

... Clarke said, *'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.'* Wouldn't it be cool if it was the other way around? Wouldn't that be perfect?...

Francis. C. Knox,
Last physical interview, 2041

H@L6N watch count: 998

CUT SCENE

Hot heart pounding against my ribcage, bare feet slapping against hideous hotel carpet, I might have been questioning my life choices. But now? Now I need to run. Keep running! And try not to look behind at what's chasing me.

Darkness. Darkness with teeth. The kind of pitch-black you don't want to catch up with you because you're not sure what you'll be when it's around you, inside you.

Breath explodes from my body as I trip. The ground comes up to punch me in the face, hard, and the thing I really shouldn't let go of bounces from my fist.

Thud.

Thud.

Roll.

The mass of heavy red meat tumbles along the corridor, leaving a splotchy red trail behind it.

Scrambling, I reach, snatch and hold tight to the hot, wet heart. My legs push against the floor and I keep

running. You can outrun this, Hal. Hope powers me on.
I can get home. I can fix this.

Just. Keep. Running.

I rattle door after door, looking for an exit, leaving
sweaty, bloody prints with every touch. The wallpaper is
smeared with blood, like some slasher movie.

“Go?” I shout, searching around me.

I can hear the darkness behind, feel the burning heat
of it. A nightmare waiting for me to give up and decide
whether I want to live or die or something else altogether.

A memory for the past
and all its possibility.

THE WRAP

THREE WEEKS BEFORE

The world that existed before Francis Knox was broken.

Our new world, World 2.0, was warm, bright and peaceful. She built it for us in the Alternet and we filled it with our lives, with everything we wanted, whenever we wanted: living as princesses, superheroes or even machines. Anything was possible, and no one was alone, not even me. It was magic.

It only cost us our dreams.

All safe. World saved!

In my world, Mum and I never argued. There was always food in the cabinets. Mum would tell me she loved me every day. If I had a problem, she'd solve it. It was perfect. One big, joyous, immersive distraction. Why worry about the future or the past when the present was so amazing? Who cared about the real world when you had your own utopia to fight for? Mum called it 'the wrap', once. We all lived in perfect bubbles, close but never touching.

Our apartment was small, but space didn't matter with the universe available at a swipe.

During dinner, Mum and I watched the wall stream, each picking a program. We sat quietly afterwards, watching rain patter on a grey lake under dappled sunlight until I was tired. Still, I couldn't sleep.

Swiping open the settings on my Alter heads-up display, pearly app bubbles appeared and floated past my eyeline. The slim Surf band on my wrist tickled with a friendly buzz. Lying down, I batted the apps away, searching for the one that gave me my life, my world: *After I'm Gone*.

"I love you, Mum," I said.

A fairy tale – my perfect mum, my perfect family. Almost.

JUST A GAME

TWENTY DAYS BEFORE

SATURDAY

*... melt fat on this cycling program, 60Kbux a week
(Alter-licensed cycle not included) - power through
the French Pyren...*

Guz invites you to play Dino Farm.

GUZZ!3 wants to chat. He has 16 eggs...

***You too can be rich with
these three...***

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER...

Only 16Kbux left in budget...

***Kookie's new designs,
just for you!...***

Does magic exist?
You won't believe...

Believe in Francis Knox! World 3.0 is your salvation!
Knox Labs to announce new products soon in their
'Brave New Launch' 52...

I was still trying to sleep and, as usual, failing. Behind closed eyes, the notifications blared at me, using my ex's sonorous voice to get my attention. It hummed in my ears.

... Halcyon Greene

Are YOU good enough?

ARE YOU THE BEST?

Buy your golden ticket to try for the 2052 KNOX WORLD CUP! Top the leaderboard of selected games to win entry to the quarter-final.

Audio notifications at 3 a.m. – really?

My settings must have been on the blink.

Groaning, I moved my hands in the dark, trying to remember the right 'skip', 'mute' or 'pause' gesture. Nothing worked. I didn't have the funds to avoid the ads.

Before I could fully wake, another ping.

AIG_Mum: It's late. You should sleep, sweetheart.

My stomach twisted. Always the same message. Always there, like she didn't trust me to be human on my own.

I swooshed Mum's message away before the guilt settled in.

The Cup announcement went on to explain the upcoming stages, which I'd known since I was twelve, old enough to play games over the Alter.

Week One:

Play-ins - individual play - Skill Challenge

Week Two:

Quarter-final - any play - Knox's pick

Week Three:

Semi-final - *Gauntlet!* team play - and Final

Sign-up closes in two days!

When we were dating, Hunter joked about how fun it would be to compete against each other in the Cup together once I turned seventeen (he was a year older). The content cred would be sky-high, followers, merch ops and class-A banter. We might even get one step closer to meeting Francis, my hero!

Then he won.

That was last year. Since then, he'd been the face of every advert and notification, at least those aimed at me. There'd been a lot! I was catnip for the algorithm based on the sheer number of interactions with Hunter, along with Cup feeds I'd followed, streams, posts and hints; hundreds of hours watching winners, hoping.

If I could win, like Hunter had, I'd be sorted for life. Then everything really *would* be perfect.

The cash prize kept getting bigger. This year, they'd sweetened the pot even further...

10 million KBux,
a lifetime *Gauntlet!* battle pass
AND free training at the Knox Labs Academy.

The Knox Academy only took a few hundred people a year. Alter development training there was priceless. If there was a way to meet Knox, it was *that*. Rumours were that she attended every graduation personally, and that was *despite* her infamous auto crash when everyone thought she'd died. A few months later, she literally came back from the dead. Her consciousness was meant to have been completely uploaded to the Alter. HOW COOL! Knox acolytes made out she was some sort of Second Coming, which you can hardly blame them for.

The few years after the crash were the 'golden period' of Knox development – she was everywhere, via the Alter, promoting each new generation of Knox Labs hardware, OS, programs... But the last six years, she'd been more like a myth, a face on old clips, a name in articles that never quite agreed on the truth. A genius. A saviour. A ghost.

How would I even react if I met her? I reckoned I would squee myself out of consciousness.

With the Academy as a prize, the hunger to get into the Cup got me out of bed and scrolling the feed.

It was unlikely I'd get in – I couldn't afford the entry fee – so hearing Hunter's voice remind me was torture. I made bank through gifts and pro-gaming to keep my life going, converting most in-game XP to real-world coin, Kbox. Enough to keep me in energy, food, boosts and sleep aids, until I turned eighteen and could access my savings, which were meant to help me subscribe to university courses when the time came. Even though I

was nowhere near the grades. I barely made the obligatory stream classes, let alone the hard stuff.

Half awake, I shuffled across my room to my gaming hub: Dad's old game chair with its foam-picked arms. Mum had found it in the storage lockup, years after he left us. There were old coins in the creases, which was cool, like a loot crate. It used to smell of him, crisps and stale coffee. It was the safest place to be while my perception was logged into my favourite game: *Altercation*.

The Alter knew my needs. As I sat, little glowing marbles floated and orbited around me in a never-ending wheel. The app that logged me into *Altercation* was the largest globe, showing how often I opened it.

Another ping. Mum again. She already knew what I was doing.

AIG_Mum: Just ... promise me you won't push yourself too far just to prove something to him. You can't control everything, Halcyon. Not forever.

She was always bracing for me to get hurt – only ever used my full name when I was in trouble.

I clenched my jaw and closed the chat before she could say anything else.

Grabbing the orb from the reel, my world vanished as I blinked to log in and landed in the sun-kissed streets of Trouble Town, in the driving seat of the most perfect car of all time, a purple 1974 Cadillac Fleetwood Eldorado.