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Fio Draco [Excerpt] By: Brittany Armstrong

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As I entered the blue-tinted throne room, my eyes wandered to the hallway that the prisoner, Avis, had been taken down. I hummed slightly to myself, and bit my lip. If she had read about the drake hierarchy like I thought she had, she would know a lot more about those in the castle than I would ever find out on my own. And judging by how well it was locked up, I wouldn't necessarily get another chance...

Then again, if I was found talking to the spy, who knew what Lady Elysia might be willing to do to me.

I started down the hallway towards the cells.

As I headed down the hallway, my curiosity only grew. I realized, slowly, that the entire hallway was completely lit, but I couldn't see any sort of light source, whether candles, torches, or otherwise. The light I was seeing simply seemed to be emanating from nowhere. I looked around carefully with a great amount of interest, examining almost every empty cell and the shadows within - which appeared, in all honesty, to be the only semblance of darkness in the entire wing of the castle.

Finally, my feet brought me to the series of cells that Claudius had led me to earlier in the day, which were somewhat larger and held a single electric torch each. The first one I looked into held the person I was looking for - Avis Quinton. I had some measure of hesitation about talking to her, but I had made up my mind, and now I was already here - no turning back anymore.

I was taking a breath to speak when I suddenly noticed something wrong.

Avis was clutching her stomach, her knees pulled up to her chest on the bench she was sitting on. Bandages covered all of the space between the hem of her shirt and her waist, but it was clear, even from behind her, that the wound she had received from Annika was still soaking through the layers of linen. She was shaking, ever so slightly, in what I hoped was only pain.

As I stood, watching the woman who I assumed to be my enemy, a lightning strike of pity and sympathy ran through me, followed shortly by an overwhelming sense of guilt. Whether her ally had killed mine or not, whether she and her side of this war were right or wrong, Avis as she sat before me now could only be narrowed down to one word: Human.

With a shock of awareness, I realized that even I couldn't be given that much anymore. Even huddled in the cell of her enemy with a stab wound in the stomach, the Negator was still better than I was. Better by tenfold. I slapped a hand to my mouth as a shuddering sob ran through me, muffling the sound to near nonexistence.

Nevertheless, Avis heard the tiny sound and instantly let go of her injury, setting her feet silently on the ground and turning to face me.

"Oh. It's you." She said quietly, barely disguising the hoarseness that laced her voice - I presumed it was from choking back any sound she might have made. "Got a vendetta against me, have you? Coming to kill the poor weakened Negator?"

Silently, I shook my head, taking the few steps towards her, and voiced my question.

"I was wondering... What you know about my parents? Th-the old King and Queen, I mean." I asked, my voice wavering slightly.

Avis got to her feet, seeming to put a bit too much pressure on one foot, and walked gingerly over to the cell door. I took an instinctive step back, remembering what my uncle had mentioned about Negators earlier. She seemed to scoff at my discomfort.

"Why would I tell you? You're my enemy, aren't you? A drake?" As she spoke, I winced uneasily.

"As of two days ago, apparently." I said simply, trying to reveal as little as possible about myself. She scoffed slightly.

"You don't just become one of them. You either are or you aren't." She leaned against the bars, wrapping a hand around the metal. "So what you mean to say is 'yes'. You're not human. You barely even pass for one in this form."

My stomach clenched instinctively, and I let my eyes narrow into a glare, despite the sick feeling rising in my throat.

"Then what is human, anyway?" I snapped, my frustration finally showing itself. "What gives you the right to decide who is human, who gets to live, or die? Is that just some automatic Dragon Hunter quality, or do you have to prove you don't have a soul first?" As I finished, I barely had time to take a breath before I felt Avis's hand clench around the fabric of my shirt, yanking me forward and slamming my cheek against the bars of her cell.

"You, at least. Have no right to judge anyone. Freak." She hissed against my ear. The words were spoken with such venom that I felt as though my ear was barring off from the side of my head. She let me go, shoving me several feet away at the same time, and I gasped, catching my breath. With a note of relief I remembered that she could have paralyzed me instead, and let myself relax a bit more.

"Sorry." I muttered, rubbing at my neck, feeling as though I had just been choked. Avis leaned back, wincing as she was reminded of the wound she had suffered. I frowned, the feeling of pity from earlier returning, though somewhat less strong than it had been.

"That doesn't quite fit the bill." She hissed, still obviously irritated. I frowned slightly, and she sat down on the single cot in her cell, gingerly pressing a hand against the bandages wrapped around her.

