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# Storm Chaser

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STORM CHASER

A thesis submitted to  
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In partial fulfillment of  
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Master of Arts

Department of English

by  
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Marshall University  
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ABSTRACT: *Storm Chaser*

Samir Abdel-Aziz

*Storm Chaser* is a work of fiction that uses strange, almost supernatural occurrences to symbolically represent various meanings and truths for different characters. Works of fiction that influenced *Storm Chaser* include *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis, *A Perfect Day for Bananafish* by J.D. Salinger, *The Collected Stories of Amy Hempel* by Amy Hempel. Reappearing themes include sacrifice, the desire to live a life of purpose, freewill, and the fear of becoming one's parents.

## *Storm Chaser*: Mass Appeal and Non-traditional Influences

In 2006, I was flying to Chattanooga, Tennessee. I noticed something odd while looking out the window. We were descending into the clouds, and it felt like being surrounded by something oppressive and sinister. I imagined what would happen if I saw something appear just beyond my line of sight. I got excited and immediately knew I had a story.

I am a writer who deals mostly with fantasy and the supernatural. It's always had an allure with me, and the vast majority of the things I've written deal with something beyond what we would encounter in real life.

When I first began preparing for my thesis in the Summer of 2011, I realized I wanted to go back and examine the idea of the creatures that lived in the mist. I wanted to try something different and outside of my comfort zone but still remain true to the kind of writer I am. I wanted something that would draw people in regardless of what they thought about fantasy.

Enter *Storm Chaser*.

This is a story that is easily the riskiest thing I've ever written and probably the most personal. The characters are not mythic heroes fighting armies of darkness; they are people who must try to understand something beyond their comprehension.

Each of the main characters in *Storm Chaser* contains parts of my personality. Some contain a few traces here or there. Zephyrinus has my dramatic and over the top personality. Phin has gained my knowledge of what it's like to love someone and lose her, and how nothing is ever quite the same without her. Others, however, have much bigger parts of my psyche ingrained in them.

Marie Soleil is an American of French-Canadian and Chinese descent who feels she is unable to be taken seriously. This is inspired by my own journey as an Arab-American. Often times I have felt that I could only get into academic programs if I relied on my “diverse” background. I have even been encouraged by my professors to “play up” my background so that I’ll have an easier time of getting in. This inspired the scene where Marie is talking to her college advisor. He sees her only as a minority and has no faith in her ability as a reporter. In his eyes she needs to rely on race and ethnicity and not on talent alone. It’s a problem a lot of minorities find themselves in.

For the character Malcolm, I was inspired by channeling a lot of my own fears and insecurities. I have known what it feels like to get left behind as those you love lead lives of their own. Malcolm’s great fear: that he’ll be forgotten and ignored, is also my greatest fear. I think that’s why I’ve given him my sense of humor. Malcolm looks at the world in a different way than most people and has a tendency to make jokes at inappropriate times. Just like me.

Gilcomegain allows me to channel a lot of my bitterness and guilt from my teenage years. Growing up, I had to take care of a sick member of my family and had to make sacrifices in regards to experiencing the “normal” teenage experience. Chapter 2 (Get Sane Soon) explores both sides of what happens when a family member suffers mental illness. Gill wants to lead a life free of his family burdens, a feeling I know all too well. Gill also faces his father for abandoning his family when Gill and Malcolm were only 10.

The characters allow me a way to confront the pain and frustrations I’ve experienced and put them to a creative use.

As a child, I found a lot of reasons for escaping reality. I was a storyteller even as a child, but it wasn't until Mrs. Daniels' 6<sup>th</sup> grade English class that I realized I wanted to be a writer. Daniels had a number of kids' books that spanned many genres. In her collection, I found *The Chronicles of Narnia* series by C.S. Lewis. By the time I had finished reading them, I knew I wanted to be a writer. I devoured any fantasy and science fiction novel I could find after that. I found myself reading *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien in my seventh and eighth grade years. Then something wonderful happened. I started writing a fantasy novel in a blue notebook. At home, when I was not reading, I was writing.

In Tolkien and Lewis' time, fantasy was not appreciated. It was something for people to enjoy, but no one took you seriously if that was the sort of writing you wanted to do. They wrote it anyway, and in doing so have inspired literally thousands of people to write, including me.

Which led me to consider my audience when it came time to start working on my thesis. I wanted my writing to be fantastical but still able to be appreciated for its aesthetic value and reach more than one specific audience.

When I read Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* as a boy, I enjoyed the stories on their surface level – heroes and magic, the good guys beating the bad guys, all the kid's stuff that people take for granted. But when I revisited the books later on in my life, I discovered things I hadn't noticed before. Lewis had layered his books in such a way that every time I reread them, I discovered little things I had missed. Some were just minor details foreshadowing a plot twist or character development while others contained strong

religious symbols and Biblical parallels. I have often attempted to replicate that feat in my own writing.

If I had to imagine the audience for *Storm Chaser*, it would be primarily for 15-45 year olds. I write about a lot of dark things that I don't think a child or even a preteen should read. Something I am fond of saying is "mass appeal." I want my writing to be enjoyed by a large number of people from a variety of diverse backgrounds. You don't have to have a M.A. in English to appreciate my writing. Instead of writing for a small group of people who all have a similar background or a particular taste, my goal is to reach out to as many different readers as I can. If someone wants to read a story that will provide him or her with interesting insights and deep issues to talk about, this novel is for them. If someone is a fan of the fantasy genre, and he or she just wants to read a story about the supernatural, *Storm Chaser* could be that novel. And if someone is just a man or woman in a bookstore who just happens to want to read a story just to be entertained, my novel is for him or her. Mass appeal gives my work an opportunity to stand the test of time in that it appeals to more than just one group of people.

I am a bit unconventional in terms of my influences. I do not see myself as a literary, academic writer, but rather as a writer of genre. One of the reasons I came to Marshall's graduate program was I believe in pushing genre forward so that it does not stagnate. I knew that I had a lot to learn about writing and believed literary fiction could help me better myself as a writer.

Many of my influences are not novelists but screenplay writers, directors, and graphic novelists. I am non-traditional, because in order to move forward I have to look

at other mediums and see what they do right. Then I take those mediums apart and see what components can be added to my writing in order to improve my skills.

In pursuit of learning from literary fiction, I examined two writers that at first glance would appear to have different styles from my own, J.D. Salinger and Amy Hempel. Salinger wrote “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” which tells the story of Seymour Glass. The piece uses a lot of dialogue to convey information to the reader. The opening conversation between Seymour’s wife, Muriel, and her mother drops a lot of hints on the reader as to his fragile mental state:

“Your father talked to Dr. Sivetski...he told him everything. At least, he said he did—you know your father. The trees. That business with the window. Those horrible things he said to Granny about her plans for passing away. What he did with all those lovely pictures from Bermuda—*everything*...In the first place, he said it was a perfect crime the Army released him from the hospital—my word of honor. He very definitely told your father there’s a chance—a very good chance, he said—that Seymour may completely lose control of himself. My word of honor.” (8-9)

Salinger uses the dialogue to paint a picture that Seymour is not well. Throughout the entire conversation, both characters are talking about something that is clear to them, but not entirely clear to the reader. The reader can infer that something is off about the main character, and the reader has been put on alert that he or she needs to watch what happens next very closely.

One of the things that I love about Salinger’s story is how the dialogue feels like it could happen in real life, yet there is a theatrical quality to it. In a scene from Chapter 4, I

attempt to use *Storm Chaser's* dialogue to convey an ominous feeling. The antagonists, Zephyrinus and Dema, are sitting on a bench in a park while it rains. Much like with Salinger's story, the reader is left to put the pieces together. All the reader knows for certain after reading this conversation is that Dema is having doubts about something they are going to do, and that Zephyrinus has none. Zephyrinus says, "This is how things are done, because this is the way they've always been done. Do you think you're the first young person to walk among the cattle and feel sorry for them? Of course not. But the lion does not restrain itself when around a herd of antelope. When the time comes, neither will we." (71)

Amy Hempel might be seen as a minimalist, but she writes about a lot of big things. Whether it is death, abortion, or the collapse of a marriage, she makes her readers confront large scale topics in a small, suffocating space. When writing short stories, my biggest problem is trying to think small enough that I can get to what the story is really about, but big enough that I feel it is a story worth telling. Reading Hempel has made me realize that the balance I'm looking for really does exist.

Another way she inspired me was by infusing comedy with tragedy. In her short story "And Lead Us Not Into Penn Station," Hempel's narrator describes the goings on around her neighborhood. One example is funnier than the next. A crusading TV reporter reaches out to street youths about drugs after a popular athlete died of an overdose, only for one of the kids to answer back, "Man, you have got to build *up* to that dose" (154). An artist finds his mentor and tells him how much the man inspired his work. "You said, 'Photography is death.' After that, I threw out my camera. I began again. Thank you for changing my life." His mentor responds, "Leave me alone. Photography is life" (155).

All of this makes the reader laugh, but the ending sends the story in a new unexpected direction.

“I don’t know what to say about this. *I* am as cut off from meaning and completion as all of these crippled people.

“These are the things that go on around here. After a while these things add up to enough weight to wear a person down. I am wearing down.” (155)

The story has now turned tragic with only a few sentences. This is something I attempted to do in Chapter 13 of *Storm Chasers* when Malcolm attempts to save lives by disrupting a band while the musicians are on stage. It’s a humorous moment for him for many reasons: from being behind the wheel of a car for the first time since leaving the mental hospital to sending pedestrians into a panic by jumping the curb and driving in a park. Toward the end of the chapter, he has finally succeeded in his goal of getting on stage only to have his warnings ignored. “Malcolm’s stomach boiled with disappointment. He realized he had failed and he didn’t understand why. This was what he was supposed to do, wasn’t it? Wasn’t he supposed to save the day? So why?” (180)

The *Harry Potter* series, by J. K. Rowling, is another influence. In terms of my thesis, I focused on her ability to give each character a unique voice. When Malcolm speaks, I want him to sound different than Gill. When Phin talks about his death patterns’ theory, it shouldn’t have the same tone as when Marie is talking about the weather.

I’ve been told by many readers that one of my greatest strengths is my dialogue, which is inspired by Joss Whedon and J. Michael Straczynski. Whedon created the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and Straczynski created of *Babylon 5*.

Growing up watching their TV shows and reading their graphic novels, I learned to appreciate their ability to create quotable dialogue. I think when someone reads a story and walks away with the dialogue still in his or her head, there is nothing more exciting for a writer. More than that, however, I think the reason my dialogue gets praise is because some of my influences come from the television medium. Having studied the dialogue of both Whedon and JMS, I have been able to take what I think works, and then inject it into my writing to create a more natural feel. The characters are talking like they should.

Whedon's dialogue is often glib and sarcastic, his trademark. When moments get sad and emotional, you can expect a joke to show up that creates a "mood whiplash," something that makes the reader/watcher laugh despite being sad or serious moments earlier. A dramatic example from the season 3 episode "Helpless" shows the main character dealing with the loss of her abilities and her worry over whether her lover would still be attracted to her.

**Buffy:** Before I was the Slayer I was... Well, I- I don't wanna say shallow, but let's say a certain person, who will remain nameless, we'll just call her "Spordelia," looked like a classical philosopher next to me. Angel, if I'm not the slayer, what do I do? What do I have to offer? Why would you like me?

**Angel:** I saw you before you became the slayer.

**Buffy:** What?

**Angel:** I watched you, I saw you called, it was a bright afternoon out in front of your school. You walked down the steps and ... I loved you.

**Buffy:** Why?

**Angel:** Because I could see your heart. You held it before you for everyone to see, and I was worried that it would get bruised or torn. And more than anything in my life, I wanted to keep it safe. To warm it with my own.

**Buffy:** That's beautiful ... Or, taken literally, incredibly gross.

**Angel:** I was just thinking that, too. (“Helpless”)

Whedon can also reverse this, turning something funny into something sad. This influence is apparent when one reads the character Malcolm. Malcolm is often glib and sarcastic, but there's an air of tragedy that surrounds him. If he were not cursed with his mental illness one gets the feeling that he could have been something. Instead he has all the potential of a tiger in a cage.

In Chapter 8, the reader sees a “day in the life” montage of Malcolm's time in the mental health facility. The chapter shows the absurdity and hilarity that comes with being a mental patient.

Shuffling into the cafeteria, Malcolm filled his plate and sat with the usual crowd of weirdoes and freaks; Harrison Ford, who thought he

was that Harrison Ford, Hugo, who never talked, and Curious George, a hairy man with severe anger control problems.

After breakfast they moved on to getting their pills, and the nurses made sure they took them. This was Harrison's favorite time of the day as he flirted with the nurses and told them all about his acting career.

"Kissing Carrie Fisher wasn't what I thought it would be, you know?" Harrison explained to the newest nurse, Rochelle. "Carrie smoked too much. That reminds me of the time I played the president in this little hijacking film...." (111)

Having established a humorous, light-hearted tone, the chapter then creates a mood whiplash when Malcolm opens up to his therapist about inheriting his mother's mental illness.

Malcolm shrugged. "The last time we went to the park together...it was right after my dad left. None of us felt like having fun, but Mom refused to let us sit around and feel sorry for ourselves. She told me that when life sucks you have to laugh, cause the gods are laughing at you, and you might as well join in. Gill and I must have run around the park for an hour. Ran till my sides hurt."

"Hmm...was your mother running with you?"

"No," Malcolm said. "She was sitting on a bench. Just watching us. I think she was burning the image of us having fun in her brain."

Something she could hold on to before she got too sick. Anyway, we never went back as a family. At the time I got so mad at her.”

“You mean when she got sick?”

“She just faded away from us, little by little. But here I am...doing the same damn thing to Gill and Gramps. The year she died I never slept. I was so afraid I would wake up and start seeing things or zoning out. I was afraid I’d turn into her. And now I have.” (116)

The chapter has now morphed into a sadder, darker piece where a glib character becomes serious and has to confront emotional pain.

J. Michael Straczynski’s dialogue is dramatic and powerful. Unlike Whedon, Straczynski is not afraid of keeping one emotional current throughout a scene. In the Season 3 episode “Walkabout,” a character named Stephen Franklin is talking to a friend about his battle with drug addiction. He explains that he needs to go on a walkabout in order to heal.

**Franklin:** You know, as a Foundationist, I was always taught that if you're not careful, you can lose yourself in the world. You get too busy with things, not busy enough with yourself...Till one day, you come to a fork in the road, and because you're distracted, you're not thinking. You lose yourself. You go right, and the rest of you, the really important part of you, goes left! And you don't even know you've done it till you realize, you finally realize, that you don't have any idea who you are when you're not doing all those things...You just leave everything, and you start walking. I mean, the Foundation adopted the idea from the Aborigines

back on Earth. The theory is, if you're separated from yourself, you start walking and you keep walking until you meet yourself. Then you sit down, and you have a long talk. Talk about everything that you've learned, everything that you've felt, and you talk until you've run out of words. Now, that's vital, because the real important things can't be said. And then, if you're lucky, you look up, and there's just you. Then you can go home. (“Walkabout”)

In Chapter 11, two of my characters, Gill and Phin, have a conversation about each other’s lives. When it came time to write Phin’s reasoning behind doing what he does, I knew I had to look to Straczynski for inspiration. The scene called for Phin to be seen as a tragic figure but a good man at heart. From Chapter 11:

“(She) was part of it, but after my wife died, there came a time when I was forced to realize I didn’t know what to do with the rest of my life. Nothing mattered anymore. Not the next bite of food, not the next sip of booze. I crawled in and out of every bottle I could find. And then one day, I realized...I knew what I wanted to do. You see, Gill, talking about my problems didn’t help. Sitting on my ass didn’t help. I had to do something. I just knew that the next storm, the next bout of weird weather would give me the answers I wanted. So I decided to chase storms.” (147)

Much like Straczynski does, I let my character express himself through dialogue to allow the reader to get a good feeling for who he is. Narration would have cheapened the effect. The reader will forge an attachment to Phin because he or she feels a closeness

to him. This makes what happens to him later in the novel all the more tragic, since the reader feels as though he or she have lost a friend.

Something I examined from Rowling, Whedon, and Straczynski and have attempted to do with *Storm Chaser* is having a story being more than just what it appears to be on the surface. In Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, the story is not just about how Harry Potter defeats the evil Voldemort. The books contain much deeper themes on prejudice, unity, and the importance of our choices.

A lesson these writers have taught me is that characters should never just deal with the supernatural "A" plot, they should deal with themes much deeper and richer, themes that make the reader pause and reflect. Character development often comes not from the earth-shattering events but rather the quiet moments that come after.

Many of my favorite writers are fans of Anton Chekhov, especially in regard to the literary trope Chekhov's Gun. As he wrote to Ilia Gurliand in 1889, "If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there." Chekhov was talking about not having unnecessary parts in one's story. Having a story full of unneeded characters or half formed themes only distracts from what is being told (203).

However, the trope has evolved into a form of foreshadowing. If someone or something is introduced at an early stage of a story, it reappears to impact the plot at a later time. There is a form of pay off. Two of my influences, Rowling and Straczynski, utilize this trope throughout their works. It is from studying them that I was introduced to Chekhov retroactively. Rowling refers to a character in the first chapter of her first novel, and then introduces him as the antagonist of the third book. Straczynski features a

standalone episode “Babylon Squared” in his first season only to have it connect to another episode two seasons later.

I believe that having a Chekhov’s Gun in my story immediately makes things interesting. It shows the writer knows what he or she is doing. It alerts the reader that he or she needs to pay attention to details because the writer has a plan. In addition, it shows the writer is not making the story up as he or she goes along, but has taken the time to organize the story and consider where it will go next.

My thesis contains many examples of Chekhov’s Gun. In the prologue, a billboard promoting the book “The Death Cycle” is mentioned, which plays a part later in the story. In Chapter 1, two characters in the background, Zephyrinus and Dema, become much more important than the reader might first imagine. Also in that chapter a meeting between the characters Gill and Landers becomes important later on as a way to bring two storylines together.

What I hope to achieve by using Chekhov’s Gun is the same level of foresight and control. Something Rowling and Straczynski do that I need to learn is that when using Chekhov’s Gun, a plot twist must make sense. Yes, they surprise the reader, but they are not created just to be there or to give the reader something to talk about. There is a logic and a reason behind them. That is something I want to master.

That’s the thing to remember about *Storm Chaser*; the reader needs to pay attention to the details. Things the reader might glance over without thinking could play a much larger role than one might think. My hope is that this is the sort of story someone has to read more than once. On the second read through, the reader will spot clues he or she missed the first time around.

I enjoy writing stories that feature a lot of suspense. I want the readers to ask themselves “What’s going on?” “Why are the villains doing what they are doing?” I appreciate ambiguity, and I think it adds to a story overall. However, I am different from other writers, in that I believe in answering those questions.

Whether it is reading a book, watching a TV show or movie, or playing a video game, I am the sort of person who hates it when a really engaging story does not answer any of its major questions. I feel cheated and begin to question why I bothered getting involved in the first place. Again, I love using ambiguity, but at some point I feel a need to come clean to my readers and say to them, “These are the answers to your questions. You might not like them, but here they are.” I don’t think of it as holding the reader’s hand, but rather freeing the reader to think about what the story is about and not only the mysteries and supernatural occurrences.

As I mentioned earlier, I am not very traditional. I am always looking for a way to show a reader something he or she has never quite seen before. That being said, with this thesis, I am attempting to follow in the tradition of Modern Fantasy, otherwise known as Contemporary Fantasy. The genre involves elements of the fantastic (of varying degrees) in modern settings. It’s the genre that has broken a lot of preconceptions about what a fantasy novel can and cannot be.

If you were to ask the average person “What is fantasy?” he or she would respond “*Lord of the Rings*.” Slowly this perception is changing and more and more readers are discovering that one doesn’t have to travel to a fantasy world (or medieval times) to enjoy fantastic elements. I believe I am following in that tradition by setting my story in the modern (2012) time period and keeping the story fairly grounded in reality.

When I consider what I will be adding to literature, I try to think about my experiments with dialogue, characters, and mingling the realistic and supernatural.

My dialogue contributes to literature by not just being locked into one medium, and it is prudent to look at different media and take the parts you like and make your writing stronger as a result.

My influences and the traditions I have been inspired by have taught me that while interesting plots bring people to a story, strong characters keep them invested. My contribution to literature involves creating characters that the reader will want to root for even if they are not a fan of a fantastical setting. Future writers will read my work knowing that they do not have to tell “certain” types of stories, but they can tell the story they want so long as the characters are strong enough.

In regards to the latter, I believe the best fantasy or supernatural stories are the ones that attach real world fears, emotions, and social issues to an extraordinary world. This thesis contains discussions about losing a family member to mental illness, being respected for who you are not what your ethnicity is, and willing to risk your life to protect perfect strangers. These things happen in our own world every day. I believe future writers will look at this story and see that it is adding to that social relevancy.

While reading *Storm Chaser*, I hope you enjoy the characters and are able to connect with the different personal issues each of them have. We’ve all faced the loss of a loved one, a struggle between being responsible and being happy, and the need to feel more important than we truly are. I tried to create characters, but I created individuals who feel more real than anyone I’ve ever written. So please, sit back and enter the world of *Storm Chaser*.

## PROLOGUE

Malcolm stood on the sidewalk and felt mesmerized by the wonders of the Preferred Reality. He hadn't been to the city for years. Time had changed it. There were new buildings and new traffic lights. Even the crosswalk images seemed crisp and new with numbers that counted down, a warning that told pedestrians how much longer they were safe.

It should have been noisy. There should be sounds of cars passing by. People talking amongst themselves. Instead, Malcolm heard silence. It wasn't as though the streets were empty. Far from it, they were filled with all sorts of vehicles. At one intersection blue police cars were placed like some kind of barricade. Some cars had swerved onto the sidewalks and walkways.

As for the people, they were still there, too. Hundreds of bodies were on the ground, their eyes open and empty. Many of them were still alive. He could see their chests moving up and down slowly, but the rest of their bodies were very still. Their spark was gone. The intangible part that made a human being a person.

The wind felt different in the Preferred Reality. Here it did not have a gentle caress, but instead it scraped against the skin as though almost solid. He wanted to describe it as cold, but temperature didn't enter into it. No, this felt harsh.

Malcolm began walking through this new yet familiar world. He walked through the muted city canyons, he stepped around the bodies, and he hoped for any sign that he wasn't alone. He got his wish when he saw a boy no older than ten running through the street. Malcolm ran after him hoping he could ask the kid what had happened. The boy's red shirt seemed to glow making him easy to follow.

The silence became so profound he could hear his own footsteps as they smacked against the pavement. The chase took him past a green billboard that advertised a book called *The Death Cycle*.

“Words form a snarling scream when spoken with anything other than the truth,” he heard himself saying. “We see the broken songs for what they are. Relics that remind us of their presence.”

He turned the corner of 10th Street when he noticed a yellow glow coming from behind him. He dared to look back and saw the sun low in the sky and much larger. Its orange surface was moving at a steady constant. The sun burned softer than Malcolm thought it would. The light glowed bright, but he could still see every flare, every pillar of fire.

“Thanks, Tom,” Ms. Sun said. Her voice was gentle and soothing. Like everything else, she seemed familiar.

Her purple eyes blinked, and it became clear she didn’t see him. Her words were for someone else.

“Yesterday we made a mistake saying that the weather was going to be clear and sunny all day, as obviously it wasn’t. However, we’re going to go ahead and tell you that unless there are any more mystery storms, we should have a fairly sunny...”

Ms. Sun’s words became distorted and Malcolm lost interest in her. The little boy he had been chasing was now wearing a blue shirt and stood only a few dozen feet away.

“Tales are woven from the dreams of lesser men,” the boy said.

“People cease to scream when broken,” Malcolm replied. “Ms. Sun can be as bright as she likes. She cannot comprehend devoured spirits.”

“Listen for the music not the song,” came the reply.

“Things fall apart, and I cannot put them together. You were always chasing after another sun. A brother’s silly jokes distract me from seeing the clues.”

“Jokes are disguises, I told you this once.”

The boy pointed toward the sky. It had turned red, the color of fire and of blood. Clouds appeared, and Malcolm swore they moved with the speed of a screaming train. Something called out to them; they danced to the melody of a superior soul. They grew and grew, thick enough they blotted out the warmth of Ms. Sun. Forked tongues of lightning, green and yellow, flashed before Malcolm’s eyes.

Malcolm looked toward the little boy. His shirt was orange and seemed to be emitting a new light. It was just as strong as Ms. Sun’s.

Another burst of lightning and now there were two figures standing atop the tallest building. They were purple shadows in the form of a man and a woman. He had seen them before, they always plotted in the dark.

The man-shadow shifted into mist flowing down the side of the building before landing on the ground. It was solid in the blink of an eye. The woman-shadow leapt from her perch with a deep, unnatural roar escaping from her lips. She landed on her feet, the impact shattering the concrete and leaving a small crater. She giggled at the carnage around her.

“They watch and listen,” the little boy explained. “A servant of the storm and a student as versatile as rainwater. They like to punish those who disagree.”

Something wet splashed against Malcolm’s face. Rain, of course. It smelled of copper.

The shadows came for the little boy and Malcolm felt a sudden urge to protect him. He ran, but he had misjudged the distance. He was too late.

The man-shadow punched a hole through the boy's chest. The blood smelled like water.

Malcolm wanted to shout out at them for the senseless murder, but he could only stare in disbelief. Who could have known clouds had teeth?

The boy looked at the hole and looked back at Malcolm. "What is done cannot be undone. What sins we commit tomorrow can be cleansed today. Swirling fog, laughing rain, look for the lights and listen for the music. T-minus 21 days. What is done cannot be undone. What sins we commit tomorrow can be cleansed today. Swirling fog, laughing rain, look for the lights and listen for the music. T-minus..."

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Malcolm twitched for a moment before blinking. His episodes were getting worse. He almost wanted to ask the nurse for a stronger dosage.

The door to his room opened and new light poured through, which caused him to blink rapidly.

"Up and at 'em, Malcolm," his orderly said. "Hope you're hungry. Patrick tells me they're serving steak and eggs."

"Is it Thursday already?" Malcolm hated it when his breaks from reality messed with his sense of time.

A sharp pain burned through the center of his skull. He glanced at a shadow on the floor and nearly jumped.

It looked almost purple.

“Sometimes I hate being crazy,” Malcolm said to no one.

## CHAPTER 1: THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

For Gilcomegain “Gill” Robertson, there was nothing worse than a Thursday. It was afternoon, and he was stuck in a Speedway while a tempest pounded away outside. Normally he didn’t mind rainstorms. In fact, he enjoyed driving in them. However, in the first five minutes of this storm the roads were already becoming flooded.

He parked in the Speedway lot and then moved inside before he could get swept away by the gale force winds. There were at least thirty more people inside the store. Some of the people inside were casual joggers, others were people who had sought refuge just like him. One or two of them still scoured the shelves, determined to make the detour worth something. He moved wherever there seemed to be fewer people. He didn’t like being crowded.

The employees didn’t seem to mind the influx of new people, except for a large woman who seemed to resent the possibility that she would have to work harder. She gave Gill a distinctive leer when he had run through the doors. His girlfriend, Heather, called such a look “the stink eye.”

Ignoring the look, he moseyed along the aisles and tried to be inconspicuous. This was not hard to do; while his clothes were clinging to him and his shoes slogged around making that wet rubber sound, he was hardly the only person who had been caught in the storm. The sound of squeaky sneakers filled the air.

“The weather forecasters got it wrong, man,” a teenage boy said to an older woman.

“That new chick on channel 4?” he pressed, trying to get the woman’s attention. “She was talking about how today was supposed to be sunny. Man, she got it wrong.”

Gill was only twenty-nine though he was already getting several silver flecks on the side of his jet-black hair. He kept it short with a clean-shaven face. Today he wore a black, buttoned up shirt with a red vest over it with a peppermint pink-colored tie. He worked as an assistant manager at the local movie theatre. It was a decent job that paid good money. He met his girlfriend, a projectionist, there almost a year ago.

The storm showed no sign of letting up. The rain kept pelting the windows of the Speedway so hard that they had a dream-like haze over them, so that you could barely see anything outside.

Gill debated whether or not to call his grandfather, whom he lived with, to check and see if the old man was all right. But Gramps had weathered tougher storms than this, so he settled on calling his girlfriend to check on her. He got his smart phone out of his pocket.

*Hi, you've reached Heather, I'm either working or being washed away in the coming flood, so please leave a message, and I'll get back to you as soon as I find dry land.*

So he had just missed her. He left a message asking her to call him back whenever she could before hanging up and then continuing his trek along the food aisles.

“God, this storm came out of nowhere,” a man in his early forties said next to Gill. His accent suggested either New York or New Jersey. He had a gray suit on with a black tie. He held his hat in his right hand. It looked crumpled. “Can you believe I was on my way home to surprise my girlfriend?”

The man's tone made it clear that he expected Gill to say something back so he shrugged and said the first thing that came into his mind. "I was on my way to the hospital to visit my brother."

The man's bluish gray eyes softened. "Sorry to hear that, kid," he said, though he didn't really sound it. "Nothing too serious, I hope?"

Gill shook his head, slowly. He felt an odd compulsion to just be honest and tell this stranger what kind of hospital his brother was in. He decided against it. "No, nothing too serious."

"I hope not, kid. Name's Landers." He jerked a thumb to his chest. "Would you believe I work at the news channel?" He made a tsk tsk sound. "Our weather lady, Marie, cute girl, not very good at her job. I had my top down for god's sake!"

One of Gill's greatest pet peeves was having random conversations with strangers. He had hoped that by not standing still he could give the impression he wasn't in a mood for talking, but Landers remained oblivious.

"You know, between me and you, kid, I think our producer was thinking with his other—"

"My name's Gill, actually." Another of his pet peeves was being called "kid." Until the silver hairs had sprouted, he looked a little young for his age.

"Gill? That's appropriate given the weather we've been having lately, ain't it?" He laughed at his own joke. "Okay, Gill, you wouldn't happen to have an ark handy would you?" He laughed again. "I was really hoping to meet with the girlfriend. It's something like our anniversary." His eyes seemed to twinkle. "She's a real firecracker for special occasions."

Dear God, did the man never shut up?

“Really?” He tried to keep his voice as dispassionate as he could while moving, however, Landers followed quickly on his heels.

The area around the Speedway grew very bright as lightning flashed. What felt like five seconds later, the loudest thunder Gill had ever heard rolled in. The building shook, the windows jostled, store items fell to the floor. The only thing that stayed the same was the rain, which continued its assault on the doors and windows.

“Jesus Herbert Christ!” Landers cursed. “You’d think it was the end of the world out there!”

Gill decided it was time to try to reach his girlfriend again.

*Hi, you’ve reached Heather, I’m either working or I just got blasted by that intense bolt of lightning. Leave your name and number, and I’ll call you back, as soon as I’ve appeased mighty Zeus.*

How the hell did she think of those so fast? He supposed it didn’t matter. He had gotten used to Heather’s eccentricities. In fact, sometimes he found them quite adorable, though he would never tell her that.

