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The Protagonist's Book

Short Story

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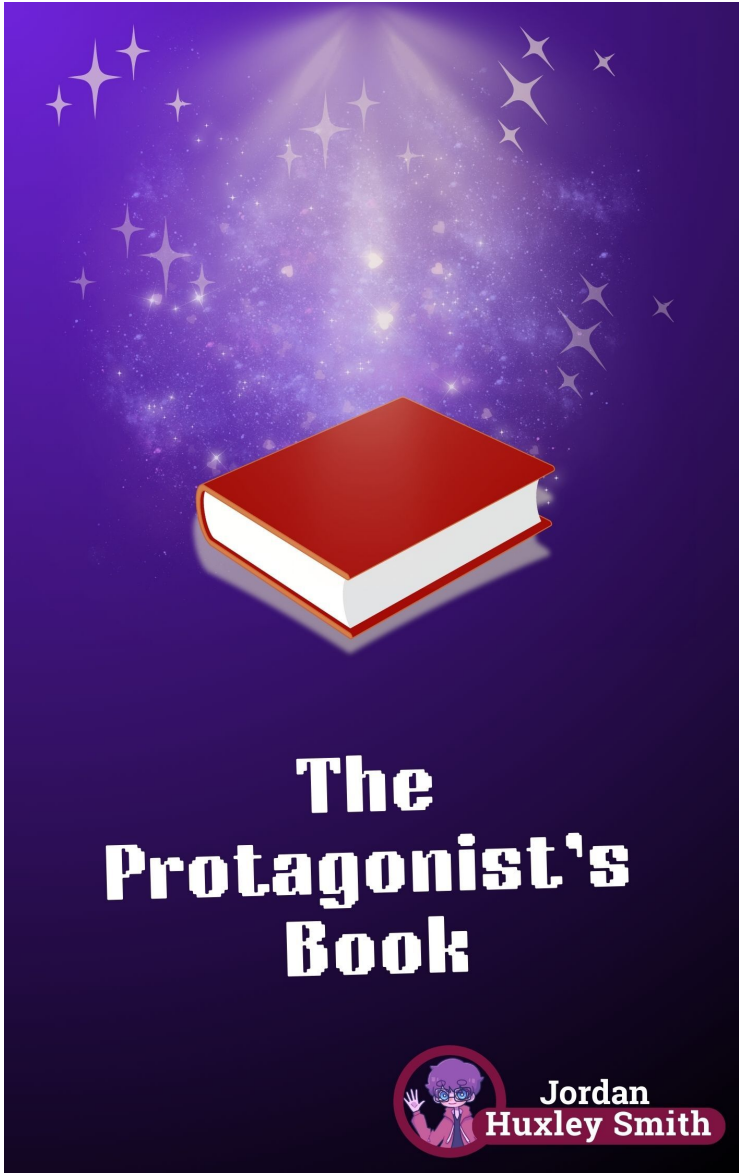
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THE PROTAGONIST'S BOOK



The Protagonist's Book

On July 18th, a boy arrived home from school, covered in mud.

His mother berated him.

On July 18th, an old man walked his dog.

On July 18th, a family went out for dinner.

On July 18th, a college student returned home to his father.

On July 18th, a bee collected pollen from a flower.

On July 18th, a girl spent her moments surrounded by loved ones.

July 18th. The day the world changed.

June 18th, 9.08 am: The guards at a hidden Government building in the UK, Building Gamma, vanished. Its entrance left unguarded, an unknown man enters, walking past piles of dishevelled clothes that lay on the floor.

June 18th, 9.11 am: The unknown man enters the conference hall, where multiple world leaders had gathered for an important conference.

June 18th, 9.16 am: After no response from anyone in Building Gamma, the worst is assumed.

June 18th: 9:25 am: The army arrives at Building Gamma and enters the premises, guns at the ready.

They storm each room until they enter the conference hall. Within the hall, a haunting scene awaited them: blood covered the walls, floor and furniture. There were no bodies to be found. Sat in the only clean seat, with his legs propped up on a table, was a man in a white shirt and black cargo trousers — all clean. On his lap was a book.

June 18th: 9:21 am: The man was arrested.

During the investigation phase in the following days, no murder weapon could be found.

