

# The Sentence is Always Death

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I'M FORTY-THREE, well beyond my years for needing a nanny. Yet Nanny is in the audience. Of course she is. After all, it is Nanny I am taking the fall for. And like all the times before, she has a plan. But first we wait. There are a few cases ahead of mine.

“Case #1201. Miz Gravona,” says the judge. I look at the docket and see that I’m Case #1203.

A massive blue alien ambles forward. I wouldn’t have known her gender without the honorific.

“Miz Gravona, you have been found guilty of two counts of sedition. Your sentence is death.”

We are at the Hall of Executions, off-planet. The sentence is always death. There is no other reason to be here. The only question is what manner of death—not all executions are equal.

“Given your cooperation and apparent remorse, you will be granted a choice of

executions from any category,” says the judge.

There are ten regular categories A-J, in roughly increasing order of pain. And then there is category K all by itself.

“Incineration, your honor,” Miz Gravona says meekly. Despite a free choice of any category, she has chosen from category B, but this is not a surprising response. Her species is highly tolerant to fire, but not particularly so to asphyxiation—or so I’m told. I just learned those facts in the holding tank. She’ll black out before experiencing too much agony. It is worth noting that there are no painless executions. Not even lethal injections, which have an excruciating additive.

“Very well. Factoring in the level of your offense, an eight minute slow burn is deemed appropriate.”

I am glad for poor Miz Gravona. She could have done worse.

Miz Gravona is whisked away, and the judge performs the task he does before the start of every new case.

He opens up the execution register, sealed safely in the time-proof vault. And he reads the name of the most recently condemned prisoner. He clears his throat and says, “The last convict was #1201, Miz Gravona.”

The gallery exhales a sigh of relief. Nobody likes it when the name doesn’t match the name they just heard moments before. We all remember Miz Gravona being taken away seconds earlier, and the execution register agrees. That means that nobody has slipped through. Nobody has suffered a category K.

I patiently await my turn.

\* \* \*

*I’m twelve years old.*

*Twelve exactly, today. It’s our twelfth birthday—mine and my brother’s—and that*

*supposedly means we're adults. I don't know where we are in the hospital exactly, but I wouldn't describe it as the pediatric ward. Every patient in the waiting room appears to my untrained eye to be a rosy portrait of fine health. And, of course, every patient in the room has turned twelve today.*

*The nurse is icy—all business. He calls my brother's name first, "Thomas."*

*But I stand up instead. Nanny sits off to our side in the waiting room, revealing nothing. Maybe the hint of a smile, but perhaps that's my imagination.*

*Our ruse is a time-honored conceit of identical twins, and one, with Nanny's conspiratorial encouragement, we've played expertly for years. We usually perpetrate such foolishness against people we know—our teachers, our friends, and even our parents (when they're not off-continent or points outward). But never our Nanny, Miz Kronen-Aro. So alien, so magnificent, so shrewd. For one thing, she can tell us apart too easily. With her bifurcated cerebral cortex and double-time nervous system, she sees so much. But really, we wouldn't even think to try it on her.*

*And today—as usual—this was her idea. She silently watches me take my brother's place. Anything for Nanny.*

*Yet this particular switch seems well beyond just-good-fun to me. It's one thing to trade uniforms and let your brother take your turn hitting a baseball. But it's quite another to fool a government doctor. Without Nanny's and Thomas's confidence to buoy me, I'm not sure I can pull it off.*

*Naturally, we already swapped ID cards at home before we left for the medical facility. The real challenge is our ID implants. Spoofing the subcutaneous hardware requires real technical know-how.*

*That's Nanny's department. And just like everything Nanny does, she does it with calm precision. She would make a master criminal.*

*I follow the nurse and pass the doors to the examination area. The waiting room*

*and Thomas and Nanny all suddenly seem far away. The ceilings are too low, the lights are too bright. My heart is racing. I don't want to think of the kind of trouble we'll be in if we're caught. What if they check DNA? Nanny says it costs too much to do for every citizen. She finds my worrying ridiculous. I try to recall why I thought this would be worth the risk. Nanny's idea.*

*I breathe, relax. Just like Nanny taught me. "Always stay calm, Paul," she has told me. "Thinking everything is right and proper, really believing it—that's how you avoid getting caught."*

*We reach a small room. The nurse glances at the ID card indifferently and then reads the signal from the hardware in my neck with keen professional interest. The signal passes muster. "Thomas Beaumont, extend your hand," he finally says. So I, Paul Beaumont, extend my hand, and the nurse clamps the hospital ID bracelet to my wrist. It's done. For the next few minutes, I will be my brother and my brother will be me.*

