

SPECTER CITY
(excerpt)

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CHAPTER ONE

“Number 97,554,141,460,” called out a voice that carried with it the noteworthy quality of being as loud as it was annoying. Max woke with a start and blinked his eyes furiously to adjust to his new environs. He was seated in a beat-up pleather chair in a large waiting room. The walls and floors were wooden and ancient and there was a lit candelabra hanging from the ceiling, slowly rocking back and forth. In his left hand Max held a numbered ticket, and in his right, a withered, dog-eared magazine. The number of other beat-up pleather chairs in the room filled with likewise tired, exhausted or altogether motionless individuals led Max to believe he was not going to leave anytime so—

“NUMBER 97,554,141,460?!?”

Max looked down at the number on his ticket and realized he was shortly destined to meet the owner of this voice that made up in sheer persistence what it lacked in beauty. He put down the magazine and sauntered around the corner of the quiet, air-conditioned room. As he moved closer, he practically jumped out of his skin when the boom of a gong suddenly echoed throughout the chamber. This did not nothing to help matters as he simultaneously caught a glimpse of the voice’s owner, a wrinkled prune of a creature of indeterminate age, though Max would have hazarded a conservative guess of somewhere around, say, the mid-thousands.

She had the obligatory blue hair, angular black glasses, way-too-droopy earrings and a necklace made of something happily unguessable. A cigarette hung languidly from her hand, from which the smoke tendrils meandered away from their point of origin to a fan a foot away that mercilessly evaporated them. The antique being was staring indistinctly at what looked like a computer, but after a second glance, Max realized it was a projection screen connected to a metal box that contained a multitude of cogs and clockwork that were apparently steam pow—

“ARE YOU NUMBER 97,554,141,460?!?!?” the thing asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” replied Max, supplying his ticket and readying himself to dodge any further punctuation if necessary.

“Well, all right then,” said the ... lady. “And you are Wake Theodore Marrow?”

“I ... could be,” said Max suspiciously.

“Well, the computer says you are.”

“OK, fine, you got me. I’m Wake Theodore Marrow,” said Max.

“‘K, great. We’re not going to have any problems then. I’m Esmerelda. Nice to meet you. Welcome to Specter City. You’re dead, of course.”

“Of cour—pardon me?”

“Uh-oh. A surprise then, I take it? Gosh-to-the-darn, I was afraid of this. I hate it when I have to do all the explaining.”

Max stared at her blankly.

“It’s not really part of the job, you see,” she continued. “I’m just supposed to start you off here. Provide only the basic data. But, oh no, preparing them for their afterlife AND letting them know they’re in it ... sheesh. This is how they treat poor Ezzie. You, for example, let’s see now... Wake Marrow.

Registered in your name is (1) Karmacard valued at κ10,646 credits, (1) apartment key card for an apartment in the SoulHo area and (1) job as,” Esmerelda paused for a second while her computer clicked and whirred, “a Possessor. Well, isn’t that nice! ‘Course you’ll need the proper training first.”

“ ‘Course,” Max managed.

“Great, I am *so* glad you’re starting to get it. You’ll be starting at the Institute, naturally.”

“Naturally.”

Esmerelda brightened considerably, “That’s the spirit, dearie! Oh, no pun intended.”

“Right,” Max said weakly.

“So here you go, (1) last item, a ticket for the G-train, complete with a map on the other side.”

“Thanks.”

Max dazedly took everything from Esmerelda’s outstretched arms and appropriately zombielike, staggered towards the exit door.

“Bye, dearie!” waved Esmerelda cheerily. “Have a ghastly day!”

Max’s senses were immediately overloaded as he stepped outside and took in the spectacle of the city—it teemed with restaurants, cafes and bookshops, some with the most garish of lights and colors, some barely earmarked in plain brick facades. The technology that powered the town was a strange mixture of mechanisms from the early eighteen-hundreds to the present and maybe even beyond, combined in ways Max had never seen before. As Max looked behind him he noticed that what he thought to be a neon sign draped across a storefront was in fact simply different-colored glass letters with lit candles behind them. A car zoomed past him, and Max noticed it was a cross between a turn-crank Model-T and a Mini Cooper convertible. A steam train chuffed in the distance and as it gained speed, mechanical wings sprouted from its sides and it slowly took off. In the distance a factory plumed several stacks of smoke that hung over the horizon like an angry cloud.

