

“Your agreement with reality defines life.”

– Steve Maraboli

Alice looked at the words written on her laptop screen.

What is everyone's agreement with life? She thinks to herself as she glances around the classroom.

In a computer lab, multiple students around her age are all looking up, appearing to be listening to the presentation lit up by an old projector, being taught by a teacher who gives the idea that he has taught the lesson one too many times.

What agreement has he made with life?

“Alright, class, we are going to be moving into compositions and what they mean. If we look at the next image, we can see the medium-full shot that depicts...”

The uninterested voice continues, starting to muffle out in the girl's mind. The world is lost in her train of thought.

This was a common day for Alice. Sitting in her lecture, trying to focus in class, wondering if this is all there is to life.

That is the reality of this society. Alice rests her head on her hand, pretending to look at the lecture and listen. Every day seemed to be a repeat for her. Yes, she did new things, learned new stuff, and talked with friends. But as the days continued, everything felt like a repeat over and over again. Working towards getting a job that you will work in for the rest of your life. But what kind of life is that?

She thinks of a life of adventure, like the movies she watches where they travel and fight monsters, or movies where an apocalyptic event has happened and everyone must survive in a newfound society.

A newfound society? It's an interesting thought.

Hobbes tells us that without a society or government, life would be nasty, brutish, and short. But would it really? Alice thinks.

“If we — pages to — follow with me —”

With that thought, everything remains silent and muffled until coming to a complete stop.

She glances up, zoned back in at the sudden silence.

The classroom was devoid of everyone. Bags and clothes remained, even the screen with the same lecture slide was frozen.

"Hello?" Alice stood up from her chair, confused. Was there a fire alarm? How could she have missed that? She wasn't that out of it. Alice slowly packed her bag, confused about the situation, and slung her bag onto her back as she left the classroom.

When she got into the hallway, it still came as a surprise that there was no one to be seen. An eerie silence flowed through the halls, causing a slight ringing in the absence of noise.

Where the hell was everyone? Alice called out again, walking into the cafeteria. "Hellooo?" she shouted with hesitation in her voice. "Where the hell is everyone?" she said under her breath.

She decided on the fact that there was a fire alarm and she must have fallen asleep, although she didn't remember being that tired, and she was an incredibly light sleeper and would always wake throughout the night.

A fact she has come to find out since she moved to the city. An attempt to move forward in life and find more adventure in the black and white she has always felt painted her life.

Alice left the cafeteria and decided to further leave the school. The whole world couldn't be gone, after all. As she approached the front doors, she saw people standing outside, and a wave of relief went over her.

When she approached the outer doors, she went to push them open, but they did not budge. Embarrassed at the thought it was a pull door and not push, she tried again to pull it open.

The door did not budge. Were they locked? She looked up to the people outside, and chills ran down her spine. They did not move. Instead, they stood like statues, frozen in time.

Alice slowly backed away from the door with caution.

"What the hell is happening?" she said, bewildered.

She tried again to open the doors with no success. Panicked, she ran to the stairwell to try the fire escape doors. This must be some misunderstanding. She tried the fire escape doors and had no luck—they did not move.

The windows, she thought. They couldn't be locked. In a rush, she ran to the hall and up to a sliding window. She tried again with as much strength as she could muster to slide the window open.

It did not move.

"This is not happening." She looked around in panic, still seeing no one in sight, then out the window at the cars on the street, paused in motion. Alice wasn't one for vandalism, but she had no choice. She turned around to grab a chair at a table and swung it hard into the window.

The hall resonated with an echoing boom and shatter, and she closed her eyes tight, letting go of the chair. When the silence settled back in, Alice opened her eyes with a shocked look.

The window was shattered but still stayed intact, with the exception of vines and moss coming from the cracks.

Alice got closer to it, looking at the window. What the hell was that? She picked the chair up again, determined to escape, and swung it once more. When it hit the window, there was no loud boom or shatter, but more pieces of glass fell down as more cracks were replaced with the presence of this moss.

Alice stood there, at a loss for the sight and defeated by this mystery.

“Who is the one making so much noise?!”

A loud voice suddenly echoed through the hall from up high.

Alice turned around frantically to see where the voice came from, only to be greeted with the sight of another girl her age standing at the top of the staircase that led down into the hall from an upper level.