His phone rang, the ringtone belonging to the new single from Poetic Monkeys. Heather. “You all right?”

She giggled. She sounded like she was touched. “Yeah, sorry I missed your call, I was working. Then that lightning hit, and I just had to update my voicemail!”

It made sense. “So you guys saw the lightning, too?” The movie theatre was several blocks away, but he knew that wouldn’t matter. “Even inside the building?”

“Yeah, I was grabbing a snack.” Her tone suggested that she thought the lightning was no big deal. “So, I gotta get back to work. Are we still going out for dinner tonight?”

Crap. He had forgotten about dinner. “Yeah, sure. It doesn’t look like I’ll be able to make it to the hospital anyway.”

“Oh, yeah.” She sounded guilty. He could tell what she was about to say before she said it.

“You know if you want to—”

“Cancel? No!” His voice sounded louder than he had intended. He rubbed the top of his head and looked around the Speedway. Some people were watching him out of sheer boredom. Landers leaned on the soda fridge door and seemed to be nodding in an encouraging manner.

Gill turned away fast, not wanting to look at the older man any longer. Heather seemed pleased at his enthusiastic outburst. She chuckled, before saying “Okay, but I understand if you’d rather see him.”

“Malcolm will understand. I don’t think he’ll want his brother to drown.” He was only half sure that was true. Things hadn’t been that great between them. Perhaps he avoided going to see his brother more out of not wanting to have another fight.

“Okay, well...” she paused as if unsure what to say. They had been dating a couple of months. Too early for “I love you.”

“Yeah, see ya later tonight.” Gill hung up and looked outside again. The rain was letting up a bit, but it was still too risky to drive. He noticed Landers had something in his hand. “That’s not a cigar is it?”

“What?” Landers asked incredulously. ““Is this a cigar?’ What’s the matter, kid, your old man never teach you the value of a good smoke?”

“Hey, you,” the stink eyed Speedway worked said. “You can’t smoke in here!” She opened up the counter and walked toward the two of them. She gave Gill a look as though he were the one wanting to smoke.

“What’s the matter, lady?” Landers stuck his chest out like a child. “You afraid ya gonna get cancer?”

“It’s against the law to smoke inside public buildings!”

“Jesus, whatever happened to the days of ‘The Customer’s Always Right?’” Landers took out his lighter. “Now look, sweetheart, I’m stuck in this crummy Speedway, we got Noah’s flood outside, and my girlfriend is in my hotel room in a see-through nighty with no one to spank her, so yeah, I’m gonna smoke!”

Gill tapped Landers on the shoulder. The older man whirled around, his eyes narrowing. “Sprinklers.”

“What?”

“Sprinklers. It’ll rain in here, too.”

Lander made a dismissive noise in his throat. “No way one cigar will make them go off!” He flipped the lid of the lighter and an orange blue edged flame appeared.

Gill wasn’t sure he should get involved in someone else’s problems. Still, he couldn’t just let Landers make an even bigger fool of himself. “I don’t think we should risk it,” he said, as he gestured at some of the other patrons who were staring at the two of them with dark glances.

“Uh, yeah, looks like you might be on to something there, kid.” Landers popped the lid back on his lighter and stuffed it back into his pocket. He eyed the cigar with what looked like a severe sense of regret. “Too bad. This is cherry wine flavored. The good stuff.” He placed it under his nose and smelled deeply. After sighing, he gently placed it back in his coat. He gave the Speedway worker a stink eye of his own. “Fascists.”

The rain continued. The roads were flooded, along with parts of the parking lot outside.

Landers “entertained” Gill with stories about his days as a journeyman back in his twenties. The good ole days, he called them. Gill figured it was a bit typical, but he started to tolerate Landers, and he didn’t want to antagonize the older man.

Gill noticed a pair of strangers standing by the pizza counter. The first was a man in his fifties or sixties eating a slice while standing next to a pretty girl with beautiful tan skin. She might have been twenty. They stood apart from everyone else, sending a message they were not to be disturbed.

*Stop raining please*, he asked the weather nicely. *Stop raining so I can leave this place and get home*. Gill worried about his grandfather. Would the old man have enough sense to stay inside and not go outside to check on things? He shook his head when he considered the absurdity of the question. Of course, his grandfather would nose about. A biblical flood would do little to dissuade the Elder Scotsman, Gill’s nickname for him, from checking up on things.

Gill got up on his feet and walked toward the door. How deep was the flooding now? Were the streets going to be nothing but river channels? He forced himself to see beyond the wavy lines and distorted images and focus on the streets. They looked bad, a

bright yellow hummer was almost halfway consumed. A police car's light flashed red, white, and blue, never a good sign.

*Please let this rain end*, Gill said. *Please*. He came to the realization he was praying, the first true prayer he had ever said since his parents had gotten divorced. He wasn't sure how to feel about this, other than he had meant it.

Gill wasn't an atheist, but he had never been fully comfortable with religion, spirituality, or other superstitious ideals. Prayer just always seemed to belong to all three. However, at this particular time, at this particular place, Gilcomegain didn't care if he prayed to God, Buddha, or Mick Jagger, he just needed to escape.

And just like that the rain came to an end.

Silence reigned inside the Speedway for several moments. No one, not even Landers, said a word. There seemed a shared fear that whoever spoke first would bring back the storm. Everyone exchanged glances with everyone else. A moment of near madness when Gill could have sworn a conspiracy of silence had been forged between them, where not one of them would ever speak again for the fear of raindrops returning.

Finally, Gill decided to speak up.

"I think it's finally stopped." The words were low, and he was sure he stuttered a bit toward the end.

Slowly everyone resumed their conversations, the new topic being whether they should walk outside. Gill examined the parking lot and pump stations, the back half were flooded, with quiet waves lapping up against the front.

The brief bit of optimism they had entertained became dashed when it appeared they would still be here for a while. A few asked if they should just try walking, but

Landers pointed out that there might be a great deal of flooding, and it might be better to wait until there was official word.

Someone to the right of him whispered “It’s a miracle.” Gill wasn’t so sure of that. Regardless, one part of the day’s misfortune was behind him. He dedicated the rest of his energy to hoping the water would recede enough for him to get home. He almost called Heather again to let her know that he would have to cancel, but he wanted to wait, just in case.

He felt a slap against his back, which broke him out of his thoughts. It was Landers, of course.

“Well, I don’t see an old man with a boat,” he joked. “So I suppose God hasn’t decided to drown the world again, huh?”

How many times had the man referenced Noah’s flood? Ignoring his own irritations, Gill decided to humor him. “I guess.”

Within the next few minutes, a few brave souls, Gill among them, decided to step outside. The sky appeared grey and overcast, though much friendlier than it had looked earlier. The air had a smell, that awful breezy smell it always had before and after a storm.

Taking a look around, Gill saw many cars stranded. Gill stepped down on the asphalt, occasionally stepping into little pools of leftover rainwater.

The water had receded far faster than it should. Gill went back inside to let Landers in on the good news. Landers shook his head and laughed.

“Figures,” he said. “Sent a text to the girlfriend to let her know I’ve got to reschedule.” He stuck the cigar in his mouth and headed outside. “At least I get to smoke this now. Hell of a consolation prize.” He turned back and faced Gill before leaving.

“Well, Gill, looks like this is where we go our separate ways,” the older man said. “You ever need anything, why don’t you give me a call.” He handed Gill a white business card. “We’re doing a series of stories about hospitals....”

“Uh...thanks,” Gill said shoving the card in his pocket. He knew that he wasn’t going to use it. “So long, Landers...it’s been...something.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll miss you, too,” came the loud reply. “Geez, why do all of these people get attached to me?” Landers laughed at his own clever comment and headed outside.

The old man and the young girl moved past him as well. The girl gave him a curious look, as though she were committing his face to memory. The old man smiled, embarrassed by his companion’s behavior.

“You’ll have to forgive her, it was her first major thunderstorm.” His voice was very smooth and polished like a politician’s.

“She’s lucky to have gotten away with never being in one before,” Gill said. She gave him a smile, and shot her friend a nasty, embarrassed look of her own.

Gill moved away from them and decided to call his house to check on his grandfather.

It was time to go home.

## CHAPTER 2: GET SANE SOON

Gill knew what he had to do, and he knew he wasn't going to like it. Gill kept telling himself there had to be another way around it. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe if he and his grandfather waited, things would improve. They had been saying this for months, and it was time to accept the truth.

Malcolm had inherited their mother's illness.

The weight of that statement hit Gill so hard he steadied himself against the door that led to the basement stairwell. In truth, he had known about his brother's condition for nearly a year now, ever since Malcolm's girlfriend first called about the mood swings, the violent outbursts, and the thrown furniture. However, Gill attributed these events to a pre-med student getting ready to graduate, struggling to maintain good grades, and moving toward the next phase of his education.

When Malcolm returned home after graduation, he looked pale and zombielike. Before, Malcolm was the funny one; he never could resist joking around. But now, he became quiet, soft-spoken. He never said anything except when he told Gill water sprinklers were really snakes and fire purified the soul. Then he'd have a violent outburst where he would throw around furniture or scream. Once, Gill saw Malcolm sing "God Bless America" for twenty minutes straight. Over and over and over again.

When Gill wanted to avoid reality, there was no limit to the amount of lies he could tell himself. Lies that ranged from the fairly logical, "Everyone needs to blow off a little steam now and then," to the silly, "Probably a bad reaction to some cold medication," to the cruel, "No wonder Malcolm lost it; he has a harpy as a girlfriend," all danced inside his head.

Eventually, however, reality refused to go away. Malcolm wasn't getting any better; in fact, his mental deterioration grew more advanced every day. It became clear they couldn't take care of him by themselves anymore. Gill had to work leaving Gramps to stay home and watch Malcolm just to make sure he didn't decide to go jump off a building.

Gill tried to imagine what it must feel like for Malcolm. To be powerless as each day parts of who you were escaped from your grip like mist. He repressed a shudder and made his way down the stairs to tell his brother the bad news.

Gill found his twin brother in the basement with all of his old comic books and action figures. Malcolm looked them over like they were brand new. His brother appeared thinner now, his shaggy black hair looked like it hadn't been brushed in days.

"I came down here," Malcolm explained in a very calm but determined manner. It seemed like every word took a lot of effort to say. "I came down here because I haven't been for years. It smells just like I remember it."

"Like mildew and rats?" Gill had long ago taken his brother's role of the jokester. He was getting better at it.

"Heh." Malcolm's laugh was short and bitter sounding. "I remember that joke. It was one of mine, wasn't it?"

"Yeah." Even Gill had forgotten that.

"And these are mine, too, right?" He looked down at the comics. "Captain Valiant was my hero when I was a kid. He saved the day just by punching some dragon in the nose. This was his action figure." He held up a gold and purple armored defender of justice.

Gill sat down on the smelly couch. “Hey, listen, Mal, we’ve got to talk.” He didn’t say anything for a long moment; he watched his twin brother play with action figures.

“Mal, we’re thinking that with me working more and more and with Gramps getting older...maybe it’s time we—”

“Shut me up someplace?” Mal finished with a quiet voice. “I figured.”

“It’s a really good place. Gramps checked it out, and he wants us to go together to see if you like it.” The words sounded weak. Gill knew he had that same fake smile he had on whenever he had to tell Aunt Virginia she wasn’t fat.

“Sure, I think it’s for the best.” Malcolm had never sounded more broken.

“Are you mad?”

“No,” Malcolm gazed at the toy in his hand and gave it a half smile. “Well, not angry, but I think it’s safe to say I’m a *little* mad, yes.” It was the first joke he’d said in months, and he giggled a bit.

“It’s really close by; we’ll visit you all the time.”

“I know.”

“And if you want, we’ll see if we can smuggle in Captain Valiant and the gang in with you. It’d be the mature thing to do after all.” Jokes are disguises, at least that’s what Gill thought.

“Nah,” he put the toys back in the box where he found them. “I just wanted to remember what it was like when I was young, and we would play out these little adventures.” He looked up at Gill, meeting his eye. “I love you, bro.” He gave Gill a playful slap on the face.

“I’m sure I’ll love the hospital just fine. It’s the start of something new, you know, like pizza and rain drops of thunder mixed with coke and cherry wine flavored cigar smoke in a room full of meaningful strangers.”

And just like that, the lucid moment vanished and his brother just drifted off, seeing things Gill couldn’t imagine.

He left his brother to examine his old possessions and walked back up the stairs. Gill promised himself he would be there for his brother in whatever way he could.

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For Gill, the drive to his brother’s hospital was one of reluctant reflection. Seven years had passed, and he had grown to hate the place for many reasons, both personal and petty. The trip back and forth took too much time out of his day. His job as the assistant manager at the local movie theatre took up a lot of his time. Often he got too tired, and he lacked the energy to go out on dates with Heather. The prospect of driving an extra hour and a half round trip did little to entice him.

Because of this reason, he hadn’t been to visit Malcolm in several weeks. He wanted to cancel today’s visit, thanks to the thunderstorm, but his Gramps had threatened to kick his “arse” if Gill didn’t go, so....

As for the personal reasons, being around his brother only made Gill think of their mother and her struggles against the same demons. When they were ten, their mother began losing her mind and tried to kill herself by taking the family pistol and putting it against her left temple.

Rather than stick by his family, their father walked out on them. Gill and Malcolm were at the top of the stairs listening to their parents yelling and screaming at each other. Gill remembered his father shouting, "I didn't sign up for this crap!"

"So what are you going to do, Rory?" his mother asked. "You just gonna walk out on us and leave me all alone to deal with them?"

Deal with them. Ten-year-old Gill took that to mean it was the kids' fault their mother went crazy. Their father left, leaving the boys with the sudden, inescapable feeling like they were discarded toys. After all of that, Gill's mom was forced to ask Gramps to move in and help her out. Five years later, on the day before the second worst day of his life, Gill's mom stopped him before he went off to school on a Wednesday morning.

"Snails taste like toads and when blood's in the water, people are going to drown," she said in a dark tone, like it was the most important thing she had ever said to him. "When walking in clouds remember to bow to their queen, cause she's rather grumpy. And don't think it's all your fault, cause who could have imagined clouds have teeth?"

"Uh, thanks, Mom."

"Darling boy." She hadn't called him that in five years. "Hearts are ripped out with casual fury and the gods barely blink. But I see the wings of strife descending, and I am not afraid. I know the words to sing that will protect us from their hungry jowls."

It was a terrible thing to see someone you loved lose their mental faculties. That feeling that if you just hold on to them a little tighter fewer memories would be lost. But

then reality set in, and his mother looked at him like he was a stranger. Then she blinked and smiled at him like she just saw him.

“Gilly! Why are you just standing around? Get to school!”

“Yes, Mom.”

“I have to go get ready to sing a lullaby for Peter so I can go inside the gates, only I’ve never had the best voice.”

“Love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too, Darling Boy.”

When their mother killed herself the next day (jumping off a ten-story building), Gramps was granted full custody.

The family had done what it needed to survive. Gill had finished high school, started college, left college because he had no idea what he wanted to be, gone back to college once he realized he wanted to be a journalist, left again when things got too expensive. Now he was almost thirty, and he had no idea what he was going to do with his life. He felt like a failure. He was too old to be this listless, too old to be waiting for his life to finally start up. Too old not to have grown up already.

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He reached his brother’s hospital at 3:45 p.m. Visiting hours lasted until five which meant he didn’t have long to meet with Malcolm. He wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or bad.

Gill located his brother’s room and politely knocked on the door before turning the knob and going in. The room felt darker than usual, Malcolm had lowered the blinds.

He was in bed looking at the ceiling. Once again the feeling of guilt appeared, as Gill was afraid his brother was having another episode.

“Hello, Gill,” Malcolm said in a low voice. “I didn’t think I’d see you today. Thought you might have better things to do.” The words felt like a punch to the stomach.

“Yeah, sorry I’m late,” he said. He looked around and noticed a chair in the corner and sat down. “You might not have seen it, but there was a freak storm earlier. The streets were flooded.”

“Oh,” Malcolm said. He had yet to take his eyes away from the ceiling.

“So, how ya been?” It was a stupid question, and he regretted it as soon as he asked.

“Still crazy,” came the response. “What about you?”

Gill tried not to get frustrated. Malcolm’s personality often flowed from bitter and sarcastic to melancholy. He never seemed happy anymore.

“Working a lot.” He glanced down and realized he hadn’t changed clothes. He could still see some of the cheese stains from the popcorn. “I don’t know if Gramps told you or not, but I’m dating someone.”

Malcolm shook his head. “He did not.”

“Yeah, her name is Heather.”

“Heather.” Malcolm repeated it over and over again. Trying out the sound of it. “Heeeeeaaaather. Het her. Reht aeh.” He scratched his chin. “Sounds cute.”

“She’s gorgeous.” Gill was surprised at himself for being so quick to say that. “Met her at work, we talked for a while, and I finally got up the nerve to ask her out. We’ve been together for a couple of months now.”

“Brown hair?”

Gill felt himself blush. “Auburn.”

“Blue eyes?”

“Green, actually.”

“Freckles?”

“A few.” Gill held out the word “few.”

“Not bad.” Malcolm giggled for a moment. “Still work at the movie theatre?”

“Sadly, yes.” Gill hated this part of the visit. Malcolm had a nasty habit of interrogating him about everything he could. “Assistant manager now. I’m going places. I might make manager in 20 years.”

“Impressive, bro.” A chuckle this time. “So, do you like her?”

“Well—”

“Be honest,” Malcolm interrupted raising his left hand again, index finger pointing skyward.

“She’s pretty and quirky. You’d like her. She has a good sense of humor, quick-witted you know? Doesn’t let me get away with anything, at least so far. Oh, and she has these crazy voicemails. She changes it constantly whenever she can. There’s a new one every day. It’s pretty cool.”

“Really? I’d think that’d be annoying.”

“Yeah, people always say that, but I just find it endearing.” He shrugged. “She’s got this presence you know? Like...when I’m with her, life’s not complicated. I know it’s cheesy, but all the emotional baggage just doesn’t weigh me down. I gotta tell ya, I’m starting to think she might be a keeper.”

“Took you two months to figure that out, huh?”

“I know, I know, I’m slow.”

“Yep.”

“It’s just... what can I do about it, ya know? I think we have something, but I’m not exactly ‘Relationship Guy.’”

“You’re scared.”

Gill let that sink in for a minute. “Yeah, I guess I am. I’ve never felt like this for anyone. All the other girlfriends... it never mattered when we would break up, because I knew there wasn’t a point to them. But with Heather, she just... yeah.”

“Heh.”

“I’m telling you, bro, I’m falling hard.”

“I remember what it’s like.” Malcolm’s tone had turned cold. Gill knew he was thinking of his ex-girlfriend, Danielle. “I hope I’m invited to the wedding.”

Gill smiled at that. “Of course. Every groom needs a best man.”

“Yep,” Malcolm sneered. “Well, this has been a fun little visit, *Gilly*, but it’s getting late. I don’t want to miss my shows.”

“What do you mean?” Gill asked nervously. He looked at his watch. “We have another fifty minutes till visiting hours are over.”

“Gill, Gillpad, Little Gillfish,” Malcolm said in a very serious tone. He still refused to look at his brother. “Just because you think you can come here whenever you want doesn’t mean I have to give up my plans. *Seinfeld* is coming on soon. That used to be my favorite show... back when I was sane.”

“Maybe we can watch it together.” Gill didn’t know why he was trying so hard. Malcolm didn’t want him to stay. He hadn’t wanted to come anyway. But still he tried. “We haven’t watched something on TV for a long time.”

“Yeah, like seven years,” came the sarcastic reply.

“Mal, I’m trying here.”

“Yes, and you are *really* sucking at it,” his brother smirked.

“What’s the matter?” Gill asked. “Are they not giving you your meds in here?”

“What’s the matter?” Malcolm chuckled. “Did you really just ask, *what’s the matter’ to me?* He jerked upright suddenly. So sudden Gill jumped back in his chair in alarm. Malcolm’s eyes burned into Gill’s. “The matter is I’m stuck in this little hellhole you and Gramps decided to stick me in. While you go off and break tickets for pimple-faced kids and fat chicks, the highlight of my day is talking to a pretty orderly. Or maybe catching a scintillating episode of *Springer*. That’s on one of my good days. The bad days I soar on pink clouds and drink nectar from the friggin’ sun itself. Or you know, at least I think I do. Last week I had a five-hour conversation with that wall.” He pointed to the one on the right. “It’s a lovely conversationalist, by the way, provided you can speak German.”

“Do you speak Ger—”

“*Nein.*” Malcolm’s express became even darker. “This isn’t funny. I’m not joking around. You come here, *occasionally*, because you feel guilty you have a crazy brother. And what do we talk about? Hmm? Do we talk about Malcolm’s progress? Malcolm’s life, pathetic that it is? No, we talk about how you’ve found the love of your life!”

“Hey, I tried to talk to you about your life, Mal. You were just too busy being a smartass to realize it.”

“Papa’s not finished, Gillwad,” Malcolm raised his left index finger to silence his brother. “Congrats on finding your dream girl, I hope the two of you will have a great life with plenty of pink, fat babies. I look forward to getting your ‘Get Sane Soon’ cards once a month. It’ll be a highlight, I’m sure.”

“Mal—”

“Again with the interruptions! What’s the matter, bro? I thought you wanted me to talk? Regretting that decision?”

“A little bit, yeah.”

“That’s too damn bad, Gill Bill. I’m not finished. I’m glad you and little Heeeeeather have found each other, but maybe you should see it from my perspective. See, I look at it as you having just another reason to pretend I don’t exist. As much as it sucks beyond the telling of it, I have no one else to depend on except Gramps. What happens after he dies, Gill? Huh? You and Heather gonna come in between crazy, sexy time and talk me out of catatonic states? No, you’re just going to disappear like everyone else in my life has. I thought you were different. When Dad split, we made a pact. You remember?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“We made a friggin’ pact. We promised to look after one another. To be there for one another. One of us can’t keep that promise anymore, and it’s not the guy in the loony bin!”

“Mal, I will always be there for you.”

“Yeah, doing a great job of it so far. Tell me something, *bro*, exactly how long did it take Gramps to talk you into coming down this time? Ten minutes? Half an hour?”

Gill didn't say anything for a while, though the guilt squirmed in his belly. “No one has to talk me into coming to see you, Malcolm, you're my freakin' brother for chrissakes.”

“Wow. You suck at lying almost as much as you do at keeping promises, bro.”

“Well, why would I want to come down here, if I'm just going to get bitched at like you're my ex-wife or something?” As soon as he said it, he knew he had gone too far.

Malcolm shrugged, his face was red, and he looked like he wanted to leap out of the bed and strangle Gill. However, he smiled and said, “Yeah, well, I guess you don't have to anymore.” He made a shooing motion. “Begone, I release you from the pact.”

“Mal—”

“No, you're right. Why come here if we're just going to argue? You should be where you're appreciated. Like at the movie theatre, smiling at losers with that crap-eating grin of yours. Like the one you have on your face every time you come here.”

“Malcolm, you're my brother, you don't get to dissolve the pact because you're pissed off.” Gill stood up and approached his brother's bed. “I love you, okay. You looked out for me when we were kids, and as much as you piss me off whenever I come down here, I'm not going to let anything get in the way of sending you those ‘Get Sane Soon’ cards.”

The two brothers stared at each other for a minute. The anger blazed between them, creating tiny little waves of friction. Then they broke into laughter that just refused to stop.

When it finally did, all the anger had seemingly disappeared, and the bitterness Malcolm had spewed out was just a distant memory. “Mal, I will always make sure you’re taken care of, even if I have 10 children.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Malcolm said. “Now stop before we end up braiding each other’s hair and start gossiping about boys, okay?”

They sat in the room for another few minutes unsure of what to say next. Finally Malcolm got up out of bed. “Let’s go watch TV. *Seinfeld* might be on. Hopefully it’ll be the one at the Asian restaurant.”

They left the room together with Malcolm leading the way to the room where the television was located, which was only a short walk away. A single orderly nodded toward them. He winked at Malcolm. None of the other patients were watching TV at the moment, so it was all theirs.

They turned to the local channel the show came on. They caught the end of a segment.

“—today’s storm,” the middle aged anchor man said. “Talking about the mix up is Channel 4’s very own Marie Soleil.”

A pretty Chinese woman came onscreen then. She looked to be in her mid-twenties and wore a red professional dress. Gill’s mind flashed back to the rude news producer he had met earlier in the day.

“Thanks, Tom.” she enthusiastically said. “Yesterday we made a mistake saying the weather was going to be clear and sunny all day, as obviously it wasn’t. However, we’re going to go ahead and tell you that unless there are any more mystery storms, we should have a fairly sunny week.”

Gill shook his head. “Yeah and tomorrow God’s going to ask this old man to build a boat.” He laughed at his own lame joke, something he hated other people doing. “Right, Mal?”

Silence.

He looked back in alarm at his brother. Mal was staring into the TV with widened eyes and his hands were shaking. Gill cursed, he knew what was coming next.

“It’s here, Gill, it’s friggin’ here!” Malcolm became very animated suddenly. He no longer seemed reserved or sarcastic. “It’s true. Everything is true!”

“Mal, what’s true?”

“It’s true!” he said again. “Lightning in the distance, thunder that rips villages apart! True!” He put his hands to his head as if he were seeing something terrible. “It’s all just a friggin’ joke about star charts and Doppler effects and peanut seashells that crack underfoot! It’s all true! No one sees it because they buy into the lies, but she’ll figure it out, she’s smart, not that you’ll ever admit it. Cute like a button of course, but you don’t like girls for their brains.”

“Mal, who’ll figure what out?” Why did he bother? Every time Mal had an episode he would go on and on about something crazy.

“They lie to everyone, especially everyone. They creep in and tell you one plus one equals two. But it doesn’t. Nope, it’s really 654. Girls and crashing yellow buses, winter tea blitz falling all over the floor, and then a painted tiger makes you look closer.”

“Okay, Mal, I’m going to go ahead and get someone.” He began to motion for the orderly to do something, but the orderly had disappeared.

“NO!” Malcolm grabbed his brother by the arm and pulled him onto the couch. His grip was tight, like Gill had been caught in a trap. “Snakes come in so many sizes. They shift into mist when you’re not looking at them. Rules exist for a reason, Gill, rules exist for a reason. You have to know the rules otherwise everything burns! All the world explodes in pink fire, and the fog growls and turnips taste like garbage unless you have snails. People die without dying, just like people live without living. You’ll blame yourself, Gill, but it’s not your fault. How could anyone guess clouds have teeth?”

Gill wrestled away from his brother’s grip while backing away slowly. “What did you just say?”

Nothing his brother had ever said shook Gill like he felt at this moment. He never told anyone what his mother had said to him all those years ago the day before she died. Yet here was his brother saying the same crazy things. Just another sad reminder that his mother’s legacy casted a long shadow in his and Malcolm’s life.

“Hey, I need some help here!” Gill yelled.

“We have to stop them!” Malcolm ran up to Gill again and grabbed him, pulling him close. “We have to stop them! Turncoats and traitors in all the right places listening to a self-beneficial song, but they don’t bother listening to the lyrics! I hear the lyrics, Gill, I hear the lyrics as they countdown to the end of everything!”

Gill broke his brother's grip again and tried to go get some help. Malcolm came behind him and screamed, "IT'S ALL TRUE!"

Three orderlies came running immediately.

"Gods are real, Silly Gilly Man," Mal said. "They aren't old men in the heavens or prophets and angels. They are luminous beings older than the dirt we walk on. They just float on by most of the time, and we never see them, but they change the weather just by asking it nicely! Roaring mist that snarls into the purple flowers of anarchy and watch while eating pizza."

"Okay, Malcolm," the lead orderly said in a calm voice as the other orderlies flanked him by the couch. "You know the drill. Can you be safe?"

"Flowers, cups, and tinfoil roses snarling as the world explodes around them," Malcolm said, and he shoved one of the orderlies away. They responded by holding him down on the couch.

"He's not responding to the question," one of the orderlies said. He was on Malcolm's right side pressing down on his shoulder while gripping his wrist.

"What are you doing to my brother?"

"I'm sorry, man," the lead orderly said. "You're gonna have to get out of the way and let us sedate him. He's upset, and that means he's not safe to be around." He pulled out a syringe and bottle.

"That stuff doesn't hurt him, does it?"

"It'll just calm him down, and let us move him back to his room." He took out an alcohol swab from his other pocket and began disinfecting an area on his brother's arm.

"Gill!"

“I’m here, Mal.” Gill leaned over and looked his brother in the eye as the orderly emptied the contents of the syringe in his arm. Malcolm inhaled and then started laughing.

“Gill, they are coming!” he said between laughs. “They are coming, and we’re all gonna die. Hehehehe. And when they get here, everyone dies! It’ll be the end of the world in 21 days! Can’t you understand that? World’s gonna end. Hehehe.” Malcolm started getting quieter.

“Take it easy, Mal,” Gill said. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

“We should start getting him back to his room,” the orderly said.

Malcolm closed his eyes and fell asleep.

The orderlies looked at each other as though the whole thing was funny. Gill wanted to punch them in the mouths, but they were bigger than he was.

“Did you guys have to hold him down like that?”

“It’s policy when a patient is upset and turns violent to hold him down,” the third orderly explained.

“Yeah,” the lead orderly said. “If we ask him ‘Can you be safe,’ and he says ‘No’ or doesn’t respond we have to restrain him. If he starts pushing....” He held up the syringe. “I’m afraid we’re gonna have to ask you to leave.”

Gill wanted to tell them to go to hell. However, he knew that if he caused too much trouble, he might not be allowed to come back, or he could expect his visits with Malcolm to be more closely watched. Besides, he knew his brother’s episode had been worse than usual, and they were only doing their jobs.

“Sure.” Gill shook his head and began the long walk to his car. He stopped for a second to watch the three orderlies pick his brother up gingerly and help him back to his room.

Was it always going to be like this? Was his brother always going to be perfectly sane and functional one minute and then screaming about “clouds with teeth” the next? Of course it would. Unless God started getting into the miracle business, things wouldn’t improve. Gill wanted to give into the anger he was feeling, wanted to just hit something or rage at someone. He really did, but what would be the point? Malcolm was sick, and he always would be.

But Gill would be there for him, for as long as he could. He couldn’t control Malcolm’s sickness. He couldn’t even control Malcolm. However, he could control whether or not he gave a crap, and Gill was surprised to find out he did.

Gill walked through the colorful, cheerful hallways and their loud, bright energy depressed him even more. As he walked through the front automatic doors, Gill realized he had better get used to this place. He’d be coming back as soon as he could.

## CHAPTER 3: THE WEATHER GIRL

“And we should be expecting some light showers tomorrow morning. Back to you, George.”

Marie Soleil smiled for the camera, her lips and vacant expression faltering while she waited for the all clear signal. Once it came, she let out a huge sigh and made her way to the snack table where her pink sprinkled doughnut awaited her.

“Good job, Marie,” Maury, the cameraman, called out to her.

She nodded her thanks. Marie never said anything until she had her sugar fix. She grabbed the doughnut and closed her eyes as she bit into it. The feeling satisfied her immediately. She believed in the holy trinity: chocolate, ice cream, and most things sugar could solve all the worlds’ problems.

