

Beyond The Other Side

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Read the first ten pages below.

Ryan pitied the corpse on the dirt road. The older male lay on his side with his knees tucked in, his back against a shriveled bush. She looked into his yellowed eyes, which were sunken and dry, then studied the flaky skin around his lips.

Another victim of the drought.

Other Outsiders her age would've cried to their mamas upon seeing the body, but Ryan didn't have hers. Mama lived on The Other Side.

Ryan pressed a hand against his thin forearm. Lukewarm. The body didn't release any scent, though burnt wood lingered in the air, like always. So his death was fresh. Her eyes darted to his pockets. Not turned inside-out yet, confirming her suspicions. She was the first to approach him. Was the opportunity real?

Her fingers stretched forward.

But wait.

What if a patrolman walked by while she searched his pockets? The path was empty but might not be for long. She didn't have time to be dragged off to who knows where and get a criminal band slapped on her wrist. And the chance of finding something valuable on his person would be slim, as he likely died from malnourishment.

But what if he did possess something useful? It wouldn't take that long to fish through his pockets. Better yet, she could move his body off the road to avoid detection. And if he had nothing, well, the brush was a more decent resting place for him.

Pressing her knees into the dirt, Ryan rolled the corpse off the road. Even though she was much smaller and younger than him, his withered state allowed his body to turn with ease. She cringed with each *thud*, sending a lizard scattering

through the brush. At last, he was out of sight, behind the tumbleweed. Good. Ryan pushed her sweatshirt sleeves up.

Would Mama and Papa be pleased she was violating a rule? That she disturbed a corpse? They should be happy she was trying everything to reunite with them. After all, they were the ones who left her.

Better to close his eyelids, just in case.

Ryan checked his left trouser pocket. All she found was his ANE tracker, which wouldn't help, and a crumpled "True Wealth Comes from Self" flyer. Only one pocket left. She shook her trembling hands and reached inside. She leaned forward on her knees and extended her wrist all the way in.

Her fingers brushed something smooth. A pebble? She withdrew the item and, upon seeing it, nearly dropped it. She caught the necklace chain before the gem hit the ground and adjusted the jewelry to sit in her palm.

Ryan rubbed her thumb over the circular gem and bit her lip. No rust, so the chain was real silver. Onyx, which couldn't be unearthed in Alezand. When she flipped it, an engraving stared up at her: *Tiffany & Co.*

It was valuable. It would grant her access to The Other Side.

Clasping her mouth with her free palm, she cried out. Was the moment real? It had to be. She deserved it. As she lowered her hand, oxygen filled her airways, and she exhaled, her chest looser.

She was going to see her parents.

She pieced the older man's story together. He must have been on his way to present it to The Other Side before collapsing from dehydration. An overestimation of strength. Poorer Outsiders could get water intake from their food, but not everyone could afford even that.

With the necklace, she would make the same journey—only she would be successful in presenting the item of wealth.

Ryan laid the necklace inside her satchel, then grabbed the ANE tracker on her hip. The touchscreen woke from the movement. *Fewer than fifty digi*. But what was the exact amount she owned? Her mind raced, and her fingers trembled too much to select the correct menu option. She'd check if she had enough digi for a trip to The Other Side in town.

Before leaving the forest path, Ryan untied the brown knot at the back of her neck, and her stringy hair fell to her hips. She aggravated the flyaways near her forehead and unzipped her sweatshirt, revealing an oil stain on her tank top. The “malnourished child” look had knocked a few digi off before, so it might work there.

Though, her ANE tracker could ruin the charade. Luckily, she didn't have to report the value of the necklace until the end of the day. Still, she had a sick feeling it would betray her in town, flashing the jewelry's worth on the screen when prompted. She tried draping the edge of her sweatshirt over the pocket-sized tracker, but it wouldn't stay. Most Outsiders positioned their trackers somewhere visible to evade suspicion, so she should be fine, anyway.

The trees cleared, and tents presenting produce, spices, and hunting supplies lined the street. Outsiders were already crowding a tent, probably the freshwater one, while other vendors stacked boxes and displayed their items. The produce bins were nearly empty, the fruit rotting, but the sight still made Ryan's stomach growl. The scent of burnt wood had grown stronger, as it always did in towns like those, for the sellers were trying to push away the last of May's chill with bonfires.

Ryan's eyes flicked toward the end of the street, where two patrolmen were guarding the jewelry tent. Nothing valuable was on display, of course, which was why

it had taken Ryan so long to learn its purpose. Like every town she visited, no one lingered over there, too preoccupied by the necessities, going about their day as if the ticket to The Other Side wasn't sitting right there.