The man was identified as Kyle Farthing. Further investigations into Farthing's past showed no purchases of weaponry. One of the members of staff was discovered to be Kyle's father, Steven Farthing. During this investigation, no method managed to get Farthing to testify. Except one.

June 23rd, at 8:45 am: Farthing's trial began.

"These are the events, as we know them, via witness statement, CCTV footage, and your own testimony. Do you wish to add anything to these facts? This is your last chance," stated the judge.

"No, your honour," responded Farthing plainly, with a disinterested look upon his face.

"In which case, the courts of governments across the world have all reached the only reasonable judgment: immediate execution. There is little point in discussing your sentencing further, given your own admission to the crime."

"How about we get to the interesting part, then? What you're really all here for," smiled Farthing. Global powers had agreed to Farthing's terms: broadcasting the hearing across the world; in return, he would reveal how he committed the crime.

He threw a book onto the table.

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November 16th. Monday.

Everyone knew this story. Four months prior, this event changed the world. Initially, word of the murder somehow got leaked to the public, causing a global panic — how could this impossible murder happen? And why? There was unrest throughout several affected counties. For ordinary people, and Jacob, it was simply background news at first.

Four months later, a simple walk to school required at least three different checks for Jacob. One as he left the civilian sector, one halfway on his walk, and one as he entered the college grounds. People doubted each other more than ever before; suspicion infected the masses like a plague. Enraptured by the prospect of power, a delirium overcame the greedy. The world was unified and separated over the same goal: finding The Book. For the average person, this was simply the new normal. However, Jacob was no longer an ordinary human; that morning, he became the protagonist of this story.

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Monday 6.00 pm.

“What would you do if you had one of the books?” asked Rachel, Jacob’s co-worker, as she was packing the shelves. Jacob, idly scrolling through social media on his phone, mumbled a response.

“Dunno. It’s all too complicated for me.”

Jacob was seemingly unfazed by this new world.

“You can’t deny you’re not curious. Unlimited power? Would you use it for personal vendetta, like that Farthing guy, or would you side with the government like that Marcus?”

“Marcus?”

“Yeah, the most recent guy to get the book. He lived in the U.S. and helped give them new resources and riches. But then other countries didn’t like that — they launched an attack until it was confirmed he was dead.”

“Dark. But that’s what I mean: too complicated.” Jacob had no desires like the rest of the humans.

“Yeah, I suppose so. But it’d be nice to dream. So far, it’s like only selfish people get it. But I guess I’d be selfish too. I’d get myself a nice house. And lots of money. And a cure for any illness.” Jacob looked over to her. He could somehow tell the complexity of emotions she was feeling.

“You know how my parents met?” he asked, pushing the narrative in a different direction.

“Yeah, you’ve told me a million times,” laughed Rachel, “The wind blew away a flower your mum had picked?”

“It landed right in my father’s face. That got them talking. That one flower led to years of joy, sadness, and life and loss. If something so small like a flower can have such a profound impact, some magic book isn’t that special to me.”

“Oh, you’ve given it a lot more thought than I realised — oh, crap, I promised Maurice I’d be round his bakery early today. It’s his son’s birthday, so he’s closing early. Think you could hold the fort? I promised Mum I’d get it!”

“Yeah, I got it,” sighed Jacob.

“Jacob?” Rachel stopped at the door. Jacob looked over to her. She simply nodded. “Thank you, really. When she’s better, I’ll help more.” Her eyes wavered. He simply nodded back. Rachel quickly ran out of the store, leaving him all alone; the hum of the lights was his only company. And our voice.

“It is time. Make a decision.”

Jacob continued to ignore our words and scrolled through social media, where he came across a video of a dog playing in a field, tips for making the most out of the end of the world, and a news story about a man who was recently murdered over suspicion that he had the book. He then came across a clip of the court case.

“I was bestowed this book by an alien,” said Farthing. “An alien with technology that exceeds our own concepts of time and space. They made this Book with the power to make desire a reality. You simply write in it, and what you wish becomes reality.”

“Why would they do this?”

“Beats me. They told me it was their *grand mission* to understand humanity better.”

“And with this supposed book, you chose murder?”

“I chose to get back at my old man, who’d controlled me for far too long. Couldn’t get more human”, he laughed. “But none of that matters now. My time is coming to an end. They said you’ve got seven days with this thing before it burns you out.” Farthing turned serious.