She patted her stomach.

*Except obesity.*

She sat down in the chair next to the table and opened up her tablet so she could finish reading her novel of the week, which she read when on break. She didn’t even have an opportunity to move past the page she had bookmarked before she heard an unwelcome voice.

“Well, hello there, Marie.” Aaron Landers, one of the producers, swaggered toward her with a lecherous smile. “Saw your little weather segment. Nice job.”

She just nodded.

“So, we’re only expecting light showers?”

His question took her off guard. “I thought you said you watched my segment,” she said.

He laughed. “Yeah, I watched it. But I thought I’d ask you again in case I step outside tomorrow and a friggin’ tornado rips my house to pieces.” His New York accent highlighted the sarcasm in his voice. “That’s the sort of thing one expects from your weather forecasts, sweetheart.”

Marie tried to ignore the comment. Even though it happened a week ago, she continued to catch flak for missing a severe thunderstorm on what was supposed to be a sunny, warm day. At first, seeing it as a way to break the new girl in, she had joined in the laughter, but Marie quickly realized the incident convinced many of the “Old Guard” that she had been hired because of her looks.

The Old Guard, Marie’s name for the older, white male employees in positions of power, Landers among them, seemed to dislike everything about her: her height, her weight, and her looks. She pretended it wasn’t because of her Chinese ancestry, but she knew that made the list. When they weren’t ignoring her, they suggested she try to make the weather “sexy.”

*Because saying “cloudy with a chance of rain” just screams “Take me now.”*

“Well, if a tornado hits tomorrow, you’ll be the first person I apologize to.”

Landers rolled his eyes. “Just be careful, Marie, our station’s viewership is already heading for the crapper. Last thing we need is more gypsy forecasts, okay?”

Marie bit her bottom lip while watching Landers walk. She knew this wasn’t going to end well, but she had to take the opportunity now, while she could. She got up out of her chair and raced after him.

“Actually,” she said, “I’ve wanted to talk to you about that storm. I think I have a good story idea—”

“Oh, no,” he waved a finger in the air. “Not this again. Look, sweetheart, you’re a weather girl, okay? That’s what you are. Tell the people what the weather is. What it *actually* is. We already have reporters.”

She kept the anger in her voice when she said, “I have a degree in journalism, Landers.”

“Yeah, so you keep telling us. Over and over again.”

“Don’t you think it’s a little weird we have this massive storm, which I couldn’t forecast, and the rest of the media have been mostly quiet about it?”

Landers shrugged. “Okay, if you have a real story, shoot it over to one of us, and we’ll sort through it.”

“But I…”

“Let’s not fight about this in public, okay, doll face?”

Marie’s expression could have melted stone.

Laughing, Landers finished walking away, the sound of his heavy footsteps echoing off the floor.

Marie stood still in the hallway while staffers, interns, and other various news people moved past her, doing their jobs. She looked over at her half-eaten doughnut.

She needed more sugar.

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Opening the door to her small apartment, Marie dragged herself inside. Her cat, Stormy, meowed and rubbed against her legs. She fed him and then collapsed on the couch, not wanting to bother with changing. She hated weather forecasting. She hated everything about working with the greenscreen, pantomiming clouds rising up from the

south, and plastering that sickening smile on her face, and pretending what she said actually mattered.

Not that long ago, in college, Marie dreamed of becoming a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist. She yearned to spend her days investigating shady politicians and writing intense stories that informed the public about things everyone should care about. However, print journalism was a dying field. Newspapers, magazines, newsletters, everything. And everyone knew it. This included journalism schools. Her advisor, Dr. Daniel Swindell, suggested she look into broadcasting.

“It’d be a nice fit for you,” he said.

“I’m not sure, Professor,” Marie replied. She remembered his office resembled a sorcerer’s study. Swindell never had the main overhead lights on and only allowed a single lamp on his desk. The lamp’s light burned low. It illuminated the stack of ungraded papers in the center and little else.

“Print is going out of business, Marie,” Swindell said, “at the very least, it’s undergoing a painful metamorphosis. Most of the people who graduate from this college are just going to end up teaching journalism in high schools or working retail. Print is highly competitive. Local newspapers are only going to accept the very best.”

“I know, and I think I’m one of them.”

Swindell gave her an uneasy smile. It reminded her of the time her father broke the news there was no Santa.

“Marie,” he said his voice much gentler. “I think we should be a bit more realistic. You’re a good student, but you are going to need all the help you can get. One thing that can really help is having a diverse background. Having some broadcast experience in

your resume will only help you. Know how to use cameras and upload videos. Soon Online journalism will *be* journalism.”

Marie took this in stride. Swindell was only trying to help, after all. At least that’s what she told herself. “I’ll think about it,” she said to him.

“Well, think fast.” He put his hand on his chin and looked at her with a renewed focus. “You’re Canadian, right?”

She shrugged. “I’m American, but my parents are from Canada.”

“So you embody China, Canada, and America all rolled into one, which will help,” he grinned while looking past her.

Marie tried not to take the comment personally. Clearly Swindell had meant more than work experience when he talked about a “diverse background.” Marie didn’t like relying on those sorts of things. What mattered was being a good journalist, right?

He leaned back in his chair, and its creaking added to her annoyance. “One of my friends at WKEN is offering an internship for meteorology. I think you’d be perfect for the job.”

“Meteorology?” A hollow feeling appeared in Marie’s stomach. A weather girl? The way she was going to break into the news business was as a weather girl?

“Yeah, meteorology. The meteorologist needs an intern to help with his segments. If you’re interested, I’ll give the station your contact information.”

Marie remained quiet for a minute or more. Her advisor felt she didn’t have what it took to make it on her own. It stung.

“Yeah...I guess.” Marie sat in silence for a few more moments before realizing the conversation was at its end. “I should be going.”

“Right, I’ll keep you posted,” he said then went back to grading papers.

Six years had passed, and Marie still kicked herself every day for letting Swindell push her into that position. She had worked as the weather girl for three different stations after graduating from college, and her disgust for the job grew at an alarming rate.

Marie had been working here for three weeks and already she received hints she should look into getting a degree in meteorology, despite her years of experience. More and more news stations loathed calling anyone a meteorologist unless they had a piece of paper saying they were.

She considered enrolling in some online classes, but her pride refused to let her take the idea seriously. Pride...and the fear that if she caved in and got the degree, it would mean surrendering and letting go of her dream of ever being a real journalist.

Marie had tried a few times to move beyond her role as the weather girl. She emailed a few newspapers about freelancing positions, but the managing editors were never hiring. Fate seemed to have spoken: meet Marie Soleil, the weather girl.

Stormy broke her concentration by jumping on her. Though only a year old, he acted like a fussy old man. He demanded she pet him, and he refused to hear any rebuttal. Marie absently scratched the top of his head while pondering his appearance. His grey and black fur, yellow eyes, and thunderous meow...Stormy lived up to his name.

Unfortunately, her cat brought back the memory of her latest blunder. She sighed and picked Stormy up and cradled him in her arms like a baby. His soft purr reverberated throughout his entire body, and it felt as though he were vibrating.

She carried him over to her desk in her living room. Displayed were a pair of minor news stories she had printed out that talked about last week’s strange weather.

Neither of the stories went into much depth, and one was a preview for a feature on storms. Marie sat Stormy on the chair while she flipped through them again. They covered the sudden appearance of the storm and the damage it caused, but didn't bother considering its cause. She opened up her laptop and opened her web browser to the National Weather Service.

The day after the storm had hit, Marie had emailed every weather forecaster she had ever met. She had tried to contact the National Weather Service and many private meteorology firms. Most ignored her, but the few who responded sounded moderately curious. However, not a single one of them seemed to find anything suspicious or ominous about it. Dr. James Dennison, her mentor, often told her, "We're playing a guessing game with Mother Nature herself, Marie. Sometimes freak storms happen."

Normally, Marie would accept that or attempt to. But something about this thunderstorm just didn't feel right. Thunderstorms need certain conditions in order to form, such as, an updraft of warm moist air and the downdraft of cool precipitation. The updraft/downdrafts had been so weak that a storm seemed unlikely. She admitted it was possible for a storm to appear out of nowhere, but the conditions suggested such a thunderstorm would be very weak and dissipate fast. The thunderstorm had caused a flash flood within minutes and winds that exceeded fifty miles per hour. Not exactly what she would call "weak." And as for dissipating...all she had to do was look outside her window to see the storm hadn't gone anywhere. It rained off and on for days. The winds should have carried the thunderstorm elsewhere. No doubt, she joked, someone had pressed the "great cosmic rain" button. At this point she was ready to believe in weather machines.

Still she felt a little thankful for the storm, however. For the first time in years, she had something to come home to and work on in her spare time. She was surprised by how easily she slipped back into her familiar role as an investigative journalist. There was a story here somewhere.

Marie Soleil would not rest till she found it.

## CHAPTER 4: LEGACY

Gill woke up and stretched his arms out. He turned to his side and noticed his green digital alarm clock read 7:15 a.m. Its lights, also green, glowed with just enough light for Gill to make out shapes around him. He checked his window and noticed that, although the sun was up, there appeared to be little sunlight seeping through. He hoped most of the early morning darkness had disappeared by now. He hated that in between state where night gave way to sunrise.

He flicked on his gold lamp and got dressed for work. His shift didn't start for another two hours, but Gill took his job seriously. He left his room closing the door behind him. The living room looked cluttered as always, but he managed to make it to the kitchen unscathed.

“Ah, Gilly, glad to see you're awake!”

His grandfather was already in the kitchen eating some of last night's leftovers. Originally from Scotland, he had immigrated to the United States in the sixties where he met his wife, an immigrant from Egypt. He had made a batch of spinach stew in honor of his late wife, Gill's grandmother. She had taught him the recipe decades ago

“Hey, Gramps, been wanting to talk to you about something.”

“And what would that be?”

Gill hesitated. “Gramps, I didn't tell you everything about when I visited Malcolm last week.”

His grandfather swirled his spoon in his stew clockwise. “You said he had himself an episode. I don't need to hear every bloody detail.”

Gramps hated talking about Malcolm's illness. Whenever the Elder Scotsman talked about him nowadays Gill felt Gramps pretended Malcolm had moved away. He suspected part of it had to do with his mother.

He felt embarrassed to confess the truth. "Malcolm said something, a lot of things actually, but one thing really bothered me."

"Aye, he does that sometimes. He told me once your grandmother floated on a magic carpet flanked by an army of angels." Gramps scooped up some of the stew and put it in his mouth. Some of it dribbled onto his beard. The orange specks reminded Gill of how his grandfather's beard used to look. "He's not well, Gilly, don't take him seriously."

Gill took a deep breath and focused.

"Gramps," he began. "Malcolm said the phrase 'Clouds with teeth.'" Gramps just looked at his grandson in confusion. "Mom said that to me the day before she died. 'How could you have ever known clouds have teeth.' Thing is Malcolm wasn't there when Mom told me that. And I've never heard him say anything similar in all the years he's been sick."

Gramps narrowed his eyes and said, "I'm not sure what you're trying to say, Gilly."

"It's odd, isn't it?" Gill asked. "Him saying that exact phrase Mom used?"

His grandfather said nothing for a few seconds. At last, he shrugged and said, "It's a bit weird now you mention it."

"And that's made me think about some things I always just pushed aside. I've never once asked you about my mother's illness."

“Gilly....”

“I was a kid when she got sick. There were so many things I never understood about her. Things that maybe if we could figure out might help Malcolm.”

“I don’t want to talk about it, lad.” He continued to eat his stew, each mouthful a determined attempt to ignore the conversation.

“You’re the only one I can talk to about it. You moved in to help take care of us.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Did she say anything to you about clouds or old gods looking down at us?”

“No, I cannae say she did, but I told you I don’t want to talk about it!”

Gill grunted. “I need you to open up and talk to me about this!”

Gramps slammed his spoon down on the table hard. When he spoke, his voice sounded low and empty as he said, “Your mother was in a bad shape! I would rather we try to remember her as she was when she was younger and healthier. Not out of her head and rambling about how we should move because the world’s going to end.”

That struck a chord in Gill’s mind, but he pushed it away. He wanted no distractions. “Gramps, I understand how you feel.”

“No, you don’t,” he argued. “You don’t understand because you’ve never had a child. Your mother might not have been my blood, but your grandmother and I loved her every bit as much as though she were. Watching her disappear into her illness and not being able to help her was one of the toughest things I ever had to endure. Watching it happen again to your brother...it nearly broke me.”

Gramps looked Gill in the eye, his own were full of moisture. “I know you want to know more about your mother, lad, and I wish I could be the one to tell you, but I can’t. I just...can’t.” He looked back down at the stew in shame.

The frustration Gill felt melted away when he saw his grandfather’s crumpled form. He hadn’t expected him to react like this. Sure, Gill thought he might resist or get a little angry, but the old man looked close to falling apart.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and he meant it. “I shouldn’t have kept asking. I just want to help my brother.”

“You’re already helping him,” Gramps pointed out. The old man smiled, though it didn’t reach his eyes. “You and I going to see him and letting him know we’re there for him is going to help more than chasing after your mother’s ghost.”

Gill shrugged and sat in the seat across from Gramps. “Yeah, you’re probably right.” He grabbed a banana from the middle bowl of the table and peeled it.

They ate in silence, Gramps only speaking to ask Gill to pass the salt and pepper for his stew. Gill didn’t know why he was so upset. He suspected when he first thought of talking to his grandfather that he’d only get a limited amount of answers. But he *was* upset, and part of that came from the knot in his stomach that told him he wasn’t in control of his life, and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it.

Gill looked up from the floor to see Gramps staring at him. “What’s up?” he asked.

“I can’t give you what you’re looking for but...but I know someone who can.” Gramps rubbed his beard in a nervous manner.

“Who?” Gill’s mind raced through the likely suspects. His mother has been an only child, and her parents had died when she was fifteen. She had gone on to live with her Aunt Selene till she was eighteen. Selene had died years ago. Was he overlooking someone?

Gramps sat up straight and took a sip of orange juice. “Now I just want to say I hadna been keeping this from you, I just hadna found the right time to tell you yet.”

Gill raised an eyebrow and became worried. “What are you talking about?”

“He contacted me about a few months ago when he came back into town. I dinna want to upset ya.”

His grandson put his food down and leaned back in his chair. “You’re talking about my father aren’t you?”

Gramps nodded. “He’s moved back to the city, Gilly, and he wants to see you.”

The knot twisted again, bringing with it another spasm of pain. Gill had not spoken to his father in years. And before that their conversations had been very short and tense. Rory had walked out on them when they were ten, leaving their ill mother to take care of his children. Gill fought the urge to make a fist. Talking about his father made Gill seethe...but he refused to take it out on Gramps.

“Okay,” he said. It was all he ever could say when the topic came to his father.

“He was married to your mum for years, and he was with her when she started getting sick. Maybe he knows something. Maybe he saw something I could never see.”

Gill said nothing.

“He called a couple of days ago to see if you knew about him yet.” Gramps got up out of the chair, its wooden frame creaking. He carried his bowl over to sink and began to

wash it out. He raised his voice over the rush of the water. "I've been talking to him about Malcolm. He's had a lot of questions. Maybe this might give you a chance to do more than just talk about your mother. Maybe you two can reconnect."

"I don't want reconnect with him," Gill growled. "And if he wanted to connect with me so badly maybe he shouldn't have walked out in the first place." His eyes stung. *Damn, not in front of Gramps.*

"Now, Gilly."

"No," he interrupted. "He doesn't have anything I need or want. He never did."

Gramps looked like he wanted to say something else, but held his tongue and nodded before he went back to his seat.

Trying to rein in his anger, Gill tried to understand why his grandfather had not told him the minute his father had come back. Gill didn't have to think for very long; it was the same reason he had waited days to ask about his mother. He and his grandfather were a lot alike. He tried to rebel against the thoughts bouncing around in his head. The realization crept into his heart that he would have to set aside his hatred and rage toward his father and put his brother's needs first.

"Ugh," Gill groaned. "Look, give me his address and call the son-of-a-bitch to let him know I'll be over later today."

"He should be off work in a few hours."

"Fine." He left his seat and went back to his room to think things through.

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Malcolm stood outside, the Preferred Reality granting him the freedom he could never seem to find elsewhere. He was in an empty park in the middle of the afternoon. His eyes were closed.

It was raining, but then, lately, it always rained. The grass became a dull shade of green, and patches of lifeless brown mud could be seen. Everything had lost its luster now that the world could only be viewed with a grey filter. The wind blew hard, blowing trash and other debris from one part of the city to another. The only thing it did not seem to blow was the clouds that lurked overhead. Spinning but never really moving.

The rain died down, now a drizzle, and Malcolm opened his eyes to the possibilities swimming around him. He saw a figure approaching that he had dreamed about for years.

Walking down the sidewalk came the Servant of the Storm, with an umbrella over his head. In the past the figure had appeared in many forms. Last time he had appeared as a violet shade. Now, though, he wore the more familiar guise of an old man, and everything about him commanded one's attention. He walked with a sort of self-important vigor, a pastor on his way to a revival. The smirk on his face hinted at an uncompromising figure. Someone who knew the answer to every important question, and, of course, knew when everyone else had it wrong.

He looked out of place walking in a park on such a rainy day. He wore a black suit with a white button up shirt. His hair was white with a few streaks of black still remaining. He had a full beard, and his eyes were the coldest shade of blue.

The Servant of the Storm found a bench closest to Malcolm and sat down on the soaked red surface, unfazed.

Malcolm wanted to get his attention, but his stomach told him not to. The Servant could not see him, and for that Malcolm was grateful.

The person on the bench just scanned the park, his eyes observing everything with a detached, even amused, contempt.

A few minutes later, something that resembled a young woman in her early twenties stomped toward The Servant. Unlike him, her skin was tan. She wore a green dress that clung tightly to her in the rain. Long dark hair fell straight along the sides of her face. Her eyes narrowed when she saw her companion. She looked miserable.

“Salutations, Dema,” The Servant said. “Splendid day isn’t it?”

She sat down next to her colleague and folded her arms across her chest. Although the man still had his umbrella up, he did not move to place it over her head. Instead it remained placed over his.

“Hello, Zephyrinus.” Her teeth chattered a little bit.

“I told you to start carrying an umbrella.”

“I didn’t think I needed it.”

“The people here carry umbrellas when it’s raining.”

“Not everyone.”

“True, but they will start to wonder why an attractive girl doesn’t have an umbrella. I imagine they’ll say she’s odd.”

“They can say whatever they want.”

Zephyrinus laughed. “Or you could just get an umbrella.”

Dema said nothing.

They stopped talking for a while, so Malcolm came closer. He did not like being near this pair. There was something unnatural about such creatures. He remembered when they were shades. Now they wore human faces and wore human clothes, but it felt wrong. They might as well be wearing plastic masks.

Why was he seeing this? What could he possibly learn from them?

On the other side of the park, a young boy in a yellow shirt ran around in the rain. The pair noticed him.

“Things aren’t like I thought they’d be,” Dema said.

“What do you mean?”

“Can you put the umbrella over me?”

“No.” After a moment he asked, “What did you mean?”

“I guess I thought things would be different. This body, this place, these people.”

“And what about these people?”

“They told me they’d be stupid.”

“My dear girl, they *are* stupid.”

“I don’t think they are. It’s strange being around them. They aren’t at all like my instructors told me they’d be. Are you sure you can’t put the umbrella over me?”

“I’m quite sure,” he said.

They watched the boy. He had an orange kite flapping in the wind. He didn’t seem to mind the rain.

“Everything feels different. When I look like this, the water only makes me cold. This hair never wants to cooperate. It wasn’t this complicated when I was home.”

“Ah, you’re homesick.”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. I’m just saying these people aren’t dumb animals. They think, and feel, and joke, and struggle, and I don’t know if I can do this, after all.”

The wind picked up and the rain fell with more venom. Her hair whipped across her face.

“I see.”

“Don’t you miss home?”

“Every minute of every day.”

“How do you stand it? Being like this.”

“I remember that I serve our people. And I remember no matter what it may look like, these... individuals are not people, not really. They may think, and feel, and joke, but not at the level we do. They aren’t like us. That you believe otherwise is most curious.”

“Don’t you think we could find a better way? Maybe we could... I mean... well, we could get what we want without hurting people.”

Zephyrinus turned to look at her, his eyes appeared to be purple. “Amazing. Simply amazing. You have been here for less than a week, and already you believe you know better than all the generations that have come before you.”

She seemed to shrink under his gaze. The wind blew harder. A lightning bolt blazed across the sky for a moment. It jolted Malcolm back away from the bench. The wind pushed him back further than he thought it would. Malcolm wondered if the umbrella would fly out of the older man’s hand.

The boy had stopped playing in the storm but still hadn't decided if it was time to leave.

The older man did not seem to notice. "Need I remind you that in a little under two weeks, The Lady and the others will be here. What do you think she would say? Hmm? If she heard what you just told me?"

Dema's eyes widened. "Please don't tell her, Zeph, please!"

He snorted. "Of course I won't. We have traditions, Dema, traditions far older than even an old dinosaur like me. This is how things are done, because this is the way they've always been done. Do you think you're the first young person to walk among the cattle and feel sorry for them? Of course not. But the lion does not restraint itself when around a herd of antelope. When the time comes, neither will we."

"I know, Zeph."

"Don't worry, in a couple of weeks you'll see for yourself. Then we can push all this nonsense out of your head."

"You're right, Zeph. I guess I just panicked."

The wind died down, and the rain went back to being a drizzle. "Good, girl," he said. "Now let's go prepare for today's assignment, shall we?" He rose to his feet and held out a hand for Dema.

She hesitated only for a few seconds before taking it. "Okay."

The pair walked down the sidewalk, Zephyrinus holding the umbrella so it protected the both of them.

Malcolm watched them leave. He wondered if he should follow them, but instead he focused on the boy. A man came running up to the kid yelling at him. The boy's

father. He hugged his son close and picked up the kite, which had been on the mud-covered ground.

The pair walked off in the opposite direction of the creatures. Malcolm looked up at the sky. The clouds dropped a few inches closer. The patterns looked like teeth.

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A few hours later, Gill was parked outside of a downtown apartment building. The sky continued to consist of one giant grey cloud overhead. There was a light drizzle, and Gill had his windshield wipers on the lowest setting. He turned the defroster on since the cold air made his windows keep fogging up. Cars drove by him, but not many people were out. He had been parked here for over ten minutes and waged a private war against his resistance to get out of the car. He turned on the radio.

“And we’re all very excited about Poetic Monkey coming to Hamill Park in the next couple of weeks,” one the deejays was saying. He had that familiar bombastic radio voice. “But we would like to buck the trend of other stations and not play you their biggest hit ‘Shakespearean Monkey’ for the tenth time—”

“We really would,” confirmed the sidekick.

“But the corporate overlords who pay us told us we had to! So sit back....”

“Relax....”

“And get ready to get sick of this song!”

The too familiar strains of Poetic Monkey started to slice open Gill’s brain so he shut off the radio. Heather worked in the charity organization throwing the concert, which had the band as their primary draw. She had brought the band up more than once.

Gill blinked a few times and refocused his attention on what he had come here to do. He had often thought about facing his father again. Would he punch him in the face? Scream at him until he could no longer speak? Not say anything and hope his father would apologize and admit he had been wrong?

Gill rubbed his temples and wondered what he was doing here. His father could not help him with this. What could he say? That his wife had gone crazy and rather than try to help her he just walked away?

Questions. That's all Gill had. And if he didn't find the courage to get out of the car, that's all he would ever have. That last realization forced him to turn his car off and open his door. The air was cooler here than the inside of automobile, and it seemed to sap his strength a little. Gill never did like the cold.

He took a deep breath and shut the door, locking it with his keys. The brown-bricked apartment building appeared low rent. A rust covered stairwell took him up to the third floor.

Each step brought Gill closer to his father, and each step brought him closer to calling the whole thing off.

*You should turn around.*

*I can't. Malcolm needs me.*

*There's nothing for you here.*

*I have to know for sure.*

"I have to know for sure," he repeated out loud. He found apartment 6 and knocked on the door.

It opened, and an old, grizzled man with dark brown eyes and wrinkles all over his forehead appeared before him. It took Gill a second to recognize the stranger in front of him as his father.

He almost laughed. No, this couldn't be him, he just wrote the number down wrong.

"Gill?" the man said to him. His voice sounded parched and dried.

Reality hit Gill, and he struggled to keep himself under control. "Hi, Dad."

His father blinked a couple of times before eyes swept his son up and down. "It's been a long time," he croaked.

Gill just nodded. "Yeah, you're right." He wanted to add, "whose fault is that?" but that would have been counterproductive.

The two of them stared at one another for a while longer before Rory moved to the side. "Please, come in."

The apartment looked barren. It appeared to hold one bedroom. A thin carpet covered the floor and a cheap couch sat against the wall along with a couple of cheap plastic chairs like one might find on a hotel patio. On the other side, a television glowed. Either his father had not had enough time to unpack everything, which Gill knew was not the case, or else he did not own much in the way of possessions. Gill sat on one of the plastic chairs.

His father clapped his hands and said, "Would you like any coffee?"

Gill wanted to say "no thanks," but he didn't want to appear rude. "Sure." Rory went off to make coffee, leaving his son to watch the television. Seinfeld and George

were in a limousine and had been mistaken for a pair of neo-Nazis. He hadn't seen this episode in years.

A few minutes later, Rory came back in. "Here you go." Rory drank most of his coffee in one gulp. Gill looked down at his and took a sip. Just the way he liked it. He looked up at his father who had a sheepish look on his face. "Dad told me the way you like yours. Took me a while to get it right...so I hope you enjoy it."

Fighting the impulse to shrug, Gill just said, "It tastes good."

Rory's eyes light up and when he smiled, he almost looked like how Gill remembered him. "Glad to hear it. Your grandfather tells me you're an assistant manager at that fancy theatre place. Very nice."

"Yeah, pays well."

"And you have a girlfriend?"

"Yes."

"What's her name?"

"Heather."

"Heather? That's a pretty name."

"I suppose so."

"So you and her getting kinda serious?"

Gill flashed back to his big fight with Malcolm and became even more uncomfortable. Was this what he sounded like to his brother? Trying too hard and pretending nothing was wrong? "We haven't been dating all that long. Time will tell."

"Yeah, I tell you, it never seems serious till that moment it hits ya."

His father kept waiting for Gill to contribute to the conversation, but nothing came to him. He knew what he wanted to talk to his father about, however, he had no desire to give the conversation any effort. “I’ll save you some time. My life seems to be going pretty well. At least in comparison to Malcolm.”

Rory rubbed the back of his neck and laughed half-heartedly. “Dad told me about your brother. Everything about his sickness. He mentioned when he called earlier you had a lot of questions about your mother. I’m sorry I wasn’t—”

“No reason to apologize. I can see you’ve been busy.” He eyed the apartment with contempt. “Or maybe you don’t put down roots anymore. Easier to walk away from it, right, Dad?”

“Gill, I—”

“Forget it,” he said. “It doesn’t matter.”

“No, you’re right to be upset, what I did was unforgivable, and I—”

Rory’s admission of guilt was all Gill needed. He had years of pent up anger and frustration to vent. “Damn right it was unforgivable! You walked away from us when we were ten! Why? Was being there for your family so hard? Mom tried to hold it together after you left, even brought in Gramps. You know, your father! Yeah, nice job having your father clean up after you, Dad. Mom needed you, and you weren’t there. And when she died...” Gill found himself choking on his emotions. “When she died, you were nowhere to be found. You didn’t even come to her funeral, you son-of-a-bitch.”

His father didn’t offer up a word of protest. He seemed to be getting smaller and smaller before Gill’s eyes. Sitting on the couch, Rory could do nothing to stop his son’s tirade.

Gill enjoyed that. He found himself taking pleasure in causing his father to appear as if he were no more than a lifeless marionette. The more he yelled, the better he felt until it became the only thing that kept him from bursting into tears.

He unloaded everything at his father, feeling a sense of catharsis in the process. Again his mind flashed back to the night Malcolm had vented.

“I’m sorry, son,” Rory said. The man kept his voice even and continued. “You’ve every right to be mad at me. I’m everything you’ve said I was. I’m a coward. I’m a lousy father. And I’m partly to blame for your mother’s death.”

The words brought no comfort to Gill, though he had expected them to. Wasn’t this what every child of a lousy parent wanted? Vindication that he had been right? It didn’t feel like a victory. Not even a hollow one.

“I don’t care about all the rest of this,” Gill lied. “I care about helping Malcolm. Gramps told me he had no answers for me. Said you might be able to help us out.”

“I can tell you what I know about your mother, and you can decide afterwards if what I have to say is helpful.” Rory got up and went into his kitchen, which looked messy and unclean. “It’ll be hard to believe. I just hope you and I can get to know each other again.”

“I doubt it,” Gill said coldly. Seeing the pained expression on his father’s face, he added, “But it’s a step in the right direction.”

Sitting back down on couch, Rory took a couple of sips from his cup before starting. “I loved your mother, Gill. Wholly and completely. There was a time...God, there a time when I couldn’t find a moment’s happiness if she wasn’t near. In some ways, I still can’t.”

Gill said nothing, but folded his arms. His little signal that his father needed to stay on point.

Rory got the message and continued. “When we found out we were pregnant, she guessed we’d have twins. When it turned out she was right, I just figured it was mother stuff. Right after you and Malcolm were born your mother got stranger. Oh, she was odd already, but everything she did made me love her even more. But after you two were born she started retreating a little. Wasn’t too noticeable. Only now with the benefit of hindsight can I put it all together. But some days she’d go into a little trance and say some weird, crazy things. Sometimes in mid-sentence.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, your mother and I were out shopping for toys and she picked up a dinosaur for you. One minute we were laughing about some stupid announcement over the intercom and the next she said you were a knight who slayed dragons. Then she blinked and pretended she never said it. I figured it was a joke that had misfired. Then a few weeks later she went on a rant through the house and said we had to move because the world was ending.”

Gill felt something tug against his memory. He pushed it back and concentrated on his father.

“Years and years she went on like this. She would say this would happen and that would happen. She said this person would be hit by a car or that person. She even predicted I would leave her, though I didn’t believe it at the time. At first I just ignored it. Days after she started sprouting all this nonsense, something would happen. Someone

would be hit by a car. Someone would repeat word for word what she said days earlier only they hadn't been around when she said it.”

Gill raised a hand to interrupt his father. “Wait a minute, are you saying what I think you're saying?”

Rory nodded without a sense irony or sarcasm. “I'm telling you the truth. Your mother could see the future, Gill. Could predict it keenly as any wizard could.”

“Wow, are both my parents crazy?”

“I'm not crazy, and I'm not making this up!”

“Yeah, and you think this is what is happening to Malcolm?”

“Yes, from everything Dad has said, I know he's inherited your mother's gift! Haven't you ever examined the crazy things he says when he's ranting? Listen to them. And then watch because they'll happen.”

“So my mom could see the future.”