Bustling about everywhere were glowing ephemeral forms—what the purgatory, could they really be spirits?—of all ages, colors and shapes. Forget

about Kansas, forget about Oz even, could it possibly be that he wasn't in *existence* anymore?

Max shook his head to clear his thoughts and looked around at all the various signs around him: lit-up billboards a mile high and half as wide, posters in windows, notices taped to walls, graffiti on the notices taped to the walls. TVs in various incarnations invariably blasted talking heads from every nook and crevice imaginable. And they were all trying to sell Max something.

Max peered in the window of a shop to stare at one of the televisions inside. Onscreen, a ghostly actor opened the door to his home and plopped tiredly onto the couch as his "wife" came down the stairs.

"Honey, I'm feeling down."

"I know what you mean! I've got that not-so-fresh feeling myself."

"You know what would do the trick?"

"SKELENOL!" they both cried in unison as little Timmy came in from the kitchen carrying a tray with four cocktails on it. Man, woman and child each took a glass, cheers-ed, and took a refreshing sip. Little Timmy grabbed the last remaining cocktail and held it toward the camera.

"Wake, this one's for you!"

Max backed away from the commercial hurriedly, looking instead at the documents in his hand and absently shuffling through them until he came to the one with the map on it. SoulHo was in the lower right side of the town apparently, and judging by the big red X, he was currently located in Spirit Square. Examining the map on the back of the ticket more closely, he located the nearest G-train station and walked down the block until he saw the brightly lit lanterns marking the subway entrance. Max folded up the map, returned it to his pocket and made for the train station.

Max bounded down the stairs, passing a host of the ghost people. He accidentally bumped into the one in front of him, and Max realized that for a second, a portion of his shoulder was occupying the same physical space as the man, who then turned around and stared at him furiously. Max hurriedly jerked back but, carried by the momentum of the crowd, did the same to the person behind him with his other arm. The experience was not wholly unpleasant, but was shocking, like an icy hot fluid had just been injected into him and was numbing the sensation in his arm. It was definitely unnerving, despite the fact this second person, incidentally female, treated him to a shy smile. Max quickly made sure no part of his body—form?—was touching the people in front or behind him as he hurriedly down the rest of the stairs. At the bottom, there was a brightly lit kiosk with a ghost bedecked in a maroon uniform and cap, next to which were the G-train turnstiles. Instead of the rotating metals bars that he was used to, there was simply a revolving door, the substance of which

was a strange, shimmering material. As each passenger swiped his card, the door would rotate one half revolution, letting the passenger go through but blocking the way for the next person in line. “Simple enough,” thought Max to himself. Passing the kiosk, he asked one of the train representatives, “Excuse me sir, what direction is it to SoulHo?”

“Oh-ho, you want to go to SoulHo? What did you do in your past life, invent electricity? Made of gold?” the employee responded.

“Um, no. Just got here today, just looking for my apartment,” replied Max.

“Your platinum apartment, I presume?”

“No idea really, but probably not, I think. Which way is it incidentally?”

“Why don’t you follow your royal nose, then, and see if you can sniff out the direction, super rich guy? I’m sure it smells like roses dipped in more roses.”

“What?” said Max. He mimed picking up a phone and listening in, “Hey, the unhelpful awards just called, and they want you to host!”

At this, the ghost representative rolled his eyes and indicated to the right. Max shook his head and located his train ticket, swiped it, and proceeded through the revolving door onto the train platform. Noticing a sign that pointed out the SoulHo direction distinctly to the left, Max followed obligingly and went along the platform in that direction. After several minutes a G-train pulled up and Max boarded.

