

High Score

"Well, well, well, if it isn't our new little celebrity!" You open your eyes. What's that? You sit up with a strange amount of ease. Energy seems to flow through your whole body. Your vision is sharp; you can see a fly on the opposite wall. When did this happen? You look to where a voice came from. A carbon copy of your younger self is staring back at you, eyes wide and mouth in a jackal-like grin. You frown.

"Uh, hey," you say. What is this? Where are you? You had kissed your wife and gone to bed ten minutes ago. Now a young you is grinning at you and calling you a celebrity?

"Welcome to the afterlife, man. How's it goin'?" He strides forward, grabbing your hand and shaking roughly. You blink. Who is this, why does he look like you, why is he here, and why did he call you a celebrity? "Oh, sorry, I forgot not everyone's figured it out by the time they're done. So, you *finally* died- seriously, it's about time, we were beginning to think you were immortal or something- and now you're down in the afterlife. It's like...after you played a big game, you had to go meet with the coach before you could go play with your friends? Remember that?" You nod. "It's a lot like that. Except you don't get the score until you're done with the game."

"Alright." Suspicious is an understatement. But you decide to roll with it. That logic's gotten you this far, hasn't it? Although you aren't exactly sure where *this* is..."So, you're taking me to see the coach and get my scores, I guess."

"Yep! If you're feeling up to it, that is." The guy raises his eyebrows, stepping back to the doorway. "If you wanna change clothes or somethin, your wardrobe's in the closet o'er there." He points to the seamless wall furthest from you, a dull silver door handle near the left corner. "Have fun." The door clicks shut behind the young man. What now? Do you get dressed? Is this more like a job interview or a casual affair? Should you be presentable or casual?

You walk to the doorknob. It's a long one, one of those that you found inspecting an old house once or twice. You pull down, a click indicating that it unlatched from the wall. Where did it pull from? You hesitantly pull towards yourself. It pulls loose from the wall. You exert more strength, the door creaking open...from the opposite corner of the wall. The door to the closet is hinged completely in the left corner. Incredible.

The door swings automatically once you pull it halfway, and it stops when it hits the end of the bed, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way to the perpendicular wall. Your jaw hits the floor. Inside the closet is every piece of clothing you've ever owned. The closet is split into four: new, young, middle, end. The stages of your life? That's only a little depressing. And creepy. Definitely creepy. How do they have all this? Where did they get it?

You grab a pair of jeans and put them on with a red and black flannel. Would you need shoes? Surely not. Still, you slip on a pair of tan sandals. No harm in wearing shoes even if you won't need them. You look at the door, biting your lower lip. You just have to figure out what's happening- and how to beat it- as you play along. Mini-you did say it was a game, right? That can't be too far off.

You push open the door Mini-you exited earlier. He's leaned up against the wall and looks at you with interest when you step out. "So, take me to your leader," you say robotically. Mini-you pops a piece of gum, chewing slowly before he smiles. He jerks his head.

"I wouldn't call it a leader, per say...more like a leaderboard." You frown. The game references again. "You're probably gonna be really high up there. You lived such a long time and did so many things, I can't imagine they're gonna penalize you for being such a nerd," younger guy chuckles. You scoff. You are *not* a nerd.

The younger guy chats about your life conversationally as he leads you down the hall, and you begin to wonder if this is a dream. You pinch yourself. Nothing. Maybe that means it is a dream?

"Nah, you just can't feel pain. We're ghosts of a sort, and that comes with a type of immunity to injury. Don't worry; it took 9 three years to come to grips with it after he came back this last time. He's pretty solid now, though." Your eyebrows crinkle. What is he talking about? But if he'd seen you pinch yourself, he knew you were trying to wake up. You hang back a bit, making sure you know where you are if you have to escape. Your gaze comes to rest on the back of your guide's shirt. A big, red "3" sits in the middle of his shirt. You remember him referring to "9" as though the number was a person. Is everyone a number here? If so...what are you?

Your spiralling thoughts are cut short when he stops in front of a door. A brief grin towards you and he shoves the door open. And not for the first nor, you suspect, the last time, your jaw hits the ground, eyebrows hitting your hairline.