“Listen closely,” he said. The room fell silent. “This book is the greatest power in the universe. Whoever obtains will inherit its power. They will be the protagonist of their story. Infinite power at their fingertips. Power at no consequence. You sit above everyone. But it only lasts 7 days.” A devilish smile appeared on his face. “The real kicker is this: when the holder dies, The Book will be back in circulation, appearing somewhere in the world. So, get off your butts and begin searching. Because today is my final day. And tomorrow, the power to rule the whole world will be out there, somewhere.”

The court erupted into chaos. And the world shortly after.

Jacob, unfazed, kept scrolling.

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Tuesday, 1.00 pm.

Jacob was scribbling in his notebook during his class. He had been stopped by enforcement on the way to school, but he didn't seem shaken. He simply sighed when they stopped him. Many of his classmates were too scared to come to school.

He stopped sketching and looked out the window at the world outside. He later spoke to us for the first time. He told us he was daydreaming about what they were all up to.

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Wednesday, 9.00 pm.

Jacob returned to the darkness of his flat and spotted that the kitchen light was left on. He entered the room to find his father sleeping, head resting on the dinner table. Jacob carefully put his hand on his father's back, gently waking him.

"Sorry, son. Your food's in the microwave," yawned his father. "Sorry, long day in the office. Martin called in sick, and Stacey was held up at an inspection. And from there it was just endless calls — how was work?"

"Boring, as usual," Jacob sighed with a distant tone. "Did you eat, Dad?"

"Yeah, I did, thank you. Sorry, I think I should head to bed. I wanted to speak with you some more, but—

"—Dad." Jacob stopped him. He gave his dad a nod. His father smiled and nodded back. His eyes wavered, but somehow Jacob's action had comforted him.

"Thank you. You get some rest soon, too."

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Thursday, 8.30 pm.

On the walk home from work, Jacob passed by a local retire-

ment home.

“Hey, Jacob”, waved Mrs Bridget. She was a widowed woman who was covered in crocheted cats, which she made herself. Jacob had once requested one of her cats, which now sat attached to his bag.

“Good to see you, lad”, shouted Mr Miles, who suffered from limited movement due to arthritis. He had an injured arm from trying to move it too harshly. His son visited him earlier that day.

It appeared that Jacob had spent many months walking by this home and had got to learn about each of its residents quite well.

“Evening,” he said casually.

“How’re things with you and that girl? Any progress?” chimed in Miss Stacey, who worked as a tabloid writer in her past. Jacob smiled at her question.

“How are you all doing?” he asked. They all smiled at him.

“We’re getting by.”

“It’s a bit of a scary time, right now.”

“Oh, but when isn’t the world scary?” they laughed.

“Give your love to your dad, for us, lad.” Jacob sighed, then simply smiled and nodded. They simply smiled and nodded back. As Jacob walked off into the night, their eyes wavered.

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Friday, 10.00 pm.

“You must make a decision.”

“Do I?”

Jacob sat in his room, sketching in a sketchbook.

“Can’t I choose not to?”

“Your life will inevitably end in 7 days. Why would you choose not to? Do you not have any desires?”

“No desires? Is that what you think? I guess we really don’t

see eye to eye. I have plenty of desire.” Jacob pulled open his sketchbook. “I spend most of my time learning to draw.”

“Then become the best artist out of anyone.”

“Hmm, I don’t think I really want to. Sounds like a lot of pressure. Takes away from the end result, too. Once you make something, you gotta stick with it, no matter how amateurish it is. Besides, a carefree life is what I desire most of all, living it my own way.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s what my Mum did in her final days. I always respected that. What about you?”

“Us?”

“Do you not have a desire?”

“We are above desire.”

Jacob looked at us with a suspicious gaze. “Hmm,” was all he said.

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Saturday, 9.45 pm.

Jacob walked home. The sky was clear, and the air was crisp. An occasional helicopter flew overhead, beaming spotlights down to the ground.

“You need to make a choice. That is your role,” we beckoned.

“I refuse.” Jacob rolled his eyes.

“You must.” Jacob stopped and watched as a cat crossed the street. A kitten followed.

“Hey, tell me,” Jacob asked, “when you see that cat, what do you think?”

“What we think is irrelevant.”

“Humour me.” We answered immediately.

“We think it is a hunter. Its function is to fight to feed itself and its child.”