“I was a fool and an idiot. I was terrified. I didn't know how to handle that! Who could? I ran away and left you kids with her....maybe if I had stayed—”

“But you didn't.” Gill rose up and sneered in his father's face. “You want me to believe the reason you walked out was because Mom could see the future? Right. Yeah, okay. This was a waste of time.”

“Gill!” his father yelled. “Gill, please!”

But Gill turned his back on his father and walked out of the apartment.

There were no answers here.

## CHAPTER 5: PHIN

Marie set up her laptop to begin her new morning pre-work ritual, surfing the Web for new information about mysterious storms before getting ready and heading to the news station.

Marie felt obsessed with finding out all she could about the storm from last week, and how it had led to an ever-present cluster of dark clouds, which lurked over the city ominously. Many of her coworkers seemed to alternate between referring to the event as a single storm or a series of storms. Marie imagined it was as if someone had placed a dome over the city keeping the clouds in one place. She found it difficult to determine what class the storm fell into. At best she thought it could be either a multicell cluster thunderstorm or a mesoscale convective complex. The former meant a group of storms in varying stages of development moving as a single unit. The latter was just a snooty way of saying a storm's length measured at a couple of hundred miles across. Neither definition fit.

It had rained off and on since that first storm hit. Sunlight burst through, stubborn and proud, but it never lasted and was quickly and quietly pushed back. It didn't make any sense.

This wasn't why she felt so frustrated; it was that no one seemed to be taking the number of storms seriously.

Landers, the mouthpiece of the Old Guard, would shrug whenever she brought it up and say, "It's a storm, sweetheart, not a friggin' earthquake."

She continued to send emails to her contemporaries, but they were beginning to lose patience with her. She realized no one believed her. She was alone.

Doubt snuck up on her, and Marie wondered if she should forget about the storms. Her peers would no doubt cheer when they heard she had, but she decided to believe in herself. Still, she continued to feel discouraged.

Marie tried to keep her morale up by imagining the look on her doubters' faces when she was vindicated, but it remained hard to be optimistic when day after day she remained the only person to see something strange.

Until the next morning when she discovered she wasn't alone after all.

*Ms. Soleil,*

*I am a former colleague of Dr. Dennison. You had emailed him about a stationary thunderstorm in your area? He forwarded the email to me and suggested I contact you. I have reviewed your findings and believe I can help. Please contact me as soon as you are able.*

*Sincerely,*

*Dr. Phineas Ferguson.*

Marie read the message again, and then two more times just to be sure her eyes hadn't deceived her. But no, there it was; someone who was willing to believe her. Dennison, her old mentor, had been among the first people she had contacted. She remembered when she got his reply, which felt half-hearted and without any faith in her instincts. However, he thought enough of her to pass along to someone who did.

Life had taught Marie a bitter lesson when it came to good news. She decided to run a Web search for the Dr. Ferguson. For the most part, it went as expected. The first few items belonged to dead links. However, one drew her attention. It was for a book released several years ago called *The Death Cycle; The Truth and What They Don't Want*

*You to Know*. After reading the title, mental alarm bells screeched inside her mind, but her curiosity prompted her to click on the link.

Marie knew to do so reeked of desperation, but there seemed a chance she could have someone on her side. She knew she couldn't dismiss a chance to know more. She remained optimistic that the title was just a way the publisher had decided could grab some attention.

The online book retailer only gave a short description, claiming the book was “controversial” and “shocking.” Marie mulled it over for a little while before she broke down and added it to her cart.

Marie continued her web search for the author, and it proved to be much more fruitful...and depressing. She chowed down on a stale breakfast bagel while reviewing the bad news.

Ferguson had been a reputable scientist in the field of meteorology before suffering some sort of personal loss. He and his wife had crashed while driving through a dense fog one night thirty years ago. He had suffered numerous broken bones, but his wife had fallen into a coma and soon died. Ferguson had come away from the accident a changed man. He began researching “death patterns,” which he believed came about after strange storms. Rejected by every other scientist, Ferguson soon faded away from the scientific community.

Marie felt embarrassed and overwhelmed when she read these reports. She wanted to believe in the possibility that she discovered an ally, however, now she felt the bile of disappointment rising in her throat.

*I knew better than to get my hopes up. How could I have been so stupid?*

Of course it would be inevitable that the crazies would leap at a chance to appear validated. Marie could only imagine what Landers and the rest would say if she had brought up the theory of “death patterns.”

After a few more Web searches, Marie found very little new information, other than he had moved to the West Coast and had been living there ever since.

Marie didn’t know what to make of it all. Here was someone who had suffered a great loss and had been profoundly addled by it; he had lost his career not soon after. After she read yet another article proclaiming him “disturbed,” Marie regretted her impulsive decision to order his book. Was this experience a cautionary tale about pursuing crazy theories?

Marie mentally shrugged. She had already ordered it, and there wouldn’t be any harm in reading whatever insane theories Ferguson created to make himself feel better after the death of his wife. After all, she enjoyed the occasional piece of science fiction every now and then.

She stared at the email for a few more minutes, the bright glow from the computer screen the only light on in her living room. She directed the cursor over the “delete” button where it hovered. Despite her common sense assaulting her with unrelenting logic, curiosity continued to gnaw inside her mind. Everything she read said this man’s ideas were laughable, no one bothered to listen to him, and he was alone.

Marie knew how that felt.

*This is the moment, Marie. This is the moment you started going crazy, too.*

She moved the cursor over to the “reply” button and then clicked on it. She blew a stray piece of hair out of her eyes before she began typing.

*Hello, Dr. Ferguson, this is Marie Soleil. I was hoping we could talk about your theories....*

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The next day Marie tried to keep to herself. No comments on the strange weather, no subtle suggestions that she investigate it further. She made polite small talk and was sociable, but she decided against standing out.

After responding to Ferguson, Marie expected it would be another couple of days before he wrote back. She had been surprised to find an email from the scientist within the hour. He was indeed on the West Coast, which made a face-to-face interview problematic.

Marie grew even more surprised when Ferguson asked if she used Skype, a software application that allowed users to make video calls over the Internet. She realized she had been taken in by the familiar prejudice that all seniors were technologically impaired.

After replying she did use Skype, they had agreed on a time to meet up after she finished her job for the evening. Hence the reason she kept to herself today, she found herself excited for impending conversation. Her email correspondence with Ferguson hadn't revealed any sinister undertones that the man was disturbed or crazy. She had many questions for him, and all of them ran through her head as she considered the possibility Ferguson could help her regardless of his mental state.

Marie came home a little earlier than she did normally. After feeding Stormy and rubbing his belly, she set up her laptop and opened the Skype application.

Ferguson's face popped up on her screen. He looked just like the pictures of him thirty years ago, but with white hair and a weathered face. He was white, with a snow-colored beard and sapphire eyes. He looked a little like a wizard from a storybook, only instead of wearing a robe and a cloak he wore a Hawaiian shirt.

"Ms. Soleil, I presume," Ferguson said, his voice seemed gentle and his tone had a playful glee about it, which Marie took to mean he seemed as excited as she was.

"Dr. Ferguson."

"Oh, please, feel free to call me 'Phin,' most people do nowadays." If he was referring to his past, Marie couldn't tell. He sounded as casual as though he were talking about, well, the weather.

"As long as you call me 'Marie.'"

He smiled and nodded as he said, "I think I can swing that. So, Marie, I've been following the best I can, but I wanted to ask you about this stationary storm or storms you've been having. Tell me everything, and don't leave anything out no matter how strange you think it might sound."

Marie almost laughed at his wording before she caught herself. It had been close. Feeling like she owed him some trust, Marie launched into her story about the last couple of weeks beginning with the day the first mysterious storm hit. Phin interrupted only to ask a few questions every now and then, but he remained silent overall.

"Has there been any sign of training?" he asked. Training was a meteorological term, which meant when a series of storms traveled along the same path like train, and its cars moved on a track. It became easy for flash flooding to occur, and some people could be fooled into thinking it was a single storm.

“The storm is completely stationary. I thought it might be training, too. It’s been over a week now.”

When it became clear she had finished, Phin asked, “Marie, have you by any chance read my book?”

*Here we go.*

“No,” she said aloud. “I ordered it, it should be here any day.” She flashed back to her college days. How often had she used that as an excuse?

Phin didn’t seem surprised by this. “Eh, I figured as much. Allow me to give you the Cliffsnote version. Thirty years ago, a lot of us weather guys got together, including Denny, Dennison to you, and just got overwhelmed by the beauty of nature. Great time to be a young meteorologist, though we called ourselves ‘students of nature.’ You’ll have to forgive us; we were pretty pretentious at the time.”

Marie laughed. “You were a part of Dennison’s clique?”

“Yeah, I was. We met every Thursday to talk about new discoveries, eat some ‘groovy’ food, and play haunting music. Denny doesn’t look like it, but the man can wail on a guitar. We were inspired by our passion, you know? Weather forecasting wasn’t just something we did so we knew to bring an umbrella on our way to work. Weather was chaos and fury, man. You ever stand on the coast and watch a storm come bursting in? Atmospheric jazz, man. Those were good times.”

Phin’s smile faltered a bit. “One of our friends, Claire, discovered something incredible while researching in Central America. Apparently the locals of some village feared some sort of cycle dating back to, I dunno, Columbus. These guys swore every 97 years a storm came that lasted close to a month. The gods’ punishment for their wicked

ways or something. And in that storm a number of people would die. It wasn't a large number, ten I believe it was. Every century a storm came and ten people died."

"The 'death patterns?'" Marie asked.

Phin nodded and leaned in closer to the webcam. "See we all thought they were some kind of weirdo, backwater joke. Claire called us from the only telephone in the whole damn village and let us know she was staying to see this storm of storms so she could laugh in their faces when nothing happened. Denny, myself, and the rest, we all jokingly wished her good luck and told her to be careful." Phin had been using a pretty casual tone up to this point, but now his smile disappeared as he snarled, "We were damned fools, each and every one of us."

An uncomfortable silence filled the thousands of miles between them. Marie felt obligated to say something, so she said, "What happened?"

"Well, their storm of storms came, and it was nearly a month long. A stationary storm or storms with no training, no known path. Claire called us a few times and said no one had died yet, but that we should all come down and see for ourselves because she had never seen anything like it, and she couldn't begin to describe how odd the weather was. A bunch of us wanted to be on the next flight out, but life got in the way...like it always does. A week after that, her family got a call saying she'd contracted some kind of jungle flu and died a couple of days after the storm had passed."

"Oh, wow, I'm really sorry to hear that."

"Her and nine other people. Ten people dead, just like the locals said there'd be."

Marie said nothing, just tried to get her mind to process what Phin's point could be.

“Our little gang, our little ‘students of nature,’ we all decided we needed to keep chasing after these storms. See if they popped up anywhere else. Right off the bat, we knew we were headed for some problems. How could you track something a hundred years ago? Most newspapers didn’t have archives dating that far back, and obviously no one was still around who had seen one. One by one our little gang gave up till it was just Denny and me still looking. Then after Jennifer passed away....”

The older man leaned back in his chair, and his expression grew even sadder. “After my wife died, Denny stayed on for another few months, but we had a falling out. He thought I was still doing this for her.”

“If you don’t me asking, Phin, what happened?”

“Story for another time, kiddo,” Phin said in a low voice tapping the desk his computer was set up on. “Anyway, after I tried to bring this to the public’s attention, I eventually got ‘volunteered’ for early retirement. But I researched. Still tried to figure out what was going on. Hell, it’s a miracle I got that book published.”

Marie tried to keep the doubt out of her voice when she asked, “And you think what happened to your friend Claire is going to happen here?”

Phin raised his head back. “Probably not, no. Worse thing that’ll happen is you’ll get a little flooding.”

Marie felt relieved for some strange reason.

“But,” Phin said, “some of the things you mentioned in that story of yours sound familiar. Care to hear an old man’s opinion?”

Marie laughed again. “Sure.”

“I’d go check out your town’s archives at your newspapers. Maybe some old microfilm. See if they have anything from a hundred years ago. If nothing else, might help keep your research skills sharp. Denny said you wanted to try your hand at real journalism.”

Marie didn’t know if Phin was just being nice or if he was flattering her so she’d do what he asked.

“I’ll think about it,” she said, keeping her voice neutral.

Phin raised an eyebrow and then stretched, putting his hands behind his head as he leaned back. “Well, you haven’t called me crazy and turned your computer off. That’s new for me. Can I take that as a sign you might be willing to believe me?”

Marie didn’t reply for a moment. Part of her wanted to switch the computer off the moment he started talking about his friend in Central America. She figured any minute, and he’d start talking about aliens. But listening to him now, she knew Phin wasn’t crazy. He might be an old hippy, but he sounded like he knew a lot more than he was willing to tell her, which she could forgive, what with this being their first conversation. She didn’t believe any of what Phin was talking about, but she believed Phin did. And he was right, going to a newspaper morgue might be just what her journalism spirit required. She looked at the old man on her computer screen and winked.

“We’ll see.”

## CHAPTER 6: DATE NIGHT

Gill spent the next twenty-four hours regretting his decision to go visit his father. He should have known nothing good would come of it. He should have known his father would try shifting the blame to his mother.

But to say she saw the future? Gill couldn't wrap his mind around something like that. He needed to talk to someone about it, but he had been too angry at Gramps for talking him into going, and he didn't want to burden Heather with his personal issues. They'd only been going out for a few months. The last thing he wanted was to scare her away.

After he left his father's apartment, Gill had driven around. Despite the constant rainfall, he stayed on the road for hours. He had appreciated the weather and the fact that the sun remained hidden behind the storm clouds. Later he talked to Heather, but had stayed silent about his father. He told himself it was because he wanted to collect his thoughts.

The next night, however, he worked the midnight showing of some teen drama. The meeting weighed on his thoughts, though, and he became distracted. He gave candy to a couple who wanted popcorn, gave soda to people wanting slushies, and made the mistake of giving a group of football players unheated wieners. They took that personally. They took his question of why they were at a teen drama even more personally.

When some of his coworkers complained, he ignored them. He knew he needed to keep his mind on what he was doing. Late into the morning, long after the crowds of moviegoers had disappeared, Gill finally had a chance to speak with Heather.

She had been by his work station a few times, but other than polite chit chat, they hadn't really talked. She looked tired and exhausted with almost no make-up and her auburn hair tied into a bun. But to Gill, she had never looked lovelier.

"Hey, you," he said. He placed his hands on her waist and pulled her in for a light kiss.

After their lips had parted, her green eyes scanned his face. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just had a bad couple of days."

"What happened?"

He wanted to tell her everything, but he hesitated. He had told her about his father abandoning him and Malcolm, but he had never gone into detail.

"It's a long story. I, uh, saw my father yesterday."

She said nothing, and hugged him. He appreciated her more at that moment than ever. "How did it go?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

She smirked. "Try me."

"Okay, you know how I went to see Malcolm last week...."

He ended up telling her everything. About his mom, his dad, about Malcolm's episode last week. Everything. The words just came out of him. He couldn't have stopped himself even if he wanted to. Talking to Heather came easily. She listened to him, really listened. And when she interrupted, it was only to offer him a "I'm sorry" or "That's terrible." If it had been anyone else, Gill would have thought they were being insincere. But not Heather. He had never met anyone who cared more. He talked to her while they closed the theatre for the night, and then they walked to his car so they could

talk even more. A fog drifted into the parking lot. The temperature seemed to drop by a few degrees and both of them shivered until they reached his Ford Taurus.

“And you know, the whole time I was with my father, I just wanted to scream at him. I felt this surge of hatred. I wanted to hurt him just like he had hurt us.”

“It’s only natural,” Heather reassured him. “I can’t imagine dealing with that.” Her parents were still married after twenty-five years.

“I just can’t believe he’d try to sell me on my mom being able to tell the future. What kind of crazy BS reason is that?”

“Are you sure it’s your mom that was crazy?” she asked in a “I’m kidding” tone.

“Yeah, unfortunately.” Gill rubbed his hands together. “The thing is, as much as I hate my father, I’m afraid I’m going to turn out just like him.”

“You’re nothing like your dad.”

He smiled for the first time all night. “I appreciate you saying that, but I’m serious. Back in the hospital Malcolm called me out on not being there enough for him. And I couldn’t argue back, not really. I wanted to, but Malcolm’s right. I didn’t want to take the responsibility of taking care of Malcolm so I shipped him to the mental hospital.”

“Gill, you told me yourself Malcolm was bad off then. He needed real help.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think I really ever tried to help him. Not really. I never stopped to think about what it would mean for him to be stuck in that place for the rest of his life. I abandoned him there just like our dad abandoned us. He needed me to be there for him. And I wasn’t.”

“Okay,” she said. “Here’s how I look at it. You think you should have done more for him, right?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“Well, you can’t change the past. At least not without a Delorean.” He chuckled. Heather loved pop cultural references. “So stop beating yourself up and just promise you’ll do better. And keep that promise.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Gill said, “That simple, huh?”

“Yep.” She leaned back into the car seat.

Gill looked at the clock. “Wow, it’s late. Or really early.”

Heather groaned. “I have class later.” She majored in theatre at the local college. She treated her job as a projectionist as paying her dues. “Crap. I think I better head home.” Her eyes scanned his face again. “Are you feeling any better?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I am. I don’t think I’ve ever talked to anyone else about all that before.”

She blushed a bit. “I’m glad you trusted me enough to tell me.”

He shrugged. “So, Heather, we still doing dinner tomorrow?”

“Yeah.” She kissed him goodnight and then opened the car door. The fog seemed worse than ever. “Be careful driving home, okay?”

“Yeah, you, too. Text me when you get to your apartment.” He didn’t want to seem over protective, but with the weather like this, he knew she didn’t care.

Gill watched her get into her car and drive away. It was scary how he could open himself up around her. He hadn’t ever been able to be that honest with anyone he dated before. He thought about what she said. About just promising to do better and to follow through. He felt hopeful for the first time in days. Maybe sons didn’t have to become their fathers, after all.

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Gill's mood continued to improve after getting some sleep. He got home after five in the morning and checked his phone. Heather had texted him to let him know she got home safely. He texted her goodnight and went to bed right after. Things would work in his favor today, he felt. Gramps had even let him sleep in, which the old man hated to do.

He didn't work again till tomorrow so Gill wanted tonight's date with Heather to go well. Something the two of them would remember for a long time. They were having dinner at her favorite restaurant, The Pearl Dragon. It served Japanese, Chinese, and Korean foods, none of which Gill was fond of. But he could deal with it for one night at least.

Gill spent the rest of his day indoors. The fog had stayed the night, but it seemed less thick. Every time he went outside to fetch the mail, or check on something, he felt the fog closing in, smothering him. He hoped it wouldn't be this bad for his date.

Later, while getting ready, Gill put on a red shirt with grey sleeves. It had a giant serpent baring its fangs while under it was black, Latin script that read, "Snakes come in many sizes." He doubted anyone would read too much into it. Who could read Latin nowadays?

He picked a pair of black jeans to wear with it. Checking himself out in the mirror, Gill worried about the silver hair he had on his sideburns.

*Getting older sucks. At least I still have my hair.*

By the time Gill drove to pick Heather up, the fog had subsided. The clouds were hovering over the city, like always. He wondered if the sun been out once in the last week. Hoping to get his mind off of the weather, he listened to the radio again. They

cycled the same five songs over and over it seemed, so the temptation became strong to switch the station. He had his hand on the button, but he heard the deejay interrupt with a special announcement.

“Ah, just read this online, but apparently the Harrison High’s girl basketball team got in an accident. There’s been a lot of fog this morning and their bus crashed on Sixth Avenue. The latest news we’ve heard is while there had been no fatalities, at least five people are being sent to the hospital, four of them girls from the team. We’ll keep you posted if we hear anything else. I-I got to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, with all this constant doom and gloom from the weather, I’m surprised it’s not worse.”

Gill stopped paying attention as his mind focused on a memory of a conversation he had with Malcolm. Hadn’t his brother said something about a school bus crashing? His father’s words rang in his head. *Things she said sounded so nuts, but something would happen, and I’d remember she spoke about it first.*

He shook his head and watched the road. His father was a lying coward who needed an excuse to walk out on his family. His brother was a victim of a mental illness. Pretending either situation was something other than what it was would be foolish.

He picked Heather up a few minutes later. She looked pretty in a green dress that made her auburn hair stand out even more.

“Did you hear about the bus crash?” she asked as soon as she got into the car.

“Yeah.”

“My cousin still goes to school there.”

“Is she a member of the team?”

“No, but I talked to her. She knows some of the girls.”

Gill wondered if he should offer to reschedule, but she didn't give him any hints she wanted him to.

"This weather has been crazy," she said. "My mom called me about it. I told you she's visiting her friend in Indiana, right? Well, anyway, she said she's never heard of a storm staying in one place for so long. I tried to tell her it's not that big a deal, but after she heard about the bus crash she wonders if she should come home."

Gill almost told her about what Malcolm said. Instead he asked, "What'd you tell her?"

"Not to worry about it. Her friend's sick, and she hasn't been out of town in years. She could use the vacation."

"What about your dad?"

"Workaholic," Heather said. She waved her hand dismissively. "The world would have to end before he took time off from work." She laughed.

Gill laughed, too, but only to be polite. Her joke made him think about what Malcolm had said again.

"You okay? You seem kind of distracted."

Gill faked a smile. "I'm worried about the kids in that crash."

They arrived at the restaurant ten minutes later. *Thank God we got reservations*, he thought after taking their seats. The restaurant had a line that stretched out into the cool evening. He ordered a Coke, and she ordered a special drink: the Winter Green Tea Blitz. She talked about the Poetic Monkeys concert, her classes, and the one act play she was working on. The conversation let Gill focus on something else.

"I admit I'm kind of jealous of you," Gill said.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, this I got to hear. Why would Gilcomegain Robertson be jealous of little ole me?”

Sometimes he regretted telling her his first name. “It’s just I never finished college. I miss it, sometimes.”

“Maybe you can go back?”

“I’m not sure I can afford it. With Malcolm and Gramps. Just a lot going on right now.”

Heather put her elbows on the table and leaned forward. “I understand, but if you’re waiting for the right moment—”

“It’ll probably never come,” he finished. “You’re right. Again.” He grinned.

“Your twenties are supposed to be about finding out who you are. Or so Oprah tells me.”

“You watched Oprah?”

“What? It was a good show.” He looked down at his menu in mock shame.

“Anyway, what I was trying to say—”

“I’m not judging you for watching it, I just worry our relationship won’t be able to recover. I thought I was dating this ‘strong silent’ type of guy. But that’s ruined now that I know you watched Oprah.”

They laughed. She gestured toward him. “Sorry, go ahead.”

“I was trying to say that I’m close to thirty, and I have no idea what I want to do with the rest of my life.”

“Eh, no one who goes to college knows what they want to do with their lives. We just go because that’s what is expected of us. I worry all the time what I’ll do once I graduate.”

“You’ll go off to some screenwriting school and direct the next classic.”

“That’s sweet of you,” she said.

The server, a surly looking woman, carried their drinks on a tray. She knelt down and handed Gill his Coke before losing her balance. The Green Tea Blitz fell to the floor and spilled everywhere. Gill’s jean leg was covered in it. Some even managed to find itself in Heather’s hair.

The server apologized and tried to wipe up what little she could. Gill noticed she had a tattoo. It peeked out of her uniform at the top of her chest. She noticed him staring, and her surly look returned. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, no.” He held his hands up in defense. “I noticed your tattoo.”

“Oh, yeah,” she said, her face easing up. “It’s a drawing of a tiger.”

*A painted tiger makes you look closer....*

Gill got up out of the chair and backed away. “Uh, I better go get cleaned up.” He didn’t wait for Heather to say anything. He just pointed toward his leg to show he wanted to wipe the drink off. Once inside the bathroom, he began to panic.

He had to be imagining things. Malcolm had told him about the bus crash. He had even predicted the Blitz spilling and the girl’s tattoo.

*Time to focus.* He washed his hands in the lavatory and focused on everything his father had said to him the night before. And everything Malcolm had said. Had he been wrong to call his father a liar? Was his brother really able to see the future?

Then he remembered his brother telling him the world was going to end.

“This is crazy,” he whispered. “This is crazy.”

The more he pushed the idea out of his head the more it seemed to latch on. His cell phone buzzed. Heather had texted him to know if he was all right.

“This is crazy,” he said again.

## CHAPTER 7: ARRIVAL

Malcolm remembered his first visit to the Preferred Reality. He had been arguing with his girlfriend at the time. What they argued about was lost to him, but he remembered talking out loud only to see a bright light in front of him. It became so bright he put his arms in front of his face to shield it....

Malcolm opened his eyes to find himself on a grassy field. Darkness surrounded him, but he could just make out the outlines of trees. The air chilled him, and he rubbed his arms to keep the cold at bay.

Nothing stirred in the Preferred Reality. No night birds sang, no people having late night jogs. Nothing.

Malcolm should have been terrified, but he found he felt only curiosity and wonder at everything around him. This felt more real to him than anything he had ever experienced in his entire life.

*Mal?*

He looked up and was relieved to see the stars. They looked larger than they should have been. Instead of pinpricks of light they looked to be two or three times larger in the sky. They were so much larger than he remembered, in fact, he could see their individual colors. He could tell which were blue and vibrant, and which were red and dying. They did not speak to him, only to each other. The mysteries of the universe were proclaimed out in the open, but only Malcolm could hear them.

“I wonder why no one ever heard them before?” he asked out loud.

*Hear what?*

He bent down on the grass and felt the dew. He shook his hands to rid himself of the residue and looked around, wishing to see more than grass and trees.

A mist began to roll in, it stayed low to the ground, but it spread everywhere. It glowed softly, and it casted just enough light that Malcolm could see the green color of the grass beneath his feet. The mist swirled, and was just thick enough it reminded Malcolm of walking through ankle deep water.

On his right, the corners of the sky lightened, and Malcolm saw a distant yellow orb rise, slow and determined. The sky continued to grow lighter, the darkness pulling back. The stars retreated, the shouts becoming whispers becoming faint murmurs until the sky became silent.

*Mal, you're scaring me.*

It had been a long time since Malcolm had seen a sunrise. He felt like an intruder. Someone who had been shoehorned into a place he didn't belong. He watched Ms. Sun (the sun was obviously a female) for a second before something odd happened.

The swirling mist spun and *rose* soon covering the entire area, including where Malcolm stood, in a dense fog. Malcolm almost panicked before reminding himself to breathe slower. The fog seemed to press in, and he felt suffocated. He couldn't see anything except for a few feet in any direction.

Malcolm froze a second later when he heard something that sounded like wings flapping. He looked around, dreading what the sound could mean. He thought he heard a growl and a hiss, but before he could identify it, something *heavy* hit the ground somewhere near him. Malcolm lost his footing and hit the ground hard.

By the time he got back to his feet, Malcolm noticed the fog began to pull away. It receded several feet away growing shorter at the same time. Eventually, the mist disappeared, though it left behind something extraordinary.

In the grassy fog-covered field, stood a young woman who looked to be no older than twenty. Her skin was a golden tan, and she had large amber eyes and an almost wedge-shaped nose. Her long, thick dark hair flowed like a mane past her shoulders. She looked just like any regular college-aged girl, except for one minor detail.

She was naked.

This didn't seem to bother her, but it bothered Malcolm a great deal. Malcolm's eyes widened, and he wasn't sure what he should do. He avoided looking at her, but he felt compelled to. He wanted to let her know she wasn't alone, but she couldn't hear him. Malcolm spoke even louder, but she looked past him. Before he could try one last time, something buzzed in his ear.

*Mal, sweetheart, are you okay?*

He ignored it. This was important, he decided.

"She comes to learn the ways of rain," Malcolm said. It seemed so obvious when he said it out loud.

*What?*

Malcolm no longer gave the voice any more thought. It could buzz around his head like a bee all it wanted. He ignored it.

The girl made no attempt to cover herself and gazed at the park around her with her mouth agape and her head darting back and forth. She took a moment to close her eyes and inhale, as if she had never breathed the air before. She tried to move forward

before stumbling and falling on her hands. The girl's eyes snapped open, and she snarled like an animal and then pushed herself back up. She overdid it, forcing her to wave her arms around and around. This kept her from toppling backwards.

The girl moved her legs in a slow, cautious manner. It reminded Malcolm of watching a baby take its first steps. He watched her grow more confident as she put one foot in front of the other. She opened her mouth to talk, but she made a soft sound, which was somewhere between a cough and a moan. She tried again and shouted, "Zephyrinus!"

The mist swirled around Malcolm's feet before gathering in front of the girl. It became a spiral of grey that formed into a human form. Unlike the girl, this new person was a man, older with white hair, peppered with black. He had a lean physique, similar to a runner, but was so tall he towered over the girl. His skin was pale, nearly white. If one disregarded the fact that he had just appeared out of mist, he would look in his early sixties. Unlike the woman, he was clothed in a white button up dress shirt with a black suit jacket over it and a dull black pair of trousers.

"Mist made manifest, the servant of the coming storm," Malcolm whispered.

Neither the older man or the girl noticed him. "You're late, Dema," the man said to her.

"I had trouble finding this place, Zephyrinus. It's so..." Here she took a moment to sneer, her teeth showing. "So small."

The man looked down at her and shook his head. "Why are you naked?"

She looked down and shrugged, unashamed. "I don't know what they wear."

“The first clue...would be *something*.” He held out a hand and some of the leftover mist traveled toward him. He draped it over her body where it solidified in a black and white outfit similar to his.

Dema pulled at her new clothes. “Why do we have to match?”

“Because I happen to like the colors.” He motioned at something Malcolm couldn’t see. “I suppose it’s time we move on. How are you at walking?”

“Fine,” she lied. Malcolm didn’t want to, but he chuckled when she took a step forward and fell to the ground. They still couldn’t see him.

Zephyrinus rolled his eyes before turning his back on her. He walked away asking, “Why is it whenever they send me a new one, they never bother to properly train them?”

Dema bristled but said nothing. Instead, she walked carefully, putting one foot in front of the other with her arms at her side. “How do they move like this?”

“They don’t,” came the sardonic voice of her elder.

“Ha. Ha.”

Picking up her pace, she managed to move beside him. Malcolm had to walk faster just to keep up to them. He had to follow them. Everything in his soul told him nothing else mattered.

“You were instructed in the limitations of this form, at least?” the older man asked the girl. He sounded like an unimpressed professor.

“Yes.”

“Recite them.”

She stopped walking and asked, “What?”

Zephyrinus did not slow down but called back to her, “The people here are able to walk and talk at the same time. Revolutionary, isn’t it?”

The girl’s eyes widened at the sarcastic jibe. “I just don’t see why I have to recite—”

“Because I asked.”

Dema stood still and Malcolm had an image of a snake readying to strike. “We are Vanguard,” she said while she resumed walking. Her voice became flat and dull like Malcolm’s did when he had to recite the Preamble. “We take the form of our prey and live among them when the time of the Culling arrives—”

“Enough,” again, Zephyrinus interrupted. “I have too much respect for the Lady to hear you say it like that. What were you told about your new form?”