The subway on the outside resembled an ultra-modern Japanese bullet train, however upon entering, Max noticed that the inside was decorated with a distinctly Western flair. Everything was inlaid in wooden panels, there were booths rather than benches, and there were lit candle lanterns hanging next to mirrors on the olive walls. Max set down in one of the empty booths and waited for the train to pull out of the station. As he did he stared at the passengers hurrying onto the train; one was the angry man from the stairs, and a few people later came the smiling lady, who again gave him a wink and sat down across from him.

“First day, huh?” she asked.

“Uh...yeah, how did you guess?” Max replied sheepishly.

“Your armed bumped into mine. Literally, *into*.”

“Ah, yes. Well I guess I should have figured that could happen, being a ghost and all.”

“Ha, yes indeed! Look, you dropped this on the staircase when we collided. I’m glad I caught up with you!” she said, holding up Max’s new Karmacard with the name “Wake Marrow” boldly emblazoned upon it. “My name’s Trixie by the way.”

“Thanks! I’m Ma—” Max began, but as he took the card and saw his new assumed name was visible to both of them, he finished off, “—rha—Wake.”

“Mowrawake? That’s an usual name, even for here!” said Trixie, smirking.

“Sorry, it’s, uh, Wake. As you can imagine, it’s been a long day.”

“No worries,” Trixie said. Despite being somewhat translucent and completely dead, Max thought she was kind of attractive. What he said, though, was, “So, Trixie, what was that sensation? I felt like someone shot a bunch of frozen needles into my arm.”

“Our souls touched.”

“Aww, that’s sweet, Trixie. And we only just met,” Max said.

Trixie laughed, “Well yes, we did. But despite how romantic that experience might sound in the Lifeworld, here it simply means the raw, individual, physical atoms of our souls were pushing into each other in the same space.

“Er, of course.”

“Our selves don’t really know what to do with that information, so it creates a kind of numbing effect. It’s a bit personal, and a bit jarring, so we try to keep to ourselves as much as possible.”

“I bet. Definitely a weird feeling.”

“Yes, you could say that,” said Trixie, smiling again, but this time with a trace of sadness. “After you’ve been here for a while actually, you can will yourself to just bounce off of someone you bump up against, like you would in the Lifeworld before. Kind of a shame, though. It’s kind of nice, I think, from time to time.”

“Well, it’s a unique experience, that’s for sure” Max said and looked out the window as the train pulled into the next stop, “So which one is SoulHo?”

Trixie’s left eyebrow raised almost imperceptibly for an instant. “Just one more stop. Wow, you must have really been somebody before.”

“Well, yes. I was kind of a big shot, not gonna lie,” said Max, lying.

“Ha, of course. And in this one?”

“Here it looks like I am going to be doing something at the Possession Institute, whatever that is.”

“Oh, really? I work there too, as a matter of fact,” Trixie replied, her eyebrow raised even further and starting to threaten her hairline. The rest of the short train ride passed in comfortable silence.

“OK, this is you,” Trixie said as the train pulled into the station with a halt. “I guess I’ll be seeing you tomorrow?”

“I guess so,” replied Max with a grin. “Enjoy the rest of your ride. Try not to bump into anyone you know!” And with that, Max got up and walked through the sliding doors of the subway and out into the sultry streets of SoulHo.

CHAPTER TWO

SoulHo was not as well lit as Spirit Square, but was certainly just as busy. Cobbled roads wound every which way and a variety of traffic snaked through them. Max consulted his map momentarily and proceeded to walk towards his high-rise apartment complex.

The building was lit in garish hues of yellow, green, red and blue, and had what looked like ship foghorns on the roof. Across the street from the building sat a bar humbly proclaiming to be “Frank’s”, complete with a neon martini sign that sporadically buzzed on and off. Max dwelled for a moment considering his next move, but after looking back and forth several times between the bar and his apartment building, decided a nightcap was really the only option in this strange new city.