The girl stood with her nose up in the air and her hands planted on her hips, almost like a ship captain angry that someone had damaged her ship. To add to the thought, she wore a bright blue jacket with white sleeves, like a type of respected general.

“What the hell is going on?!” Alice yelled from the bottom of the room.

“And who the hell are you?” Alice continued.

The unnamed girl stepped back with her hand on her heart, an offended look on her face.

“I am the person who rules this world, thank you very much!” she said proudly as she started to walk down the stairs, with a hand on the rail and her head still held high.

“And as the ruler, you must tell me your name!”

Alice stood in her place at a loss for words.

Was she in a coma? Is this a dream? She ignored the girl approaching her and looked down at her hands. She started to pinch the back of her hand and only came to the conclusion that it must be a type of lucid dream—

“It’s not a dream,” the girl, who now stood a couple of feet away from her, interrupted her thought, or rather continued it.

Still in shock, Alice just looked up at the girl, now getting a better look at her. She had short auburn hair that framed her face well and ended just before her shoulders. Freckles adorned her cheeks, and she had a weird grin on her face, giving Alice the vibe that something was off about her. Her eyes were dark, like lifeless pits.

"It's not a dream, and my name is Mira," she repeated as she extended a hand out. "Your name is?"

"Alice," she said, confused as she took the hand in front of her to shake it.

"What's going on?" she continued.

"I'll tell you everything as long as you answer one question," Mira—the girl—said hastily. "It's an important one," she continued as she leaned in, still holding Alice's hand. "Can you cook?"

"What..?" Alice said, not expecting the question.

"Can you cook, Alice? Hurry, it's important!" Mira now started to yell.

"Uh, yes—yes, I can cook."

"GREAT! Let's go, 'cause I'm starving," Mira exclaimed as she pulled Alice by the hand out of the hall.

"Hold on! What's going on?!" Alice yelled back, getting pulled away.

Mira stayed silent, with only a smile on her face and determination to lead Alice somewhere.

They arrived at the cafeteria, and Mira let go of her hand. Alice immediately backed away, thoroughly annoyed with the situation.

"Mona—"

"Mira." She immediately corrected. "Queen Mira to you." She emphasized the 'you' in a sarcastic way. "Now, Alice, see the cafeteria? There is fresh food at your disposal. Make me a sandwich, and I will explain everything."

Alice opened her mouth to respond but gave up with a dramatic sigh and walked into the kitchen area to make food. She wasn't following her orders—she was also hungry, okay!

After a couple of minutes, Alice walked back to the seating area to find Mira lying back in a chair with her feet on the table. Alice walked up to the table, slamming the plates down to get her attention and to prove she had had enough of this behavior. Mira only opened one eye and closed it again, ignoring her.

"Are you always this annoying, or is this my subconscious punishing me?" Alice said in an unimpressed tone.

"Not subconscious," Mira responded, sitting up and taking the plate. "Your queen thanks you, loyal guard," Mira continued with a proud voice.

"I'm done with this." Alice turned around quickly and started to walk away, her hands balled into fists, annoyed with the other's behavior.

"This is real," Mira said suddenly. Alice stopped walking and stood in her place, waiting for her to continue.

"This is real, and no, this is not a dream. You're not in a coma or have fallen into an alternate dimension. It's an in-between," Mira finished saying, now more focused on the sandwich than the conversation.

"An in-between? What does that even mean? And why are all the doors locked? Why is everyone frozen out there?" Alice began to panic more as she talked.

"Calm down and eat." Mira pushed the other plate a bit to motion for her to sit down. "Look, I can't explain everything. I'm not some scientist or god with all the answers. I just know that this is some sort of in-between reality only certain people can enter," Mira continued as she ate.

"What do you mean, only certain people can enter?" Alice pressed on.

Mira shrugged.

"Why can't we leave?"

"Don't know."

"Well, you must not have checked all the doors."

"I did," Mira said, unimpressed.

"Well, you may have given up, but I haven't!" Alice slammed both hands on the table, standing up and storming off.

"I'll be in room 10041 when you're done," Mira said, now grabbing the other plate and rolling her eyes.

After searching for an exit all day with no success, Alice's stomach began to hurt. She had left in a hurry to find a way out and forgot the sandwich she made.

What the hell was wrong with that girl? she thought. How does she not care about the situation?