The room is nothing but scoreboards, small ones touching at every edge on the left and right walls, and one giant scoreboard plastered across the whole wall opposite the door. The numbers in the slots across "4" are moving, blinking, and calculating faster than your eyes can see. None of the other numbers change or move.

"This is the leaderboard. Someone created nine of us to play this life game. We don't know why, my guess is until one of us gets a perfect score. You know what they say, practice makes perfect, right? But no one's ever gotten a perfect score. Those of us who figure out that it's a game while we're playing tend to score higher. Of course, that's not always the case. I'm right there, middle of the pack." Young guy points to the number 3. "I just made a mistake, died too young. It's alright though, I just had an off life."

You frown. Is life a game? What are the scores made up of? Young guy mentioned living a long time and doing a lot of things. Is that what makes the scores higher? What do other decisions have to do with the score? When will you know your score?

Despite your doubts, you feel your heart pick up. You've always been competitive. What if you win? *What if you get a perfect score?*

"I'll stop you right there," Young guy- 3? Is that his name?- drones. "No one gets a perfect score, because we all make one mistake before we can help it, when we're young. Do you remember the girl in pre-k that we kiss?"

"Vaguely...So what?" You've never told anyone about that. How does he know? "Yeah. It ruins her character. She has a set development plan, and when we kiss her, it causes the development to go haywire. Some, like yours, seem to function normally until they end up killing themselves or someone else on accident. Some, like mine, turn ax-crazy and try to kill you every chance they get. Some, like 7's, go completely sex-crazy, living the rest of their development as a whore, then a stripper, finally dying from an STI. She's the mistake we all make before we know not to make mistakes, and she's the one we never go back to fix, because we don't remember until it's too late. I think it's part of the game's design. We can't win. We aren't allowed." He shrugs and looks back at the leaderboard. So do you.

"So, why are the numbers- scores?- spinning by the 4?" You ask, glancing sideways at the young guy. If numbers were names, who was 4?

"Oh, those are your scores. They're still calculating, looks like. That's a good thing. It means you scored a lot of points." You raise your eyebrows. So you're 4. Or 4th? Only one way to find out.

"So, 3..."

"Mhm?" So numbers do function like names. And your name- number? Number?- is 4.

"Do you know where I might end up? Like, what my score might be?"

"Nah, no one except the leaderboard knows...And maybe 7." He shrugs. "I wouldn't necessarily put it past 7, but honestly, not even he's that smart." No *one* except the leaderboard?

"Is the leaderboard...alive?" You ask. 3 nods, sending a shiver rolling down your spine. Another living thing is ranking you based on how well you played a game that you didn't know about? Only slightly creepy.

"Ohp, here we go!" 3 says, grabbing your shoulder. Your head snaps back to the leaderboard, where the numbers have finally settled. But you don't get long to look at them before a screech bursts your eardrum. You gasp silently, grabbing frantically for your ears to cover them, protect them. You feel warmth against your palm. You close your eyes.

"Get your hands off your ears, it stopped like a minute and a half ago!" A different kind of scream hits your probably-burst eardrum, and 3 tugs your hands away from your ears. "Quit fooling around and look," he grumbles. You blink. Quit fooling around? That screeching noise probably broke your ears, but he's telling you to quit fooling around?

"I think it burst my eardrums," you gasp. You look at your hands, one of which has blood on it.

"No it didn't," 3 says. "Can't get hurt here, remember? There was an original impression of pain, but really you're not hurt at all." You blink again. Is that true? You put a finger slightly into your ear, feeling for blood. Nothing. "See? Now check it out. I told you you were gonna have some high scores."

High scores? You whip your head to the leaderboard, searching for 4. Where are you? You look up from the bottom, and your number is sitting proudly...second. Your stomach drops.

"Second?"

"Yeah, looks like 7 just did a bit better in childhood. See? He's got 1454, and you have 1444. That's really close," 3 says, looking at you.

"That's a whole ten points," you whine. 3 rolls his eyes, pointing at the other columns.

