

THE SECOND DOOR

Nico sits in his bedroom gazing at the photo of his family. His mother and father, red cheeked, fat, and proud, stand behind their equally rotund children. A smile on his father's face; something he hasn't seen in a long time. He runs a finger down the face of his mother and sister, long gone. Both were given legal early passage through the Second Door, and Nico hopes that by the time school starts, he will have followed.

Nico places the family photo on the floor and begins to get dressed. It just happens to be the three hundredth anniversary of *The Answer*, so he chooses his faded denim jeans and jacket.

The floor boards outside his room creak, and his father enters. His swollen belly protrudes between the unzipped lapels of his cracked, black leather jacket. The dark circles under his eyes larger every day. His fingers play with Mum's wooden necklace, as though they were rosary beads from the old religion.

'Have you asked another girl out yet?'

Nico's breath catches, and he grips his neck. He lowers himself onto the moth-eaten mattress and casts his vision outside, through the pane-less window, over the dense, rain-soaked, dark greens of the forest to his school in a clearing beyond.

'Wendy's gone, son. You're thirteen. You need to find someone else.'

One month ago, Nico decided to tell Wendy how he felt, but before he could, she rammed a broken ruler into her neck, slid from her chair onto the floor, and bled out in front of her friends and teacher.

'I need to get ready for school.'

'Sure, sure.' His dad leans against the door frame. The whole house creaks under his weight. 'Just remember that nothing is more important than maintaining this state.'

'You said you weren't going to rush me.'

'I'm not.'

'It sounds like it.'

His dad sighs. 'I worry about you, that's all.'

Nico fixes his vision on the floor. The musty carpet is threadbare, patchy, and fused with the hardy wood underneath, which is as old as The Answer. He worries more about his father. When Mum passed through the Second Door, she took more than my sister with her.

'George is outside,' his dad says. 'I don't trust that kid. Watch yourself with him, OK?'

'OK, Dad. Everything's going to be fine.' He leaves his room and stops by the weathered old oak door, his hand trembles on the iron latch.

'Son?'

'Yes?'

'Don't do anything stupid.'

Nico steps outside. If his passing looks premeditated, his dad will be placed in *Limbo*. That can't happen. It must look accidental. It must. 'Bye, Dad.' Nico covers the wobble in his voice by clearing his throat and pushes on the door and runs outside.

#

Nico and George walk along the weed-cracked, stone path that leads to the forest. Nico looks over his shoulder at the yellow-bricked bungalow, his home since he passed through the first door, and the home of his family for generations. The towering eucalyptus regnans make it look small and insignificant. Nico sighs and turns to catch George staring at him.

'What?'

They stop. George reaches out and rubs the collar of Nico's denim jacket between his thumb and fingers. 'That's a fine fabric.'

Nico's eyes reluctantly linger on his friend's make-shift burlap poncho and twine belt. He feels uncomfortable, as if he's gloating that he, the son of a landowner, is rich, and George, the son of a labourer, is poor. Life in school would have been so much easier if he'd worn the itchy natural fabrics, like most of the other bony kids, but he preferred the rare, sort-after, old manufactured materials too much. Also, there were many other

reasons the other kids picked on him. Nico subconsciously pinches his belly fat. He was well fed, well clothed, and he slept on a spring mattress in his own room. He didn't have many friends. There weren't many other landowning sons or daughters, and Nico stayed away from the offspring of the Preservers. Nico smiles at George. It took Wendy's departure to bring Nico his first real friend. He and George have been inseparable since.

George's hand slips under his poncho to scratch his chest. 'What I wouldn't do to have your clothes.'

Nico feels the heat beaming from his cheeks. He avoids George's gaunt, grey face. His eyes wander down the path beyond the gate and into the forest. 'We should get moving, right?'

'Was your dad suss?' asks George.

'He's more concerned about getting me a partner.'

'Impatient, is he?'

'He wants to be a Grandad so he can follow Mum. He really misses her.'

'Pfft. Sucks to be you. No wonder you want to pass through before him if he's gonna leave you behind. You going first is the right move because he's had his kids, so if they've all passed through already, he can follow.'

Nico smells the scent of wet foliage in the air. He looks back at his home one more time.

George clicks his fingers in Nico's face. 'Remember what I said to you the first time we spoke?'

Nico thinks for a moment. Then it comes to him. 'The only purpose of this state is to keep this state.'

'Exactly. There's nothing else to it. You can't live without Wendy and you want to help your dad, and I can't stand being poor. Today's the day we change all that. Come on. While we walk, you can guess how we're going to do it.'