They walked in silence for a few seconds before Dema said, “I’m stronger than them. Faster, too.”

“Yes, but you are stronger in your natural form than you are now. Know your limits. For example, a single bullet will kill you just as easily as any of them. Just because you can toss them around like toys, it doesn’t mean they can’t just as easily end your life. And we wouldn’t want something unfortunate to happen to you, would we?”

Malcolm’s temper flared up. He wanted to hit the old man, but the smug bastard just grinned at Dema while taunting her. Malcolm hated bullies, especially the ones that hid behind their higher status. They continued along the path for several minutes.

Malcolm attempted to trip the old man up, but it was useless. His arms and legs slipped right through them. His mind flashed back to holograms on that science fiction show he used to watch as a kid.

“Back there you were mist,” Dema said. She jerked her left thumb over her shoulder. “How did you change your form? We all can’t do that.”

He scoffed and said, “Only the oldest and most experienced of us can do the things I do.”

“Oh.” Malcolm could tell she hated him as much as he did. “Why can’t I wear something else?”

“Be happy with what you have.”

Dema’s eyes narrowed. “Fine.”

Zephyrinus began to speak about the numerous things they were going to have to start doing. Malcolm wanted to remember them, but as soon as the elder man spoke, the words washed out of his mind. He couldn’t focus.

Dema spoke up on occasion, but Zephyrinus would hear none of it.

“Patience,” he said. “That is the most important thing about this month. Without patience, we are just creatures without purpose flinging from one emotional high to the next. Without patience there could be no planning, no strategy, no focus. Without patience we would be one of *them*.”

“Why can’t we get started now?”

“It’s not the time.”

“When will it be time?”

He sighed. “When it’s time.”

“You’re crazy!”

He cupped his chin, and he considered this. “So I’ve been told.” Seeing the look she gave him, he patted her on the back and bade her to keep walking. “My dear, there is

a reason for everything I do, even if it seems I'm just being difficult. I could stand here and tell you everything you need to know about what's to happen next, but then what would there be for you to figure out? It's better that you learn as we go on. I'll explain things when I need to, that's what I'm here for, but don't expect me to hold your hand as we go on this little adventure together."

"So you're saying I should 'stop whining?'"

Zephyrinus chuckled. "Come, we have much to do."

The Preferred Reality pulled Malcolm forward. Everything collapsed into a spiral of blue, red, green, yellow, orange and purple that all became white. He closed his eyes again and when he opened them, he realized he was in a new place.

It looked like a convenience store. He turned his head this way and that before stopping at Zephyrinus and Dema. Both were walking past a collection of coffee pots. To their left was some sort of oven with hot dogs and other meats. They stood near a machine that had two windows with swirling Slushies inside; one was blue, the other a bright red.

Malcolm recognized where they were. A Speedway.

"I trust you've been made aware of the rules?"

Dema nodded. "Yes."

"Tell me."

She sighed. "Do I have to?"

Zephyrinus just raised an eyebrow.

"Fine," came her reply. Malcolm wondered if perhaps this was her catchphrase.

He moved to pick up a hot slice of pizza when he heard her say, "Being a Vanguard

means we can't be discovered. We have to act in secret and do whatever we must to prevent the Culling from being discovered. Which I don't understand."

"Oh, there's a surprise," Zephyrinus said in a dry tone. "But what don't you understand?" Malcolm forgot about the pizza and drifted over by the hot dog machine.

"Why do we hide?" She folded her arms in front of her chest and shifted her weight to one foot. "Why don't we just take what we want? It's not like they could stop us. In our real bodies we could kill everyone in here in under a minute." Her tone suggested she didn't think it was a good thing. "I don't understand why we go through all of this. Is it just a game?"

Zephyrinus' eyes narrowed. "A game?" He stood so close to her that his chin was only a few inches from her forehead. Malcolm worried he might strike her. "I sympathize with your frustration," he said in a silky voice. "I, too, want to make our presence known. However, our people number only in the thousands, Dema. And our family consists only of a hundred. *They* number in the billions. The Lady feels that if we were ever discovered that war would erupt. We'd do a lot of damage." He admired his fist as he said this. "But we'd be beaten. Or so the Lady tells us. Now, do you know the rules?" She nodded. "Then you know once we start, once we truly start, there will be no going back."

"I understand," she said.

"Then do it." Zephyrinus commanded.

Dema appeared scared. "You mean now?"

"Of course," he said absently as he took a slice of pizza and started to eat it. If he was worried someone might notice, he didn't show it. "That's why we're here. Even in

our new forms we can still reach out to the sky. I wouldn't suggest you do it too often. It can be taxing. Go ahead and try. Unless, you'd rather *I* do it."

She shook her head. "No, no, I can handle this."

"Good," Zephyrinus said, his mouth full.

Malcolm watched Dema close her eyes and begin to concentrate. She sang in a language he had never heard before. Beautiful and soft, strong and deep. A song capable of making anyone who heard it sad and happy all at once. When Dema opened her eyes, the round pupils were now long slits.

Malcolm looked up and saw past the ceiling. He watched clouds forming in the sky above them. Black, white, and gray all swirling together, shifting into one another. Everything darkened, faster and faster. Ms. Sun burned in anger and embarrassment, but even she couldn't stop the clouds.

Lightning flashed. Immediately after that, rain fell faster and harder than anything Malcolm had ever seen before. Within minutes the convenience store went from having only a handful of people to having almost thirty. A middle-aged man walked in with a drenched hat.

"I had the frickin' top down! Damn that Marie!" he roared. The man moved toward the beer aisle, stomping the entire way in an immature fashion.

A minute or so later, another man walked in. Malcolm almost fell down in shock. The man looked older, his black hair had streaks of silver on the sides. But it was him.

"Gill?" Malcolm raced toward his brother and waved his hand in front of his face. Gill didn't seem to notice him. He moved about the aisles.

*Why am I seeing this?* Malcolm asked no one. He turned his attention back to the creatures.

“Well, not bad, for a novice,” Zephyrinus was saying in a low voice. Malcolm walked back toward them, keeping one eye on them and another eye on his brother. “I would have gone with hail and more lightning, but not bad.”

Dema looked pleased with herself. She bowed her head to him. “Thank you, Zephyrinus.”

“The Culling cycle is our most important ritual, Dema. It is also when we are at our most vulnerable. Some individuals will start to take notice now that the storms have started. They’ll ask questions. They’ll do a little research. Ultimately, they will find nothing. At least not in enough time to warn them of what’s to come.”

“But what if they do?”

“They won’t.

“But what if...”

“This is my tenth cycle, Dema. I think I know a little something about how these things will turn out. It would be better for them that they don’t find out, for their sakes. We cannot let anyone disturb our ritual. Tradition says that those who trespass must pay a hundred fold. Practicality tells us it wouldn’t be good if someone interrupted us. Imagine if they could somehow let others know what they’ve discovered? I’ve seen what happens to a city when the ritual is interrupted. Not a pretty sight. But the rules are clear. If they do find out by some miracle, you know what we’ll have to do, yes?”

Dema frowned. “We kill them.”

“That isn’t going to be a problem for you, is it?” Zephyrinus leaned in close, his eyes staring into hers. Malcolm almost thought he was reading her mind.

She looked away at some of the people inside the Speedway. “No,” she said after taking a full minute to think it over. “No, I don’t suppose it will.”

“Good girl.”

Malcolm felt something tugging on his shoulder. He spun to his left and hoped that someone had finally seen him. But there was no one there. He turned back and gazed at the two figures he’d been following. The feeling returned, and Malcolm twisted around and said, “Stop that!”

The moment his body completed its turn, he was no longer in Speedway but back in his apartment. He felt disoriented, and he wobbled in place for a few moments trying to stay upright. He heard someone crying and looked down to find his girlfriend, Danielle, rubbing her cheek while sitting on the floor. Someone had hit her. It took him a second to realize it had been him.

Malcolm regarded his right hand and noticed it ached. His first impulse was to slice it off. The horror of the moment made him nauseous.

“Dani,” he said, but she got to her feet and rushed past him and fled to their bedroom. He wanted to apologize or explain himself. But he couldn’t. It would be a while before he could face the truth of what had happened to him.

## CHAPTER 8: PREFERRED REALITY

Malcolm woke up feeling groggy, which was how he felt every morning at 7 a.m. When the sun had barely been out long enough to warm the world up, he felt no one could blame him if he was a bit sluggish. He changed out of his evening clothes and into his regular attire, which had no zippers, no strings, and no buttons. These restrictions were supposed to keep them safe; however, Malcolm had yet to figure out how to kill someone with a button.

Life in the soulless and yet cheerful halls of the mental institution began early in the morning so the inmates, that's what Malcolm called them, could all grab a bite to eat.

Shuffling into the cafeteria, Malcolm filled his plate and sat with the usual crowd of weirdoes and freaks; Harrison Ford, who thought he was *that* Harrison Ford, Hugo who never talked, and Curious George, a hairy man with severe anger control problems.

"Gentlemen," Malcolm said while eating a banana. He looked toward his closest tablemate and asked, "George? Did you have a banana yet?"

"I'm gonna rip your face off, Malcolm!"

"Just thought I'd ask, my friend."

He tried not being a smartass, he really did, but most of the time Malcolm still felt he didn't belong in here. Despite all the time he spent in this place, he still hoped to one day leave. These other nutcases? No hope.

After breakfast they moved on to getting their pills, and the nurses made sure they took them. This was Harrison's favorite time of the day as he flirted with the nurses and told them all about his acting career.

“Kissing Carrie Fisher wasn’t what I thought it would be, you know?” Harrison explained to the newest nurse, Rochelle. “Carrie smoked too much. That reminds me of the time I played the president in this little hijacking film....”

Malcolm breezed out of the one-sided conversation and made sure he swallowed every single one of his useless pills. They never helped him; they only made him feel tired.

Around ten o’clock he went to group therapy. The topic? Anger management. Their doctors, Joyce Hall and Carol Oates, tried getting the inmates to talk about their latest breakthroughs.

“No, George, threatening to eat someone’s face is not a step forward even if you didn’t follow through with it.”

Later in the evening Gramps and Gill both showed up to watch television with Malcolm. It surprised the orderlies because getting both men to visit at the same time was like watching for a meteor shower—eventually you’ll get lucky and see it happen, but most nights you’ll just end up disappointed. Gill looked like he wanted to talk to Malcolm about something, but whatever it was, he kept it to himself. It felt pathetic and sad for him to admit it, but spending time with his family watching television had become the highlight of his week.

The next morning Malcolm woke up at seven like he always did and got dressed, though he felt much lighter. Seeing Gill and Gramps did a lot to bring his spirits up. At breakfast he even tried to limit his sarcasm to his fellow freaks and weirdoes.

“Harrison, how’s it going?”

“Haven’t heard from Callista in a while, I hope she still gets my letters.”

Malcolm bit his tongue and turned to Hugo and said, “Huuuuue. How’s it hanging?”

Hugo blinked.

“That’s a fair point,” Malcolm said in a smooth voice. Turning toward the last tablemate he asked, “So, Georgie, how ya feeling today?”

“I FEEL LIKE STICKING THIS BANANA UP YOUR ASS!”

After the orderlies had taken George away, Malcolm still didn’t let this negativity get him down and even listened in later when Harrison spoke to a couple of nurses about his time filming all over the world.

“Yes, I’ve been to Egypt, it’s pretty hot, however, it doesn’t hold a candle to you two. When Steven...I mean Steven Spielberg of course...when he told me I’d have to be near snakes, I said to him, ‘Hey, I fear no vipers,’ and he shot back, ‘Then you’re gonna love my ex-wife!’”

Group therapy ended up being fun, too. The topic began being about “struggle,” but it evolved into overcoming the guilt of being a burden. Malcolm got a chance to unload some of his own guilt about his condition.

Once a week, Malcolm had to meet with a doctor for one on one therapy. Good mood or no, he never liked these sorts of things. Group therapy felt freer, more open. This felt invasive, and Malcolm rarely opened himself up.

Malcolm started rubbing his arm, which he did whenever he felt nervous. After all the therapy, all the times he had to explain how he felt and what went on inside his head, Malcolm liked to let his mind float away into what he chose to call The Preferred Reality.

Waiting in the therapy room, Malcolm closed his eyes hoping that when he opened them next he would be someplace entirely different...

...the first thing Malcolm Robertson noticed as he opened his eyes was the sunlight. It shone bright against his black locks. The incredible sensation of being warm made Malcolm laugh free and easy, similar to a childlike giggle. He was in a park of some kind. So many things about it felt familiar: the way the grass touched his bare feet, the way the wind kissed his cheeks, and the way his ears picked up the sounds of teenagers laughing and enjoying life. He knew this place, he realized. He had been here before.

A little boy ran by him just then. His little fingers clutched the string of a large blue kite.

Malcolm ignored him. Beauty beckoned all around him, demanding his attention. He spent what felt like an hour just watching the trees pulse. Contracting and then expanding, they matched the rhythm of his heartbeat.

The boy ran by him again, a red kite cutting through the air behind him.

*Red? I thought the kite was blue?*

But it was clear the kite was red, like a fire engine or a rose. Seeing the boy having such a good time reminded him of all the fun he used to have as a little kid. He remembered the adventures of Captain Valiant, his favorite hero, the savior of mankind who defended the world against the evils of despair. Captain Valiant always knew when innocence was in trouble.

Malcolm heard the teenagers again. He heard them crying. Begging. He scanned the park around him, but he could not find them. Empty, save for him and the boy. Malcolm knew he had to find the teenagers. He looked up at the sun. No longer the size

of a dime, it now looked to be the size of a beach ball. The burning gas giant's plasma shimmered fro and to like waves on a beach. He took off running across the grass, his bare feet sliced open by the emerald blades of grass. The red from his feet became dark and muddy. His blood made the world around him uglier.

Malcolm didn't care; he had a mission to accomplish. His purpose was not yet done. He kept running, trying to keep his breathing steady and ignoring the way the sunlight seemed to make things too bright. Or the way his body was drenched in sickening coat of flop sweat. His thighs burned as they rubbed against his pants, his sides ached and within seconds he struggled to get his breath back.

The kid with the green kite skipped past him; however, he did not seem the slightest bit tired.

*The boy's kite changes colors when I'm not looking at it, he thought. I won't take my eyes off of it.*

For several minutes Malcolm watched the boy as he skipped back and forth in front of him. As if to mock him, the green kite became yellow, and burned brighter than even the sun. Malcolm didn't have time to turn his eyes away before it became orange. A moment later it was purple. Then the pattern repeated itself. Blue, red, green, yellow, orange, and purple. Over and over, the colors shifting into one another so fast Malcolm decided it was time to run again.

After two hours he realized the teenagers had to be someplace else. He looked back toward the sun. He raised his hand over his eyes so he could have a better look at it.

The sun blinked back.

"Ms. Sun, have you seen the teenagers?"

“Teenagers, Mr. Robertson?”

Malcolm’s face twisted in confusion. It spoke with a male’s voice. That wasn’t how Ms. Sun sounded. He closed his eyes for a few seconds and then opened them. He was in a blue painted room with many happy platitudes plastered on the wall shouting at him.

Malcolm ran his hand through his long black hair while sitting down on the red couch. It was a Thursday. Where was he again?

Sitting in a comfortable green chair, Dr. James Coral stared back at him. He had a large notepad in his lap, his demeanor serious and not amused.

Oh, right. Therapy.

The chill of the mental unit returned to him, the warmth of Ms. Sun faded away and all that remained of his preferred reality clung to his soul almost choking him. Malcolm leaned forward with his hands on his forehead massaging his frontal lobe.

“Are you okay, Malcolm?” Coral asked though his voice remained neutral, unconcerned. “We were talking about your mother and you seemed to freeze up.”

Malcolm shrugged trying to buy some time to process his thoughts and regain control. He had to stay in control.

“I’m fine, Doc,” he grunted, holding onto his left side. It seized up on him, and he rubbed the area right under his armpit to help loosen it up. “I guess I was thinking about my childhood. I used to love going to Hamill Park. You ever been?”

“Yes. Did your mother take you there?”

Malcolm enjoyed how Coral refused to be distracted. “Yeah, me and my brother would spend our days running around with kites. Gill, heh, Gill never knew how to fly the damn things right.”

Coral stroked his beard. “Yes,” he said, “so while you and your brother were having fun, where was your mother?”

“She usually ran with us and played with us. We stopped going to the park when I was 10.”

“That was when your mother started getting sick, wasn’t it?”

Malcolm shrugged, failing to keep the memories at bay. “The last time we went to the park together...it was right after my dad left. None of us felt like having fun, but Mom refused to let us sit around and feel sorry for ourselves. She told me that when life sucks you have to laugh, cause the gods are laughing at you, and you might as well join in. Gill and I must have run around the park for an hour. Ran till my sides hurt.”

“Hmm...was your mother running with you?”

“No,” Malcolm said. “She was sitting on a bench. Just watching us. I think she was burning the image of us having fun in her brain. Something she could hold on to before she got too sick. Anyway, we never went back as a family. At the time I got so mad at her.”

“You mean when she got sick?”

“She just faded away from us, little by little. But here I am...doing the same damn thing to Gill and Gramps. The year she died I never slept. I was so afraid I would wake up and start seeing things or zoning out. I was afraid I’d turn into her. And now I have.”

“We’re all afraid of becoming our parents, Malcolm,” Coral said. He paused for a second. “It’s natural to want to overcome what we perceive to be their mistakes. The important thing you need to remember is that you’re still here. You’re still living with your illness.” He took his glasses off and started to clean them with a yellow handkerchief. “I hear your brother is coming to see you more often. I think it’s good you two are reconnecting. It’s important that you *talk to him and help him stop the world from ending.*”

Malcolm looked up in shock. “What?”

Coral put the glasses back on his face and said, “You need to reconnect with your brother so he can keep you grounded.”

Malcolm laughed while rubbing his arm. “Right, yeah. Yeah, we aren’t fighting as much as we used to.”

“Another thing we’re going to have to talk about is keeping your anxiety under control. You recently had an attack when you were talking to your brother.”

Malcolm rubbed his arm again. “I was mad at him.” He wanted to add, “He had more important things to do than come visit his crazy brother,” but he thought better of it. The wall behind the therapist began rippling.

Coral checked his notes. “The orderlies tell me you started getting violent. There are a number of different techniques we can try to calm you when you feel an attack coming on.”

Malcolm had heard all of this before. His interest remained on the way the wall seemed to shift behind Coral. It promptly turned orange and began to glow. It filled the entire room with a warm light. Malcolm closed his eyes again and welcomed the

returning light. The wall pulled away. It disclosed itself as the back of the sun, which floated away, and revealed the bright grass and pulsing trees of the Preferred Reality.

Malcolm got up from the couch and walked into the park. The sun had gone back to being the size of a beach ball. All was right in the world.

*Malcolm?*

A purple horse leapt into view. It ran by Malcolm, then turned around to face him. The creature exploded before his eyes, and Malcolm had to place a hand in front of his face to protect it. He needn't have bothered as nothing got on him. No trace of the creature existed, no blood remained on the grass and flowers, no smoke. Nothing. He backed away slowly. He remembered he needed to find the teenagers because they would help him with his mission.

He looked at his friend, Ms. Sun, and asked, "Can you tell me where they are?"

"No, Malcolm. I'm looking for them, too. I just don't realize it yet." Yes, this was how her voice should be. Smooth...gentle. Not uninterested and cold like Coral's.

Malcolm heard music then. Someone was playing the piano. A slow melody that seemed to make him happy and sad all at once. He felt drawn to it, and he knew he should head toward its source. A minute later, it started to speak to him with a new tone. Loud, aggressive, full of energy and fire from the heavens; it roared for his attention. Pounding drums and screaming guitars joined the piano keys. Around him the park changed. The trees no longer pulsed along with his heart. They joined the rhythm of the music and lost all their leaves in the process. The grass lost its luster, eventually becoming little more than rotting reeds. Even Ms. Sun drifted away and left Malcolm to feel as though he had been abandoned under a cloudy sky.

Still, he walked toward the music his world continued to dance to. There was something frightening in the center of the park, he knew. However, for all the fear he held in his heart, he knew that he had to face it.

*Malcolm, are you listening to me?*

“The center is where the answers are. Only available for the courage to listen to the music, not the song. We spend so many days thinking about the end, we never wonder about the beginning. Stars scream for our attention so that they may shine a light to help us.”

*Malcolm, I need you to focus. Are you having an attack?*

The buzzing couldn't distract Malcolm, couldn't lead him astray. He found the center with barren trees that formed a circle around it. They convulsed to the music around him. He walked past them, afraid of what he would find.

“When one sees the wicked acts of the better ones, we ignore it because we don't want to face the truth. But we must push ahead and follow where the music leads us.”

*Malcolm, I'm getting the orderlies.*

He had found the teenagers, they were on their backs looking up at the darkening sky. Some had looks of horror forever frozen on their faces. Others had fear. Or surprise. They weren't dead, but neither were they alive. They were simply...empty. Vessels without cargo.

Malcolm looked for his friend among the clouds. She was nowhere to be seen, but the clouds lowered and lowered until they touched the ground, enveloping the entire park.

“How could anyone guess clouds have teeth?”

\*\*\*

Malcolm's eyes snapped opened. He was in his room. Sitting up, he pushed the covers off of his body. A hard, vicious pain shot through his head. How long had he been out this time?

"Mal?"

Looking up, Malcolm saw his brother standing in the door way.

"Gill? Did they call you here?"

"Hey, my brother's awake!" Gill spoke to someone unseen down the hallway. He rushed to embrace Malcolm. "Geez, Mal, don't scare me like that!"

"Gill...I saw something in my head...never mind."

"You can tell me," Gill said in a strange tone.

Malcolm didn't believe him. His brother had never wanted to hear about what he saw when he had an episode, what was with the change of heart?

"Really, Gill Pad? And why should I do that?"

Gill got up off the bed and stood over his brother. He had never looked more serious than he did at this moment. "I want to hear you talk about the end of the world."

Malcolm jerked suddenly. He pinched himself. "Am I still dreaming?"

"No."

Malcolm began rubbing his arm again. "Well, then why do you want to hear me talk about the end of the world?"

"Because, bro, I believe you."

## CHAPTER 9: CONVERSATIONS

Gill could tell his brother was confused.

“You what?”

“I believe you, Malcolm,” he said with no hint of sarcasm.

His brother brushed his hair out of his eyes and blinked. “You believe me? *I* don’t even believe me!”

Gill folded his arms in front of his chest and let out a sigh. He had no choice but to tell Malcolm his theory. No matter how hard his twin might laugh at him, he had to take the chance. His gut told him this would be a long evening.

“Remember when you and I had that big fight a little over a week ago?”

Malcolm’s face fell. “Yeah, I ended up having to be put on lock down.”

Gill grimaced. He knew of his brother’s hatred for the strict punishment. “Okay, well, you said something to me. Actually, a lot of things, but I’m only going to focus on the one thing right now. You said this phrase about clouds having teeth.”

Malcolm’s eyes lit up, all the confirmation Gill needed that his brother remembered those words.

“Something I should have told you a long time ago was that the day before Mom...died, she said something to me. It didn’t make any sense at the time. It was a lot of gibberish about snails and toads and blood in the water. But something she said always stuck with me. She said, ‘Who could have imagined clouds have teeth?’”

Malcolm cursed. “You’re not saying what I think you’re saying, right?”

Gill nodded and said, “Don’t tell me you must have overheard or she said the same thing to you or something. I’ve already had that convo with Gramps. You weren’t

there when she said it, and you've never said that phrase in all the times I've ever seen you have an episode. So, I decided I needed to talk to the people who knew Mom the best. That meant I had to talk to Dad."

"You talked to that piece of crap?" Malcolm's voice had an edge to it. Malcolm had taken their father's abandonment even harder than Gill had. He had said on many occasions that he would never forgive their father for what he had done to their mom.

"I had to, Mal," Gill explained. "Gramps refused to talk to me about it. I had no one else I could talk to."

Gill retold the conversation between him and their father, informing Malcolm of every detail he could remember. Throughout, his brother remained silent, his face not betraying a single emotion. When Gill finished his brother finally spoke.

"So, Dad thinks Mom could see the future?" Mal said, his tone remaining neutral.

"He was sure of it. I thought he was crazy, but then I went on a date with Heather—"

"Oh, boy," Malcolm interrupted.

"No, listen," Gill said, launching into the story of his dinner with Heather and how Malcolm's ramblings had come true. "The bus crash happened. Heather's drink spilling? It happened. The waitress had a tattoo of a tiger for God's sake. When you have these episodes, Mal, you're not just saying gibberish. At least not all the time. You're seeing the future, just like Mom could. Do you understand?"

Malcolm nodded. "Yeah, I understand they locked up the wrong brother!"

"Hey!"

Malcolm raised his right hand to shut his brother up. A minute later he said, “Look, I won’t pretend I haven’t hoped that one day people would look at me and say, ‘You’re not crazy, you’re just gifted with something special.’ Sometimes it’s the only thing that kept me from just giving up. But this? I’m somehow able to get visions of the future? That’s too crazy, even for me!”

Gill understood why his brother felt cautious. Malcolm wanted to believe what Gill said, but if he was wrong, if this was just some sort of weird coincidence, Malcolm wouldn’t be able to take the disappointment. So Gill chose his next words carefully.

“Tell me about the end of the world then.”

Malcolm shifted uncomfortably. “Why do you keep asking that?”

“That time I first started coming back, you said something really important. You said the world was going to end. If I’m right...and you can see the future...I have to know what you meant about that.”

“But the end of the world?” Malcolm sneered. “That’s a little melodramatic don’t you think?”

Gill sighed again. “I know this sounds nuts, but if there is just the tiniest chance I’m right about what you see, we have to investigate. Maybe it’s the end of the world. Maybe it just means a terrible thing is going to happen. Either way if something bad happens, and we kept our mouths shut and didn’t try to help then that’s on us, Mal. We would be partly responsible.”

Gill waited for his brother to say something, but he just looked at the wall deep in thought. The silence became like acid slowly dissolving Gill’s patience. He realized he needed to get through to his brother and fast. He needed to speak from the heart.

“I need you, Mal.”

“T-Minus 21 days,” his brother whispered.

“What?”

“A little over a week ago the episodes began getting worse. I traveled to the Preferred Reality. That’s what I call my episodes. There was this kid and after he....”

Malcolm fell silent again. He had been on the verge of saying something important, Gill realized, but he held back.

“After he what?” Gill prompted.

“Not important, but the kid said, ‘What’s done can’t be undone. The sins of tomorrow can be cleansed off today. Swirling fog. Laughing rain. Look for the lights and listen for the music. T-minus 21 days.’ I think it’s a countdown.”

Now Gill cursed. “Mal, that’s less than two weeks away!”

His brother just shrugged.

“Tell me everything,” Gill said. “Don’t leave anything out. If it happened in your vision, I want to know about it.”

Malcolm scratched his chin. “Okay, bro, but this is going to take a very long time.”

\*\*\*

It had been an exhausting couple of days for Marie. When she wasn’t working at the news station she begged the local newspapers for a chance to check out their morgues, or where they kept their non-digitalized copies. Marie would have been lost looking through all the old papers had Phin not pointed her to papers from a hundred years ago.

The first paper, *The Sentinel*, had a morgue located in a musty basement. The opaque windows did not let in any light, though with the storm going on outside she doubted there'd be much. The lights overhead flickered, and Marie worried about the electricity going out.

*The Sentinel* only had papers going back to WWII. Marie read the earliest copies just to make sure she didn't miss anything. Nothing of note happened locally. No large number of mysterious deaths. She did come across one story that sounded oddly familiar though. It involved a man found outside of town in a catatonic state. Ted Rodgers had been driving home along McFaren's Field when his car went off the road. Rodgers had been discovered a few feet away on his back. No attempt to wake him up seemed to help.

She carefully searched for a follow up story. After a few minutes, she found his obituary. Rodgers had died days later. He never woke up.

Still one case from over sixty years ago hardly proved anything. It hadn't even been raining the night they found him. Only a light fog.

Realizing *The Sentinel* could not help her, Marie went to its competition, *The Daily Republic*. *The Republic* had been around for almost two centuries though Marie doubted they'd retained any copies longer than their competitor. Rather than being stuck in a basement, the paper had a backroom that had several older stories on microfilm along with a machine to examine them. It hummed, and the noise from the machine became even louder by the silence of the morgue.

The first year she tried to zero in on was *The Republic's* version of what happened to Ted Rodgers. She found the story to be very similar, the only difference was that here the reporter made it clear that something large had run Rodgers off the road. His car had a

dent in it. There were no tire tracks or any other evidence of another car being on the road, however. One person interviewed suggested Rodgers had hit a cow, but the reporter dismissed this in the article immediately. After all, where was the cow?

Marie copied the name of the reporter, Jackson Creed, for future reference. Moving on, she continued until she reached the 1910s. She covered her mouth in horror...she had found what she had been looking for.

\*\*\*

Malcolm had been right, telling everything he could remember from his episodes, or “visions” as Gill now called them, took over an hour. He still wasn’t sure how to feel about the idea he could tell the future. Part of him wished he had tapped into those powers earlier when it came time to pay for his college tuition.

Humorous thoughts aside, Malcolm found himself believing Gill. He never told anyone, not even Gramps this before, but when he first started having his “visions,” he believed them to be real. No one ever trusted him when he tried talking about them, and eventually he came to the conclusion he was as crazy as his mother, too. When his brother had told him he believed him, a burden had been lifted. All their lives Gill had been the practical one. If he could say with a straight face that visions of purple horses exploding could somehow stop something terrible from happening, who was Malcolm to be stubborn?

In the back of his mind, Malcolm always wondered about the illness he had inherited from their mother. Was it possible that she hadn’t been crazy? That she had seen visions of the future? If so, then why did she kill herself? What had she seen that messed her up so badly she needed to jump off a ten-story building?

That hurt Malcolm the most. The not knowing. The endless questions that formed whenever he thought about her. The fact that he would never comprehend the answers only made the pain worse.

Thinking about his mother never helped Malcolm. There was too much confusion, and he could never find relief. The idea that Gill had spoken to their father about her angered Malcolm even more.

*That bastard never gave a damn about us.*

It took a few moments before he realized that Gill was speaking. His brother dissected every vision over and over again, examining them for any deeper meaning. Malcolm admired his resolve.

“So you were looking for teenagers?”

“Music started playing, but I couldn’t recognize the song. It made me happy and sad all at the same time.”

“Maybe it was a club?”

“But I followed the kid into this path of trees.”

“So maybe it’s one of those forest raves. We went to a couple of those in high school.”

Malcolm considered this, but then shook his head. “I think we’ve overthinking the teenager thing. I got the impression there were other people than just kids there. Adults and what not.”

Gill grunted in frustration. “Okay, then about Ms. Sun? You said she was looking for the teenagers, too?”

“Only she didn’t know it, yeah,” Malcolm finished. “I’ve always felt like I’ve seen her before.”

“She’s the sun, Mal, you see her every day.”

Malcolm rolled his eyes. “Seems like you inherited Mom’s sense of humor at least. Wanna trade?”

