

Awake

by Shakirra Ulmer

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Rae throws the covers off as sweat beads between her thighs. Her feet pound the ground sending shivers down her spine as he lays in bed. She hears Gatekeepers approaching behind her so she ducks behind a bush. A small pool forms underneath her.

“...Dad?” Fright blankets her face as trails of tears race down her chin. Sheets clenched between Rae’s fists, she shoots up.

#

Mum makes breakfast while Rae checks the Union news.

July 7th 2026, manhunt dies as search for Dr. Ralph Tournesol, a founding father of the Union, comes to a halt.”

Rae kills the feed.

“Day 500,” says Rae staring at the withering plant set at the center of the wooden dining room table.

“How’d you sleep?” mum asks.

“I thought I saw him again last night,” Rae says yawning.

“He’ll be home soon, love. I know it,” mum says as she hands Rae a plate of eggs and toast. Rae doesn’t touch it.

“I’m going to nap under the tree.

Mum sighs at Rae’s full plate of food, “Don’t forget to set an alarm,” she says gets up from the table.

Rae ventures out the back door, sack in head, backpack strapped. A stoned pathway leads Rae through mum’s strawberry patch and berry bushes and out to brush land. She hikes alongside trees and wild orchids until she reaches her field of sunflowers. A large tree is set in the middle of the field. Rae sets up shade with a small blanket, string, and branches. When she’s laying comfortably under her blanket Rae notices the hum of bees hard at work while two birds sing together above her. Lost in tune Rae is soon asleep

#

The rhythm soothed her soul so when it stops Rae wakes up. She opens her eyes to grey skies and an empty tree hanging over her. Fort gone and tree branches weeping, its leaves surround Rae on the ground. Rae closes her eyes and lays there. A breeze stirs the leaves around her and a crack of thunder rips through the sky. After a few minutes her gaze is again met with dark clouds. Searching all around for her backpack, Rae freezes when she realizes all her sunflowers are gone and a tall unfamiliar concrete wall cuts through the center of the clearing.

“Mum?” Her voice echoes through the silence. Rae slowly walks back over to the tree pinching herself. She leans against its trunk and slides down to the ground. Knees at her chest Rae trembles. She shifts feeling something poking her. Rae reaches underneath her bottom to find a small golden locket. She brushes some dirt away recognizing the finely etched “T” on the front of it.

It’s hard to open but she remembers how her father taught her two years ago. He promised to give it to her on her today. Using her shirt for leverage she pulls it open. Her parents stand in lab coats proudly gleaming at the camera. Her father holds a sunflower between them. After a moment a raindrop lands on her father’s face. She shuts the locket, stands up, and places it in her pocket. Rae walks to the edge of the woods surrounding the dead field then enters in search of her father.

“Dad?” her voice breaks. Rae catches sight of newspaper flailing in the wind. She runs over to catch it before the wind carries it away.

“DR. RALPH TOURNESOL WANTED BY THE FEDERATION.”

Crouched over, Rae examines the date on the page: July 7th 2036.

#

All five men—three behind two, wearing thick black boots, heavy gear, and shields baring the earth—fall silent when they spot Rae ahead. A twig snaps behind her and Rae’s heart pounds. She turns to see five men running towards her, weapons in hand.

“Stay where you are!” yells one of the men in front.

Rae folds the paper—stuffing it in her pocket—and jets towards her tree.

“Just a dream. This isn’t real,” she says between breaths. Bullets carrying traps blaze past Rae. She stumbles over a rock but manages to catch herself and push on. Rae makes it to the edge of the trees before her body uncontrollably seizes. The hairs all over Rae’s body stand up as her reality sets in. Pain radiates throughout her body. Her limbs paralyzed, the men grab her.

“Identify yourself,” the tallest one says to her.

“My name is Rae. I’m lost, please, help me.”

“Stop playing games child. Where is your code?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” says Rae.

“Alright, just restrict her limbs and let’s get back to base,” says a familiar voice.

Rae manages to turn her head just enough to see her uncle in uniform.

“Uncle Pete? It’s me!”

“Nice try, I don’t have siblings...Let alone an outlaw niece,” the man spits.

“Sir! My scanner senses movement east by the Living Tree,” says one of the Gatekeepers carrying a briefcase.