'Can't you just tell me?'

'What's the fun in that?'

'Fine.' Nico's sight drifts above the tree tops to the grey blanket above. 'We get hit by a car?'

'Pfft. Only the Preservers own cars. They'll know you did it on purpose. Guess again.'

'Jump off something?'

'Really?!' He trots backwards, facing Nico, his feet squelch in the mud and wet weeds. 'How's it gonna look accidental if we both fell from the same place? Guess again.'

'OK, OK. How about if we, um, choke on food?'

George arrives at the gate at edge of the forest. He leaps over it, and asks Nico to guess again.

'Drown?'

'Illegal, however you do it.'

'Suffocate?'

'How?'

'I err...'

'Exactly, dummy. Guess again.'

Nico arrives at the gate, rotten from rain and neglect, and almost swallowed by bracken and shrub. He swings a leg over the top but loses balance and falls into the wet dirt. George pulls him up and helps brush off his denims.

'Thanks.'

'Don't mention it. One more guess. Come on.'

'Poison ourselves?'

George smiles.

A chill runs through Nico's body. He folds his arms.

'As you know, the Preservers have their list and, accidental or not, if you eat or drink something on that list, you are assumed to have done it on purpose. But,' George thrusts up his index finger, 'there's a loophole.'

'A loophole? I don't like the sound of a loophole.'

'Trust me. When you see what I've got planned, it'll look like a supermassive blackhole.'

'What's that?'

'Did you listen in class, or did you just stare at Wendy the whole time?'

Nico pictures her face: freckled, dimpled cheeks, pink soft lips, those sleepy eyes, that gash in her neck—

He blinks back to the present. He rubs his eyes dry. He needs to focus on the present. He follows George through the forest, along the avenue of a once populated estate. The houses are overgrown with vines and mosses, and tree roots break through roofs, floors, and windows. Ferns pierce the pavements, and the grasses have colonised the road. Nico supposes they'll save these houses one day, if the population ever gets big enough.

'Tell me again,' Nico starts, 'what does it feel like?'

'Death?'

Nico sucks air through his clenched teeth. 'Yeah.'

'Wow, you just stared at her in all the classes, didn't you?'

Nico shrugs.

'Well, the old books say it feels akin to the post-orgasmic chill, the feeling of calm, satisfaction, and relief. But I prefer the passage that likens it to your body being submerged and dissolved in a warm bath. And that bath is the Universe.'

Nico forces a smile. 'I like warm baths.'

'Well, yeah. That's the problem, isn't it? Who doesn't? The Answer has a lot to answer for. It set humanity back a bit, didn't it? Now we're trying to maintain our race and

save it from extinction. Makes you feel for the Preservers, doesn't it? It seems as if they're the only ones rooting for humanity sometimes.'

Nico narrow his eyes. 'Does it? I don't understand.'

'The warm bath is very tempting, and if everyone has one before they procreate, that's the end of the human race. Life is pretty crap for us poor, you know, Nico? It's hard. There are temptations everywhere to call it quits. The Preservers have it tough, is all I'm saying.'

Nico scrutinises his friends face. 'You sound like you're routing for them.'

'You wouldn't be here if not for them.'

'Look what they did to Wendy's family.'

'Let's not get into this. Once you pass through, it won't matter anyhow.'

'What do you think they're making them do?'

'The family? No idea. It won't be good. Wendy broke the Preserver law: she passed through on purpose. Her family must pay. It's the only way to deter suicide. Don't worry though, your dad'll be fine. Our plan is the perfect way to kill ourselves.'

Nico grits his teeth.

George puts his hands on his hips. 'What's with your face?'

'I just don't like the old-fashioned words for what we're doing.'

'Why?'

'They're so... finite. It makes it feel as though we're ending something when we're beginning something. It makes it feel as though we're doing wrong.'

George shakes his head and pushes his friend down the green avenue. 'C'mon, you idiot.'

After a few minutes of walking in silence, a twig snaps in the near distance. They freeze. Nico's mind races with thoughts of eavesdropping Preservers, of men and women bursting out of the trees arresting him, throwing him in Limbo to rot for the rest of his life. He turns to run, but a voice reaches them from the trees.

'George! George! It's Guy. Hang on.'

George bursts out laughing and slaps his thigh. A man, with a decent bit of fat on him and a lined face, steps out from behind a caved-in garage. He wears a buttonless, filthy shirt and a burlap skirt. He embraces George, who says: 'You scared us there.'

'Ooo fancy clothes on this one,' Guy says, raising his eyebrows. 'You must be Nico. George has told me all about you.'