"Well, what do you expect me to say?" I started. Avis looked as though she was about to interrupt, so I continued, my voice gaining volume. "In the past two days, I've watched my best friend get killed by one of your allies, found out that my parents, who aren't my real parents by the way, never actually gave a crap about me! I got attacked out of the blue by a dragon, and a guy who is apparently my uncle, and in charge of training me for some kind of a war. I've tried to come to an understanding about the fact that I'm not even human, and I've tried to find even a starting point in understanding this secret war that has been going on between you and us.

"So sure, you could say I'm a freak. Or a drake or whatever the hell we're supposed to be called. But to be honest, I'm just looking for answers from the only person that will give them to me, and if that just so happens to be the 'enemy' then so be it." As I spoke, I stepped closer and closer to her cell, and she got up to put me within her reach, but I was too wound up to care. I seethed darkly, taking a breath to continue, but Avis' arm shot out, pressing against my forehead with a vice-like grip, and all of a sudden a chill ran through me, my anger dissipating almost instantaneously.

She tugged me gently to the ground, and I had no choice but to follow, sinking slowly to my knees and breathing lightly. For a brief second she had to let go to avoid a crossbar between us, and I felt my anger start to flare up again, but the chill from her hand was back almost before I could register it.

"Calm down." She said softly, her voice having become something almost akin to caring. Had I not already been numbed by her ability, I figured I would have been compelled to relax by her voice alone. "I get it." She continued, slowly letting go of me. I slumped backwards, shaking a little from the excess emotion that started to course through me once again. I stayed quiet, however, as she returned my outburst with a simple sentence. "That's kind of my specialty, you know."

As I stared at her with a questioning look, she sighed, and continued. "Within the Hunters, or at least Negators and Locators, we all have specialties in the same way you have elements. Mine sort of rests with frustrating people, is all. I just am that kind of a person. And then, without even meaning to, you give up a lot of secrets." She smiled, showing teeth that held a hint of yellow, and I widened my eyes, suddenly worried. She laughed then, shaking her head slightly despite the wince of pain that crossed her face.

"Don't worry; all of it is safe with me. Stuck in a cage, remember?" She gestured to her surroundings, as though I couldn't have noticed them myself. Rather than get frustrated at the off-handed insult, however, I felt my lips twist upward into a smile.

"Yeah," I said, a little hesitantly. "Sure."

With the arrival of a sudden yawn from the bottom of my lungs, I was reminded distantly of how late in the evening it actually was. Avis voiced my concern almost instantly.

"It's almost one in the morning. You should head off to bed, Eva." I nodded, almost obediently, and got to my feet. As I started to leave, she reminded me of the reason I came to visit in the first place with her final words.

"And for the record, I do know about your parents. I'll tell you if you earn it." Letting my shoulders droop in my confusion, I heard Avis' laugh echo after me as I headed back into the throne room.

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Process A Vignette Series

By: Brittany Armstrong

ReALiZe

For a long time, you didn't think this was strange.

The tests with no answers.

The bars on the windows.

And me. The hallucination. The little shadow in the corner of your mind. Always listening. I notice everything you do, but I don't comment. I'm too kind for that. I simply... attempt to keep track of every crime you commit. Every murder, every theft. The things you do when you aren't sure you even did them. But I'm sure. I'm always sure.

Now you've been caught, and what do you do?

You scream at them.

You yell, and kick, and flail, and you grab the needle and break it before they force me away. Because I keep you... sane. On the right track. If I weren't here, no one could tell you what happened yesterday. Or why you're here in the first place.

You need to be here. This is your home. Our home. This padded-up room, in a building of the insane. The place everyone winds up when they can no longer tell how real I am. But listen up.

I'm real.

You're real.

And we're all just a bit... Mad.

ReMiNisce

Blackness. Whiteness. Redness.

My mind. My walls. Their medicine.

Those are the only things I have left. Those, and the pink-tinted bandages on my wrists. The bandages that I hide under the jackets they give me. The spotless, white, deaftfully sanitized jackets that I can never keep. I'm never permitted. I see them one day, and I wear a jacket and it holds me still and I sit and I sit until lunch, and I take it off. I eat, it goes back on, and then dinner comes and with it, there's a new jacket. It doesn't matter if I've worn it before because now it's clean and bleached and won't be mine ever again.