“Funny, when I see it so casually walking about, it makes me think it must be a pretty nice evening.” Jacob took a deep inhale, breathing in the atmosphere. The wind was cool and slow, the night sky was illuminated by the moonlight, and the stars glistened brightly. He was unfazed by the state of the world.

“The two do not correlate.”

Jacob turned his gaze to the stars. “What do you think when you look at the sky?”

We paused.

“We think about the distance we are from our origin.”

Jacob looked to us, standing beside him, invisible to all but him. He looked at us directly in our eyes. “I can tell.”

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Sunday 11 pm

Jacob was again scribbling in his sketchpad late at night.

“It has now been six days and 23 hours. Your time with the book will soon come to an end. And yet, you’ve desired nothing.” We were at our wits’ end. “We grant you infinite power. And, yet, you’ve spent it doing absolutely nothing.”

“That’s not true. I went to school. I spent time with Rachel. I enjoyed seeing my Dad for the first time all week. And I saw my friends. Now, I was thinking of finishing it off with some art.”

“We don’t think you understand the sheer power at your disposal.”

“No, I think it’s you who doesn’t understand. I hold no more power than anyone else in this world.”

“But with the book, you are.”

“With the book, or without it, we’re all the same. Leaders, citizens, friends, family, animals — the young or the old.”

“We don’t understand.”

Jacob rubbed his head. "You know, for guys, allegedly so powerful, you think pretty binary. The moments of my story don't just happen because of me. It's the convergence of countless stories. My tomorrow happens because of others' yesterdays." Jacob sighed. "Do you know how my parents met?"

"Yes, your mother was picking flowers. One blew away over onto your father's face. She apologised. From there, they began to converse."

"Exactly. That one flower led to years of joy, sadness, and life. That one flower had so much power."

"It was merely a flower. The circumstances were coincidental."

"No, it was determined by everything that came before it. That flower was planted by a gardener, who two parents birthed. He planted it in soil curated by countless hands, and it survived despite endless feet walking by it. And one day, that single flower, with all of its history, was picked up by someone random and took on a whole new purpose. That's the story of the flower. Nothing is ever so simple.

A boy coming home from school, an old man walking his dog, a country at war, a girl doing her best to support her mum, a baker loving his son, an elderly man, a baby born, a man spiteful of his father, a man beholden to his government, a father doing his best, a boy with a book. All of these, they hold the same power. Each are protagonists of their own story. And you're the same."

"We... are not the same. "

"We are though. You act all high and mighty, but I don't think you even understand yourself, let alone humans. I asked you before... when you look at the sky, what do you think?"

"We think about the distance between us and our home..."

“And how does that make you feel?”

“...We do not feel.”

“No. You do. I know how you looked at those stars. I know you miss it. Because you gave that look we humans see every day. The look of persevering through an impossible pain. You think you’re above humanity, like some gifted narrator. But in reality, you’re just like us. Your eyes wavered. You feel...”

“...Lonely.”

“I know the feeling.” Jacob smiled. He returned the book to us. “Then here’s my desire: take back the book, and do with it what you really want to do.”

“If you do this...”

“I know. In my Mum’s final days, she always had such a sad look on her face. I never understood it. But when I finally asked her about it, she said her last moments with me were the happiest she had ever felt. It was contradictory. It made no sense. And yet, it’s the truth. You wanted to know what it means to be human? Wanting to understand and to be understood. Wanting to be seen. Contradiction. That’s all it ever is.”

“Jacob, you truly are a strong protagonist.”

“Strong? I guess we still don’t really understand each other. I’m terrified.” Jacob sighed. We had heard this sigh a hundred times. We always thought it was a sigh of boredom, but now we think it conveyed far more emotion than we could have ever understood. “I relinquish the book.”

We didn’t know how to convey our respect, or pity, or appreciation, or confusion, or love, for him. So we simply nodded. Jacob nodded back. His eyes wavered. We took back the book and wrote in it our greatest desire.

Monday.

On November 23rd, a boy arrived home from school, covered in mud. His mother berated him.

On November 23rd, a son walked his father's dog.

On November 23rd, a family shared a dinner in their home.

On November 23rd, the army raided a home in search of a book.

On November 23rd, the stars shone especially bright.

On November 23rd, a girl entered her workplace at a local store.

"Hey, Jacob, good to see you," said the girl.

Jacob smiled and nodded.