'Who the heck is this?' Nico fires at George.

'It's my cousin.'

'What?!'

George reaches out and slaps Guy on the shoulder. 'OK, he's an honorary cousin, a close friend of the family.'

Nico rakes his hands through his limp, greasy hair. His eyes are wide with fear. This changes everything. If Guy tells anyone about this, and word gets back to the Preservers, perfectly accidental pass or not, his father will be thrown in Limbo.

Guy speaks: 'Nico, relax. I know what you're thinking. Chill. This is what I do. Think of me as a suicide consultant. I've done these many times. I actually came up with the idea for your method.'

'Have you spoken to anyone else?' Nico directs his anger at George, who takes a step back, hands held out in defence.

'I've only spoken to Guy about this. He's been *very* supportive. I told him about my frustrations and your situation, and he came up with a brilliant plan.'

Nico looks to the canopy. The trees shake angrily in the wind. Down on the ground there's not even a breeze.

'Let's get down to it, OK?' says Guy. 'Firstly, do any of you have a terminal disease?'

'No,' says George shaking his head. 'Nico's mum and sister had cancer, but Nico's in the clear.'

'Ah, unlucky for him. He missed out on a suicide permit.'

Nico covers his face with his hands. 'Why are you asking questions now? Let's get on with it.'

'I'm a professional. I need to know you have no other option, and you're 100% about passing through the Second Door, immediately and illegally.'

'No, I've no other option. My mum and sister are gone, and Dad is miserable. My only chance at happiness was with Wendy, and she's gone.'

'Who's Wendy?'

'Nico loved her,' says George. 'but he turned into a stuttering moron when she was around. He never actually spoke two words to her. She slashed her own throat. I told you about her already.'

'Ah, the Waltons.' Guy nods knowingly. 'Mother, father, twin sisters, right?'

The trees groan and creak. Nico clenches his teeth.

'If that's not an incentive to make sure you commit suicide properly, I don't know what is.'

'You know what they're doing in Limbo?' Nico asks Guy.

'Sure. I heard the males sew.'

'Sew?'

'Yeah. They make uniforms for the Preservers and clothes for the community, from a bright white, padded isolation cell. There's no communication with anyone, and it's the same gruel to eat day in day out. Apart from the task at hand, there is no other stimulation.'

'What about the women?'

'Not sure if it's true, but I heard the females, age dependent, are artificially inseminated every twelve months.'

'Artificially? Pah,' says George. 'You sure the Preservers don't get to...you know?'

He pumps his fist.

Guy raises an eyebrow. Then calmly says, 'No, George, I haven't heard that.'

Nico holds his gut and closes his eyes. His stomach churns. He should have had something to eat. This is taking too long. His eyes flick open. 'We don't have time for this. If the school come looking for us and find us talking to you, they'll put us in Limbo for sure.'

'OK, OK,' Guy turns around and walks back from where he came.

A few seconds later, he appears with a metre long, Perspex, rectangular box, crudely painted black. He places it on the ground by the feet of Nico and George. It looks like a plastic coffin for a child.

'Here it is, boys,' Guy says. He kicks the box, and a hissing sound emanates from within. 'Your key to the Second Door.'

#

Nico stares at George and then at Guy.

'It's perfect,' George says.

'A snake?!' Nico steps away from the box.

'Two eastern brown snakes,' Guy says. 'The old books rank them as the second most venomous land snake on the planet.'

'The second?'

'The inland taipan isn't common in this part of Victoria, whereas our friends here are.' He kicks the box, and the snakes hiss again. 'You two walk barefoot through this wasteland every day, so it's only a matter of time before something bit you.'

Nico balls his toes.

There are two holes the size of a grapefruit cut into the top of the box. A piece of cloth sags into the holes. Guy points to the coffin. 'I want you both, at the same time, to slip a foot into the box.'

Nico looks to George for support, but George has a grin from ear to ear. Guy kicks the box a third time and, again, they hear a hiss.

'Will it hurt?' Nico asks.

'The bites? No. These guys have small fangs.'

'How will I err...?' He bends over, hands on knees.

'Boys your age would be hoping for a heart attack, or a brain haemorrhage.'

George claps his hands together like an excited child before linking arms with Nico and helping him towards the box. 'You ready?' he asks.

'I'm not sure.' Nico's voice comes out fast and clipped. 'I was sure before, but now I'm not sure.'

'You don't have to do it,' Guy says. 'It's fine if you don't. You'll pass through the Second Door when you're older anyway. Make the most of this state and create a life. Follow the law and wait until you're a grandparent.'

