

In a cold alley stretching between two dilapidated brick buildings lay the body of a small boy.

He could be seen by neither cars nor passers-by from the main road twenty feet away. It was early morning and the sun only shone into the alley briefly at midday. More than likely several pedestrians looked directly at the boy and mistook him for a pile of garbage or old clothes. In this bustling city that was becoming more a major industrial force with each passing day, a body strewn amongst the rubble at the end of a darkened, narrow alley could go unnoticed until it floated out onto the main road with a heavy rain.

This particular body, fortunately, was not without life.

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His eyelids fluttered open slowly, at first revealing only a cloudy world of grey much like the one seen by a newborn in the first few moments following birth. For long minutes the boy's small body was unresponsive. He lay there and blinked, waiting for the strength to move. Eventually he was able to clench his fingers and curl his toes.

His face pressed against something cold.

*Concrete*, he realized. He lifted his head from the ground and small pebbles dropped away from his skin. Lying next to him in a puddle of green water was a small hill of garbage, the contents of which would have made him lose his lunch—if he had any to lose in the first place. The boy rolled away from the stinking mound and pushed himself to his feet. He brushed the muck that was caked to his palms against his dirty blue jeans, then looked at his hands. Strange that they were so small.

*I'm a child*, he thought.

He inspected his body and found no serious injuries. Several small scrapes on his knees and elbows trickled tiny lines of blood into the small crevices of his skin, but he was otherwise unharmed. His clothing was dirty but undamaged except for a small rip at the bottom of his filthy white t-shirt. He brushed loose asphalt from his arms and searched the ground for his purpose.

It was not sitting comfortably on the pile of garbage, nor resting safely in the reeking gutters that ran alongside each brick-walled building on both sides of the alley. As he usually did when all else failed, the boy looked up, and saw it.

The pear-shaped jar—his purpose—rested precariously at the junction of three metal supports which barely kept a fire escape attached to one of the buildings. The bottom half of the ladder had broken off and been cast aside long ago; it now sat rusting in an inch of brown slop farther down the alley.

The boy tried to reach the lowest rung on the fire escape ladder but discovered that he was too short.

*Child*, he reminded himself. He dragged over a nearby garbage can and climbed on top of it. With great effort he was able to grab the lowest rusty metal rung and pull himself up. The coarse metal bit into his soft, unused hands and peeled away several outer layers of skin, drawing blood.

The boy climbed the ladder slowly, keeping his eyes on the jar as he ascended. The metal

contraption to which he clung wobbled and groaned with every movement he made. One of the rungs broke through from rust as he put his weight on it, snapping with a spray of red dust directly in the middle. His foot dropped down and landed squarely on the next rung, which held firm.

The boy climbed on.

Three feet from being able to reach out and grab the jar, another rung broke and his feet slipped off the ladder. He caught himself at the last possible moment, his legs dangling wildly in the air. A soft noise of clay on metal grew louder above him. He looked up at the jar as it started to roll away. The boy watched with dread as it moved slowly at first, then picked up speed as it headed for the edge of one of the supports. It hit a small lip on the frame of the support, spun in place once, and then fell.

Without a millisecond of thought, the boy let go of the ladder and reached out for the jar, falling with the container as it rushed toward the concrete ten feet below.

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When he finally opened his eyes the boy was lying on his back. His vision exploded with bright white light as he lifted his head from the ground. Once the electric streaks faded, he saw that he was still in the same alley. It took him a moment to remember his purpose.

The jar was sitting upright on his chest, completely intact. The small lid was closed tightly, and none of the contents had been lost. He placed a hand on either side of the cool jar and let its shape fill some of his memory. The tiny etchings that traced circuitous routes along its exterior teased at reminding him; of telling him everything he needed to know. Yet he was denied full understanding and had to settle for fragments of partial memories too abstract to make whole.

The boy's vision clouded as he sat up. There was pain.

*How unusual!* he thought.

He put a hand to the back of his head and felt blood. He would need to clean up before starting his journey and knew that sometimes even the best-intentioned of people would turn away from a filthy little boy. He rubbed the blood between his fingers thoughtfully, studying the red slick as it outlined his small fingerprints.

The boy stood up slowly and waited for his dizziness pass. A great wave of nausea rolled through his body, and for a moment his stomach turned upside-down and jumped into his chest. He put his hand out to steady his shaking body against the wall. The boy slowly looked out onto the sunlit main road at the end of the alley.

Cars zipped past as they hurried from one place to another. The boy watched men and women dressed in suits and skirts hurry along, never once glancing in his direction. The motion made him dizzy again, so he dropped his gaze to the littered ground.

The boy tried hard to remember everything that had happened in the past weeks. His memory was an impenetrable fog. Occasionally an image would materialize in his mind and threaten to become understood, only to vanish back into the grey before it could solidify. He hoped that in time he would be able to recall things clearly; so much depended on his being able to remember. There was a distinctive feeling of visiting other places before waking up in the alley; of traveling great distances in search of...something.

Detroit? Buffalo? The memories would not return.

He knew there was someone he was supposed to find; someone that could help him on his

journey. The thought drifted away and disappeared. There was a dark presence nagging heavily at the recesses of his mind; something that rumbled fiercely, begging to be recognized. He felt an absence of light in the air; neither close nor distant, it lingered in his thoughts like a bad dream.

The boy ran one of his hands along the smooth exterior of the jar, and he remembered.

*My adversary.*

His realization brought with it an avalanche of memories that crowded his mind with enough doubt to make him want to cast aside his mission. His enemy was already in the city, searching for the boy and his precious cargo. How much of a head start did he have? How much did he know? Images of a vast shadow cast themselves over the boy's mind. He saw the world enveloped in a black cloud of evil and heard the screams of billions.

He struggled to bring his thoughts into focus. His enemy was cruel and twisted, and would not stop until it had achieved its goal. The boy thought he would need another day, probably two, to carry out his own search.

*Search for what?* he asked himself.

*Not what,* came a reply from within. *Who.*

He needed to find someone.

No time for leisure now; no time for waiting. One more minute wasted could mean the difference between failure and victory. When his head was finally clear and he could stand without the need for support—precious minutes later—the boy tucked the jar under his arm and walked out of the alley.

*Find help,* said the voice from deep within his mind. *Quickly.*

*Who will help me?* he asked himself. *Where do I start?*