Click. Laugh. Scribble.

A shot. A joke. The notes.

God, their terrible notes. They never show them to me. But I know what they say, down to the last apostrophe. "Improving, Inconsistent coherency." The usual. The psychiatrist, he tells me what it says every time I visit. Asks me why I don't just explain. It's not that simple. Never is. I can't just explain. Can't drop the wall I've built, not on command. That fine barrier that keeps me from having to care. But that wall, it has a second purpose. It's there to shield me from the darkness. It keeps me from falling in and having to face my shadow and his traitorous, murderous thoughts.

Trip. Stumble. Fall.

Careening into the place I wish I never had to see again. The place I call the abyss, stuck with my shadow surrounding me, whispering false truths in my ears at every corner, where I'm more vulnerable than anywhere else.

Others call it an Asylum.

AnALYze

• October 23, 2015

Though continually showing signs of improvement, it seems as though the patient is only learning to mask his emotions and thoughts – with increasing success. Soon, even I won't be sure what he's really thinking.

It's cases like this that make me start to wonder. It used to be only occasionally, but it's getting more frequent.

What if they're not the insane ones? What if they're the ones who should be saluted as heroes? They deal with these "hallucinations" – which might not even be that – and don't ask for anything in return. What if those same "hallucinations" are actually something else entirely? If these people we believe to be treating are in fact ambassadors to a "something else" that no one can see?

What if, what if, what if, I sound like one of them... Then again, that would give me some perspective.

I'm usually wondering what's going on behind those acid eyes of his. He never seems to hint at what he's thinking, let alone tell me. It's futile to continue, yet we do it anyway, waiting for that day when he'll say something miraculous. I can't imagine what would be worth all these years of trying. Surely not a simple sentence, a turn of phrase? It can't possibly be worth it.

• October 24, 2015

He spoke today.

Finally.

Nothing like I was expecting, of course. It brings some sense of calm to me, that my "what-ifs" might actually prove true. He claims to have been sane for most of his time here. He had a simple request, and I accepted it. The words were few, and not really meaningful to anyone but the pair of us. But I finally know. All of that effort, for this simple morning conversation?

The quiet words were worth every second of it.

sALvAGE

"Do you feel like explaining now after that... outburst?"

No, the younger man would say, if he hadn't refused to speak to this excuse of a doctor. The series of one-sided conversations and frustrating silences had been the only communication between the two for years.

"You know I hate having to say that you're insane, but it's the only choice I have." The wording sparks something in the huddled and gray-clad patient. Words slip off the taciturn's tongue, rendering the doctor speechless.

"I'm not insane." His voice is melodic, almost as though he's singing. He continues before the doctor can interrupt. "I might just be the sanest man in the looney bin."

The statement is so out of place that the doctor has to cough to cover a laugh. The patient notices the expression anyway, a grin slipping onto his face. Suddenly, his eyes look far too old for him, and his doctor realizes, again, how young the schizophrenic is. His hair – shaggy and unkempt due to his time in the asylum – hangs loose and black by his shoulders. He tugs his sleeves down to cover hands which, like his bare feet, are scarred and calloused.

The doctor quickly remembers he should be making notes and starts scribbling furiously to catch up.

"My mind is sound. But no one knows it. That's the only problem. He's hidden behind the barrier along with my words, and he's still trying."

"Trying to make me run. To escape." As if in response to the doctor's sudden unease, the patient shifts.

"But I won't let him. I'll never let him free." He's no longer talking to the doctor. He's talking to his shadow, his hallucination, his guide. Because it will always listen. Even now, locked behind that barrier of will and courage.

"Never again."

IsOLATE

He sat as though he was worried of being burned by the floor. His feet, completely bare, were tucked against the edge of the chair. Knees pressed to his chest. He stared at me as though he was a caged bird, as though I would force him through a ring of fire at any moment. And who was I to blame him, really? He'd seen nothing but hospital beds and doctors since he'd arrived here.

He looked around the room, seeming to relax, but his position was no less tense. I broke the awkward silence with a cough, and his acidic green eyes snapped back to me with rapt focus. He didn't make a sound, only stared at me, somehow making me feel... what? Afraid? Nervous? Weak? Possibly all three.

"Would you like to talk now?" I asked, using the characteristically kind voice that was practically hard-wired into me. In response, his eyes simply narrowed into a glare.

No.

