

Chapter 1

March 2020, 29 years old

The day our life changed was ordinary in every way.

Trust me. We know how cliché that sounds, but that's truly how it happened.

Nia, the most common front person at the time, had spent the day editing one of our books, futilely hoping that doing so would spark some creativity in their deadbeat brain, but that wasn't to be. Of course it wasn't! We were still stuck in place, keeping silent until it might be safe to change.

Ultimately, something would distract Nia from their latest attempt at 'useful productivity', a never-ending repeat of the last few years. In that time, they'd been unemployed, which had created many difficulties in their marriage. They'd gone through so many different plans for contributing financially to the relationship, mostly out of a sense of debt to their wife, and every time one of those ideas failed, it hurt.

They couldn't know this, but there was a reason they hadn't been able to find or keep a job for the last year and a half. Many reasons, actually, but they wouldn't find out about them for a while.

Nia couldn't spend much time thinking about their failures. If they did, an insistent need to throw up and a desperate desire to *disappear* would claw into their brain. Sometimes, those feelings led to behaviors or decisions that they'd look back on later, baffled about what had occurred. It scared them when this happened.

So, as always, they shoved thoughts about 'jobs' and 'financial security' away, even if an ever-present sense of worthlessness refused to budge. Focusing on their first draft, they again read about a reunion between two of their characters, biting their lip as they did.

Something about this interaction—the characters' sense of feeling whole, they suddenly realized—was making their head hurt, but they couldn't focus on that. They continued reading, both knowing and not knowing that they were using the activity to distract themselves from something worse.

Hours passed, slipping between the cracks of their awareness, and beneath their notice, night came, turning the world outside pitch-black. Nia didn't realize how late it was until their wife came into the room, dressed for bed. They vaguely realized how badly their head and heart had been hurting, which was confusing. Why on earth would they be feeling so awful?

As they lay in bed beside their wife a half-hour later, they tried to put their feelings into words. They explained what they'd been doing that day, carefully listening to the breathing beside them all the while.

Nia could never be sure if or when their wife was in a bad mood. They knew that sometimes, she just needed space. Sometimes, she needed Nia to keep their problems and thoughts to themselves, but figuring out when those times had come was difficult for them.

So, they listened to their wife breathe as they talked, soon reaching a conclusion to their winding speech.

"I don't know," they said. "It's like I never feel whole. I'm jealous of my characters and how when they're together, everything feels *right*, and I guess... that's making me a little depressed."

Even as they said that last word, they cringed. Years ago, they'd been admitted to a mental hospital for depression and suicidal thoughts, and during their stay, they'd been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Weirdly, they weren't ashamed of the condition, and most of the time, they felt comfortable talking about it.

Sometimes, though, mentioning that problems that came with it felt like making an excuse. Like they were trying to weasel their way out of an unknown mistake, and that never felt good.

With how dark the room was, their wife didn't notice their discomfort, so instead of hugging them, as they'd have liked, she said something about understanding how they felt. Unfortunately, Nia was having a hard time with hearing her words.

In the split second before their wife had started speaking, they'd hungrily listened for her response, but as soon as words of comfort had started coming, a feeling of misunderstanding crashed through their body, even though that clearly wasn't happening now. They heard what their wife was saying, but none of it reached their mind. By the time their wife had finished speaking, Nia wanted to vomit, wondering why they'd tried to explain what was going on with them.

They should have known better by now. Every night, Nia and their wife checked in about their days, and every time, Nia felt compelled to honestly answer their wife's questions. Most of the time, it wasn't a problem because they'd felt fine. We'd successfully concealed everything hidden beneath the surface from them. When we failed, however, they struggled to convey these 'real' feelings to their wife, and every time, this was how those attempts ended: with them left dangling over a vast cliff.

As always when tasting that feeling, Nia started mentally retreating, ready to change the subject.

Before they could, their wife said something that would change our life forever. We're still not sure what made her say this, whether she was simply frustrated with our constant whinging or if she didn't know what her words would cause but honestly? We've decided we don't care what her reasons were. Her mistake would set us free.

"Have you heard of plurality?" she said. "This thing between your characters sounds a lot like that, and it's a common theme in your other stories. Maybe you're plural. What do you think?"

For a moment, all Nia could do was blink. They knew about the concept of plurality. After moving to California last year, they'd heard their wife talking about her plural co-workers, so they knew that

some people experienced life as if they were many people, living in the same body.

At the same time, though, they'd never connected that idea with their writing, even if it seemed obvious after a moment of reflection.

Most of their characters had another entity living in their head. This could range from something as simple as a personified sense of guilt to a mother who after death, had been magically transplanted into her child's head. One character even had two versions of himself living in the same body, each of them from another 'plane of reality'. All of which looked similar to the concept of plurality, now that Nia was paying attention to it.

But they'd never thought about it that way. As they'd written those stories, those various examples of plurality had simply seemed right, as if that state of existence was only natural.

Shaking their head, Nia tried to subsequently shake off the unease that had settled over them. What had their wife said? Something about plurality, obviously, but what else?

Right. That... *they* might be plural.

Huh. That was an interesting concept, setting their thoughts whirling. Possibilities and doubts flitted through their mind at lightspeed, which made everything outside their head fade. Just a little bit.

With their attention focused on that, Nia automatically replied to their wife, trying to change the subject, and the two of them might have talked about other things before falling asleep.

If they did, Nia was only peripherally aware of it. They had something new to distract them.

And we'd received the first sign that it might be ok to come out of hiding. If the wife had mentioned 'plurality', especially in such an open way, maybe we could take that as permission.

But only if Nia decided to look into it. Only if they and all the others up front seemed ready for what we'd bring to the table.

Revision #1

Created 4 July 2026 17:35:14 by FatalisticFable

Updated 4 July 2026 18:02:11 by FatalisticFable