*I have slowed my pulse by the time the nurse takes my vitals. Finally, after all of my shots, I'm dismissed with a round, red swelling on my upper arm and a grimace on my face. The twelfth year shots—I didn't even count how many in all—they're a doozy.*

*The nurse accompanies me to the waiting room. "Paul," he says.*

*My brother and I pass one another in the doorway. He is enjoying this ruse much more than I am. He really sells it:*

*"One more shot, baby brother," he says, and his fist flashes out. He lands a blow on the flesh of my upper arm, right on the site of my injections. I wince, not acting. I grit my teeth and take it.*

*Thomas is smiling broadly. He knows, playacting aside, I'd take it anyway. Trading blows is a game of brinksmanship, and I could never gird myself for how hard the next blow might be if I fought back. And Thomas knows it.*

*"Boys!" Nanny tuts, but she is unmistakably smiling now. Smiling at Thomas as he is*

*swallowed into the back reaches of the facility. Her eyes flick over to me. And her smile turns just a degree frostier.*

*When we're both done they remove our hospital bracelets and send us home, rubbing our arms. Back home, Nanny returns our ID hardware to the proper settings. Our lark has been a thrill for Thomas and Nanny—Nanny was a rare, fine incandescence on the train ride home—but I am relieved to be Paul Beaumont again.*

*I have no way of knowing at the time that Thomas's and my days of trading places are over.*

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The judge clears his throat and continues, "Case #1202. Mister Tarman."

A tall, unctuous man strides forward. He preens confidently for a man on Death Row.

"You have been found guilty of seven counts of murder. Your sentence is death." The sentence is always death.

The room begins to simmer with audible discontent. They are disgusted with his crime but equally with what they know will be the form of execution.

"Considering the severity of your crime, you are offered no choice in your execution."

This is what the gallery both feared and expected.

"I order death from category K." Somehow these words sound less insidious than the proper name. There is only one type of death in this category. It's called "Erasure."

This murderer Tarman must have seen it coming. For the most heinous crimes, Erasure is a popular choice among judges. But no convict selects Erasure. None ever has. Across species and across cultures, the psychological barriers to Erasure are

universal. Erasure means you will have never existed. Well, for all intents, anyway.

What Erasure really amounts to, what it proves, is that you never *mattered*.

Government operatives—nothing to call them other than executioners—go back in time (like murder, time travel is a high crime for you and me, but not for the government) and plant a bioweapon in you. Not at the time of your birth, but at the moment you reach majority: the weapon is carefully hidden in your twelfth birthday shots. And the only thing keeping that bioweapon from killing you, in a horrible rainbow burst of pain (or so I'm told), is whether your actions have any lasting impact on the universe. The universe will not abide paradoxes, but it is surprisingly resilient. A change here or there may make little difference in the long run. It's what makes time travel possible, and Erasure too.

The bioweapon is insidiously clever. It includes a built-in trigger with an extremely high probability of killing you moment to moment. But you keep beating the odds so long as your actions in the past matter to the present. The moment they don't, the moment the universe can tolerate your absence from the timeline, you're dead. And horribly.

Children occasionally die moments after their twelfth year prescribed injections, proof that a convicted felon of the future was Erased, and despite their fantastic crimes, clearly their lives made no difference. It's always a horrible surprise to the usually impassive nurses.

It's not unheard of for men to die from the Erasure trigger moments after impregnating a woman—or women moments after giving birth. Their progeny's future secured, these felons from the future are claimed by Erasure.

No, nobody chooses Erasure. It's the ultimate insult added to the ultimate injury.

This Mister Tarman didn't choose it, but he apparently has come to terms with it. He stands patiently waiting to be Erased. To *have been* Erased. And when he is,

the universe will forget him—most of him. From birth until sometime after his twelfth birthday, he will exist. But some or most or all of his adulthood will unexist.

And where does that leave the gallery? In a state of profound ill ease. It's true that Mister Tarman might begin to convulse and bleed out before our eyes. Perhaps he was too important to die before this moment. But this rarely happens, and the gallery knows it. Instead, people look at the clock, and at their neighbors, and at the judge. Everyone is hoping to hold off a minor bump in the timeline. But like a patient who has just been given an anesthetic, there is no way to stave off the effect. Like it or not, fight it or not by *concentrating very hard on the revolting Mister Tarman standing right there*, history will change, and we won't remember a damn thing about it.

