

# Change

By

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## Chapter 1

He opened his eyes slowly. His vision blurred, adjusting to the dim glow of neon lights that crept into his room from the adjacent buildings. This room looked surreal in the early hours of the night and with a groan he climbed out of bed. The clock on his kitchen table read 8:47. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the blinking light on his terminal and sat down to check his messages.

Commented [1]: Ahren Dowe

The pale face looked at him from the terminal screen. "Don't forget why I- you, why WE made this decision. Try to remember, after what we did, this was one of the easier decisions to make. I don't know exactly how it will affect our memory, but just don't forget that this is who you were. Once we get the procedure it'll be a fresh start, new name, new city, hopefully new friends. Whatever happens after this, just remember that regardless of what anyone says, I-you, can be whatever you want to be, and *nothing* is going to stop us! I know some people say your memory fades once it's done, so now I'm gonna page through some of our photo albums. There's me and mom..."

He tapped the spacebar and paused the video's playback. Reaching out and touching the screen, he was left with a perplexing pit in his stomach. The family in

the photo album was smiling and laughing, but... he couldn't for the life of him remember anything about them. Obviously it was him and his mother, he'd just told himself that, but why couldn't he remember anything about them, and why did he have this feeling that he didn't want to hear what came next? Against his better judgment he hit the play button and let old him in the recording fill him in on his life, all the while the twisting in stomach worsened, he was almost on the edge of tears, but video him was only talking about vacations and working in IT. Then realization hit him, video him's voice turned somber as he turned the page. "And this is Mom's funeral. We weren't there, but Reb took pictures and said the pastor gave a lovely eulogy."

He let out a small whimper and began to cry, he had no recollection of being the man in the video, couldn't remember his mother, or why he'd missed her funeral. Everything before waking up this morning was hazy at best and anything concrete quickly faded into nothingness when he tried to latch onto it. As the rest of the video played out he sat there with anger and contempt, staring at his former self recant their past life with such lackadaisical nonchalance.

The recording ended with a still frame of video him reaching forward to grab the camera. As the recording ended, and video him's angular face faded to black it was replaced with his reflection on the screen.

He reached up and ran his fingers across the patchy fur slowly growing in on his new face. *Gone* was the pale skin and sharp human features he'd had just— how long ago? He couldn't remember when he'd first woken up, it couldn't have been more than a week. All he could remember doing for the last several days was climbing out of bed, scavenging food from the kitchen, and then slumping back into bed and sleeping.

His mind was wandering again, he focused once again on his reflection, manipulating his face to examine the features that now constituted *him*. Overall he would describe his new face as foxish, his previously flat face now sported a muzzle, and rather than round ears on the side of his head, he had two triangles jutting from the crown of his skull. He ran his thumb across the top row of teeth, applying enough pressure for them to dig into his skin and leave a mark. Now moving his attention to his hands, he noticed the patchy spots of fur covering most of his head ran down his arms to the back of them, his palms though were still rough skin. It was difficult to see in the dimming light of evening but the closer he looked at his fingertips the less sure he was he could make out a fingerprint.

Had those been taken with the rest of his former identity? He got up and stumbled into the bathroom and turned the lights on to get a clear look at himself in the mirror. The motley patches of grey-

brown fur covered most of his body. The space in-between was filled with a short ground hair that he hoped would even out eventually. Looking at them closely under the fluorescent lights he could see that sure enough, there was no pattern to be found on the tips of his fingers.

He remembered his own words from the video, "*after what we did*", what could he have done that merited a full body resculpt, the removal of his fingerprints, and a memory wipe? He steadied himself on the edge of the sink and just started into the mirror. Even his eyes were different. In the video they'd been a bright hazel, almost green, now though, now they were a dull blue, bordering on grey in the sterile glow from the cold bathroom light. He splashed some water on his face to try and snap himself out of it, then realized that now with fur, he'd have to find something to dry himself off with.

Once he'd gotten himself sufficiently dried off, he walked back to the computer and began to search for any more messages he'd left for himself. He searched through the files on the computer for a few minutes before coming to the realization that this computer had either been wiped, or was brand new, as there was nothing personal on the machine, save an email client and the video he'd downloaded earlier. He closed his eyes and tried to think about his past, hoping

that any part of his memory was intact, but any ephemeral glimpse of a memory slipped from him the moment he tried to focus on it. The only thing he could remember with clarity was waking up in this apartment with a handwritten note on his bedside table.