I should have known that was coming. They never wanted to talk, not at first. Nevertheless, we had an hour to fill, and fill it we would. Pulling the folder on my desk closer, I flipped it open.

"I see you've had quite the history. Five counts of attempted murder, two of attempted suicide – and that's only what's on file." He seemed to be trying to ignore me, head turned to one side. "You have no other background that we know of."

The tiny responses were the ones I noticed. The minuscule shake of his head, bony hands curling into fists. I continued, pretending not to notice the response, trying to coax something – anything – out of the taciturn boy.

"I might even go so far as to say you didn't really exist until now." That got his attention. Venom met my eyes from his, and he spoke, the only words I would hear from him for a long while.

"I was never supposed to."

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The Truth of the Ledge

By: Brandon Mayer

First Night

Tck, Tck, Tck, Tck, the sound the keyboard made, as it was being tapped on by a 'nobody' in his office. Nothing is more harmful than not only feeling, but truly knowing, down to your core, that your existence is meaningless. The name plate in front of the man's desk says "Phil", but unless he is sitting right in front of it, everyone seems to forget it. "Oh it's such a long morning I am getting forgetful!" all his co-workers would laugh as they told him this, but he knew the truth. As he tapped away furiously at his keyboard, trying to finish early so he could get out of his personal hell, to get back to the wife who is drifting away, and the kids who simply ignore him, his office door flung open, smashing the wall behind it. A man ran through. His face was white with fear shouting, "Phil don't do it!" He recognized him as his boss. He wakes up in a cold sweat. Just a dream.

First Morning

Phil gets out of bed, lazily showers and puts on his clothing, thinking to himself about his bullshit dream, not only does he have to live it daily, but he dreams about it during his only time of nirvana?
He walks downstairs to see his wife and kids before he heads off to hell, they barely acknowledge his existence, and it would hurt his soul, if he wasn't part of his everyday life. He was used to it.
He gets in his car and drives to work in silence, no radio; the windows rolled up as to avoid the outside world. Perfect silence.
He gets to work and rides the elevator up to the 50th floor with a man who was never taught how to cover his mouth when he coughs, disgusting.
He passes by people he has walked by for years, no one says hi, hello, morning, nothing. In fact, it almost seems like conversations are stopping as he walks by them. What a shame, they may have like him years ago if he was given the chance.
He enters his office, does his work all day, no one bothers him, and at 9 pm he goes home.
He gets in bed with his wife who is still awake reading; before he sleeps he wants to say one last thing.
"I love you April, do you know that?" he says, staring up at the ceiling.
"I know." She responds after a few seconds of silence.
Phil sleeps.

Night Two

Tck, Tck, Tck, Tck, Tck was the sound the keyboard made, as it was being tapped on by a 'nobody' in his office. Nothing is more harmful than not only feeling, but truly knowing, down to your core, that your existence is meaningless. The name plate in front of the man's desk says "Phil", but unless he is sitting right in front of it, everyone seems to forget it. "Oh it's such a long morning I am getting forgetful!" all his co-workers would laugh as they told him this, but he knew the truth. As he tapped away furiously at his keyboard, trying to finish early so he could get out of his personal hell, to get back to the wife who is drifting away, and the kids who simply ignore him, he saw something out of the corner of his right eye. He looks to his left, half expecting to see his boss barge in again, but he doesn't. He gets up and makes his way to the window, to see what had caught his eye. He looks out ahead, looking at the large bank across the street, but sees nothing else, but again, out of the corner of his right eye he sees something. He turns his head and sees a man on the ledge, facing away from him. He can't see who he is. Again, Phil wakes up in a cold sweat, and again, it's just a dream.

Day Two

Phil gets out of bed, the second day in a row having this awful recurring dream. It seemed real, and his stomach was churning, he felt sick, like he was going to vomit. He was afraid of heights, and he felt as if he was really on this ledge. The room was spinning, but he pressed on. He showered, changed, combed his thinning hair to the side, and left, without saying a word to his family, they all hate him, so what is the point?
He gets in his car and takes a different route to work; a route with more turns, but shorter.
He gets to a busy intersection a block away from hell, when he slams on his breaks for a man who wasn't paying attention as he crossed the road. The man stopped and looked at him for a few seconds, about to wave as if he was saying sorry, thank you, but instead the man looked at him with fear in his eyes, as if he recognized him, and was scared to ever meet him. The look was filled with regret and embarrassment.
He waved the man across the street and continued to hell; again he rode the elevator up to the 50th floor with a man who was never taught how to cover his mouth when he coughs.
He gets up to his floor, brushes past all his co-workers, ignoring them as they ignore him, and went right to the window in his office. Nothing. He finished his day at work, and went home to his loveless household.