With the case closed, the judge performs the task he does before the start of every new case.

He opens up the execution register, sealed safely in the time-proof vault. And he reads the name of the most recently condemned prisoner. He clears his throat and says, "The last convict was #1202, Mister Tarman."

We all stand in momentary disbelief and disorientation. Everyone remembers Miz Gravona and her death by incineration. But nobody remembers this Mister Tarman. We know what must have just happened. And we wonder what else has changed. I look and see Nanny Kronen-Aro in the gallery, and I wonder if she was there before—before this now Erased Mister Tarman changed our timeline. I shake my head in an exaggerated attempt to clean the thoughts from my mind.

My number will be called next.

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*I am twenty-two.*

*And just days away from graduation, but that particular ceremony is the last thing on my mind. The coming funeral is.*

*I haven't seen Thomas in more than a year, and today will be my last chance. His battered remains await me just beyond the doors to the police hospital morgue.*

*Mother says she hasn't seen Thomas much either. Dad hasn't, certainly, but he's been off-planet for so long now.*

*Mother weeps silently into a tissue. Nanny is by her side, and Mother, addled, hasn't questioned what, exactly, Miz Kronen-Aro is doing here.*

*The police doctors tell us that Thomas has died of multiple traumas, which seems vague and ill-defined to me. But when you fall such a distance, when so many bones break and organs rupture, I suppose there's no need to dwell on such things.*

*Precisely why Thomas might have been thrown to his death is a mystery. After leaving school following just a cursory stint, he had begun moving in disreputable circles. What had he been involved with? Petty crime? Drugs? The sex trade? I had refused to have anything to do with it. Or with him for that matter. We had become strangers. I mourned the loss of Thomas long before today.*

*A police doctor tells us that it's our turn to identify the body, as if it were really necessary. Thomas's subcutaneous ID hardware and a sample of DNA have already told them what they need to know, but the archaic practice of visual identification of the deceased persists.*

*Mother starts crying harder in uncontrolled sobs. "Oh, Thomas, baby boy..." And I see for the first time that Nanny is crying too, silently. I had never seen her cry before. Ever.*

*Nanny presses Mom on the arm and then stands. "I'll go. Come then, Paul." And we let ourselves be led to the morgue.*

*Thomas's remains are spilled out before us, limbs arranged in the semblance of a human, though twisted and broken askew. His eyes are closed. The way his head is resting, it's obvious that the back of his skull is crushed in.*

*"Is this your brother, Mister Beaumont?"*

*I whisper, "Yes."*

*"Do you need a minute?"*

*I nod. The police doctor leaves us.*

*Nanny is at my side. Her face is streaked with thin ribbons of tears. She grits her teeth. "Stupid boy," she says at last. "Stupid, stupid boy."*

*I turn my head at her, shocked.*

*"Don't look at me like that, Paul. You know I had much higher hopes for him than this."*

*Indeed I do. But we can't speak freely. One is never truly alone in a police facility.*

*Nanny's high hopes for Paul. She had long given up on trying to bring me around to her viewpoint that the laws governing polite society were largely a construct to manage the unimaginative masses. That they kept the simple and the timid from harming each other or from coming to harm.*

*Nanny believed that breaking the law, if you could get away with it, was your right for the claiming.*

*I could never quite come around to her way of thinking. Or maybe I was just one of the simple or timid ones. And around the time of our twelfth birthday, Nanny stopped trying to convince me. Lost interest in me, frankly. It was just a thought experiment anyway, right?*

*As for Thomas, however...*

*No, it wasn't an experiment or game. Nanny had found her protégé in Thomas. His teen years played out very differently from mine. And long after we were of the age of*

*needing a nanny, somehow Miz Kronen-Aro stayed on with us. What those two conspired about, what they did, I'll never know the details. Back when we were still living in the same home, still teens, Thomas once even confided to me that he was in love with her.*

*But where Nanny was truly devious and fearless, Thomas was reckless and bluffed shrewdness beyond his capacity. (And to be fair, where she had duplicate brain structures, he only had one brain to work with.)*

*And yesterday Thomas learned the hard way that just because Nanny never gets caught, well...*

*I wonder if Nanny even knows what sort of trouble Thomas got involved with at the end. Was it something she was involved with too? Or a side project of his own?*