He walked over to the kitchen to find something to eat. He'd managed to go through all of the canned goods and was down to his last frozen meal. As the oven was preheating he started searching through the chest of drawers at the foot of his bed, hoping he'd left himself some money to buy food with.

Digging through several drawers resulted in nothing but several dull colored shirts, a few pairs of pants, two other hoodies, and a weird watch. He was examining the watch when the oven beeped, alerting him that it had reached cooking temperature, but as he set it down the face came to life. He thought it was odd, but left it for the moment to go tend to the kitchen.

Once his tv dinner was in and the timer was set he grabbed the watch and sat down at the table in the kitchen to examine it. It was an unassuming, if sleek slab of glass and aluminum with black straps. The case had a single button on the side, and no other openings he could find. He gave it a tap and a shake to try and assay the thing, but it refused to give up any secrets, that was until he strapped it to his wrist.

As soon as the cold casing made contact with the thinly furred back of his wrist, the screen lit up and displayed a digital watch face with the time and date. October 27th, 9:53 PM. He swiped at the edges of the screen to try and pull up a menu, only to be met with a disheartening message on the tiny screen. "STEP 1: VOCAL PATTERN REQUIRED FOR UNLOCK".

He tried prattling off anything he could think of, hoping that he'd had the forethought to make the password something he'd be able to figure out without his memories. After several incorrect attempts a new message popped up on the screen. "PASSWORD HINT: MY NAME". He racked his brain. The him in the video hadn't mentioned their name, and that was just one more on the long list of things he couldn't remember.

Thoroughly dejected from what was arguably a small setback compared to everything else that was going on in his life, he just slumped down at the table and closed his eyes, waiting for his sym-ribs and potatoes to finish cooking.

As he sat there eating, he couldn't help but wonder why he hadn't left any more help for himself. The him from the video seemed to know roughly what would happen to him, but he didn't leave any notes other than the one saying that there was food stocked in the kitchen and that email...

He jumped up from the table in the kitchen alcove and ran over to the computer. He tapped the power button and waited the excruciating seconds for the machine to boot up. Once the screen finally came to life, he opened the email client and scanned the screen looking for the sent/received section. The message had been sent from and to *Al.Donne@MWP.Gov*, but *A.Dowe@haven.io* was *BCCed*.

"Al Donne?" he said aloud, holding the watch's screen up to his mouth and pressing the side button. Dots appeared on the screen and began cycling up and down as the device thought about his input. After a moment the screen turned red and a new message appeared, "PASSWORD INCORRECT". He took a deep breath and tried again, pressing the button and saying "A Dowe" to the device.

More time passed in what felt like slow motion as he watched the dots move about the screen. He closed his eyes as the dots disappeared, bracing himself for another failure, but he was instead pulled from his stupor by a small chime and a synthesized voice. "Welcome back *Ahren Dowe*, how may I assist you?" it chirped. He let out a laugh, "So my name is *Ahren Dowe*." he whispered to himself, shaking his head and smiling.



Now with the device finally unlocked, he walked back to his dinner while looking through the various applications and programs on it. Most of the programs seemed to be the bog standard that come pre-installed on comms, all with a matching sleek theme and unassuming names, but two apps caught his eye: Virtual Assistant, and Banking. When he tapped the Virtual Assistant app the same voice from before chirped at him, "How can I help you *Ahren?*"

He sat there in silence staring at the screen for a few moments, racking his brain for something to ask the robotic assistant. Coming up empty, he tapped the home button and navigated back to the banking app. He placed his finger on the reader dot when it asked him from a biometric challenge, and with an exaggerated click, the screen changed to an account summary page.

"Fifteen thousand credits" he read in a hushed voice, "where did I get all of this from?"

Playing around in the app for a while, checking various pages, he eventually found the transaction log. He had been receiving regular weekly payments of five hundred credits for the last seven and a half months.

"Is that how long I've been here, or was I getting money before I came here? I only remember waking up a week ago."

He quickly tabbed back over to the Virtual Assistant app and cut off the cheerful voice, asking it "When was the last time you were activated before tonight?"

Three dots popped up and danced along the screen as the assistant thought about its answer. "This device was previously activated on August 15th."