As she thought about it more, looking around, it was quite peaceful here. Yes, everyone was gone and frozen outside for some reason, but with all the concern and worry for her physical state, she thought, for a second, that she could breathe.

The sun began to set, and the school was illuminated in an orange glow. Her stomach grumbled again, and she clenched her teeth, annoyed at the defeat.

"10041, huh," she mumbled, walking down the hall.

As she approached the door, the lights began to switch off, and it started to become dark as the sun set. Alice had a tense yet excited feeling, like when you're a kid sneaking into a place you're not supposed to be. As it got darker, she noticed light coming from a classroom. As she approached the room, the number on it read **10041**. She sighed and pushed the door open.

In what seemed to be a classroom, Mira lay on a couch, watching TV on a projector. The light illuminated the room as it played a movie. The classroom furniture had been misplaced—chairs stacked in the corner, a couch in the middle. To the side, there were tables with little trinkets on them and plants. Comfy furniture and chairs, which Alice recognized from other rooms, had replaced all the desks, making it look like a weirdly put-together living room.

Alice walked over and sat down in a chair beside the couch in defeat, watching the movie on the screen.

"Given up?" Mira's voice came from the couch as she yawned and rubbed her eyes.

"Yeah," Alice said quietly, not wanting to give the other girl satisfaction.

"It's not as bad here as you may think. Look, I get it—it can be alarming to go from being surrounded by people and living in a regular world to no one around. But you'll get used to it. You're here for a reason, after all. We both are."

"And what reason could that possibly be?" Alice responded, now more interested in the conversation.

"Don't know. We all have our own reasons. I think it has something to do with detachment from reality, personally," Mira said, not even looking over at her, instead invested in the movie.

"Our own reasons, huh," Alice responded and thought about earlier today.

Mira has felt detached from reality? Was she the same? She felt so detached that she somehow transported herself into the "in-between," as Mira called it.

"You should eat. I can hear your stomach from over here," Mira interrupted her thought.

Alice's face heated up in embarrassment, and she looked over at the coffee table. It had been a desk with the legs cut shorter. She chuckled at the craftsmanship.

On top of the makeshift coffee table sat the sandwich from earlier. Mira had kept it and waited for her to come back.

She picked the sandwich up and started to eat.

"Thank you," Alice said.

"I'm your queen, not a savage," Mira commented, now giving her a side glance with that stupid smirk.

Alice rolled her eyes and continued watching the movie as she ate.

Maybe this wasn't so bad.

Alice woke up in a panic. Disoriented, she glanced around the room. The hybrid living room/classroom was now fully illuminated by the sun, and the memories of the previous day came rushing back. Right. She was still trapped in this strange place. As she shifted in the chair, she noticed a blanket draped over her. When had she fallen asleep? She didn't remember sleeping that soundly in a long time.

The smell of bacon filled the air, leading her out into the hallway and back to the cafeteria. There, she found the same girl from yesterday, panicking over a smoking stove. Mira glanced up, beaming with excitement, and waved.

"You're awake! You slept for a long time," she laughed, setting two plates down on a table. The food looked suspiciously like burnt bacon and eggs.

"You can't cook for shit, can you?" Alice chuckled, stepping into the kitchen to remake their breakfast.

Mira only shrugged, smiling to herself as she took a seat.

A short while later, Alice returned with freshly cooked food and placed the plates on a table by the window. Mira sat there, gazing out at the empty world beyond.

"So, we're stuck here then," Alice said, sitting down. "What do you even do all day?"

Mira smirked, clearly excited for the day ahead.

Over the next few days, the two girls spent their time doing whatever they pleased. If they had to be trapped somewhere, a college campus wasn't the worst place. They had access to a courtyard—technically the only outdoor space available—a gym with a pool and showers, a pub, and a fully stocked food court.

As the days passed, Alice made some interesting discoveries. Despite the passage of time, nothing in the school seemed to age—food never spoiled, supplies never ran out, and the power remained on, keeping water and electricity functioning as if frozen in time.

To pass the time, they occupied themselves with different projects. They repurposed furniture in the manufacturing classrooms, welding and painting to make the space more colorful and comfortable.

They even started a small garden in the courtyard, just to see if anything would grow in this strange reality.