*Nanny sniffs one last time. She wipes her nose. She is done crying.*

*And I feel a hand on my waist. Nanny smiles at me in a way she hasn't for a very long time. Here we are, in a morgue, standing over my brother's broken body. Yet her smile exudes warmth and mischief and—why did I never see this in Nanny before?—something else.*

*"You know, Paul," Nanny says, running a finger up my arm, up into the nape of my neck and the curls of my hair, "when things calm down, we need to talk."*

*Her eyes sparkle, wet but not with tears. She whispers: "Thomas's passing creates certain... unique opportunities that you and I need to explore."*

*The next several years will prove interesting.*

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The judge continues, "Case #1202. Mister Beaumont." I look at the docket and see that I'm Case #1202.

"Mister Beaumont, you have been found guilty of multiple criminal acts of theft

and fraud. Your sentence is death.” The sentence is always death. “But considering your confession to the crime—indeed you turned yourself in—you may choose from categories D through K.”

I look at Miz Kronen-Aro, and I wonder if I can go through with the plan. She has instructed me to ask for Erasure. Years after that seemingly innocuous game at the government doctor’s office, I now see how her plan is supposed to play out...

My brother died long ago. If I accept Erasure, it is he who will be Erased, not me. Where is the harm? He has been gone for decades. What difference does it make if he loses a few more years? I would be taking years away from a dead man. Miz Kronen-Aro will go free, and I will be the first person to escape a category K. Pulling this off will be a crowning achievement for a woman who has masterminded her share of crimes.

Yet the words are almost unwilling to pass out of my lips. Asking for Erasure—can it really be done?

But I do what I always do. I do what Nanny says. I tell the judge, “Category K, please.”

The judge is momentarily speechless. “Nobody *chooses* category K, Mister Beaumont.” He speaks the truth.

“I know, but I wish to be Erased.” I look at the gallery and see that Nanny is pleased even if nobody else is. At seventy years old, she still has another fifty years left. That’s the blessing of her race.

“It is indeed a first, Mister Beaumont. I will be sure to note it in the execution register.” He shakes his head. “A voluntarily Erasure.” He calls the bailiff over to provide instructions about Erasing me.

And I stand waiting. The rest of the courtroom is staring at me now, wondering what is about to change in their memories as some portion of my past is wiped

clean.

I know better. It's not me who will be Erased, but Thomas, who will have received the bioweapon intended for me in his twelfth year shots.

And when I do survive, even though there is no precedent for prisoners surviving a category K execution, there is a rule firmly in place. Nanny has already explained it to me.

It's not a moral or legal principle; it's a cosmological one. The prisoner—living with the latent bioweapon since age twelve—will die when the universe is good and ready for them. Since category K was invented, the universe has readily claimed each Erasure victim at some point in their past—or occasionally in their present. It has been assumed by some and theorized by many that one day an Erasure will drag out into the future, when the prisoner's life is too essential, too important to the days that lie ahead.

I am certain to be released.

For now, a gallery of humans and aliens of varying description—including one with a bifurcated cerebral cortex—stare at me and wait in dread.

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*It's the afternoon of my twelfth birthday, and I'm on the train home with Thomas and Nanny. Thomas is wearing a wide grin, sitting at Nanny's side, still enjoying our stealthy victory at the medical facility. Nanny, glowing, pets Thomas's hair. I sit facing them, fidgeting. I am more than ready to be Paul Beaumont again.*

*We arrive to an empty home—this is not the first birthday our parents have missed. "We must celebrate your big day," says Nanny. She has promised us ice cream.*

*Instead, she conjures a bottle of whiskey and pours us each a finger. "Happy birthday, boys." She corrects herself: "Men. Drink up." Thomas gulps with bravado. I*

*eye the stuff nervously before following suit. We both cough.*

*Whiskey dispatched, the second order of business is the reversal of our identity hardware. The process last night had been uncomfortable but painless, and it took only a few moments.*

*We follow the same routine now. Thomas and I march up to my room and sit side-by-side on the bed facing away from Nanny while she fiddles with the hardware still sitting on my desk.*

*I feel the process begin. A faint tingling... pins and needles around my head and throat. Just like last night, but mellowed now with whiskey. And then, in a minute, it's done. I'm myself again. Not painful at all.*

*And yet.*

*A scream. Wailing. Thomas stands, whips around, clutching at his mop of hair. "Nanny! Naneeeeeeeeee...!"*

