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AMARANTHINE

Trexiea Hernandez
Winner of Writers' Bloc Competition

“YOU FEELING OKAY TODAY?”

THE FAMILIAR QUESTION HUNG IN THE AIR AND I IGNORED THE AWKWARDNESS THAT CAME WITH A QUESTION NOT REPLIED TO IMMEDIATELY.

“I’M ALRIGHT,” SHE TOLD ME.

She said it with a slight shake in her voice and with a slowness that made me believe that she always chose her words before she spoke. Sometimes it was annoying, how slowly she spoke, but there was a solid assurance that she meant every syllable she managed to breathe; even if what she said made no sense.

For instance, one time, she rambled on and on about her best friend’s funeral. She spoke of how the sky was beautiful and that it was almost insulting because, in her own words, “it was too lovely for such a grievous occasion.” As she continued to describe the funeral and how the open casket was “made with a simple elegance,” I couldn’t help but think to myself...

What was a funeral?

What was a casket?

What was grievous? I had never heard that word before. I thought it was some type of supplement.

Eventually though, I had to look those things up in the Information Index. (You know what they are, don’t you? Oh, you don’t? Well, you can look it up later.)

As I tended to her IVs and various medical instruments, I listened. In our world, full of distractions and whatnot, I did the impossible. I shut up at let someone else talk. Sometimes it was hard to do so but her stories, oh her stories! Those things were worth shutting up for. I would go home and I would think of her Story of The Day; even after I had gone to bed. I would dream about those things.

After years worth of listening, I was comfortable enough to ask questions. A person can only simply listen for so long, you know, before the questions take over.

"I never got to say goodbye to my best friend," she said one day—out of the blue, "The last time I saw her she was driving off in her car...I said I was going to meet her before she left...I was late..."

My eyebrows furrowed with slight confusion. Car? Yet another thing I noted to look up in the Information Index. (Oh, you don't know what that is either? Ah well, another thing for you to look up.)

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said, "Did that make it harder to go to her...whatdidyoucallit?...Oh. Her funeral?"

"What?! I never went to her funeral! I would have remembered that!"

"But you said—"

"No! I never went. I would have remembered!"

The logical side of me rebelled against that statement and against my cordiality. "Not really. You're 110 years old. Loss of memory is to be expected."

"I'm not 110 years old! Why, I'm... I-I'm 35."

It was odd to hear her say that because she was still speaking with that slow, oldness, drawl that I had come to grow used to.

"Uh...No...that's not reality, Last. You're old. That is fact."

"Don't argue with me. I know what I know. Don't you go trying to convince me anything different."

She said it so firmly and her chocolate eyes were so sure that I did what she said. I argued no further. Besides, she was surely senile at this point. There was no use in arguing against someone so far gone.

"Oh, I wish I hadn't been late," she continued, "I loved her. Oh, I loved her. And my sorrow when I watched her drive out of my life..."

The Last Mortal paused, letting a heavy silence settle around us. For a while, no sound was made except for the sound of the machines keeping her alive. She had her hands clasped together in her lap and her gaze was far, far, away.

"Are you...sad?" I asked.

"Sad? No, no. I'm mourning. It's an action deeper than sad, darker. It's more consuming. It feels like dying but worse."

That made no sense...Dying but worse? I touched the watch on my wrist. I glanced down at it. The watch glowed, telling me that

"WHY WOULD YOU FEEL SORRY FOR ME? YOU'RE THE ONE WHO'S OLD; THE ONE WHOSE BODY IS BREAKING DOWN ON HER. YOU'RE THE ONE WHO'S GOING TO DIE AND TURN INTO DUST. EVERYTHING WILL OUT-EXIST YOU. INCLUDING ME."

my vital signs were normal and that my cell regenerator was working properly. How... How could anything be worse than dying?

She must have seen the questions swimming just beneath my irises because then she said, “You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

“No,” I shook my head and released a chuckle. This was preposterous. Talks of something worse than death and feelings darker than sadness. Senile, I told myself, she is senile. “Not a clue.”

“Then I feel sorry for you.”

The chuckle died in my throat and I gave her another confused gaze.

“Why would you feel sorry for me? You’re the one who’s old; the one whose body is breaking down on her. You’re the one who’s going to die and turn into dust. Everything will out-exist you. Including me.” I hold up my wrist so she can bask in the azure glow of my watch—my indicator that all our advanced technology was seamlessly and tirelessly working to keep me immortal. Suddenly her Sleep Alarm sounded, startling me for the first time. This was part of the routine but tonight it had made my heart jump in my throat. I blame it on the vortex of confusion that was this conversation. It had entranced me and the alarm had broken the spell.

“It’s time to sleep,” she said.

“Yes. It is.”

I prepared her for bed and my hand moved to push down the Serum button and I saw

one of her IVs fill up with the pale, diluted, blue sleeping serum. I watched as the liquid entered her bloodstream. A strict amount of sleep was required to help aid our cell regenerators achieve their purpose of infinite longevity, I recited to myself; my favorite excerpt of the Amaranthine Commandments. My lips said their usual goodnights and I turned to leave. However, before I could leave, the Last Mortal grabbed hold of my wrist.

“Do you know why I feel sorry for you?”

“My apologies, I thought that this conversation was over—”

“Do you know why I feel sorry for you?” she repeated.

I tried squirming out of her grasp but she held fast. Where was this old woman getting her strength?

“I-I don’t know,” I finally answered, “It doesn’t make sense. You’re the one who’s going to die. You’re the only one I’ve ever met who says that they’ve felt like they’re dying but worse. What does that even mean?”

“Exactly,” the Last whispered—as if she was sharing a secret. Her eyes were filled with a queer childlike shine, looking more like she was about to gossip with me rather than share a secret. She pulled me closer and despite a bit of hesitance, I leaned in to listen to her words, “I’m not going to live forever. But that just means I’m the only one who knows what living, but more, feels like,” she breathed into my attentive ears.

And with that, her grip on my wrist slackened and she fell back into her pillow. The drugs must have kicked in.

That night, while she slept soundly in her hospital room, I was kept awake by what she said to me.

Living, but better...How could she know how it feels to “live, but more” if she was dying?

I didn’t understand her.

She’s dead now.

(But of course you knew that, the media covered it for days. ‘END OF AN ERA’, they said. ‘END OF AN ERA’, they exclaimed. ‘END OF AN ERA’, they plastered all over the hologram newspapers and building-wide televisions. End of an Era, indeed...We should have been mourning her death, the death of another human being...But instead we celebrated it. It was the End of an Era and the Ushering in of the Age of Glorious Immortality, they said. The Last Mortal Human was gone...And they didn’t even care to know her name...No one cared. No one except me.)

I understand her now. I’ve understood her for a long time now. It wasn’t until I discontinued my stem cell regeneration, until I decided to not live forever, did I get her. They can say what they like about me, about my decision and how stupid and crazy it was...I don’t regret it. I...loved every moment I lived from that point on. I ceased to merely exist. I loved every sunset, every person who came my way (as best I could, I mean) because I didn’t know if that sunset was my last or if that person was the last person I would ever speak to again. Things mean more when they have the possibility of being your last.

...So, is that it?

Do you have all you want for your interview? I have an appointment to keep, you know.

I must tell Thecla that I know why she felt sorry for me. She’ll be thrilled.