The one she mistook for her uncle Pete throws her over his shoulder. He runs gripping her ribs--his shield cuts her every time her face flops against his chest. As they near the tree, a glow emanates from the far side of its trunk.

“Don’t take another step!” the Gatekeeper holding Rae yells and draws his weapon from his side. Rae, shaking, sweating, and panting turns her head towards the light. The man already halfway into the portal proceeds to grab something off the ground. It takes Rae a moment to adjust to seeing from the angle she’s at. As the man enters the portal he faces them and smiles.

“Dad!” Rae yells.

Dr. Ralph Tournesol’s smile dissolves from his face and dread takes over. As he motions to run towards Rae, the portal shuts and Rae’s nightmare comes to life.

Groove Thang

Instrument poise for dance, Ari's hand hovers over a mostly blank page with a date scribbled in the top right corner. Mellow smooth instrumentals flow from the living room speakers replacing her cycling thoughts. An alert momentarily pauses the music. Groove interrupted, Ari ignores the second, third, and fourth notifications. She enables airplane mode, puts on her mystic blue suede boots, and grabs her stained moss green NASA baseball cap—locking the door behind her. Today, on her twenty seventh birthday Ari decides to do whatever her heart desires.

On her way to the elevator she sees her neighbor.

"Hi'ya Sal," she greets him with a smile.

"You're in a good mood," Sal says his eyes skeptical.

"Today is the first day of the rest of my life Sal," she says putting her airpods in ear. The groove begins.

Ari boogies her way off the elevator towards the front doors. She gives the peace sign to the lobby desk host who tries to wave her down and slips out of the front door. It's noon when she takes a seat at the Sky Bar. It's empty during this time of day. Perfect.

"What are we having?" asks the bartender.

"I think I'll try the llegalito."

The bartender serves her pina colada mojito drink and soon a pen finds its way out into her head. She scribbles a poem as she sips:

If we meet

We can unravel the mysteries

And develop history—

She folds the napkin. Pays and twenty-five minutes after arriving, Ari is off to her next destination. She thinks she hears someone call her name as she puts her airpods in but she's grooving again and doesn't look back. Pacing her steps to the beat she heads downtown.

Ari sees colorful soaps in the window of a shop, stopping to observe the vast collection of goods. She's there for a few minutes admiring the craftsmanship it takes to sculpt soap into

cupcakes when an associate smiles and waves inside. She almost walk-ins in out of courtesy but instead goes into the record shop next door.

“Hey, welcome! Can I help you find anything?” asks the guy behind the

“I think I already have,” says Ari getting lost in the first crate she sees. The door jingles as someone walks in behind her but Ari is too lost to care. Otis Redding, Deborah King, Aretha. Her heart floods with excitement.

“Do you guys have a record player for sell?” she asks aloud to no one in particular, arms and hands already busy on the second crate.

“Yeah what kind are you looking for?” a guy at the register asks.

She turns around with a blank look. A new face accompanies the clerk behind the register now. Both seem humored by her inability to answer. The back wall is lined with different makes and models. Ari decides on one that’s rustic brown that closes like a suitcase since its easy to transport.

“Can I come back for the records? Kinda hard to carry everything right now,” says Ari.

“Sure,” the new face says, “my names Levi by the way.”

“Ok,” says Ari, “I will be back in an hour to pick up the crates. Thank you!”

Ari doesn’t notice Levi about say something. She doesn’t offer her name in response. She just grabs her suitcase record player and boogies her way back home.

An hour and a half later she’s back at the record store but it’s closed. The sign reads 8:00PM closing and its only four o’clock. Heat rises from the balls of her feet. Ears steaming and confused she yanks on the door a few times before she realizes a cop eyeballing her across the street. She mounts her bike and heads back home.

Ari sweating, upset, and feeling cheated on her first day of life drags both her feet and her heart into the elevator. Defeated and done for the day, Ari decides she’ll try again tomorrow when she comes across something stuck on her door. She unfolds the note to find one word: Roof. She goes inside and falls into the couch. She finally looks at her phone again for the first time in hours. She’s about to disable airplane mode when there’s a knock at her door.

Charlie holds a large bouquet of flowers out to her as she answers his knock. Ari looks at her boyfriend as if she’s seeing him for the first time in her life.

“I’ve been texting you all day. This is my second time coming here. Where have you been?” Charlie asks with less concern and more annoyance, “Happy birthday,” he adds.