Though she found Mira annoyingly carefree at first, Alice quickly realized how easy it was to be around her. She could talk freely without fear of judgment and joke without worrying about offending her. They both chose to ignore the greater mystery of the "in-between"—if Mira didn't have all the answers, there was no point in asking. They simply had to keep going and see what happened.

A week later, Alice decided to surprise Mira by setting up a makeshift movie theater in the main hall while the other girl was in the gym—most likely using the showers. Mira had made it clear early on that she valued her privacy in the gym's washrooms, and Alice respected that.

She stepped into the hall but immediately froze.

The cracked window from her first day—the one she had shattered—had changed. The fractures had spread beyond the glass, creeping into the frame and even into the floor. Within those cracks, something had begun to grow. Moss, roots, and small plants had taken over, twisting and expanding as if consuming the building itself.

Her breath caught as she reached out to touch the strange growth.

"STOP!"

Mira's voice rang through the hall, sharp with urgency.

Alice turned to see her standing in the doorway, her expression uncharacteristically tense.

"Don't touch that stuff," Mira warned, stepping closer. "It's dangerous."

Alice hesitated, glancing back at the creeping foliage. "Why? What is it?"

"I don't know," Mira admitted. "But it's not the only one. Follow me."

There was something off about her tone—something Alice had never heard before.

Without another word, Mira turned and stormed off in the opposite direction. Alice hurried after her, following her down to the loading docks on a lower level, where the school's culinary program likely received its food shipments.

When they reached the dock doors, Mira pointed to the small glass window in one of them. Alice peered through and felt a shiver crawl up her spine.

The door on the other side of the loading dock was partially open—but instead of leading outside, a tangle of dark roots and vines had forced their way in. They pulsed, like something alive, stretching

across the entire dock and pressing against the doors. Some tendrils even peeked through the cracks beneath their feet.

"When I first got here, I tried to open the loading docks," Mira said, staring at the mass of roots. "That's when this stuff showed up. And since then, it's been growing."

Alice turned to face her. Mira's usual relaxed posture was gone. She stood rigid, gripping her left arm as if unconsciously seeking comfort.

"How long ago was that?" Alice asked, realization dawning on her.

Mira hesitated, then finally answered.

"Two months ago."

Alice whipped her head toward her in shock.

"You were here alone for two months before I showed up?!"

Mira only shrugged. "Yeah."

Before Alice could press further, Mira abruptly turned away.

"Let's have a campfire tonight! Queen's orders." She pointed dramatically toward the exit and strolled off as if nothing had happened.

Alice frowned. She could tell Mira was dodging the conversation—but for now, she let it go.

The small courtyard between wings was glowing orange from a little campfire built in the center. Alice and Mira sat side by side, roasting marshmallows that took way too long to find in the culinary sector. It was nice in the courtyard; there was fresh air, and it wasn't too cold. You could even see some stars, although most were outshined by the lights of the school. The fire was hot; since it was late spring, it had gotten warmer outside, and the fire made it even warmer. Alice glanced over at Mira in her blue jacket, wondering how she wasn't hot. The more she thought about it, Mira was always wearing that jacket.

"Is that jacket important to you in some way?" Alice asked.

"No, why do you ask?" Mira looked over at Alice, not paying attention to the marshmallow she had slowly been losing due to the fire.

"It's just that you're always wearing it. I don't think I've even seen you take it off, really." At the comment, Mira immediately looked away for a second in thought. When she looked back up, she had a smirk on her face.

"What? The jacket looks so good you wish you had one, huh? You couldn't pull this off, peasant!" It had been the wrong thing to say on Mira's part. Alice smiled and lunged at her to rip the jacket off. "Wait, STOP!" Mira yelled, but it was in vain.

"Let's see who really looks better in that jacket!" She tackled her to the ground and got the jacket off, throwing it over her shoulders proudly and turning to show Mira.

Mira, still on the ground, looked up at her in terror. That's odd, did she really look that bad in the jacket? Alice thought. Why did she have that look?

Then she saw it.

"Mira... what the hell?" Alice looked down at the girl as she held her left arm. The arm was decorated with the same roots that unearthed themselves from the hall and loading dock. So that's what she meant by "they are dangerous." Alice knelt down to touch her arm, and Mira flinched back.