*He doubles over and coughs. Blood spills out of his mouth in clumps and onto his shirt. Blood too wells up out of his ears and the corners of his eyes. A gurgling wail of pain rises out of him.*

*I shrink back in horror. Thomas is now twisting on the floor, with Nanny kneeling beside him, trying at once to hold him down and to clutch him to her breast.*

*His fist has caught the fabric of Nanny's sleeve. He clutches once and lifts up, and then drops back to the floor. Dead.*

*Silence.*

*Nanny wraps her arms around Thomas and rocks him slowly. She whispers his name, and then something I don't hear. And then she lays him back down.*

*She turns to face me.*

*"You," says Nanny. "Boy. Horrible boy!" She lunges at me, and before I can react I feel a swipe of fingernails across my face. I stagger backward.*

*“Horrible, miserable boy. Do you know what this is? What kind of death this is?”*  
*Nanny is raw and uncontrolled, alien in her unchecked rage.*

*I stand in dumb silence, my hand to my own bleeding cheek, braced for another attack. I have no idea what she’s talking about.*

*“Your brother, your own brother, just died of Erasure. That’s what you just saw, Paul Beaumont.”*

*I have no idea what she means. She leans in, poised to spring at me again. Her eyes are wild. I brace for her attack.*

*Then I see her eyes narrow and go cold. She straightens up. In control again, proper, even awash with Thomas’s blood. She is passably human again. Nanny again.*

*“Erasure, Paul, is the worst kind of punishment an adult can suffer.” An adult. I am one, as of today.*

*She explains it all. Erasure. The probabilistic bioweapon. That because of that little game we played today, Thomas has just died because of a crime that I will someday commit.*

*Nanny sighs. “Apparently, it only mattered to the timeline that Thomas stay alive long enough for your identity hardware to be restored to their proper settings. Then...”*  
*she trails off. The rest of his life: meaningless.*

*The body is still on the floor. I stare at it numbly.*

*Nanny calls the police, and they come to claim the body. They don’t ask me any questions, and as Nanny instructs, I remain silent. My parents are notified. I am told they will be home in two days.*

*Night comes.*

*I’m alone in Thomas’s room. I can’t go back into mine, even with Thomas’s body gone and his blood washed away.*

*I’m crying. Crying for my lost brother. Crying with the knowledge that I will commit*

*a crime someday and condemn him to die. I'm wearing Thomas's baseball cap and clutching his prized bat—signed by our whole team. I press the barrel of the bat to my cheek like I'm feeling for its pulse.*

*Nanny enters the room, and sits beside me on the bed. I shy away.*

*"Paul. Dear Paul." She gently removes the cap and strokes my hair.*

*"We need to be strong. We need to be very strong, and we need to understand each other very clearly now." She puts a protective arm around me.*

*"What happened today at the medical facility, what we did, that needs to be a secret between you and me. That's absolutely vital." I turn to her and nod, not understanding, and wipe my nose.*

*"And you don't know it yet, but your life—our lives, really—just changed in a way you can't have ever imagined."*

*A life without my brother, I think. A life as an only child.*

*But that's not at all what Nanny has in mind.*

*She explains: "Do you know what Thomas's death means? It means you have the opportunity to be a criminal like no one before you. You have one free conviction and death sentence coming to you. One free capital offense.*

*"Because when you are caught someday—and you will be caught—you will choose Erasure as your choice of punishment. And you will survive it. Thomas has already paid for it."*

*And even through the pain of loss, I see Nanny's scheme now. Yes, I can be a career criminal. I can become wealthy and powerful, and live an extraordinary life. And I can escape a death sentence exactly once.*

*And yet.*

*I see it plainly now: I will never be more than a puppet of Nanny's. A servant to her alien machinations. I will be condemned to do her bidding, like Thomas always did*

*gladly (and, I wonder, how many simple humans before him). That will be the sum of my life.*

*I have stopped crying, but Nanny still strokes me gently. She is already sinking her claws into me. I will never be free of her.*

*Nanny's eyes are far away, considering this new life of ours.*

*And it occurs to me: Of course, this isn't Nanny's original plan.*

*Certainly Nanny pictured this life with Thomas, with him one day being convicted of a crime. And he was to be the one electing Erasure, not me.*

*And I, in turn, was to be Erased—a human sacrifice for Nanny.*

*Most definitely, that's what Nanny had in mind.*

*The creature slips her other arm around me.*

*My tears are dried now. The baseball bat, I notice, is still in my hands.*

*What had Nanny said?*

*I get one free capital offense.*

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