Frank’s seemed to Max reminiscent of the usual Irish pub haunts back in his old neighborhood—exposed bricks for portions of the walls, off-white paint on the ceiling, wooden floorboards on the ground. Similarly wooden barstools and barrels lined up like dominoes, awaiting patrons invitingly. Of course there were subtle differences; ghosts being the sole patrons of the bar was one of them. A couple of them sat quietly talking in booths, one occupied a stool and watched a TV in the ceiling corner, one filled out a crossword by the counter. The bartender, presumably Frank, wiped down the counter with a napkin that would sporadically grow legs, move down the counter top to clean an errant smudge, then return to him. Max walked over to the nearest bar stool and sat down.

“Hey there, newcomer, I’m Frank. Whaddaya’ll have?”

“Hi Frank. I’m M ... Wake. Whaddaya got?”

“Well, our most popular drink I’d have to say is Skelenol.”

Glancing around, Max noticed the majority of ads adorning the walls, and even the occasional commercial on TV, persuaded the patrons of the virtue of this self-same drink. According to the poster near Max, it was made with real Spirasweet, no less.

“That sounds great, thanks.”

“Alrightie then, that’ll be five karma credits please, sir.”

Max took out his Karmacard hesitantly, which was promptly swiped by Frank and subsequently a card reader. Frank diligently and dexterously stepped behind the bar and poured a Skelenol from a silver tap.

“So this is it, huh? The end of it all?” said Max.

“Well, no, this is Frank’s. The End Of It All is down the road, to your left. Nasty bunch in there,” replied Frank with a wink.

Max sunk his head into his arms.

“All right, sorry about that fella. But death wouldn’t be worth dying for if we didn’t get to have our little jokes on the newbies.”

“That’s right,” agreed one of the nosy patrons sitting on the other end of the bar.

“Agreed,” said his neighbor. “But The End is actually not too bad a place.”

“What!” said Frank. “How dare you? After all I’ve done for you.”

“Yeah, between takin’ me karma and exchangin’ it for a hangover, it’s hard to decide what to be more grateful for,” replied Nosy.

“Anyway,” said Frank in a slightly louder voice, “this is it. The afterlife. The next stage. The answer to it all—”

“They do a really good happy hour special on Tuesdays, too. Two for one-and-a-half!”

“—the gateway to a better place—”

“And don’t forget the Bloody Bloody Mary’s on Sunday mornings. They even has celery and olives too, not just blood!”

“—so do you have any more questions?”

“Well, can you get some of those little olives in this place?”

“I was talking to the newbie!”

Max stared around and, realizing it was his turn to contribute, took a sip of his drink and said, “OK ... well, so what’s the real deal? This seems just like ... life. Sorta. Just a little bit quirkier I guess. But where’re the angels and harps? Or brimstone and fire even? I sure didn’t expect this crazy mishmash place.”

The patrons looked at Max blankly.

“OK, fine. How about this. What are we supposed to do here?”

“Ah, right. The meaning of death,” Nosy said sagely. “Meaning of life, that one’s easy. Death, on the other hand, now that’s a doozy.”

“You ... know the meaning of life?” asked Max incredulously.

At this chestnut the majority of patrons in the bar snorted.

“Well then, to get your karma up, innit?” said Nosy’s neighbor. “So many good deeds, so much good karma. Throw some bad ones in there, it gets reduced. That’s how you establish a base line of credit when you start in this place. So you can afford the Pyramid.”

“The Pyramid?”

“That’s where you go when you’ve got enough dough. Keycard in the entry slot, scanner checks your moolah, if you’ve got enough your account is deducted, the entry door opens, and you’re through to the other side. Bam.”

“Right. And here I was just thinking that *this* was the other side,” Max said wearily. “So how much do you need to get through?”

“Well you gotta earn up those karma points to get in. It’s κ1 million credits when you’re all said and done. You got a job when you came in, right?”

“Well yes.”

“So’s long as you do that, you’ll get paid regular,” said Frank. “Everyone here gets paid the same wage. Feel free to spend a little here and there on creature comforts, but at the end of the day, the Pyramid’s your end game.”