Ryan took a hard right and bought three apples, one of which she devoured before stuffing the other two into her bag. Next, she would need water to endure a two-day walk to The Other Side. The crowd was growing outside the freshwater tent. She should probably join it before the bottles sold out.

But a whiff of rosemary, then thyme, tickled her nose. Where was that delicious scent coming from? Her eyes drifted to the left and locked on a roasted pig rotating on a skewer. Mouth watering, she floated toward it.

"I'll cut you the first slice if you stop staring at it," barked a middle-aged man with a bloody apron. "Five digi a quarter pound."

Ryan bit back a groan. Since the drought, the cost of food and water had soared. Her parents paid half that last year. She tilted her head and bit her bottom lip: her trick to get a digi knocked off.

The vendor rolled his eyes. "I said five."

Tough. She pulled out her ANE tracker and tapped through some menu options to locate the exact balance she had left. Only three credits—the last of Mama and Papa's digi. The digi they wanted her to put toward an education. The digi she would have had double of if her uncle hadn't run away with half. "True wealth comes from self," the government of Alezand proclaimed. But that didn't exactly apply when someone stole her digi.

She couldn't wait to tell her parents what that moron had done. On her twelfth birthday, no less.

The tent on her back suddenly felt heavy.

“I’ll be right back.” Ryan laced between the wandering Outsiders and reached the pawner. Slinging her backpack off, she approached him and held up her sleeping tent for him to judge its value.

She’d sleep after hugging her parents.

He quickly determined a selling price—six digi, seven if she included the backpack—which was low. Of course, he set that as the bottom number because most Outsiders negotiated, and normally, she would, too, and pout her lower lip.

But she didn’t want to. Something about that man put her on edge. It wasn’t his ragged clothes or lack of hygiene. Perhaps it was his yellowed eyes, a sign of dehydration, but she’d seen that in countless Outsiders. No, it was the way his tongue lapped his lower lip and the way he tapped his feet against the dirt, as if he couldn’t wait for the exchange to be over and would lash out if she stalled.

She agreed to the price, and when the pawner extended his hand over the table to take her supplies, backpack and all, she focused on the silver band on his wrist. What crime had he committed? Theft, assault, or murder? Her eyes flicked to his face. Stubble littered his chin, and his left ear was missing. Did he lose it while breaking the law?

“I know you’re staring because I’m good-looking,” he snapped before licking his lips.

She concentrated on the backpack. That was exactly why they put bands on her neighbors, Ryan realized. To pit them against each other. To create distrust.

The pawner took the backpack, and while he fished through his pocket, assumedly for his tracker, a butterfly fluttered by his face. What it was drawn to, Ryan couldn’t guess. He swatted around his forehead, then looked up to find the nuisance.

He smacked his lips upon recognizing the insect, then pinched the butterfly and flicked his wrist toward the ground. Ryan gasped, and when the vendor finally offered the tracker, she quickly tapped her device against his and turned away.

The *ping* of the completed transaction was muted against a scream. Two patrolmen clad in red orange burst from an alleyway, so Ryan reached for the foldable pocketknife in her jacket. But they were pulling a thin man by the arms. His feet were kicking up clouds of dust, which covered the shiny exterior of their armor near the elbows and calves. Whatever life they were dragging him away from, he wasn't leaving willingly, for he yelled again and struggled against their grip.

When the patrolmen came to take Mama and Papa, she wished her father had put up more of a fight, like that man did. But the truth was, Papa *wanted* them to escort him away, so that she could have a better life or something. They couldn't even give her the right to be mad at the patrolmen because he *followed* them out.

Ryan gripped the handle of the pocketknife, the scuffed edges biting into her palm.

You'll understand one day that this is a gift, he had said.

And despite all that, she had spent the past six months poor, anyway, having to violate the law for a chance to reunite with them.

The strap of Ryan's satchel tugged at her collarbone, bringing her attention to the bag at her hip. A tiny wrist was submerged inside.

Nope. Not happening.

As the arm retracted, she snatched the forearm in a death grip. A small whimper escaped from the thief as she whipped around.

A short younger boy stood in front of her, his lips downturned. Her eyes darted to his clenched fist, the silver chain dangling. Ryan shook his wrist, but he didn't let go. Some nerve.

How had she been that distracted? She had found that necklace less than an hour ago, and she already had to thwart a pickpocket. First Uncle Isaac, and then that twit? Absolutely not.

She looked up to see if anyone else was watching, but the patrolmen had passed and the vendors had returned their gazes to their work. It was bold of him to attempt such a stunt in a public place, but she wasn't leaving town without that necklace even if she had to chop his hand off.