“Today I made a decision that doesn’t involve you and I moving past yesterday. Goodbye.” Ari says locking her front door.

Charles stands scrolling through his phone waiting on Ari to come back. She enters the stairwell heading towards the roof.

She braces herself for the unexpected as she reaches the exit door to the roof. Unsure about what’s waiting on the other side but confident she wants to experience it anyway. Levi the record store clerk is waiting with her newly purchased tunes. Christmas lights hang above her head and music is playing from a radio on a table. The table has two beach chairs on either side.

“I’m surprised you showed. I’ve been trying to get your attention for weeks,” says Levi.

It’s now that Ari realizes Levi is a neighbor of hers from a few doors down. They’d had small talk in the elevator before. They both hum to elevator music.

“I left a note for you at the front desk with a buddy of mine but he said you danced your way out of the front door before he could give it to you,” Levi says chuckling at the thought.

“When I saw you at my store I was sure you’d gotten the note but—“ Levi laughs, “you’re pretty unapproachable, you know that?”

“Well,” Ari says, “It’s nice to meet you Levi. Groove time?”

EM

Rays of sunlight peek through the leaves waking her. She feels around in the grass, finding only morning dew. Vim reaches towards for the inside of her jacket and realizes she's not wearing it. Her eyes shot open revealing vast nebulas. Premature exposure to the light makes it hard for them to adjust so she struggles to catch her footing as she gets up. Vim shades her face almost in salute of the foreign land. Golden faces glow all around the park. A little boy walks past her with his parents in hand. While his other two eyes guide him, the one resting above his brows holds an image of Em; Vims rubixx.

"Em, where are you?" she says aloud.

Everyone in the park pauses in place. A ball floats in the air between two ball player practicing at the far end of the lot. Cheese hangs from a man mouth while his wife's hand holds the slice of pizza for him. The image of Em disappears from the lads face. Two woman having a picnic under the tree closest to Vim turn their heads to face her.

"I am here," say the two women and boy simultaneously.

"We have to go," says Vim, a shiver runs down spine as panic takes root in her gut.

"You must find me," the three of them say before everyone snaps back into action around her.

Vim listens to the two woman picnicking under the tree.

"Are you going to the shower event tomorrow?"

"Maybe if it's raining salt deposits, I need a good exfoliant," the other says, laughing, as she packs up.

The hair on her neck stands at attention and she notices how quickly it's getting dark. Noticing a faint effulgence at the edge of the field she sets out towards it when she feels a warm, damp sensation on her pant leg. Panic now sprouts in her chest when she notices a pup at her side; its tail wags fiercely. Terrified, she bends down to pet the beast circling her feet — it's head a lotus not yet bloomed — affectionately rubs against Vim.

"You poor beautiful thing," she whispers.

“Focus,” says a soft voice from woods beyond the park. Vim looks up from the peculiar animal to find everyone in the park gone. Night covers the sky and stars decorate the space between Vim and the moon. She looks towards the trees where she heard Em.

“I’m coming.”

Vim stumbles through a lightly treaded pathway while lotus pup chases after something Vim can’t see. Trying to keep up, she gains speed; ducking branches, hoping logs. She almost catches up to it when he disappears and her feet get caught in something that sends her flying face first. Vim lands on her jaw, immediately tasting the blood gushing from her tongue.

“I’m over this Em.” A sharp ache radiates across her face and down her spine. Staggering back to investigate what tripped her up she finds her jacket. Vim carefully inspects every pocket for her Rubixx. Nothing. She takes a deep breath.

“An hour til, Em. Come on!

“I am close.”

“Guess I’ll just get comfortable.”

Vim lays on her back facing the sky, lining the stars into shapes with her pointer finger. The lotus pup finds his way back to her, resting on her chest. Upon contact a sharp pain rips through Vims chest, emanating an aching glow. A hole forms; exposing her heart.

“I am close,” Em says again.

Vim reaches in, past her heart, and pulls out Em.

“I’ve found me,” Vim says.

About the Author

Shakirra Ulmer fancies herself a new wave Sci-Fi short story author who dabbles in the complications of the present and occasionally pens matters of the heart. Exploring raw, spiritual, and subconscious elements of existence, a couple hours into typing and staring at the screen she might shout in unidentifiable languages; it's all a part of the process.