The brothers shared a laugh before getting back to work. They went over all other options about the sun, but it seemed fruitless.

“Okay, these shadows you saw. The creatures who could turn into mist and leap tall buildings in a single bound. You said they approached you and the kid?”

Malcolm didn’t want to lie, but he felt an impulse not to reveal the fate of the boy from his vision. He spoke with some hesitation. “Yeah, but then the kid started with the madness mantra, and then I woke up.”

“That’s pretty strange.”

“It gets worse. Did I ever tell you what I saw in my first episode? Or vision? The one from when I was in college?”

Gill shook his head. “I think you said something about pizza.”

“Yeah.” Malcolm launched into his story. He kept the poetic conversations with the planets to a minimum and focused only on the two creatures. When he got to what happened at the Speedway, Gill leaned against the wall and slumped down to the floor.

“What?” Malcolm asked. “Did I say something wrong?”

“You said I was talking to some middle-aged guy during some massive storm. In a Speedway.”

“Yeah, I think you were talking to him. I was paying more attention to the other two. What’s wrong?”

“This confirms it. You really can see the future! Mal, I was at a Speedway when a massive storm hit. That was on the Thursday I came to see you. You saw that eight years ago!”

Now it was Malcolm’s turn to lean back. “Son-of-a-bitch.”

“Are you saying the two ‘creatures,’ um Zeph and,” Gill snapped his fingers.

“Dema.”

“Right, you’re saying Zeph and Dema were at the Speedway. But I didn’t see any purple shadows.”

“Well, they don’t always look like that. Sometimes Zeph is an old man, and Dema’s a hot, Middle-Eastern chick.”

Gill swore out loud. “I saw them. Or I think I saw them. So there’s someone behind these storms?” They spoke for a few more minutes trying to piece everything together. They needed help.

“What we need,” Gill said. “is someone who knows about social events. We know the day this bad thing is supposed to happen. We need to talk to someone who knows what’s going on then.”

“Like a gossip columnist?”

Gill smirked, and Malcolm worried his brother was as crazy as he was. He reached into his pocket and started rifling through his wallet. “Nope...something even better.” He yanked a card with contact information out of the center slit.

“A reporter.”

\*\*\*

“So what’d you find?” Phin asked when Marie returned from the newspaper morgues.

The storm had quieted down to a light drizzle so Marie hadn’t bothered to use her umbrella. After coming back, she emailed Phin to see when he could Skype. She had to be at the station in a little under an hour, but she needed to talk to someone and the eccentric man was her only ally.

Marie paced back and forth, something she did when she got nervous or upset. “You’re not going to believe it!”

“Remember who you’re talking to here, Marie,” Phin said with a smile. “I believe all sorts of crazy things.”

“This is...big.”

“Well now,” he said. “Marie, could you stop pacing? I can barely see you!” He seemed to be excited. No doubt he had hoped she’d find something to validate him after all these years. But his joyful attitude only made Marie angrier.

“Phin, you don’t understand!”

“Well, explain it so I can.” Despite his good mood, he had an air of impatience.

“I went to the archives like you suggested. One of the newspapers here had a few papers dating back 97 years.” She let that last sentence sink in before continuing.

“I found a couple of stories about an odd series of storms, just like the ones we’re having now. Just like the ones you said were in Central America thirty years ago.”

Phin’s face became very still. “Go on.”

“I checked a couple of weeks later. Apparently there had been a flu epidemic around that time in this region. The story I found said over two hundred people died all across the state. The largest number in one area is here. A little over a hundred people died. But here’s the thing, a couple of the people had been sick for a week before dying. But the majority of the sick, a hundred people exactly, died a couple of days after falling into a coma.”

Neither of them said anything for a few moments. Phin’s expression hadn’t changed in a while, but he seemed to be deciding something. For Marie, speaking what she had read aloud just made it feel more real. She didn’t want to believe Phin’s theory. The idea seemed ridiculous. And yet there remained a doubt in her head that this all couldn’t be explained away. Not after reading about the strange case of Ted Rodgers.

“Heavy stuff, kiddo,” Phin said at last. “This is the largest number I’d ever heard of. They normally don’t take that many.”

“They?” Marie asked.

Phin looked away, his blue eyes burned with something that resembled hatred. It felt like he wanted to tell Marie something but wasn’t sure he could trust her.

““They,”” he said, making air quotes. “The death patterns. Anyway, so now you know that 97 years ago a hundred people died under strange circumstances. They were all in comas in the same day and then all died around the same time. Odd, certainly, but I’m no medical doctor. And they had some strange storms like we do now before this happened. If we just had this one case to go by, I doubt either of us would think much about it.”

Marie knew Phin hadn't been honest with her in regards to "they," but didn't hold it against him. She figured he had been burned by trusting others too quickly in the past. To show him she could be counted on, she decided to tell Phin about Ted Rodgers.

The look of hatred returned on his face. "Damn," he said. "I'd like to say that's the only time I've heard of cases like that. But I have notebooks full of similar reports. A few dozen dead here. A family in a minivan found there. The fact is, Marie, there are places all over the United States where people die like this. Doesn't happen every year, and the numbers are never consistent unless you go further back."

"Okay," Marie said, taking this all in. "Say I believe you that these storms are just like the ones that hit 97 years ago...I have no idea how to put that into a story. Let alone know how to tackle something like this. Who to warn. I'm in over my head here."

Phin stroked his beard before saying, "I can be there first thing tomorrow."

She snapped her eyes back onto the screen. "What?"

"You need help here, kiddo," he said in a gentle tone. "Two heads are better than one, and there is only so much I can do hundreds of miles away. Let me help, let me show you my research. We can figure this out. I know we can."

Marie didn't know how to respond to that. On one hand, she knew she couldn't do this alone. On the other, what did she know about Phin? He seemed like a nice person, but this whole thing seemed crazy. Her big chance to become a reporter now seemed harder than ever. Still, if there seemed to be any chance he was right...

"Okay," she consented. "But we have to do this quietly. If we can't find anything concrete we won't be able to get anyone to take us seriously."

“Heh, you don’t have to tell me that, Marie, I know how the game is played.” He seemed ecstatic. “You won’t regret this, I know we’ll get to the bottom of it.”

“Remember, Phin,” she said. “This is my career we’re talking about. So we need to be sure.”

The old man took the warning in stride. “Don’t worry, I’m not looking to redeem my reputation. I couldn’t give a damn about that. This is about helping people. I’ll be very careful.”

They said goodbye, and Marie resumed pacing. She hoped she was doing the right thing.

## CHAPTER 10: CONNECTIONS

Another storm occurred the next day. The rain, steady and cold, made walking outside a bitter experience. Every now and then, a small wind would blow low to the ground, which caused part of the rain to fall sideways. It created an illusion of ripples in the air.

Gill folded his umbrella and shook the water off. He walked into the WKEN news station with a lot of doubt. It had been hard enough having a serious conversation with Malcolm about the end of the world. Now, he needed to convince a man he barely knew to help them find the social event without revealing too much. Gill knew no matter what he would say, no one would believe him.

He called Heather to let her know he'd be busy today. When he got her voicemail it said, *Hi, you've reached Heather. Work is boring, and I have tons of homework, so leave me a message after the beep.*

Malcolm was right, those did get to be annoying.

They had less than two weeks to find these "teenagers." Malcolm had recommended they try looking online or looking through newspapers, but Gill worried that would take too much time. They needed to locate someone who had an interest in concerts and other social events. The first person Gill could think of would be a reporter. The newspapers' social coverage came off average at best. Besides Gill already had an in.

They still had no idea what might happen when the countdown finished. Gill just prayed it wasn't really the end of the world. After all, he planned a trip with Heather for next month, and he hoped it was perfect.

*Ugh, he thought. Maybe I should leave the bad jokes to Malcolm.*

He wondered if he was making a mistake. Landers hadn't impressed Gill when they first met, and the idea of having to make nice to ask for his help bothered him more than a little.

The news station bustled with tension. There existed a palpable energy. People walked past Gill chatting to one another about their assignments. Gill had felt this on occasion while at the movie theatre. He wondered if he had been wrong to give up being a journalist. He enjoyed knowing about things before anyone else did.

He reached Landers' office door and tried to appear nonchalant as he tapped against the glass. Landers looked up at Gill with an exaggerated look of surprise and clapped his hands at seeing the man he had only met once at Speedway.

Gill felt uncomfortable that the older man seemed to think so highly of him. Landers opened the door and extended his hand, which Gill shook only for a few seconds before letting go.

"Robertson, nice to see ya again!"

Gill took a seat in front of the producer's desk, cluttered with dozens of time sheets, equipment log books, and story files. The smell of cheap alcohol clung to the air. "Thanks for taking the time to see me."

"No problem." Landers waved away any concern. "How is that brother of yours?"

Gill looked up in alarm. "What do you mean?"

"Ya said he was in the hospital."

Gill relaxed and nodded. "He's doing a lot better actually."

"Glad to hear it!" Lander sat back down behind his desk. "So what can I do for you?"

“Um, well, I’m not really sure where to start,” Gill said rubbing his arm. He knew he should have practiced his spiel before seeing the producer. Still, he had to say something.

“I generally like it when people start at the beginning,” Landers said with a smirk. “I get enough of the inverted pyramid at my day job.” He held his hands out gesturing to the entire office.

“Right, okay, so I am looking for whatever reporter or reporters cover social gatherings. Concerts, musical performances, whatever’s hip these days.”

Landers’ smirk grew more pronounced. He looked at Gill in a pitying manner. “What’s the matter, Gill, you get in trouble with the girlfriend? Need to take her to someplace so she’ll let you have another shot at the promised land?”

Gill’s only reaction to such a statement was to blink a few times before replying, “Uh, sure. Yes, I need to impress my girlfriend, and I figured you could get me in touch with whoever covers these events so that I could, um, impress her.”

The producer narrowed his eyes for a second before shrugging. “Okay, fair enough. Logan Summers is our social event guy. He’s fresh out of college so he focuses on young new bands and all the local venues. Heh, is that everything?”

The younger man breathed a bit easier. He expected Landers to be more curious. It gave him the confidence to ask another question.

He shrugged at Landers and asked, “If I could ask another question, do you know what’s been going on with these weird storms lately? Is NASA finally testing that weather device I’ve heard so much about?”

Malcolm's visions seemed to be related to the weather in some way or another. The day of the first mysterious storm was when his brother experienced the first countdown dream.

He expected Landers to shrug like last time. He did not expect the man to burst out laughing. "What is with you people today and these storms? Gah, you'd think people really did believe in weather machines the way some people have been talking."

Gill perked up and asked, "Has someone been investigating the storms?"

"No one at this station," Landers said. "Well, officially."

"Officially?"

"Our weathergirl, this cute Asian number named Marie...she's been itching to do a story about them. I keep telling her she needs to just stick to her job description. Tell us when it's going to rain. Leave the reporting to the professionals. Just between you and me, we only hired her because she's pretty to look at and having an Asian on the staff looks good on my resume. Girl doesn't have a habit of listening, so I bet ya anything she's been investigating them on her downtime."

It felt so obvious that Gill almost slapped himself. Of course the meteorologist would be looking into these storms. His excitement cooled, however, because someone doing the weather wasn't a journalist. Still, the important thing was someone else had noticed and had looked into it. She might have some answers for him. "Could you get me the contact information for both that Summers guy and the weathergirl?"

"Heh, got a thing for her? I don't blame ya, if her voice didn't grate on my nerves, I'd be right there with ya. However, better be careful about this girl, kid, or else you'll be taking your girlfriend to a lot of shows."

Gill laughed nervously. "I'll be sure to do that. Be careful, I mean."

Landers wrote a pair of numbers down on the back of a business card. "Summers is out doing a few stories. Who the hell knows where Soleil is. But here's their contact info."

Gill took the card and placed it in his wallet. "I really appreciate you helping me out, Landers. I'm just not sure why."

"Don't mention it," the producer said with a shrug. "I got this seventh sense when it comes to people."

"Seventh sense?" Gill scrunched his face up. "What's the sixth?"

"The ability to understand women," Landers deadpanned.

Gill laughed out loud, surprised to find something this man said funny.

"Everyone always thinks I'm kidding when I say that...."

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The weather grew worse the next day. Lightning flashed every minute or so, and thunder chugged along behind it. The clouds were so dark, and very little sunlight filtered through, so the lights in Marie's apartment had been turned on. The rain pelted her windows, but she barely noticed. She paced around her apartment while Phin sat on the couch with Stormy on his lap. He looked comfortable and almost at home.

"Marie, you're worrying too much," he said in a reassuring voice. "We'll see if he has any information."

She picked up Phin at the airport yesterday when she checked her voicemail and saw she'd received a phone call from a Gillcomegain Robertson. The man claimed to be investigating the same storms they were, and said he had information they didn't.

"Maybe we shouldn't have offered to meet him at the apartment," Marie worried. "Who knows who this guy is?"

"Hey, you could have said the same thing about meeting with me," Phin said. "We'll hear what he has to say. He might know something we don't."

Another bolt of lightning flashed outside as Marie nodded. This had been the fifth discussion between the pair in the last twelve hours. It always came back to the gaps in their knowledge. Marie didn't know if they should be so quick to trust someone who offered to help when they needed it most.

"What's that phrase about something being too good to be true?" Marie countered.

Phin nodded in a Zen-like manner. "All right, kiddo, you want to cancel, go ahead."

Someone knocked on the door.

Marie looked back at Phin who shrugged. "Guy's early. Good sign."

She laughed despite her nerves and walked toward the door. She released all the nervous energy she could. Phin was right. She had started this investigation into the storms. She had brought Phin hundreds of miles to a place he probably hadn't even heard of. She had to see this through.

Marie gripped the handle and opened it, revealing a guy around average height with black hair that had a few gray hairs on the sides. She couldn't help but notice he looked almost cute.

“Marie Soleil?” he asked with his hands in his pockets.

“Gill Robertson?” she said.

He nodded.

“You said you had some information for us?”

Gill sat in the lounge chair while Phin and Marie were on the couch. The crystal coffee table between them, both parties remained quiet. Marie checked the black digital clock she had on the wall. She hoped this man might have something more to add than just silence.

“I think something bad is going to happen when these storms finish,” he said in a quiet, careful voice.

Marie and Phin exchanged a look. “Something bad?”

“Yes, I'm not sure what exactly. But whatever it is, it'll show up in about a week and a half.”

“We?” Phin asked.

“Yeah, me and my brother, Malcolm. There's not a lot we can do on our own. We figured I would give whoever I could what information we had and see if we could help.”

Marie wanted to ask “And what is the information,” but Phin asked, “Why a week and a half. That puts it on the 21<sup>st</sup> of the month, right?”

Gill nodded. “Yeah, see this is going to sound crazy but...my brother can see the future.”

At that moment the latest thunderclap rolled by. The rain quieted down for a few moments before returning to its previous speed. Neither Marie nor Phin said anything for a full minute. Marie could almost hear Landers' laugh from here. Gill shifted on the couch. Finally, she groaned and leaned back.

"Of course he can," she said, her voice dripping with venomous sarcasm. "And I can fly, and Phin there fights crime."

Gill smiled uneasily. "Like I said, it sounds crazy...."

"Because it is!"

"Marie," Phin whispered.

"Look, Gill," Marie said in a nicer tone. "I appreciate you coming all this way, but we're really not interested in that sort of news story."

He looked angry but nodded. "Figured as much." He got up and headed toward the door and muttered to himself.

"Wait," Phin said, getting up at the same time.

"Oh come on!" she said.

"I want to hear what you have to say," her friend explained. "This obviously means a lot to you, and looking past what you just said, maybe you have something we can use."

Gill still looked angry over Marie's outright dismissal, but he shrugged and stepped away from the door.

Marie rounded on Phin and gave him a mean look. Her new friend just ignored it and waited for the newcomer to explain what he knew.

Gill launched into a story about how Malcolm had dreamed about something terrible happening, and that there appeared to be a countdown. He explained his reluctance to believe in his brother's abilities himself, and his sincere certainty that unless they stop it a lot of people were going to die.

Marie kept glancing over at Phin. She didn't buy any of this. Death patterns were hard enough...but seeing the future? But her colleague did not take his eyes off of Gill for the entire time he spoke. He narrowed his eyes a few times and that familiar look of hatred crept into his face, but he seemed to be paying rapt attention. Because of this, she stopped herself from interrupting. Then a thought struck her, and she could not be silent any longer.

"I'm sorry, but if Malcolm is the one with the vision, and the one who keeps seeing mysterious storm clouds, why isn't he here explaining this to us? Why are you his messenger?"

Gill's uneasy smile reappeared. "Malcolm can't come and see anyone right now."

"Is he sick?"

A nervous laugh escaped Gill's lip as he said, "Well, he's not really."

Marie rolled her eyes and said, "Then why isn't he here?"

"Uh...he's in a mental hospital."

"Oh my god," Marie slapped her hand against her forehead. She turned toward Phin. "He's in a *mental hospital!* This doesn't help our credibility!"

"Hey!" Gill said. "Malcolm isn't crazy! Just, no one ever believed in him before. We thought he was having these episodes. We didn't know they were something else."

Marie ignored him. “Our chief source is a crazy person. I’m dead. My career is dead.” What kind of hellish Pandora’s box did she open when she answered Phin’s email?

“You know what?” Gill said standing up and walking toward the door again. “I was just trying to help. There’s a good chance something bad is going to happen soon, and if you two didn’t think the same thing, you never would have let me tell you my story in the first place.”

Marie put her head in her hands and tried to remain calm. She wondered how much did Landers’ know? Did he send Gill here just to mess with her? Did he hope she would believe Gill and get herself fired?

“I believe you,” Phin said.

Marie had wondered if she should just quit and find a new job when it dawned on her what Phin had just said. She took a second to absorb this while the rain continued to splatter against the windows.

“Excuse me?” she asked. She had a tone of panic in her voice.

Gill looked just as surprised as Marie. “As much as I don’t want to agree with her, what?”

Phin got up out of his seat and went to refill his drink. “The thing is, Gill, I’ve been called crazy most of my life. And because of that association, I’ve had to deal with a lot of wackjobs in order to get anything accomplished. I know crazy people when I see them. And you’re not one of them. Not sure how or why I believe you, but I do.”

Marie looked at Gill then Phin. Then back again. “Well, I think you’re both crazy.”

“She’s kidding,” Phin reassured him. He turned toward Marie and said, “He can help us.”

“This is a mistake,” she muttered to herself. She looked back at Gill and asked, “What kind of name is ‘Gilcomegain’ anyway?”

“It’s Scottish,” Gill said with a playful tone. “What kind of name is ‘Soleil?’”

“It’s French, it means ‘sun.’”

Gill’s eyes widened, and he took a step back. He then rubbed his hand through his hair and chuckled.

Marie crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes before saying, “What’s so funny?”

Gill just smiled and looked into the cool, blue eyes of Phin. “I think you’re right. We are supposed to work together.”

Phin sat back down and Stormy returned to sit in his lap. Scratching the top of the cat’s head for a few seconds, he finally said, “Let’s show him what we have so far.”

## CHAPTER 11: AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

They spent most of the night talking except when Marie had to go to work. Then Gill and Phin went to a coffee shop and continued the conversation. They had snagged the only booth seat in the establishment. Phin sat sideways with his back against the wall.

The rain continued to pour outside. They had made it to the coffee shop only a few minutes before it got worse.

Despite the rocky start, things had gone better than he had hoped. The sheer scope of what they were dealing with twisted Gill's insides, yet somehow just knowing that he and Malcolm weren't as alone as they thought made him feel better.

Gill still didn't know how to feel about Marie. She seemed smart, driven, and focused on getting to the bottom of these storms, which he could admire. Her outright dismissal of Malcolm's visions got to him, but he really couldn't blame her. After all, last week he had been so sure of this world. A world where there were no such things as prophecies, signs, or portents. Just free will and all the baggage that came with it.

Now? He was trying to save people from being killed by angry, fluffy storm clouds.

“So these storms are like the harbingers of death?”

Phin grabbed his cup of coffee and then took a sip. “Yeah, that's the theory I've been working on for 30 years. This is the most progress I've ever made. Vague as it is. But I knew when I started researching, I'd be in it for the long haul. My father always said ‘nobody ever got rich by doing the right thing.’ I'd like to think I've proved him right. ”

The two shared a laugh. Gill realized at that moment he liked Phin. The old man might look a bit silly, with his bright blue and purple Hawaiian shirt and his Gandalf beard, but he had a good heart.

“Any regrets then?”

“Are you kidding me?” Phin shook his head causing his beard to sway back and forth. “I have more than enough regret to fill both of our lifetimes, man. But like I told Marie, what the three of us are doing here, it’s worth every bit of hardship. If we do nothing, we’re just as responsible for what happens.”

“Yeah, that’s what I told Malcolm.” Gill wondered how he was going to explain this to his brother. He would be jealous he had missed such an important conversation.

Phin opened up the lid to his drink and used a straw to stir the whipped cream.

“So, have anyone special in your life?”

“Heather, my girlfriend.”

“Serious?”

“It’s getting there. Whenever I’m stressed or got a lot to deal with, I can talk to her, I start to feel better. Or where I could be feeling like crap, but she comes into the room, and it all just melts away.”

“Don’t let her go then,” Phin said, flashing a warm smile. “That kind of feeling only happens once in a lifetime. Believe me, I know.”

Embarrassed, Gill turned the question around. “What about you? Married?” He nodded toward the wedding band on Phin’s hand.

“Ah, noticed that did you?” He looked down at it and turned it around a few times. “No, not any more. She died almost thirty years ago.”

Gill shot a compassionate smile his way. "Sorry to hear that."

Phin waved away the words. "A long time ago. She was a hell of a woman, though. You would have liked her. She's what got me into doing all this."

"Storm chasing?" Gill straightened up. "I thought you said it was that friend of yours."

"Claire was part of it, but after my wife died, there came a time when I was forced to realize I didn't know what to do with the rest of my life. Nothing mattered anymore. Not the next bite of food, not the next sip of booze. I crawled in and out of every bottle I could find. And then one day, I realized...I knew what I wanted to do. You see, Gill, talking about my problems didn't help. Sitting on my ass didn't help. I had to do something. I just knew that the next storm, the next bout of weird weather would give me the answers I wanted. So I decided to chase storms."

He took another sip before he added, "I needed to seek them out."

Something in his tone suggested Phin wasn't talking about storms. Gill's mind flashed back to the creatures from Malcolm's visions, but before Gill could ask, Phin got up to go to the bathroom. A few minutes later he came back and resumed sitting sideways.

Gill decided to move on and asked, "I never thought a hundred people would be at risk?"

"It's the largest I've ever heard of."

"Are we certain it's going to be in one place?"

Phin stroked his beard. "Yes, every bit of evidence I've rounded up suggests that those who die are in one place. It makes it harder and easier all at the same time. On one

hand, we don't have to evacuate the whole city. On the other, we'll have a hard time figuring out what's going to be hit.

“Something doesn't make sense, though.”

“Heh, take your pick, man.”

Gill laughed. Malcolm would appreciate Phin's sense of humor. “If you guys are right and the numbers are consistent every 97 years, then there's intelligence behind this. That's too pat a number for it to be random. But the way these people die...” He wanted to broach the subject of Zeph and Dema with Phin, he just wasn't sure how to go about it.

“See, that's what I like about you, Gill, you ask the right questions,” the old man said. “It does sound like there's something behind all this, right?”

“But what?”

Phin seemed lost in thought before adding, “Or who?”

Gill raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing, man,” Phin said in a dismissive tone. “I just get a bit dramatic at times.”

Gill decided not to bring Mal's creatures up. There would be plenty of time to tell Phin everything once he got to know him better.

“Maybe you should ask Heather to go out of town for a couple of weeks. Visit some relatives.”

In truth, Gill had already thought about that. “I'd like her to do that. Gramps, too. But neither of them would go. Heather has some charity thing, she's been talking about for a while. It's after the 21<sup>st</sup> day, so there's no worries there, but she'd never leave. I could never tell Heather about all of this. She'd think I was as crazy as my brother.”

Phin finished his drink and placed it gently on the table. "If she's as special as you say she is, she'll believe you. The special ones always do, man. They always do."

He checked his watch and then started to get up. "I gotta get back to my hotel. You should come by Marie's tomorrow. We'll figure out what to do next there."

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When the three of them met again the next morning, they contacted Logan Summers, the social events guy. By noon they had twenty possible events that could be the target. An hour later, and they had reduced the number to eight. An hour after that there seemed only to be three places that could be hit.

The first was an annual church benefit being held in Hamill Park. It seemed unlikely due to having a small attendance. The second, a foreign film festival, and the third, a book signing by some B-list movie star, looked more attractive.

They devised a number of different ways get each event cancelled, not all of them especially legal. Marie overlooked this; however, it grew more and more difficult. After an hour of brainstorming, Gill suggested they discharge Malcolm.

Marie found that she could tolerate Gill's presence. There were times when he didn't seem all that crazy. This wasn't one of them.

"You want to discharge your brother the mental patient?"

"Marie," Phin rebuked.

"He could help us out," Gill argued. "I wouldn't even have found you guys if not for him."

*And that would have been a shame, Marie thought while rolling her eyes.*

“You make a good point,” Phin conceded. “You have to admit, Marie, we would have had a lot more work to do if he hadn’t joined up with us. Plus if Malcolm has another vision, I’d like to know about it as soon as possible.”

Marie chose to keep her mouth shut. She felt like she had no control over the situation. Phin had taken up a leadership role, and she felt she was no more than a hapless footsoldier. She still had no idea how she could wrangle all of these things into a story.

“I can get him out today,” Gill said. “The paperwork will be hell, but I can do it.”

After they spoke about it some more, he turned to be on his way, but Marie offered to go with him. Phin appeared to be both surprised and impressed.

“I figure I can learn to get along with our newest member, you can get some rest. Feel free to stay here,” she said. Over the last few days the two of them had grown to trust one another more. She knew he wasn’t some crook, and he knew that despite her attitude, she really did care about what they were doing. Phin came across like an uncle, a parental figure you wanted to listen to. Despite her resentment of him taking over, she knew he was the right choice.

“Thank you, kiddo, but I better stay at my hotel. I’ve always preferred them, if I can be honest. I’m a fan of temporary.”

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Phin decided against taking a cab to his hotel. Instead, he walked. He remained thankful that he still had the health and physical fitness to experience moments like this. The rain fell lighter than it had since he first arrived. Less than a drizzle, it almost felt like mist was falling from the sky. The chilly weather didn’t welcome sandals and thin, colorful shirts, but he persevered.

The gray skies overhead churned. Phin knew the clouds would get even lower as they got closer toward the date. He refused to let that fact get him down. His young friends had helped him understand the storms a lot better than he could have hoped. He knew he would have to tell them the truth eventually. He couldn't keep what he had experienced a secret. It wasn't fair to them.

Walking, his mind drifted back to that night thirty years ago. Jennifer had called him a storm chaser. It seemed like a fitting title. It had been one fruitless search after another. Neither of them wanted to admit it, but they had no idea what to even look for. They talked about quitting the next day and chalking Claire's death up to a simple twist of fate. He drove home like he always did, the two of them singing along with the radio.

"This decade's going to kill music," he complained.

"I dunno," she argued, "I think this could be our theme song."

Journey's *Don't Stop Believin'* blared through the speakers. Phin wanted to freeze that moment and place it in a protective crystal so nothing could ever mar or tarnish it. He admired the way his wife's chestnut hair flapped in the wind because he never liked having the windows up. He remembered how her green eyes sparkled whenever she sang. He remembered her voice, off key yet beautiful all at the same time.

He wanted to stop the memory right there, but he never could.

A dense fog had started rolling in. His lights barely penetrated the swirling gray mass in front of them. He should have slowed down, but he was too busy pretending to play lead guitar.

Something slammed against the car hard. Phin thought another vehicle had hit them. He didn't have time to reduce his speed before his car got slammed again, harder this time. They swerved off road and into a ditch. The car toppled upside down.

"Sweetheart!" he yelled. Phin tried to fight the blood rushing to his head and peered over to his wife. Her hair dangled over her face. She seemed like she had been dazed, and she moaned a little.

*What the hell was that?* He tried not to panic, but seeing his wife like that made him desperate to do something.

He almost yelled for her again, but he became aware that someone was outside the car.

"Hello?" No one responded, but the ground outside crunched. "Hello?"

He couldn't hear his own heartbeat; he couldn't hear his wife's shallow breaths beside him. The car didn't creak and no insects chirped beside him.

Then something grabbed their vehicle, and Phin's head snapped against his window. Something ripped the passenger side door off its hinges and threw it away with no effort. He and his wife barely had time to scream before a white arm, many times larger than a man's reached in and yanked his wife out of her seat.

"NO! JENNIFER! NO!"

He thought he saw a glowing light, and then his wife's body fell to the floor. The way her arms were sprawled, he was sure she was dead. He never remembered how he got out of the car. He just remembered holding her and the joy in his heart when he realized she still breathed. He thought he caught a glimpse of something large with wings disappearing into the fog, but he didn't care. All he cared about was what he had in his

arms...let it be a demon or an angel or God himself. Phin didn't care. He held her close and placed his hand into hers. He kissed her on the forehead and prayed she'd be all right and wake up soon.

Then he saw her eyes were open. Living but not alive, she died a couple of days later, as though she had something ripped out of her.

Thinking about his wife's death had been a mistake. Phin brushed it aside and tried to enjoy the rest of his walk.

He reached his hotel in twenty minutes. When he got off the elevator, he decided he would take a nap after all. He needed a chance to chase the demons out of his head.

## CHAPTER 12: THE SERVANT OF THE STORM

It happened again. Malcolm was having the dream where he became someone else. His thoughts, his feelings, everything about him belonged to another person. He was in a motel room, just coming back from walking through town. He felt older, slower. Like a man twice his age. He had a long beard and wore a Hawaiian shirt. Here Malcolm Robertson became someone named Phin.

Phin coughed and said, "I'm sorry, do I know you?"

There were two strangers in his hotel room. One was a man who looked to be around the same age as Phin. He wore a black suit with a buttoned up shirt. The girl standing next to him seemed to be in her early twenties with tan skin.

The older man chuckled and said, "Not formally, no, but I've seen you from time to time. And of course, we've kept track of you all these years. My name is Zephyrinus Molahn."

Phin didn't know how to respond to that question. "I know I'm getting old, but I don't remember having a fan club."

"You do in a way."

"Well, it's nice to know I'm appreciated, but I'm gonna have to ask you to get the hell out of my room before I call the police or hotel security or whoever I have to."

Zephyrinus chuckled. "Perhaps you should do that."

Phin tried to remain calm. "I'm serious, but if you leave now, I'll forget I ever saw you."

“Phineas, we’re not going anywhere. We’re here to talk to you because I feel as though we’ve gotten off to a bad start. And if you cooperate, you might very well leave this room alive.”

Phin processed that last remark. “I’m sorry, what did you just say?”

The old man’s eyes were full of anger. He kept his voice low and quiet, though it sounded congested and watery. “I’ve been planning something for longer that you’ve been alive, Dr. Ferguson, and while I remain ever confident that no amount of human error can get in the way of what will happen, I don’t like loose threads.”