The Final Night

Tck Tck Tck Tck was the sound the keyboard made, as it was being tapped on by a 'nobody' in his office. Nothing is more harmful than not only feeling, but truly knowing, down to your core, that your existence is meaningless. The name plate in front of the man's desk says "Phil", but unless he is sitting right in front of it, everyone seems to forget it. "Oh it's such a long morning I am getting forgetful!" all his co-workers would laugh as they told him this, but he knew the truth. As he tapped away furiously at his keyboard, trying to finish early so he could get out of his personal hell, to get back to the wife who is drifting away, and the kids who simply ignore him, he saw something out of the corner of his right eye. He looks to his left, half expecting to see his boss barge in again, but he doesn't. He gets up and makes his way to the window, to see what had caught his eye. He looks out ahead, looking at the large bank across the street, but sees nothing else, but again, out of the corner of his right eye he sees something. He turns his head and sees a man on the ledge, facing away from him. He opens the window slowly, panicking as he felt the outside winds on his face.
"Hey buddy why don't you get in here and talk to me, whatever it is it isn't worth it just come down from there!" He said with a shake to his voice.
As the final word left his mouth, the man on the ledge slowly turned his head to him, and he saw he was looking at himself. He was on the ledge.
"Hey Phil, you should come out here, you can see the truth from up here!" he said as he turned around, facing the building. He stretched his arms out like a crucifix and fell backwards with a smile on his face. As his feet left the safety of the ledge, his office door flung open, smashing the wall behind it. A man ran through it his face white with fear shouting, "Phil don't do it!" He recognized him as his boss.

The Final Day

Phil woke up drenched in sweat, immediately rolling to his side, on the edge of the bed and vomits on the floor next to him. He quickly gets dressed without cleaning the floor, or himself.
"This ends today, I will save that man." He muttered to himself under his breath. He was dizzy, something wasn't right.
He ran down the stairs, missing steps all the way down, almost stumbling over his carelessness. As he passed the kitchen opening, near the front door of the house, he stopped and saw his daughter. Again he almost got sick and felt even dizzier. This must be another dream he thought, as he stared at his daughter, who was simply missing her face. There was no hole, or wound, it was just flat skin.
He rushed out of the house, he had to escape, he had to get to work, and he had to save the man.
On his way to work every person he encountered, even the coughing man from the elevator had the same face, or lack thereof.
He ran passed all his faceless co-workers, his flop sweat dripping onto the floor and to anyone in his way. He was pushing people over to get to the window. He ran into his office and slammed his door shut. He ran to the window and flung it open.
Nothing.
"Oh no no no," he laughed with the tone of lost madness in his voice. "He doesn't want to be saved, so he must have moved down further on the ledge to the next office, he knows I'm coming."
He crawled out the window, his fear of heights diminished with his fit of madness.
50 stories down, he saw a familiar faceless woman. "That dress" he thought, he knew it from somewhere.
His madness started to fade somewhat, as he started to hear the busy street below, which jared him from hearing absolute silence in his mad determination and focus. Just as quickly as they had left, all the people below had their faces back. He knew that woman below. He has known her for quite some time. That was April. That was his wife.
He sat up on the tall ledge, observing her, she was acting strange she was looking over her shoulder nervously looking for someone. Then another familiar face appeared and he was walking toward her. He knew him from somewhere but where?
Just then he realized who he was. That was the pedestrian from yesterday; he almost hit him with his car. How could he forget?
The man kept walking towards his wife April, and pulled her close and kissed her passionately.
From the ledge he just stood there dumbstruck from what he was witnessing, the infidelity of his wife. He laughed quietly to himself. Just then he knew what to do.
His office door flung open, smashing the wall behind it. A man ran through it his face white with fear shouting, "Phil don't do it!" His boss flung open the window and looked at him.
He turned around and faced the building and turned his head to the right, looking his boss in eyes, smiling, a smile that he hadn't felt in at least 10 years.
"Hey Jim! You should come out here, you can see the truth from up here!" he said to him, happier than he has ever been.
He outstretched his arms like a crucifix and leaned backwards, excitement rushing through his veins. He had found solace for the first time, and it was from the truth of the ledge.