George drags Nico to one side, away from Guy. His face is inches from Nico's, and Nico can smell his sour breath. 'You're not pulling out on me now, man. Don't make me look like a fool in front of Guy. You've been dead set about this plan for days. There's nothing for you here. Wendy's gone and she's enjoying infinity without you. Think of your miserable Dad.'

'Yeah, but--'

'What? You're scared about your old man being put into Limbo.'

'Of course, but--'

'But what, Nico? What did I tell you about this state between the two doors? Forget the prison; we're all in limbo already. *This* is the waiting room before the main event. What you do here doesn't matter. Who cares if you go to school, if you get a job, or raise a kid of your own? Once you pass through, everything before means nothing.'

Nico waits for George to step out of his personal space before he exhales and wipes his face clean of spittle.

George ushers Nico back to Guy and says: 'Let's do what you want us to do. Let's step through the Second Door together and become part of everything, part of all matter.'

Let's free ourselves from these temporary shells. Let's slip into the warm bath and feel eternity. Let's connect to infinity.'

Nico flashes back to the classroom and to the gash in Wendy's throat spewing blood and to those sleepy eyes closing for good. She's gone. He'll never be with her in this state. He'll never get to do what he dreamt about and what he thought about all day every day as he stared at her in class. Then he imagines his dad's tired grey face rejuvenate as he is told he is permitted to pass through the Second Door. Maybe a nod of appreciation towards his son. He looks George in the eyes.

'Yeah?' says George.

Nico takes a deep breath. 'OK, let's do it.'

'Yeah.' George claps and turns to Guy. 'What now?'

'One more chance, Nico. Are you sure you don't want to pass your genes onto the next generation, to keep this state existing between the two doors and to grow your community?'

'It's been good knowing you,' Nico says to George.

'Same.' They shake hands and face the box.

Guy rubs his hands together. 'I want you to thrust your leg into the box and wave it about. You want to make the snakes as aggressive as possible, so they give you multiple envenomed bites. First though,' he pulls two cable ties from his pocket, 'I need to tie each of you to the box, so you don't pull your leg out after one bite.'

George pulls a face. 'I'm not going to pull my leg out.'

'I don't want to risk it. If you pull your leg out after receiving a single bite that ends up being non-envenomed, people will ask questions.'

Nico nods, and Guy pulls the cable tie tight around Nico's ankle and around a metal hook on the box. Guy steps back and dusts off his hands. George gives him the thumbs up and joins Guy around the other side of the box. They shake hands.

Nico watches for a second before he asks: 'Are you going to tie George up as well?' Nico's leg waves limply above the hole. 'You said we were going to do this at the same time, right?'

George smiles. 'I've changed my mind.'

'What?' Nico kicks his bound leg forward, but the box is heavy, and the tie is tight. 'You said we were going to do this together.'

'Thanks for your good work, George. We can never be too careful with the youth,' says Guy. 'The community is fragile enough without punks like this taking the easy way out. No responsibility. Do they not realise the only purpose of this state is to keep this state?'

'I've told him many times,' says George.

Nico feels the blood drain from his face.

'Well, if we keep our eyes peeled, like you did, George, the population will grow to a size that will sustain itself once again.' He slaps George on the back. 'This should put you in good stead for your Preserver application.'

'What?!' Nico shouts. 'I don't understand. George? What have you said? What the hell have you done?' His fingers unsuccessfully attempt to break the tie. 'There's been a mistake. George, you lied to me.'

George ignores him. He points to the box. 'So, what's in there anyway?'

'A few grass snakes,' answers Guy. He dismisses the topic with a wave of his hand. 'I nearly lost it earlier, George, with the, "Let's feel eternity. Let's connect to infinity," line. I almost burst out laughing.'

Nico looks between the two of them in horror. 'It was a joke. I want to live.' He bolts forward and lands face down in the dirt. He flips onto his back and watches George and Guy converse.

'I can't wait to tell the guys about it,' continues Guy.

'It just came to me,' George says, puffing out his chest and striding towards Nico. 'A moment of inspiration is all.'

'Come on, George, let's take him in.'

Nico feels two arms loop under his pits and lift him to his feet. He can hear it rain, but he feels no raindrops. A bony hand pats down his jacket and knocks the dirt from his jeans. Stunned and shocked, he stares at the one he thought was his only friend.

With his free hand, George rubs Nico's denim collar between his thumb and forefinger again. 'Guy, you meant it, didn't you?

'What? Oh the clothes. Yeah, sure.'

'You hear that, Nico? I get to keep your clothes.'

End