"Just don't! It's fine. It started growing a while ago, but it's fine. Nothing to worry about." Mira looked pissed, and she stood up, grabbing her jacket and sitting back down by the fire.

"It's not fine, Mira. If it's growing, what does that mean? Doesn't it hurt?" Alice watched her arm as the roots started to move. Mira grabbed her arm and clenched her teeth in pain. She was lying.
"Mira—"

"For Christ's sake, just leave it alone! Don't you know when to quit? I said stop searching. You did anyway and caused more trouble for us. Then you go and almost get yourself infected too. Can't this just be enough? I said it's fine." Mira started to shout and stood up, walking back inside. "I'm going to bed." She disappeared behind the doors and into the school as Alice stood in the courtyard, staring at the doors, hoping she would come back. Will it kill her? She immediately changed her train of thought. She wasn't going to live here without her. She needed to find a way to help her. The past two weeks, she had never felt more alive, and it wasn't going to end now.

The next day, they woke up and met in the cafeteria for breakfast. They said nothing about the night before. Mira continued to act boisterous, laughing about stories and jokes from her past, and Alice pretended everything was okay, quietly eating her toast, listening to the other girl. Except it was different. They both knew the future that was coming for them. Alice knew if they didn't find a way out soon, Mira would probably—

"Stop thinking about it."

Mira interrupted her thoughts again. How did the girl always know what she was thinking?

"It's your face," Mira deadpanned.

"Stop reading my thoughts! Witch!" Alice yelled back.

"Everything is going to be fine. This reality is better than any other we could be in anyway," Mira huffed out. She went back to talking about a movie they should watch later until she decided to go wash up. When she left, Alice sat there crushed. It was a sick kind of joke after all. As soon as she gets to live in a better reality, her own society, there has to be something to ruin it. What is a utopia without something dark underneath to keep it afloat anyway?

But it wasn't even just the world. She got to know someone and connect with another person better than she ever had before in her life. Her family would always be busy with other matters, and friends came and went. Mira was a constant in this world. Always there at the end of the day and when she woke. The girl even knew what she was thinking. Alice stood up from her seat, storming off. She wasn't going to lose something she had always been looking for in life as soon as she got it.

She started searching the school again, starting from the basement, trying all the doors and keys she could find to unlock the doors. She worked her way up each floor and across. She only had so much time before Mira was going to be looking for her again. On the top floor, she tried all the doors, vents, and windows. Until she came to the north stairwell. Did she ever actually try the roof?

As she reached the door, she grabbed the handle, breathing in slowly and closing her eyes. She didn't want to lose Mira, and this was her last hope. When she pushed the handle down and pulled, the door creaked open, and her heart started beating out of her chest.

It was open.

She ran to the doorway, looking out, and life outside began to move again. The cars on the street zoomed by, and the sound of idle chatter from below could be heard. It was lightly raining, and the wind felt good on her skin. She really had never felt better to hear the sounds of the world spinning again.

That was until she was pulled back in from behind.

Alice stumbled back, and the door slammed shut loudly. Arms were wrapped around her, and a face was buried into her shoulders.

"Alice, wait," Mira's voice was muffled in her shirt as she held her arms around her tightly. Alice could feel the adrenaline rush through her at the realization Mira knew about the door. Why else would she pull her back in?

"Mira, let go of me." Alice said in a flat tone, pushing her off. Her hands started to shake with anger. "How long have you known about this?" She said, looking her straight in the eyes. Mira looked scared again. It wasn't a good look on her. She was always so happy or proud.

"I—I don't know..." She mumbled, not wanting to look up at Alice. "I found it a little while ago, around the day you arrived."

"WHY DID YOU NOT TELL ME, MIRA?" Alice shouted, grabbing her left arm. "YOU COULD— you could be dying." She held her arm tightly until she saw the noticeable pain on Mira's face. Her eyes were dark underneath, probably from lack of sleep. They needed to go back.

"I know. And I know I should have told you about the door, but I like living here. I like you, Alice. We could be living in a worse reality. We have food and water here. We don't have to go back to working and making money just to spend it in an endless cycle to survive. We can live freely here... we're happy here, right?" She rambled on, trying to convince Alice to stay. "I don't understand. We're in this in-between to escape from reality. Congratulations, we've got it. Why do you think you're here too, Alice? It means you were trying to escape something so badly that you ended up here too. And now that you have it, you want to run away from it." That got Alice's attention.