An idea popped into her head.

"Do you know the old punishment for stealing?" Ryan taunted.

The boy didn't answer.

Tightening her grip, she withdrew the pocketknife and flicked out the blade, which slid into place with a *click*. "Cutting off your hand."

"I'll scream," the boy stuttered.

Smart response. A scream would attract the attention of the pawner, who would certainly be interested in the antique item they were fighting over. Ryan should have known a threat of violence wouldn't have gotten him to open his fist. People threatened each other every day.

She surveyed her surroundings. No figures seemed to peek from behind walls or tents, waiting for the outcome of their interaction, which meant he was alone.

Maybe his parents had sold themselves into slavery on The Other Side like Ryan's had. Maybe he wanted the necklace for the same reason: to reconnect with

them. The boy's chestnut hair didn't pass his ears, so he had only been taking care of himself for less than a month. His face was round but wouldn't be for long.

She had to get him talking, for that was better than screaming. Eyeing a large bag on his back, she asked, "What do you have in there?"

"A tent," he sputtered. "Some fun board games."

"Games? For what?"

"That's how I earn digi. I hustle."

He spoke slowly—a speech impediment, probably. But if he was a hustler, how much was he worth?

"Wait, what's your Anne?" Ryan asked.

"My what?"

"A-N-E?" He blinked rapidly, so she continued, "Automatic Net Estimation?"

He didn't answer, his lower lip trembling. Oh, jeez. She knew that trick; she'd used it herself.

"The tracker on your hip. Show me the screen!"

The boy blew air from his cheeks and unclipped the tracker. Of course he knew what ANE was; he shouldn't have said he was a hustler. Otherwise, he would've been able to pull off the innocent child trick.

He gave the screen a shake, and red letters flashed against the black background. *Negative digi.*

Oh no. That was someone she certainly didn't want to be around. With negative ANE, he owed Outsiders digi. He had probably jilted someone. That was unnecessary attention she didn't need.

But he could be of use to her. With her item of wealth, she needed someone to watch her back while she slept, and he even owned a tent.

However, asking the boy to join her on a trip to The Other Side would be risky, for he could pickpocket her again and run off. After her only family member had ditched her and stolen half her digi, Ryan had sworn she would endure her journey to The Other Side alone. Nobody could be trusted, especially adults.

But their confrontation was seconds away from becoming a spectacle. Ryan twisted her head toward the pawner, who was staring at them. And her clasp on the boy's forearm. More attention she didn't need.

Convincing him to tag along was the only solution, and he needed to let go, like yesterday.

"You let go, and I'll bring you to The Other Side. That necklace is good for two people."

His eyes narrowed. "But it's one item."

"If you even cared to look at it, the gem is onyx, not from Alezand. That alone makes it enough for two, maybe even three."

He pursed his lips. "How do you know?"

Another question? Just let go!

She closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath, a habit Mama had always encouraged when she wanted to scream and when her face would turn tomato-red, which she assumed was happening right then.

Out. In. Out. In.

After her parents had crossed, she spent days hiding behind a divider outside the entrance, learning items patrolmen accepted. Word of mouth and eavesdropping had taught her they allowed access with old-world jewelry. And that made sense. Jewelry was the first item of wealth people sold after the American government collapsed, but when Outsiders discovered it granted access to The Other Side, its value

tripled, making it impossible to come by. But she'd won that information fair and square and wouldn't share it for nothing.

Ryan released her breath. The lie came easily to her lips as she opened her eyes. "My parents told me, and they lived here in California before The Great Silence."

He scanned the road from left to right as if he also knew he had seconds to decide. Finally, he released his grasp, and Ryan seized the jewelry from his palm.

Had it been that easy to lie? Of course the necklace only had enough value for one to travel beyond the gates, and she would exchange it for herself. The plan would be quite simple. When she presented the jewelry, the electric gates would stay open for fifteen seconds—she had counted—and during that confusion over the item's worth, she'd slip through the opening and leave the boy behind.

She held back her smile, for she had a place to sleep and a guard, along with confidence that she might even reach her parents a day earlier with his aid.

Before she could tuck it away, his chest suctioned to hers, and he wrapped his arms around her back, making Ryan recoil.

"I'm sorry. But I'm glad we get to stick together." He stepped back and bounced in place. "I'm Eli."

Oh, great. He's terribly upbeat.

"Ryan," she muttered. "And don't think about lifting this off me again. I'm our best bet of getting to The Other Side."

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The Other Side?” You can order this
short story on Amazon [here](#).

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