“So what you’re saying is,” started Max, as the bar’s customers all looked at him grinning expectantly, “is that the meaning of death...”

“Yesssss?”

“Is a one...million ... dollar pyramid?”

“Nope, a one million *karma* Pyramid!” exclaimed Frank happily.

Max slumped into his seat. “I’m going to need another drink,” he said wearily, as Frank walked up to the taps.

“And, uh ... how far along are you then, if you don’t mind me asking?” Max asked.

“Gettin’ there, gettin’ there. If I wasn’t a diligent patron of my own bar it’d probably be going a lot quicker,” responded Frank, pouring Max’s beer.

“Here, here!” exclaimed Nosy, clinking glasses with his neighbor, who fell off his bar stool.

“You know what, can I get that to go, if possible?” asked Max.

Frank nodded and transferred the drink to a paper cup, which Max paid for before going outside. He quickly walked across the street to his apartment building, paused as the huge glass lobby doors opened automatically, and headed in.

The décor inside made the outside look...well, not gaudy. Light fixtures sprouted from every wall and corner possible and shone in every shade, while rotating endlessly, giving the impression of a disco for the color blind. Thick metal chains hung from the ceiling and the floor was carpeted in a shag rug that was rich, red and a half-foot deep. Wading through this, Max made his way over toward a massive mahogany desk that stood against the far wall.

“MMmmmmmmmyeeeeessssss?” a voice called from somewhere behind the mammoth construction.

“Hi there. I’m a new ... resident.”

The voice looked Max up and down disapprovingly. “Mmmmmmyiiii see. Well then mhwhyyy don’t you hand me over your apartment key and mmmmy’ll have a quick looksee.”

Max complied and waited to the sound of a few levers being levered, a few dials dialed, and a few of what could only be described as clankers clanked.

“Myalll right then. Hmmm, myou are in room 437 - the Calavera Suite. Just take the mmmlevator right on up to the fourth floor. Have a pleasant stay with mmmys Myr. Myarrow. Myahh.”

Max stared blankly at the mmmyan and wordlessly walked toward the elevator.

“NINE ... EIGHT ... SEVEN,” happily boomed a sing song voice, in accordance with the flashing lights above that matched the floor level. Max looked around, confused.

“SIX ... FIVE ... FOUR, ALMOST THERE!”

Max stepped back a few yards.

“THREE ... TWO ... FOUR NO, JUST KIDDING! ONE! TAAADAAA,” proclaimed the elevator.

“There isn’t some sort of staircase, is there?” asked Max meekly.

“NOW WHY WOULD YOU EVEN WANT TO KNOW THAT?”

“I just ... never mind,” said Max, stepping inside. “Floor four, please.”

“WHAT WAS THAT? FORTY FOUR?”

“No, nope. Four. Just four. Three floors up.”

“AH, GREAT! FLOOR FORTY THREE, COMING RIGHT UP! ONE ... TWO”

“Just FOUR please!

“OKKKKKKAY. WHY DIDN’T YOU JUST SAY SO? WAY TO GET MY HOPES UP AND EVERYTHING. ANYWAY, THREE ... THREE AND A HALF ... FOUR!!!! FOURTH FLOOOOOOR TADAAAA!” said the elevator as the doors opened.

“Thank you!” Max jumped out of the elevator and ran down the hall until he came to his apartment door.

“GOOOD NIGHT MISTER 437!!”

One quick key turn and door open later, and Max was inside his new abode. Red and gold trim ran along the length of the walls and the only sound was the hum of the air conditioner. The apartment was immaculately kept but sparsely furnished. There was a bed, a lamp, a couch, a desk, a bookshelf, and a TV, but beyond that, not much else. No paintings or photos, nor anything that gave the room any sense of history or permanence at all. Max barely took in any of this, however, and without any chance for further contemplation on the day’s fantastical events, dropped like a lead log on his bed and immediately fell asleep.