall.”

“Don’t tell me...”

The tiger nods, staring at the road. “Yes. They jumped.”

“Shit...”

Carlos drives us to the site of the incident, a few minutes away from here. I can’t help but ask a question I know the answer to.

“Did you notice anything weird?”

“What do you mean?”

I shake my head. “Never mind.” If he’d seen it, he’d know what I mean. “We just can’t rule out any other possibilities, that’s all.”

The tiger grunts in response. I know that’s Carlos for ‘I agree.’

It doesn’t take us long to find the site. Multiple Public Safety teams are already on location. Some are setting up barriers around the perimeter. A few of them are grouped around where I assume the body is. Others... are trying to cope with what they saw.

They’re just kids, after all.

I hop out of the cart as Carlos parks it next to the others. Jogging up to the group around the body, I hold my breath. The tiger is right behind me, having decided to be as helpful as he can. The group parts as they see us approach, faint murmurs spreading through them. We might have a protocol in place for this kind of thing, but I can’t blame them for being in shock.

“Excuse me.” I step up to them, and take my first look at the body.

A young male crow is splayed out on the ground, dark stains soaking through his clothes, saturating the cement below him. His limbs are twisted in all the wrong ways, bending in places they never should. He stares into the sky with glassy eyes, thin streaks of blood running down his cheeks. This isn't the first body I've seen, and it won't be the last, but even then... Holding back a tidal wave of emotions, I crouch down.

I hear Carlos huff behind me. “Madre de Dios...” One of the Public Safety officers runs to a tree to hurl.

I notice something strange around the abdomen of the body in front of me. His shirt is torn up in multiple places, coinciding with where the bloodstains seem to be the most present.

“I don't think this was a suicide.”

“What do you mean?” The tiger kneels down beside me and I can see how pale he's become.

“He looks like he's been stabbed. A lot.” I point at where I think the wounds are, making sure not to touch anything.

Whatever color left in Carlos's face seems to drain out completely as he realizes what I'm implying. “I... I see.”

He does his best to keep his composure, but I can see this is too much for him. “You should go help the guys setting up the barriers.”

He nods, staring at the body, then gets up. “Okay.”

I watch him stumble out of the crime scene and I turn back to face the body of the poor crow.

Except the body in front of me isn't a crow anymore.

It's a cat, his green shirt torn up just like the crow's, stained black with blood. And he's staring at me, his expression a mix of terror and confusion. I recoil in fear, tumbling back. My heart races in my chest as a colleague helps me up. When I'm back on my feet, the crow is back again. For a moment, I felt the same way I did in the chemistry building.

The same dread. The same whispers.

I think I found it.

This is a temporal disturbance.