"I'm not running away, Mira. Look, I enjoy it here too. I don't want to leave, but it's not safe. You need medical assistance. That could only be getting worse. I can't live here without you. We could go back together. Yeah, sure, this 'in-between' is nice, but you're the reason it's been fun. We can go back and still be happy together," Alice tried.

"Don't you get what I'm saying? I can't go back. There's nothing for me there..." Tears began to stream down her face as she spoke, and her breathing began to pick up. Alice pulled her tightly into a hug to stop her.

"It's okay. Let's just think about it. We have time, right?" Alice spoke softly to her as the girl cried, still holding her tightly.

They finished off the day with their usual gardening tasks and painting the school. Alice had been painting near the hall when she noticed the growth there. The roots had almost stretched across the whole room, and the moss was everywhere. She ignored the sight and went back to painting. Later, they made dinner together and went back to the homey classroom to watch that movie Mira had mentioned earlier in the day. It was peaceful, and they sat on the couch together until eventually, the two fell asleep side by side.

When Mira woke, it was noticeably colder. Alice was gone. She sprang up in panic, knowing exactly where she was going. Mira ran out of the classroom and down the hallway to get to the stairwell where the door was. In the panic of it all, sharp pains ran up her arms, causing her to gasp out in pain and stop in her tracks. Why was it hurting this bad all of a sudden? At the bottom of the staircase, the hall was in view.

Alice was standing in the hall in the middle of the roots and moss with her eyes closed and arms outstretched.

Mira quickly changed course and ran to the doorway.

"ALICE, STOP!" she yelled. "What are you doing?" Roots and vines spread up her arms and legs, and she wore the same grin Mira always had.

"Not giving you a choice," Alice laughed, but it was soon followed by a pained scream as the roots spread up her neck. Mira sprinted down the hall, dodging the roots, and reached Alice. The roots had been holding her in place. Mira grabbed Alice's arm with both hands, pulling with all her strength. The roots separated from Alice, and they both crashed to the ground right outside the hall. Alice's breaths became labored as the roots clung to her neck, almost suffocating her.

"We need to leave, Mira. I can't breathe."

"Why would you do this? You're so stupid," Mira shouted, helping Alice to her feet. She grabbed Alice's arm and pulled her up the stairs with her. "We could've stayed here longer. You could've gone back once I was gone. Why?"

Alice didn't respond, her eyes unfocused and pained. Mira could feel Alice's pain just from the tight grip on her arm. Knowing that, she guessed Alice was on the verge of passing out from the roots covering her body. When they reached the top of the staircase, Mira swung the door open and stood in front of Alice.

"You need to go through now. You can't stay here," Mira said, tears streaming down her face as she realized she would have to leave Alice behind. She didn't want this. She wanted to stay in this in-between world with Alice and live out her days peacefully. Alice had made the world feel alive again, meaningful.

When Alice looked up at her, she smiled, vines slowly reaching up her face as she closed her eyes.

"Sorry, Your Majesty, but you'll be joining me, too."

Alice fell backward through the doorway, and Mira was suddenly pulled along with her. When she looked down, she saw that the roots on their arms had fused together.

In that moment, Mira just laughed, tears in her eyes. So, that's what Alice had planned.

Maybe she was okay with it, as long as she had Alice.

"Ce- lice- ALICE!" The name suddenly brought Mira back. Back to the very same classroom she had sat in weeks ago. Everyone had returned, and the lecture had resumed, except for the teacher, who now singled her out.

"Alice, are you even listening?" the teacher asked, tapping his foot impatiently. Mira stood up quickly, gathering her things.

"No, sir! I think I need to go," she said, rushing out of the classroom, leaving everyone confused. She hurried down the hall, feeling that something was missing. Why did she need to leave? Where was she even going?

She rushed through the busy halls, overwhelmed by the feeling but unable to understand it. Suddenly, she was knocked to the ground, landing on her knees. She sat there, confused, overwhelmed by a storm of emotions she couldn't place. Realizing she was still on the floor, she turned to see who had bumped into her. The girl stood there, staring at her as if she knew her. Did Alice know her?

"Who the hell do you think you are? Watch your step," Alice snapped, her voice sharp.

The girl extended a hand to help her up.

"I'm Mira, and you?"