Phin repeated the words in head before he felt his body seize up with fear. He realized whom he was talking to. “You’re with them, aren’t you?”

The man looked toward his female partner while pointing toward Phin. “You see, I told you he was clever!”

“I’m impressed, Zeph,” the girl purred. Zeph turned his attention back to Phin.

“What do you want?” Phin asked. He didn’t run, despite every instinct in his body begging him to. “Why are you here?”

Zeph sniffed the air. “I admit I enjoy the smell of fear. Practically fragrant.”

Yes, I’m afraid,” Phin admitted. He felt no shame in it. “But why are you two here? Why now? I’ve been out of there all this time. Why approach me now?”

“You know,” Zeph began, ignoring Phin’s questions. “I must admit I was wrong, which I assure you doesn’t happen very often.”

“I can vouch for that,” the girl quipped.

“Thank you, Dema. That’ll be all for right now.” Zeph walked to the mini fridge and opened it up. “Ah, alcohol. I expected you to have this overstocked by now. As I recall, you were quite the drinker after your wife’s passing.”

Phin clenched his fist. “I don’t know what the hell you are, but if you mention my wife one more time I’ll—”

“My friend, the only reason we didn’t kill you when you walked into the room was because you have some information we need.” Zeph held up a small bottle. “Mind if I indulge?” Not waiting for an answer, he opened it and drank the contents fast.

“What information are you talking about?”

“I like that you don’t get distracted,” Zeph said. “It’s a weakness in your kind and deeply ingrained in all of your cultures.” Seeing the look Phin was giving him, Zeph continued, “The Culling will be upon us soon, you already know that. I’ve worked very hard to make sure things run smoothly for when the rest of my people arrive. I picked the time, the place, everything. What I didn’t count on was you.”

Phin said nothing. He could tell this thing liked the sound of his own voice too much to care.

“As I said earlier,” Zeph sneered, “I was wrong about you. I thought we had nothing to worry about. No one believed your story about what happened that night. Your attempts to get the scientific community to investigate your death patterns theory never came together. Those of us who walk this world believed we had muzzled you. Broken you.”

Phin scoffed. “I never stopped trying to get the truth out.”

“And no one cared,” came the smug reply. “Not a soul in all the world cared what Phineas Ferguson had to say about storms. And that was lovely.”

“So you’re here to gloat?” Phin looked from Zeph to Dema. He took the blow to his pride in a stoic manner. He had heard far worse. “Tell me I wasted my life, is that it?”

“We don’t like to state the obvious,” Dema smirked.

Zeph chuckled. “The girl has wit, you have to give her that. But she’s right. We’re not here to gloat. Things were running smoothly until someone reached out to you and brought you here. That girl, Marie Soleil. As smart as you, I’d wager. The two of you have been snooping into our Culling. Normally, the course of action for something like this would result in me crushing your windpipe, but I detest violence. I arranged for our little get-together because I want to offer you a chance to spare your life.”

“In exchange for telling you what we know?”

“Picks up fast,” the girl pointed out. “I like this human.”

Zeph raised an eyebrow at Dema before turning his attention back to Phin. “Yes. Come on, Phineas, tell us what you know, and you have my word you won’t be harmed. We’ll even arrange for you to live out the rest of your life in luxury. Want a mansion with an ocean front view? Want your own jet? The only thing deeper than the depths of our generosity is our fury. As you no doubt remember.”

Phin always wondered if he made the creatures that had caused him so much misery nervous. Did his research ever made them want to finish the job they started on that foggy night? He felt something akin to happiness knowing he succeeded.

God, how he had missed that sensation.

“You know,” he stated. “if you had offered me this thirty years ago, I would have said yes in a heartbeat. I would have given anything to forget about storms or death patterns. I would have just lived the rest of my life worshipping my wife, which is the way God intended. But now? After learning what I’ve learned, after seeing firsthand what kind of cruel monsters you are...sorry, pal, not interested.”

Dema smiled while her boss fumed. Phin almost laughed out loud.

“One last chance, Phin, tell us what you’ve learned.”

“Go fuck yourself, Zephyrinus.”

The older of the two intruders growled a surprisingly deep sound, and he seemed to grow a little bit taller. “Very well, Dema, let the record show we offered this man a chance to spare his life, and he rejected it in a rude and vulgar manner.”

“Noted,” the girl said. Phin must have been imagining it, but she looked pleased when he had rejected the offer. Almost like she were proud of him.

So they weren’t all like the old gasbag. That thought comforted him.

“If you’re going to kill me, you might as well get on with it. Otherwise, I gotta go back to planning on how to stop you. Shouldn’t take long.”

Zeph snickered. “You don’t understand, Phineas, I wasn’t just offering you a chance to live. I was offering you a chance to save your new friend.”

Phin’s smile disappeared. “You wouldn’t.”

The creature didn’t even bother to reply to that absurd statement. “If there’s one thing I enjoy it’s consistency. And besides failing to protect the women in your life. I wonder if Marie will scream like she did.”

Without saying a word, Phin launched himself at the thing wearing a human face. Zephyrinus batted him aside as easily as he might a beach ball. Phin hit the wall hard leaving a dent in it.

He didn't stop and refused to let fear slip in. Phin only had one mission at the moment. One care in the entire world. He wanted to cause this creature as much pain and suffering as he would. Age didn't matter. Pain didn't matter. He charged again and threw another punch. It connected on the creature's jaw. Zeph's head snapped back, and he staggered.

Phin didn't stop to gloat. He kept on the attack. But every punch had less power to it. Every swing lost some of its luster. Even righteous fury couldn't stop the cold truth that Phin was in his sixties and not a fighter. In the end, he never ran out of courage, he just ran out of time.

Zeph roared and reached for Phin's throat one handed. He lifted him up without any effort at all. Then he crushed the life out of Phin's body. Phin felt his entire figure seize up and found he couldn't breathe. He no longer had any strength and his body offered no resistance.

Satisfied, Zeph threw his body on the ground and walked out.

Phin knew he should be panicking but all of this felt right. Nothing seemed to bother him as his body began to shut down.

Dema leaned over his dying body. She touched his shoulder and gave a little nod. Perhaps she wanted to honor him. She wasn't like Zephyrinus. This gave him comfort. The last thing that ever would.

Objects became blurry. Thoughts stopped coming. All the world turned white, and the part of Phin that would live forever left the part of him that was destined only to decompose.

*Jennifer, how I've missed you.*

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Malcolm opened his eyes and sat up. He regretted doing so; his “after vision” headache made him feel like his brains were leaking out of his ears. He could feel his nausea getting worse despite his attempts to control it. He kept having the same dream over and over again. Even though he would be asleep for just a few hours at a time, Malcolm would experience the vision a dozen times each cycle. Each time the dream would differ slightly. This time he had been called “Phin.”

He wanted to go on a cursing tirade and get out all of the feelings of confusion he had trapped inside him. But the nice people in the mental healthy facility frowned on that sort of thing. The first night he had the vision, he had screamed, and the orderlies had barged into his room.

He hated not having access to a phone. He wanted to know if Gill had gotten any new information. The worst thing about his situation—the waiting and how he couldn't do anything about it—became intolerable. He needed to do more than just be the vision guy.

*I wish I could leave here and help Gill,* he thought. An orderly walked up and slapped his hands against Malcolm's door. He said, “Yo-Yo Mal, got some good news for you, bro.”

“Georgie's been moved to an institution in Germany?”

“Haha, nah, your brother’s here for you. I overheard him talking to one of the docs. Looks like Christmas is coming early. You’ll be sleeping in your own bed tonight.”

The orderly moved on leaving Malcolm to interpret his words.

*I wish for a million dollars....*

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“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Marie asked Gill for the twelfth time. “I know I don’t know your brother—”

“No, you don’t,” Gill said.

“It’s just I know you and Phin seem to believe he can tell the future, and I’m willing to go along with you two, but you’ve said it yourself...your brother suffers from violent fits. What if he goes off while on the trip back home?”

In truth, Gill had thought about that. He knew there was a chance this could go horribly wrong. Malcolm’s doctor still believed his brother needed a lot of care. Gill decided to trust his brother.

“He needs me to believe in him now,” Gill said. “I’ve kept him in here too long. I should have yanked him out the minute I knew his visions were true.”

Marie didn’t have a reply for that. Gill could tell she had given up trying to talk him out of it. He felt for her, Gill did. She said she wanted to find a story, but all she seemed to find was trouble.

He texted Heather to let her know what he was doing. He knew he’d have to tell her eventually. After he finished, he asked Marie, “Hey, can I ask you a question?” He kept his voice low.

She gave him a curious look before saying, “Shoot.”

“Why are you here? I know you don’t believe in visions and death patterns and things like that. So why are you here? Why haven’t you gone back to giving the weather?”

She stayed silent and considered her answer. Then she said, “You’re right, I don’t believe these storms are a part of some evil conspiracy, and I’m sure there’s a realistic answer to why a certain number of people seem to die mysterious deaths. And I know you love Malcolm, but I don’t believe the future is written for anyone. Call me old fashioned, but I believe in free will.”

“So why are you doing all of this?”

“Because regardless of whether your brother and Phin just happen to be right, I’d sleep a lot better knowing we did something. And if by some miracle they’re right, I don’t want to have to hear Phin say ‘I told you so.’”

Gill snorted and signed the last of the liability forms.

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Marie watched as Malcolm and Gill hugged in the lobby of the mental facility. Malcolm’s hair was a bit longer, and his face seemed a little sharper, but those seemed superficial. The real difference dealt with character. Seeing them next to each other allowed their strengths to shine through. Gill was more thoughtful and strong. Malcolm seemed like a funnier guy but had a vulnerable look to him. Like he was unsure of what to do with himself.

In the short amount of time she had known Gill, she could already tell he was serious but with a playful side. Malcolm seemed the exact opposite.

“Free at last,” Malcolm. “Free at last.”

“You’re looking a little better.” Gill examined his brother’s face. “You’ve been getting your rest?”

“More or less.” Malcolm turned to look at Marie. “Are you Heather?”

Gill put his hand to his forehead and said to Marie, “Heather’s my girlfriend.” To Malcolm he said, “Remember, I described her to you. You wanted to know what she looked like....”

Malcolm nodded. “So, uh, who’s the babe?” He scanned her from top to bottom and then winked at her.

She felt her cheeks blush. “I’m Marie Soleil.” She held her hand out.

Malcolm shook her hand in a slow and deliberate manner. He looked at Gill.

“Brother, why have you brought me a weathergirl?”

*Well, I’m glad someone recognized me, she thought.*

It’s kind of a long story, Mal, but there’s something about her that I thought you should know.” Gill thumbed in her direction. “Her last name is French for ‘Sun.’”

Malcolm’s eyes widened, and he took a step back. Marie remembered Gill had done the same thing. “What?” she asked. “Do you guys have a thing against French Canadians?”

“Nope,” Gill said.

“I think they’re lovely,” Malcolm grinned. He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close for a side hug. “Nice to meet you, Ms. Sun.”

Marie laughed and pulled away from him. “I’ll go wait by the car.” She walked away but not before hearing Malcolm stage whisper, “Tell me she’s into crazy guys.”

It had started raining again by the time they had gotten back to the car. Malcolm looked at the clouds overhead. They had gotten lower. The raindrops splattered against the windows, so much so it became doubtful they could drive. Malcolm worried they'd be stuck in the parking lot of the mental hospital, but the storm quieted down enough for them to leave.

Malcolm sat in the backseat of Gill's Taurus. He had never been in this car before. His brother got it sometime after Malcolm had been admitted. For a few seconds he felt carsick. It'd been a while since he had been in an automobile, after all.

Gill and Marie were talking about the storms and the countdown. Malcolm wanted to pay attention, but the backseats were too comfortable. He nearly fell asleep before he heard Marie say something about calling someone.

"I've been calling his cell for the last half an hour," she said. "He's not answering."

"I'm sure it's nothing."

"It's a little troubling. I haven't known him very long, but he always answers after the first or second ring. I'd just text him, but he really should have called back by now."

"I'm sure Phin's fine."

Malcolm sat up so fast that Gill almost drove the car off the road.

"Jesus, Mal!"

Malcolm ignored him. "Wait, your friend is Phin?"

Gill glanced at Marie before looking back at the road while he drove. "Yeah, you'll like him. He's a nice guy."

Malcolm breathed in and out so he could keep calm. “Is he an old man? In his sixties? Has a wizard beard and Hawaiian shirt?”

Marie and Gill exchanged glances.

“How could you know that?” Marie asked. “Have you met him?”

Malcolm rubbed his arm. “In a manner of speaking.”

Gill looked back at him for a second and asked, “What do you....” He turned back to keep his eyes on the road. Malcolm knew his face was pale.

“What?” Marie adjusted her seat and looked from Malcolm to Gill. When neither said anything she raised her voice. “What?”

Malcolm rubbed his arm again. “I’ve been having these dreams where I’m an old man named Phineas Ferguson. If he really exists...I think you’re right, Marie. I think he’s in a lot of trouble.”

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They arrived at the hotel twenty minutes later. Marie made Malcolm tell her everything he had seen in his vision on the way.

She hoped it was just one big coincidence. Maybe Gill had told Malcolm about Phin at an earlier time. But both brothers denied ever talking about her friend before his evening.

Still, Marie knew that when they got to the hotel they’d find that Phin had just over slept and had his phone on vibrate. He’d be alive and well. Marie almost laughed as they got out of the car. She could imagine the look on the old man’s face when the three of them arrived at his door pounding on his hotel door. The idea that a pair of strangers had killed him seemed, well, crazy.

“My visions are getting weirder,” Malcolm was saying. “I wasn’t just seeing this Phin guy talk to Zeph and Dema. I *was* Phin.”

“Who are . . .” She shook her head and decided not to ask. “Let’s just find Phin and get all of this cleared up.”

They snuck in using a back entrance. Either the hotel had terrible security or they had great luck, because no one noticed them as they got up to Phin’s room. Marie hoped he wouldn’t be too annoyed with them when he woke up.

Gill noticed it first. He pointed toward Phin’s door. It was slightly ajar. The three of them rushed inside.

The hotel room looked a little messy. One of the walls had a small dent in it. In the center was Phin’s body.

Later after they called the police and the paramedics, Marie had to tell the authorities why they had snuck into the hotel. She explained it was just to visit her friend. Amazingly, they bought it. Though they warned her they’d keep in touch.

Marie went over to Gill and Malcolm. Gill had something in his hand. Some kind of book. She recognized it a minute later. “That’s Phin’s journal!”

“I found it. It was taped under a dresser drawer. We took it before anyone else got here while you were in the bathroom making the call.”

“How’d you know it would be there?”

Gill shrugged. “I watch too many spy movies.”

She looked back at the spot where Phin had died. Her eyes found Gill’s, and she gritted her teeth as she said, “Okay, tell me everything. Who are Zeph and Dema and what the hell did they have to do with my friend’s death?”

## CHAPTER 13: T-MINUS...

He gathered his strength and rushed after the kid. He had to find him. He looked up to Ms. Sun, but she had already faded.

Clouds soon formed around the trees. They were very low to the ground. Malcolm never realized how important the kid was to him. How much he needed to protect him from what dangers lurked inside.

He pushed past any exhaustion. Beads of sweat danced their way across his face. He reached the trees and entered. The teenagers were already on their backs. He couldn't save them, he realized. The boy walked among them and pointed to the sky up above.

The clouds descended and nothing was certain save the grey overhead and the green underneath.

“Who could have ever guessed clouds have teeth?” he asked the kid.

“What's done cannot be undone, Malcolm.”

“The sins of tomorrow....”

“There is no tomorrow after today. The end approaches.”

Malcolm did not let this news deter him. “Then tell me why am I here? What is this place?”

“This is where it happens.” The kid motioned around him. “They will come here, and we will all die.”

“No!” Malcolm shouted. “How do I stop it? How do I save you?”

The purple shadows returned. The Servant of the Storm and his student. This time their eyes glowed with a pink fire. They circled the kid and screamed terrible things. A

third figure watched from the fog. She viewed humanity with a detached sense of humor. Laughing at ants trying to fight their betters.

“Stay away from him!” Malcolm charged the first shadow but just went through it. “Leave him alone!”

The figure ignored him and lifted the kid off the ground one handed. It raised its fist, ready to rip into the heart.

“How do you I save you?” Malcolm asked again.

The shadow laughed and put his fist through the boy’s chest. Malcolm screamed and charged once again. He begged he wasn’t too late. As he got closer to them he felt as though he were being pulled back. Despite him leaving the Preferred Reality, he heard only the thinnest whisper.

“You make a choice and then act on it, silly.”

“Malcolm?”

He jerked awake and rubbed his head. A javelin had been thrust through his skull, he was sure of it.

“Hey, Gill,” Malcolm said, fighting the urge to throw up. “Is it morning already?”

His brother gave him one of his patented “concerned sibling” looks, but Malcolm just dismissed it. “I’m fine. Just another vision.”

Gill didn’t let him get away with it. “What did you see?”

Malcolm groaned. “Come on, bro, let me get a moment to collect myself.”

His brother didn’t fall for it. “It was bad, wasn’t it?”

Malcolm hated that his brother knew him so well. He had for years but especially in the last week. They were in the living room, which Malcolm used as his bedroom. He

had spent too many days of his life cooped up in a room with a bed. The couch hurt to sleep on, and he woke up a lot during the night for fear of falling on the floor, but it felt great to be home. Gramps seemed to have de-aged by a good decade now that Malcolm was back.

His visions only came when he slept now. He guessed it had to do with being out of the institution, though there could be no way of knowing.

“Malcolm?” Gill leaned in closer to look him right in the eye. “Was it bad?”

“It was bad,” he said without giving any more detail. “We’re running out of time, today’s the day.”

It had been a week since Phin’s death, the brothers had worked with Marie to figure out what location would be a target. Marie had taken his death the hardest, but everyone expected that. He had been a mentor to her, and he seemed to have believed in her. Malcolm knew the effect that had. Besides, she wanted to cause pain to whoever had killed Phin. If they stopped this event from happening, then maybe she could start to heal.

Gill distracted himself from the grief by obsessing over any detail he could find in Phin’s notes. Nothing seemed too small or inconsequential. Phin had not told them everything, and that appeared to hurt Gill worse than the murder. Malcolm wasn’t sure how, but Phin knew about the creatures he kept seeing in his visions. If his vision of Phin’s death didn’t prove it, the notes certainly did. He had records on sightings, how they featured in all sorts of mythologies, and even speculated that they could assume human form. Phin had even suggested that some of them walked the earth to prepare for the mass killings. Vanguard, he called them.

Malcolm, who could see the future, thought this sounded insane. He believed it with all of his heart, but that didn't make it sound any less crazy. But neither Marie nor Gill seemed disturbed by Phin's facts. They now believed with all of their hearts, too.

"He hinted at it so many times," Gill had said to Malcolm. "That night I had coffee with him...he practically spelled it out for me."

"Why didn't he just tell you?"

"He thought we'd think he was crazy."

"Really? Saying 'I think evil cloud monsters are going to kill people for shits and giggles' sounds pretty sane to me," Malcolm had joked. "Mind you, I did just get out of a mental health facility...."

"Funny," Gill snarled. "Just remember he believed me when I said I had a twin who had visions."

Malcolm hated feeling guilty.

Gill returned to the notes, his devotion putting a cold chill through Malcolm's body. He had never seen his brother so committed to something. He worried about him; Gill never seemed to sleep anymore.

Today, however, they tried following the progress of each event. The church function had been cancelled due to the weather. The film festival showed one film late in the evening, which confused Malcolm. Either way, the three of them had decided to focus their attention on the book signing, which started at 2p.m.

Despite Marie being at her apartment, the twins spent their time going over strategies. The minute anything weird or unusual seemed to happen one of them would

pull the fire alarm. The other would shepherd the people out of the building. It felt like an easy solution.

Too easy.

“I think we’re overlooking something,” Malcolm said for the tenth time.

Through gritted teeth, Gill said, “I’ve been looking over all the notes, and I think we’re good to go.”

“Are you sure that these things only go after people in large groups?”

“Phin believed these guys have some sort of big ritual every 97 years,” Gill explained, also for the tenth time. “They take them all at once.”

Gill could be snooty sometimes. It really pissed Malcolm off. “Okay, then what about that Ted Rodgers guy? You guys think they killed him, and he was all by himself.”

His twin shook his head before Phin had even finished. “They occasionally go after a person or small group here or there.”

Malcolm threw his hands up in the air. “Looks like you have all the answers. Except about what the hell they are and how they do what they do. And don’t tell me it’s because of magic, or I’ll have to slap you.”

Gill cracked a smile. “I’ve missed having you around, Mal.”

“I don’t blame you,” Malcolm joked. “I just think that we’re looking in the wrong place. These visions I keep having, whatever happens is outside by trees. It’s not going to be in a department store.”

“These are the only options we have,” his brother pointed out. “The only place where that many people would be around trees is Hamill Park and the church function is cancelled remember?”

They dropped the subject and started getting ready for the drive over to the bookstore. Someone knocked on the door.

Malcolm rushed to answer it, hoping it might be Marie Soleil. Instead, Heather stood in the doorway. Gill had tried to talk her into visiting a relative until after the 21<sup>st</sup>, but she had refused and started asking a lot of understandable questions. Malcolm had only met her once since coming back, but she seemed like a nice girl. He remembered when he introduced himself by saying, “Hi, I’m Malcolm. I’m the evil twin.” Gill had wanted to kill him.

Heather’s nervous smile suggested she feared another awkward greeting, but Malcolm spared her. He turned around and yelled for his brother, but not without wondering why she was here. From Gill’s confused expression he must have been wondering the same thing.

“Are you ready?” she asked him.

*Uh oh*, Malcolm thought.

“For what?” Gill blinked in ignorance.

“I’ve texted you for the last two hours! The concert is today!”

Gill looked over at Malcolm for support. His twin shrugged and backed away. He knew a lost cause when he saw one.

“The concert’s this weekend,” Gill pointed out. “I checked this out weeks in advance.”

“What concert?” Malcolm dared to ask.

“Poetic Monkey is putting on a concert for the needy in Hamill Park this afternoon. My church booked them.”

“Poetic Monkey?” Malcolm tried to keep a straight face at their name. Tried.

“They’re this band that had a couple of hits that Heather’s charity place booked for some kind of benefit,” Gill explained. “I don’t like them, but they might bring more people.”

“Don’t you think that should have been on the list?” Malcolm asked in an aggravated tone.

“What list?” Heather turned toward her boyfriend.

“It’s nothing,” Gill lied. “And I just said, it was supposed to be this weekend. Why isn’t it this weekend?”

“Have you checked none of your messages?” Heather said. When Gill gave a sheepish smile, she moaned and said, “Yesterday, this guy with a funny name pledged us half a million dollars if we moved the concert to today. He even paid to have the band shipped here and everything. It’s bad enough that we haven’t gotten the word out to everyone. I’m just a volunteer, but I’m expected to be in Hamill Park, and I wanted to bring my soon to be ex-boyfriend!”

The twins exchanged a dark look.

“Son-of-a-bitch!” Malcolm hollered.

“The church cancelled yesterday,” Gill said in a monotone. “Damn it, we picked the wrong place!”

“What are you guys talking about?”

Malcolm shushed her. Heather looked scandalized, but he ignored her and focused on his brother. “Let’s call Marie. She’ll be at the book signing by now.”

“I’m sorry,” Heather said, putting her hands on her hip. “Gill, who is Marie?”

Her boyfriend didn't answer her and got out his smart phone to make the call. After a few rings, Marie answered. He put her on speaker.

"Marie, listen, we think we have a problem." He didn't wait for her to ask questions and quickly explained the situation to her. "When you read that story from a hundred years ago, where did you say the flu victims were found?"

"A field right outside of the city," Marie informed them. "Guys, I'm not sure I understand—"

"No," Gill interrupted her. "You wouldn't. No one would remember, but the city's expanded since then. That field's now a part of Hamill Park!"

"How do you know that?" Malcolm asked.

"Phin's notes!" Marie said.

Gill confirmed it with a simple "Yep."

"Okay, I'm going to get out of here," Marie said. "You two meet me at Hamill Park!"

"She's cute when she's bossy," Malcolm joked.

"I heard that!"

Gill ended the call and the brothers headed toward the door only to find Heather still standing in the doorway.

"Um, Gill, what the hell is going on?"

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Gill looked toward Malcolm for support.

"Oh, no," his brother raised his hands up. "I stay out of all wars both foreign and domestic."

Gill was going to have to stop doing that. “Sweetheart, Malcolm and I have to get to that concert.”

“To meet up with Marie,” Heather said. Her tone suggested she wasn’t happy about that fact.

“Yes, but it’s not what you think.”

“Sounds like you and Marie know each other pretty well. Why haven’t you mentioned her to me before?”

Malcolm muttered behind Gill, “Great, a hundred people are going to die because your girlfriend’s jealous.”

Gill closed his eyes and kept his frustration at bay. “She’s a friend of ours and for reasons I can’t tell you, we have to go meet her at Hamill Park and get to that concert.”

“Fine,” she said. “But I’m going with you.”

“Heather, that’s not going to happen....”

Heather’s green eyes flashed and her face began to match her hair. “What.” He knew in his heart that he had made the single biggest mistake of his life at that moment.

Gill giggled nervously. “It’s just that...if I told you the whole truth you wouldn’t believe me. But you have to stay here and watch Gramps while we go.”

“Excuse me? I’m your girlfriend, not a nurse.”

Gill closed his eyes again and thought about what to do next. He considered yelling, but that wasn’t his way. Heather didn’t deserve that, regardless. She had been very patient while he retreated into researching the storms. She wanted answers, but he doubted even she would believe any of it.

Then he remembered Phin’s advice about trusting her.

Gill knew what he had to do now. Heather would never agree to stay unless he explained the truth to her. His insides churned knowing what they were up against. They were running out of time.

“Malcolm,” he said in a low voice. “I need you to go on ahead and meet with Marie.”

“Long walk to Hamill, bro.”

Gill sighed. He regretted it already. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his keys. Malcolm’s eyes lit up like it was Christmas.

“You mean it?”

“Just be careful.”

Heather’s anger vanished, and she looked almost frightened when she asked, “Should he be allowed to drive?”

The twins shrugged at the same time. Malcolm grabbed the keys and moved past the two of them. The smile on his face could have rivaled the Joker’s. “Hey, relax,” he said with a smirk. “It’s not like it’s the end of the world or anything.”

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Malcolm couldn’t remember the last time he had been behind the wheel of a car. When his sickness had first manifested, his driving privileges had been the first thing to go.

After just a few minutes in the driver’s seat, Malcolm got comfortable. It all flooded back to him. The wonderful smell of pine car freshener. The feel of the leather steering wheel against his flesh. The sheer joy that came when he drove ten miles over the speed limit and ignored the basic rules of traffic like stop signs and red lights.

A few cars honked their horns at him, and he noticed the city had started putting traffic cameras up, but he didn't allow himself to worry about any of that. He'd pay for a thousand tickets if he could just get to Hamill Park in time.

The sky looked worse than ever. Thunderclaps grew so loud Malcolm worried the car windows would shatter. The clouds in the direction of Hamill were black like burnt toast. Any minute now and rain would come.

Malcolm knew in his gut there wasn't much time left. He arrived at Hamill, but there wasn't an easy place to park. The guest parking lot was filled with a lot of cars.

*Forgive me, Gilcomegain,* he thought. *I know exactly what I'm about to do.*

He jumped the curb and a few bystanders ran for their lives.

"Are you crazy?" one guy bellowed.

"That's the consenting opinion, yes." He parked in the grass by the closest maroon picnic bench. He leapt out of the car and started running. Malcolm remembered too late that Gill hadn't given Malcolm his cellphone. He had no way to find Marie except by fate, and that seemed to be against them at the moment.

A little boy about ten years' old ran past him. The cold touch of destiny slapped Malcolm across the face. This felt familiar. To his surprise, he felt at peace.

*Here we go.*

He decided he should follow the boy and as soon as he did, Malcolm heard music being played. Being cooped up in a mental facility had robbed Malcolm of his vitality. Not even thirty, he ran like a man twice his age. Within a minute, he gasped for his breath and fire roared through his legs and sides. He watched the boy disappear past a small hill.

Malcolm climbed up using his hands and feet. He hoped the dirty hands were worth it. The last twenty days had left the hill muddy. When he got to the top, he saw the boy run past some Hamill Park banners. They were brown flags with white trees in the center, and they formed a circle around the park's amphitheater. They danced in the wind like they were in tune with the music.

In the center of the circle, a band performed to a crowd of roughly a hundred. Parents, children, and teenagers were cheering the band on. Some were sitting on patio chairs, some were standing, and others sat on the ground. The band had lights set up that flashed blue, red, and green before switching to yellow, orange, and purple.

Malcolm caught his breath and began to run downhill toward the concert. The wind picked up, and it felt like it pushed him to run at a greater speed. He realized he would never run that fast again. He feared he would slide in the mud, but he kept his footing. In less than thirty seconds he rushed past the banners. He didn't hesitate, but he ran straight down the middle. He did his best not to mow anyone over. Malcolm reached the band and interrupted their song. The concertgoers screamed, bellowed, and roared at him, the lead singer said, "Hey, man, what the hell?" Malcolm ignored him and grabbed the live microphone.

"Everyone, you have to get out of here now! There's...a...well, there's something coming and if I told you what it was, you wouldn't believe me. But if we don't all get out of here, we are all going to die horrible deaths!"

Some people in the crowd muttered, "What is he talking about?" "Is this part of the show?" He thought he even heard someone shout, "Freebird."

"No, seriously, LEAVE!" He made a "shooing" motion with his hands.

The leader singer of Poetic Monkey, a Hispanic man with long dark hair with green streaks running throughout, grabbed the microphone back from Malcolm and said, “Uh, sometimes our shows bring out the crazies, ladies and gentlemen.” Most of the audience laughed. The singer put his hand over the microphone and whispered, “This is the best gig we’ve had in a while, man, so get your ass off the stage.”

Malcolm grabbed the microphone back and cried, “I am not trying to panic anyone, but YOU ARE ALL GOING TO DIE!”

The audience members started muttering again but still stayed where they were.

The lead singer motioned for some people wearing security shirts to help him, and they wrestled the microphone away from Malcolm and dragged him off stage to the cheers of the crowd.

Malcolm stomached boiled with disappointment. He realized he had failed, and he didn’t understand why. This was what he was supposed to do, wasn’t it? Wasn’t he supposed to save the day? So why? His visions showed him this. Why lead him here if he couldn’t change a damn thing?

“What kind of low rent organization is this?” the lead singer muttered. He brought the microphone up to his face and said, “Sorry about that, folks, but I say let’s dedicate this next song to the douchebag psycho!”

The crowd broke out into a round of applause, and the band started playing again.

“You don’t understand,” Malcolm screamed. “We have to go! Now, all of us!”

“Only one who’s leaving is you, brother,” an overweight security man said.

“You’re lucky we don’t call the cops.”