"Was it me who activated it?"

"*Ahren Dowe* is the only registered user of this device."

"Did *Al Donne* leave any messages for me?"

"*Ahren Dowe* is the only registered user of this device."

"Did I leave any messages for myself?"

"There are *ZERO* messages on this device. Would you like to record a new message?"

"No thank you."

## Chapter 2

Waking up the next day, he felt somewhat relieved. He could remember that his name was Ahren, and that he'd gotten access to a smart device the previous night. Little victories were important when his entire world was a blur. He got up and walked to the kitchen before remembering that he'd eaten the last of his food the previous night.

"If I'm gonna go out and get food I should probably shower first." He thought to himself while walking over to the computer terminal. He sat down and started looking up best grooming practices for body sculpted people, and once he'd managed to get through the pages of advertisements from the biomorph corps like Rachke, ThetaTech and Belinski, he finally found some useful forums where actual people were having discussions.

Eventually his stomach gave him a growl and he decided he best just get to it so he could get out and buy some food.

Since his fur was so short and patchy, the shower was much less of an ordeal than he'd expected, but he did still end up using three towels to fully dry off. Tapping the screen of the watch to wake it up, he spoke aloud to the Virtual Assistant,

"Can you remind me to buy an air drier?"

"\*Buy an air drier\* added to todo list. Is there anything else I can help you with Ahren?"

"Thats all thanks."

"Then have a good day"

He slowly got dressed in some of the cleaner clothes he had laying around, and started towards the door. At the threshold he paused, as if something was holding him back. This would be the first time he ventured outside of the small room since waking up. Would anyone recognise him? Did he have any friends in this city? Who was video him so afraid of that he'd undergo a memory wipe and a full body morph to hide from them?

It was overwhelming, he didn't know if he'd been standing there with his hand on the door handle for seconds or hours. Another quiet squelch from his stomach told him that it had probably been at least a few minutes, but the hunger pangs weren't any worse than they'd been when he'd awoken that morning.

Letting go of the handle sent a shock down his spine and snapped him back to the present. He pulled his hand away and rubbed it as if it were injured by the mere act of touching the metal. He started to hyperventilate and ran back to his bed, shoving his head under a pillow in an attempt to stop the world from

spinning. Once the feeling of nausea passed he slowly sat up and steadied himself.

"Well if I can't go outside maybe I can get something delivered?" he thought.

He brought the watch up to his face, and after keying the button weakly said, "Can I order groceries to be delivered?"

The dots on the device danced up and down for a moment before the Virtual Assistant chimed back, "Certainly Ahren, where would you like to order from?"

"I don't even know what the hallway looks like, how am I supposed to know what shops are around here?" he muttered under his breath.

"I can download a map of the local area if you would like Ahren", the Virtual Assistant chimed.

"Shit! I didn't know I said that out loud."

"I monitor all of your vitals and can detect speech patterns based off of the vibrations in your body."

"That's concerning..."

"Not at all, with this technology I can better assist an incapacitated user."

"Can I turn it off?"

"Yes, but I would advise against it, vitals and telemetry data help me to keep you safe."

The comment made him pause, why was a virtual assistant concerned about his safety?

"What model of phone are you?"

"I am not a phone, I am a Virtual Assistant Smart Wrist Comm."

"Okay... Well who is your manufacturer?"

"I am a bespoke one of one Model, I have no publicly listed manufacturer."

"Then who built you?"

The dots on the screen cycled rhythmically for what seemed like an eternity, as if the virtual assistant were actually thinking about it's response.

"My hardware is of Alken-Hartjen Engineering production, and my base operating system is of FSI Technology architecture, but was heavily modified by a private third party."

"And do you have any information on that third party?"

"I am sorry Ahren, my programming prevents me from going into specific detail about this subject. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"No that's fine..." He sat there contemplating that short conversation he'd just had with his watch. Why was the Virtual Assistant monitoring him, was that data being sent anywhere, who, or what built it, and most of all, why did he get the feeling that finding out the answer to any of these questions would lead to the same sort of trouble that made past him wipe their memory and change their body? Trying to push that all aside, and praying that the amnesia drugs were still in his system enough to forget this whole debacle, he opened the maps the Virtual Assistant had downloaded and began looking for places to buy food.