"Yeah, but you make up 7 points on him in the other categories. So really, you only scored 3 behind him in the long run." He grins. "I'm flattered! That's me!" You feel your face drop in unamusement. He thinks he's funny. "Okay but in all seriousness...That's pretty freakin' good. 7 has had the top spot locked down for a long time. Every time he plays, he gets better and better. Have you ever met 7?"

"The only one I've met so far is you," you deadpan. 3 laughs.

"Right, right, you don't really remember yet. Alright, well, it's whatever. Let's go find him!" 3 grabs your wrist, pulling you out the door and down a hallway before a protest can leave your mouth.

Second. You came in second. Half of you is impressed that you came in second in a game you didn't even know you were playing. But the other half of you is disappointed that you couldn't take the top score. You frown. Next time, with your next life...That top spot is *yours*.

3 comes to a screeching halt in front of a big oak door. You slam into the back of him, landing on your butt on the floor. He doesn't move other than to turn around and raise an eyebrow at you. You flush, embarrassment flooding your face.

"Is this where 7 lives?"

"Yeah, this is 7's room. Check this out." 3 knocks on the door, a deep sound echoing that resonates deep into the fibers of your chest. You try to stand, stumbling slightly and falling against the wall. The knock is still resonating a tad when 3 opens the door, peering inside. He makes a disgruntled noise, pulling back out and looking to you. "He's not here. But I guess I can show you what's going on in here. It's how he wins." Well, that's a surefire way to pique your interest. He walks inside and you quickly follow, eagerness bubbling in your stomach.

"This is his secret. His chessboard." It's dark because 3 has shut the door, but some light comes in through what you assume must be a window. But this is the afterlife, right? What does the window show? You shake your head. You don't care, and it surprises you only briefly before you're again engrossed in 7's master tactic. A chessboard? That's little less than genius. "But here's the kicker. All of the pieces are significant people in the game. If you check it out..." 3 plucks a piece off the board, shoving it close to your face. "They all have names."

"Holy crap," you breathe, leaning in to stare at the rook. It has *Roger Kenneth* in hasty cursive on a name title on the bottom. "The 7th grade math teacher?"

"Yep. 7 traced him down to the reason that you want to become an accountant, securing your wife, then two little boys and a healthy legacy to leave behind. He was also the first one to figure out that leaving a "healthy legacy" counts for major points."

"Wait so...He figured this out from just one run?" you ask, looking from the piece to 3. He shrugs.

"No...7 was just the first to figure out that it's a game. When we enter the game, we don't know. None of us knew before him. He was the first to realize it was a game while playing his first game. So he started mapping out the game and the characteristics of the game, and he ended up with some lists that he just kept compiling. He's been at it for a while."

You nod. Everything is in order, in places. There's dust on some of the pieces, while others are freshly moved. One even has a drop of blood on the bottom of the piece. You pick up the black king. A thin red line from the king's crown to the base of the piece. He's sharp. You turn the piece, looking for the black king's name.

"Oh! 7! There you are, I've been looking for you," 3 stutters suddenly, flailing in an attempt to not drop the fragile piece he holds in his palm. He's looking over your shoulder. You freeze. Two claps echo behind you, and every light in the room switches on, nearly blinding you. You turn away from the lamps to see yourself standing in the doorway, everything about you two the exact same. His- Your?- eyes twinkle as he stares at you. Every second is an hour, drilling into your skull, through your eye sockets, straight to your brain, where you're sure he can see everything

you've ever known and done and loved. Your mouth dries. Should you blink? Can you? The silence breaks when he strides towards you, foot heaviness and weight placement the same as yours. His eyes stay locked on you until he gets right up close to you, eye to eye. If you twitch, your chest will bump his. Can he feel your heart thundering? He's blank, unreadable. He's tense like he's going to do *something*, but you'd be just as surprised by a hug as hands around your neck. Your courage slowly shrivels to dust.

"So, number 4...It's nice to finally meet you." The mirror image grins, revealing white teeth. "I'm 7....The winner." His smile turns ugly, scary. "Let's chat."

You gulp.