They tossed Malcolm into the mud, and he slid a couple of feet. His hands were now covered in dirt and mud. The cool air made him shiver. He slid again trying to get to his feet.

“I am trying to save you idiots!” Malcolm ran after security but didn’t make it very far before he slid and fell on his face. Again he felt that keen sting of failure. Why was this happening?

He rolled over on his back, and he cursed the fact that nothing came easy. *I hate being a hero. Makes me pine for the days when I had a cell with padded walls to call home.*

That’s when he saw it. The clouds overhead rolled over one another. They churned like waves at sea. They looked even darker now. The clouds descended, far faster than they should. By the time Malcolm got to his feet, the clouds had reached the trees. A few seconds later...and he was surrounded by a swirling fog. He saw only gray around him, and dull green grass beneath him.

It felt like he had been swallowed by some great beast.

Malcolm said, “Who could have ever guessed...”

## CHAPTER 14: CLOUDS HAVE TEETH

Gill didn't have time to tell Heather everything, but as soon as Malcolm left, he decided to give her the Cliffsnotes.

"There are some things I haven't told you," he said.

"That much is obvious."

Gill had never seen her look so angry. "Heather, I didn't tell you all of this because I didn't want to put you in danger."

She scrunched her face up in confusion. "Danger?"

He launched into his story and didn't stop to answer any questions. He explained about how Malcolm's visions came true during their dinner date. He explained how they felt the recent series of storms signaled something ominous. He explained about meeting Marie and Phin and how he had learned about the death patterns.

"So you think these storms pop up ever hundred years?"

"97."

"And you believe Malcolm saw all of this in his head? Like a Jedi?"

"Yeah. And I didn't want to get you involved. There are...people behind these storms, Heather. Dangerous, evil people. You know the Phin guy I told you about?"

"What about him?"

"They killed him a week ago. If Marie, Malcolm, and I had been there, they might have killed us, too."

Heather sat down on the couch and covered her mouth with her hand. "Do you know what you sound like?"

He sat down on the couch with her. “Yeah. I do. But I know it’s the truth. I know Malcolm can see the future, and I—I know that if I don’t get down to Hamill Park people are going to die.”

“Okay, if you think someone killed Phin, why don’t you just call the police?”

“And tell them what? You don’t believe me, why should they?”

“I didn’t say I don’t believe you,” she muttered. She ran her fingers through her hair. “This is just a lot to take in.”

He put his arm around her and pulled her in for a hug. “I know, Heather. I’m sorry I can’t tell you more. I promise that as soon as this is all over, I’ll tell you everything. I just need you to stay with Gramps and stay inside. Can you do that for me?”

“Why do I always fall for the crazy guys?” Her way of saying “yes.”

He kissed her on the cheek.

“Thank you so much, sweetheart,” he said. He got up off the couch and grabbed his coat. He felt something in his left pocket and realized he had forgotten to give Malcolm his cellphone.

He turned back to look at Heather one last time.

“I still don’t see why it has to be you.”

He shrugged. “The Brothers Robertson made a pact to look after each other.”

She got up and hugged him. “Just be careful, okay? You’re insane, and you’ll probably embarrass the hell out of me in front of my charity friends, but be careful. I kinda like having you around in one piece.”

He smiled. “Yes, ma’am.”

He reached for his keys out of habit before he remembered. He grinned sheepishly at his girlfriend. “Um...I have one more favor to ask....”

Heather raised an eyebrow at him.

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Five minutes later, he was in Heather’s cherry red Mustang. He had always imagined driving it ever since she first got it a few months ago, but he didn’t have time to cherish it now.

Gill called Marie to let her know that Malcolm was already at Hamill and learned she had gotten stuck in traffic. There were thunderclaps every minute. Each one sounded louder than the last. Occasionally, he saw a flash of lighting, but no rain. He turned the radio on so he could listen to any news.

“Wow, people, don’t go to Hamill Park anytime soon,” someone on the radio said. “We got a lot of crazy calls about some weird fog surrounding the place. C-can you believe this, Eddie?”

“Nah, man,” Eddie replied. “This is end of days crap right there, man.”

“The Poetic Monkeys were playing there today. I think they were still playing their set when the fog rolled in. We’ll try to keep you updated with the latest news. Um, I guess we should get back to playing today’s top twenty. Next up with their smash hit ‘Blood’s in the Water,’ here’s—”

Gill turned off the radio and tried to find the quickest route to Hamill. There was too much congested traffic, which meant he could forget about getting an available parking space close by. He settled for parking a few blocks away and ran as fast as he

could. People were gathering outside of their homes and running to the park. He heard sirens, people on bullhorns, and scattered conversations of confused citizens.

“What the hell is that thing?”

“Daddy...what’s going...”

“Is Susan in that thing?”

“Allah protect us.”

“Jesus Christ...”

“Never saw anything like that before...”

“Is it the Rapture?”

“Nah, I think it’s al-Qaeda.”

Gill finally turned the corner and saw Hamill Park. He froze on the spot. The entire park, almost as far as he could see in any direction, had been swallowed up with fog. It swirled with patterns of black and gray. It was as if the thunderclouds had decided to devour Hamill and everyone inside it.

Was Malcolm already inside?

That thought woke Gill up, and he checked his phone to see if Marie had called. How many people had already died inside the fog? Was he too late?

Hundreds of people were gathered in front of Hamill two dozen feet or so in front of the fog. Cops were everywhere setting up barricades and telling the spectators to get back. Fire engines and cop cars had their lights on. Several television reporters were present asking the chief of police any questions they could. Gill thought he could make out Landers smoking a cigar and writing down responses on his notepad.

Gill shuffled through the crowd. It felt like moving in a thick jungle bush. The further he got, the more the bodies seemed to press against him. He got a lot of dark glances and muttered threats and curses, but he continued on. Gill checked his phone and texted Marie. He called her once or twice, but only got her voice mail. He kept himself from panicking by remembering that it helped no one.

“Excuse me,” he said, pushing past some more people. “Please, I got a brother inside!” He ignored the words of those around him his only focus was on finding Marie. Maybe she had found something out?

Gill began to lose hope, until he saw Marie waving her arms at him. “I’m over here!” She was standing by a less crowded area. It took some doing, but he managed an escape and found his way to her.

“Have you heard anything? Did you find Malcolm?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Maybe he’s not in there. He might have gotten out.”

“No. He wouldn’t have left. Malcolm would have stayed inside. He would have wanted to get as many people out as possible.”

“How do you know?”

He sighed. “Cause I know my brother. You can always count on Malcolm to do the least sane thing.”

Marie nodded and then gestured to the fog. “I’ve never seen anything like this before. Never. So what do we do now?”

Gill resisted the urge to shrug. Why was it up to him all of a sudden? “You’re the expert.”

“You’re his brother.”

Gill didn’t have a response for that. He turned his attention back at the crowd. Some were crying, others were holding their loved ones. A few people were even laughing, as though this were some sort of game.

When he saw the crowd of people, really saw them, he felt the full weight of his responsibility. They had failed. Despite all their planning and all their research, they could not stop this moment from happening. For all they knew, a hundred people were already dead.

Gill refused to let Malcolm be one of them. Somewhere in that abyss was his brother, and right now Gill needed to know what he could do, if anything

“I have to go in,” Gill said. “Malcolm’s inside that thing.”

“But—”

“I don’t have time to debate this with you. I’m going in.”

Marie rolled her eyes at his attitude. “We have to come up with a plan. The police are here. We can talk to them and get them to help.”

Gill disagreed and said, “We still don’t have any proof. Right now people may be dead or dying. We don’t have—”

“Time, yes, I know, Gill. I know you’re worried about Malcolm, I am, too, but we can’t just run in there!”

His eyes widened. “We?”

“Like I would let you go in there alone!” She shook her head at him. “We go together or not at all.”

“You could warn the police while I go looking for him.”

She gave a sad little laugh. “And leave you in there all alone? Not happening.”

Gill struggled to find a way to convince her not to come with him. He knew he couldn't stay outside and leave Malcolm to his fate. And he knew he didn't want Marie to get hurt because of him.

“I can't win can I?” he asked, hoping she might be bluffing. He focused on the barricade in front of the fog, and the lone police officer guarding it. They would have to be quick.

She clenched her fist and laughed again. “Nope.”

He sighed and added, “You can still join the reporters and get on the air in time for the evening news.”

“I'm tempted,” she said. “But if Phin were here he'd say ‘There are more important things in life, kiddo.’ Let's go get your brother. Pain though he is.”

They exchanged glances and shared a smile. Gill readied himself to run.

“Well this is just sickening,” a voice said behind them. The pair turned around to see an older man dressed in a black and white suit with a younger brown-skinned girl next to him.

Gill felt himself turn pale. Their descriptions matched the people from Malcolm's visions.

“Who are you?” Marie asked.

The man bowed in a mocking fashion.

“Zephyrinus,” Gill said.

Marie did a double take while the man in front of him narrowed his eyes.

“How do you know that name?”

When Gill and Marie stayed silent, he waved his hand in a dismissive manner. “No bother. Keep your little mysteries. But understand that if you and your charming little woman go inside the fog, I’m going to kill you.

Gill had never had someone say that to him and mean it. “What?”

“You heard me,” the man said. “I can see the little gears in your head struggling to understand. Here you are deluding yourself into thinking you’re being heroic. You can’t save the people in that fog any more than you prevented us from gathering. It has been fun watching you two stumble along, though. So thanks for that.”

“You’re one of the people that killed Phin, aren’t you?” Marie said, her eyes full of hatred. Gill admired her bravery. He felt a twinge of panic as he struggled to comprehend what the pair in front of him represented.

“No,” Zephyrinus smiled. “I am not *one* of the people... I am *the* one. I grabbed him with this hand.” He lifted his left arm. “And I crushed his throat as easily as one crushes a paper cup. You should have heard him beg for his life. Quite sad, really.”

Marie almost launched herself at Zephyrinus, but Gill pulled her back. “He’s trying to provoke you.” He turned toward the creature. “You’re a vanguard, aren’t you? You and your friend.” He pointed at the girl. “Phin left notes on you. He said your kind always left a pair around to make sure things went according to plan.”

Zephyrinus applauded. “I’m impressed you can read, Gilcomegain Robertson. Yes, I know your name, too. But I’m afraid his notes won’t protect you when I rip out your spine.” The man took one step forward.

“What about the rules?” Zephyrinus’ partner asked, suddenly. The older one growled and looked back at her. “No one can be killed today except those inside.”

Zephyrinus looked like he wanted to dispute that. He shot Gill a nasty look and Gill could have sworn for a second his eyes became bright pink. The man forced out a grin and said, "Fair enough. I can't stop you, Gilcomegain, but I can offer you a warning. The Culling is our most sacred ritual. No one may interfere once it has started. The only hope your brother has is he was inside when the ritual began. If you go into the fog now, you'll both be punished to the extent that you will *beg* for your deaths. Stay where you are, and no harm will come to you. I'll even promise you that your brother will not be harmed. What are the lives of strangers worth, when compared to you and your brother's?"

Gill almost gave in. Everything that had happened these last few weeks had been so far beyond what he could understand. Then he wondered what his grandfather would think of him. What Heather would think...if she knew he had let a hundred people die without trying to help.

He turned around and faced the mist. Marie did the same. They broke into a run the minute the cop's back was turned and disappeared into the fog.

## CHAPTER 15: RULES WERE MEANT...

Gill and Marie entered and found themselves in a world they did not recognize. The chilly air caused them to see their own breath. The grass beneath their feet looked gray and lifeless. The fog swirled around them and between them and above them. It was as if they were trapped in a box that shrank and grew at the same time.

Gill felt nauseated and could barely walk. He had to stop every few seconds just to get his bearings. He looked over to Marie. She seemed to be having the same problems he did.

Both of them spoke only in whispers. The fear of the unknown settled in and infected every pore of their bodies. Gill wondered if he should call out for his brother, but every time he wanted to, he felt a stab of terror run through his heart, and he fell silent.

Gill wanted to be brave, for Marie's sake, but he shouldn't have bothered. Looking at her, he could see she was scared, but she wore a determined expression. Nothing would keep her from this.

A few minutes later and Gill stumbled over something and landed on his hands. The impact sent ripples of pain up and down his arms. The grass felt wet and made him even colder, if that were even possible. He turned back to see what he had tripped over.

On the grass, arms and legs sprawled out, was the body of a young man in his late teens. Marie gasped and knelt down. His chest moved up and down, but his face looked like he had been cut off mid scream. His eyes were wide but vacant. Gill wanted to say something, but no words came. His hands trembled as he reached and closed the young man's eyes. Gill knew the man would never see anything ever again.

"Do you think we're too late?" Gill whispered after forcing himself to do so.

“No,” Marie said.

As if to prove her right, a scream sounded not too far from where the two of them were at. The fog seemed less oppressive here. They could trot and not feel like they were floating.

The scream came again, and this time Gill’s heart exploded in an intense combination of fear and joy. He recognized the voice.

Malcolm.

Gill called out to his brother, and Marie did the same. No answer. Gill didn’t care. He called out to his brother again and again.

“Gill?” his brother’s voice rang out. “Gill?” Then Malcolm ran out of the fog and the two leapt toward one another and embraced. The Robertson Brothers were together again, and Gill wanted nothing else but to turn around and leave right then.

“Malcolm, are you all right?” she hugged him close.

“What the hell are you two doing here?” His brother looked so pale he almost blended into the fog. He was breathing in short, raspy breaths.

“We came to save your sorry butt,” Gill teased. He looked around. “We were afraid they had done something to you.” His heart refused to calm down. They had found each other in this dense, foggy nightmare, but Gill’s heart sank when he realized this had been the easy part. Now they had to find their way out.

“You guys shouldn’t come in here,” Malcolm said. “I’ve seen them, Gill. I’ve seen what they look like, what they really look like. You—you have no idea. They’re these giant...I mean they have...they’re...”

“Hey,” Marie said, grabbing his arm. “It’ll be all right, Malcolm. We’re going to find our way out of this fog, and then we’re all going home.”

Malcolm didn’t appear convinced. Neither did Gill.

“Mal, we have to ask you...do you know if anyone else is still alive?”

Malcolm shook his head. “They got them all, Gill.” He sounded crushed. “I’ve searched and searched. Everyone’s dead. Or at least will be. They’re on the ground staring at the sky. Every single one of them. And it’s our fault. We...we couldn’t save them.”

Gill just blinked. That’s all he could handle doing at the moment. He had held onto the hope that it would have all been worth it. That after everything, they had managed to save someone. He wasn’t even sure they could save themselves.

He heard a scraping sound then, like something heavy being dragged over the ground. Gill thought back to the time he and his family had gone to the zoo. He and Malcolm could not have been more than nine. He remembered going into the snake exhibit and seeing a python slither away into a dark hole.

The sound he heard now triggered the same feeling of disgust. Something just beyond their sight slithered by them. None of them dared to breathe, and Gill thought he might pass out if he didn’t inhale soon.

The fog cleared, but there was nothing there. Whatever the sound was, it must have been some trick the fog was playing on them. Gill felt relieved...until he saw Malcolm.

His brother continued gestured at the clearing. “Creatures tall and slithery,” he said in a whisper. His voice sounded hollow. “With scales just a few shades darker than

the white of the mist. The only color you can see is the twin fires of pink light they have for their eyes. They promise only two fates, death and something far worse. Mercy is as foreign to them as fear.”

“Mal, are you okay?”

His brother lowered his hand and slumped his shoulders. “You don’t see them, do you?”

“See what?”

“What the creatures really look like. I didn’t think you would. Their heads are a lot larger than ours. And they have a sinewy neck, like a serpent’s. Their arms are large and powerful. I think they could lift a truck and throw it. And they have wings...large, leathery wings. And you see those little trails in the grass there?” He pointed at one.

“That’s where the scraping sound comes from. They don’t have legs, just the lower body of a snake.”

Marie and Gill moved their heads back and forth afraid they’d see the same thing. Gill thought he saw an outline of something far away, but the fog swallowed it up before he could get a better look.

“Don’t bother,” Malcolm informed them. “It’s moved on. I don’t think it saw us.”

“I’m sorry,” Marie said. “Are you telling me they’re...I mean, they’re dragons?” She sounded silly just saying it out loud.

“That’s impossible!”

Malcolm just gestured all around them at the fog. “Have you noticed where we are? Anyway, I’m not sure what they are. My ‘vision’ sense is all jacked up. I keep going

in and out. I can't tell if I'm really seeing monsters from the id or if I'm really talking to you two."

Gill wanted to sit down but motioned for his brother and Marie to follow him.

"We have to keep moving."

No sooner had he said the words then he stood frozen as he noticed a pair of pinkish lights among the fog. Malcolm froze, too. Marie must not have seen them, for she asked, "What's wrong?"

"Gill?" his brother asked.

"Yeah, bro. I can see it, too."

"Guys? We need to be moving." Marie shook Gill, but he couldn't look away from the light.

The eyes, for that's what they were, came toward them. The slithering sound continued, and Gill noticed the eyes were lowering bit by bit. Closer and closer the pair of eyes came, but none of them could move. The fear sapped all of their energy.

Gill felt like he was trapped on railroad tracks. He wanted to move. He wanted to run, but no matter how many times he told his body what to do, he remained frozen in near terror.

The eyes lowered still and when the thing stood no more than ten feet away, the eyes were level with Gill and Malcolm. They braced themselves, expecting some kind of fairy tale monster to snap out at them.

Instead, out of the mist came the most beautiful woman Gill could possibly imagine. Her skin was white like freshly fallen snow or salt. Her hair fell long upon her shoulders and was black like a starless night. She wore a white gown that shifted and

swirled like the mist around her. Her eyes kept the pinkish hue, and she looked at them with an almost regal air.

“Why are you here?” she asked Gill directly. “Why have you come?”

Gill swallowed and spoke. “We came for my brother.”

The woman came closer but never took her eyes off of Gill. He couldn’t seem to think while under her gaze. He felt like she could see into his mind and know all there was to him without needing to ask.

“You were told not to come here,” the woman pointed out. “Zephyrinus warned you about the dire circumstances you would face. We keep our word, Gilcomegain.”

“We didn’t care about your warning,” Marie said. The woman’s eyes darted over to her, giving Gill a reprieve. He was glad she could see the woman, too. “We came here to stop you from hurting all of these people.”

“You failed,” the woman said. “Magnificently so.”

Marie recoiled a bit under the woman’s harsh gaze. “Maybe, but we had to try.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do.”

The woman turned her attention back to Gill. He felt his body freeze again. “You will be punished for your sins. All of you. The Culling is our most sacred tradition. We have practiced it longer than you could imagine. You will be made an example of.”

Gill found his voice at long last. “What purpose would it serve in hurting us?”  
The woman blinked for the first time.

“I do not understand your question.”

“Phin, our friend, believed you and your people exist in secret. You and Zephyrinus and everyone else, you don’t want anyone to know about you. This fog and all of that will just be chalked up to some kind of mystery. No one would ever guess the truth. Let us leave here safe and sound, and I promise no one will know about you. Nobody else has to suffer.”

The woman seemed to consider his offer.

Gill glanced at the others. Marie looked at him like he was a coward. Malcolm stared at the ground. He didn’t blame them. He knew what he sounded like, but he needed to protect them. He couldn’t save anyone else.

“You make a valid argument, Gilcomegain,” the woman said. “We don’t revel in useless deaths. Yours would grant us little joy.”

The three of them breathed a little easier. Malcolm looked like he might even laugh.

“Sometimes a little is enough.”

The woman snapped her fingers and out of the fog stepped Zephyrinus and his partner. It took Gill a minute to remember her name was Dema. Zephyrinus wasted no time in moving toward Gill and grabbing him by the throat. Gill heard his brother scream, but before he could do anything about it, Zephyrinus lifted Gill up off the ground. The younger man struggled to break the cold grip, but he couldn’t.

“I want you to know before I kill you, Gilcomegain,” Zephyrinus whispered. “I want you know this is just how I killed Phineas. He begged for my mercy, and I showed him none.”

Gill saw Zephyrinus lift his right fist up and knew he would do to him what they had done to the people the three of them had failed. He readied himself. He stopped struggling. Zephyrinus' hand arched back.

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Malcolm had been silent the entire time the woman had spoken. But the moment he saw the two other figures he recognized the final part of his vision was coming true.

“NO!” he screamed. Marie tried to move near the creature as it held his brother in the air, but the younger creature intercepted her and threw Marie down to the ground.

“I'm sorry,” the female servant said.

Malcolm looked at Gill and saw the creature getting ready to hurt his brother. And then everything fell into place. He realized the truth of his visions and what they really represented. It had never been about stopping the Culling. It had been about saving one person all along.

Gill.

Malcolm knew what he had to do. The time had come to stop thinking. In the end, Malcolm realized life wasn't about how many times a person thought. Actions mattered. Choices mattered. And Malcolm Robertson had made his choice. He didn't hesitate, he just ran toward the monster that threatened his brother. By the time the creature realized what was upon him, Malcolm collided into him with as much power as he could muster. The thing let his brother go, and Gill collapsed on all fours, gasping for air.

“I'm going to reach inside your throat and rip out your spine, boy!” Zephyrinus snarled. Malcolm punched him. It felt so good, he punched him again. Over and over

Malcolm hit the creature. He thought he could see the mask slip. The façade of human features falling away to reveal the monster within.

Blood poured out of his nose, and Malcolm shouted in victory. Then he heard a wet, crunching sound and felt a sharp pain in his chest. He looked down and saw the creature's forearm, but it was too close.

His legs gave out, and Malcolm's body started shaking. The thing took his arm out of Malcolm's chest. It was covered in his own blood and bits of his insides.

*Choices are what life's about, he thought. This last one was my best one.*

And then he thought no more.

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Gill yelled when he saw Malcolm crumple. He and Marie gathered around his body. Malcolm had died with a defiant smirk upon his face. Gill held his brother's body close and cradled him. Tears fell free. He noticed Marie was crying, too.

"How gallant," the woman commented. "We did not think your kind capable of such self-sacrifice." She turned and headed toward the mist.

"My lady," Zephyrinus said, a bewildered look in his eyes. "Are we not to kill them also?"

The woman looked down on Gill and Marie. It seemed like she looked at them for hours. Gill found he no longer cared if he died. He had failed at everything. He couldn't save the people in this park, and he couldn't save his brother. He felt his twin's body grow cold.

*Let them kill me, he begged. Let them end my life, please.*

“No,” she said with authority. “I think they’ve suffered enough. We grant them a reprieve this day.” She spoke directly to Gill. “Do not squander this opportunity. Our people are not known for our forgiveness.”

“But my lady,” Zephyrinus argued. “They violated the rules! They came into our grounds and have worked tirelessly these past couple of weeks to stop our Culling. We should strike them down and this whole damn city with them!”

The woman turned her intense gaze on her servant. He withered beneath it. “What point is there in such slaughter? No, better we show a little mercy and give them a second chance. If they attempt to tell their people the truth, we will know of it and return. And we shall kill everyone that has ever touched their lives.”

“My lady...”

“I have spoken, Zephyrinus.” She did not wait for her servant to reply. She continued her walk into the mist and disappeared from sight.

“Of all the...”

“It’ll be okay, Zeph,” Dema, said. It had been a long time since she had said anything. Gill barely remembered she was there. “Let’s go home.”

The creature’s eyes turned pink and burned with open hatred. “And I was so looking forward to killing you.” He growled, and Gill thought he saw wings spouting out of his back.

“She meant what she said, human,” Dema warned Gill. “Neither of you can speak a word of what you saw. Or write about it.” Here she shot Marie a look. “We’ll know. We’re everywhere. So please don’t.”

“Why do you even care?” Gill asked. His throat felt constricted from being choked earlier.

“Not all of us hate. These past three weeks I’ve gotten to know this city. Its people. They’re not so different. You’re not so different. Hope to see you never.” She laughed at her own joke and then she, too, faded into the mist.

Gill retreated into his own grief. The mist and fog rose, becoming a cloud over their heads. A hundred people were around them. Most were on their backs staring into the sky. A testament to his failure.

Marie touched Gill’s shoulder. “What happens next?”

## EPILOGUE

Gill walked along the sidewalk and was mesmerized by the life around him. He sat on a bench in The City Square, which was what the downtown cluster of stores, shops, movie complexes was called. A pair of kids, brothers, ran around throwing water balloons at each other. Their parents watched them from another bench.

The entire square teemed with movement. Couples went to the local coffee shop, two teenagers went into the movie theatre talking about the latest action flick, and an elderly man hobbled into the bookstore. It was a beautiful, average day.

Six months had passed since that horrible afternoon in Hamill Park. After the clouds had returned to the sky, rescue workers discovered Gill and Marie. Having no time to come up with a believable cover story, they remained silent about what happened until they could talk later. The workers believed them to be “shell-shocked.” Marie and Gill agreed to pretend the mist and fog had been so thick, they couldn’t see anything until they had discovered Malcolm’s body.

The final death toll had been a hundred and one. No one could explain it, nor could they find a single rational explanation for what happened. The event got national attention as several news channels descended into the city to find something, anything that could solve this mystery.

Marie had become the go-to person for interviews. As a meteorologist she had a unique perspective of the “strange weather patterns.” Besides appearing on a number of segments on CNN, MSNBC, and FOX, she had been called to do a lot of side panels on the local station as well. Without trying, she finally had become the reporter she had always wanted to be.

Gill envied her that.

Malcolm's body had been buried beside their mother's. Gramps' health couldn't take the loss, and he died only a few months later. Heather tried, she really did, but Gill's grief had opened a chasm between them. He barely looked at her for weeks. They never spoke and their relationship had ended two months later. Gill hadn't bothered to fight it. The death of his family had broken him.

He still worked at the movie theatre. At thirty, he was the oldest employee there. He showed up and did his job, but it was clear he wasn't the same person.

The only one he interacted with on a semi-regular basis was Marie. She had tried to get him to go to a counselor or group therapy, but Gill always declined. Caring took too much effort, and nothing seemed to matter anymore.

Well, almost nothing.

He watched the kids play some more. Their parents were encouraging the water balloon fight. One of them, the father, got hit by mistake. He stood up then, and his children shrank back, no doubt afraid of him. The father reached out his hand and silently asked for the nearest boy to give him one of the balloons. After getting one, the father winked as his children and then whirled around throwing the balloon at his wife. The children fell to the ground laughing.

"Oh, you are so dead," she roared at him. She wasn't really mad, Gill could tell from the hidden smile she wore just on the corner of her mouth.

*A happy family, Gill thought. So that's what one looks like.*

He checked his phone to see what time it was. 2:46. She should be here any minute now. He had asked Marie to meet with him here for one of their bi-weekly

meetings. She had accepted, but warned him she couldn't stay long. He found humor in that statement.

A few minutes later, Marie turned the corner of the coffee shop coming into view. She looked as pretty as ever, only now her smile had more confidence behind it. A few people recognized her from the news. She acknowledged those who waved and her smile grew even wider.

Gill suppressed his resentment and gestured to get her attention. She wanted to greet him with a hug, but Gill didn't get up, so she sat down next to him looking crestfallen.

"Hey, Gill," she said. "I got here as fast as I could. How are things?"

"The same as always." The sound of his voice almost startled him. He hadn't said a word all day.

"You look good."

Gill didn't blame her for lying. His beard was unkempt and his clothes reeked of alcohol. She was too nice to call him a wino.

"You look better than ever," he said, gesturing to her fancy clothes. "Are you meeting a hot date tonight?"

"Oh, no," she looked down at her outfit. "I'm just getting ready to interview the governor. He's campaigning for reelection, and he's doing a press conference at Hamill Park to talk about...the incident."

Gill just nodded. "The governor. Huh. That's impressive."

"Yeah, I know. I've been stressing about what to ask him."

"My advice? Don't mention dragons. No one ever takes you seriously after that."

They shared a laugh. It was the first one Gill had had in a while.

“Hey,” Marie said. “I have an idea, why don’t you come with me to the press conference?” She tried to make it sound casual and spur of the moment, Gill knew, but it was obvious she had wanted to ask him for a long time.

“I never want to see Hamill Park again,” he said. His tone sounded sharper than he had intended.

“Okay,” she replied. She looked away before asking, “So why did you ask me to meet with you?”

Gill rubbed his chin. “I need Phin’s notes.”

Marie narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

“I haven’t read them in months, and I wanted to look at them again.”

“Okay, but why do you want to read them again? What’s the point?”

Gill steeled himself. He knew she wasn’t going to like what he said next. “Marie, I’m leaving town.”

Her eyebrows raised up. “You’re what? Why?”

“There’s nothing for me here,” he said. “Not anymore. With Gramps dead and Malcolm... gone, it just doesn’t feel like home anymore. I need to do something different with my life.”

She took that in and asked again, “But why do you need Phin’s notes?”

Gill shrugged. “They make good reading material.”

Marie folded her arms against her chest and stared at him hard. “Want to try that again?”

Damn. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

She got to her feet and looked down at him. “How about, ‘I’m an idiot.’ You’re going to look for them, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“They’re going to kill you for this. You have to know that.”

“I do.”

“Forget it, I’m not helping you commit suicide.”

Gill had expected this. “Marie, I’m sorry, but I have to do this. I’ve tried pretending that I can just accept the fact that those things are out there. But I can’t. They killed Malcolm. They killed Phin. They tried to kill me.”

“Gill, what do you think you can do? You saw what they did!”

“Yeah, I saw.”

“I know you want revenge for Malcolm, but he wouldn’t have wanted you to get killed!”

Gill kept calm. Part of him wanted to scream at her, “Don’t tell me what he would have wanted. You barely knew him.” But he suppressed it. Like he had suppressed so much lately.

“You have to let this go,” Marie told him.

“Let it go?” Gill asked. He laughed, this time it sounded like a cough. “I can’t let it go. I’ve tried letting it go for half a year now. Talking about it doesn’t help. Writing about it doesn’t help. Ignoring it doesn’t help. The only thing that helps is doing something about it! That’s what I want to do. That’s what I have to do.”

“Gill,” she said but couldn’t finish her thought.

“Marie, I’m going. Now, you can keep the notes if you want, but I’d like to have everything I can at my fingertips. I don’t want to go in blind. I hope you can respect that.”

Marie stayed silent for a few minutes. She wanted to scream at him, he could tell, but she didn’t. Finally, she nodded. “Come by my apartment tonight. I’ll give them to you there.”

He nodded. “Thanks, Marie.”

“Don’t thank me,” she snarled. She started to turn around but then stopped. “Phin once told me that obsession and stupidity are an ugly mix.”

“He did have a way with words.”

Marie turned around again and walked away, her heels clicking loudly. Gill leaned back in the bench and exhaled. It had gone better than he thought.

The family left the square ten minutes later, and Gill was left with his own dark thoughts to focus on.

Later, after he had finished packing his car, Gill climbed onto his roof and watched gray clouds along the horizon. He couldn’t help wondering if those clouds might help him find what he was looking for. Much to his surprise, Gill felt a sense of hope and excitement about what the future might bring. Things had never been clearer.

For the first time in his life, Gilcomegain Robertson knew what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

He wanted to chase storms.

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