

Sentinel Event
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Table of Contents

| | |
|------------------|-----|
| CHAPTER 1 | 3 |
| CHAPTER 2 | 7 |
| CHAPTER 3 | 14 |
| CHAPTER 4 | 19 |
| CHAPTER 5 | 29 |
| CHAPTER 6 | 39 |
| CHAPTER 7 | 48 |
| CHAPTER 8 | 56 |
| CHAPTER 9 | 65 |
| CHAPTER 10 | 73 |
| CHAPTER 11 | 78 |
| CHAPTER 12 | 82 |
| CHAPTER 13 | 92 |
| CHAPTER 14 | 104 |
| CHAPTER 15 | 112 |
| CHAPTER 16 | 118 |

CHAPTER 1

Dr. St. Cross, the psychiatrist, would have found it ironic that Tammy was watching the news report on the TV in the waiting room when the ambulance arrived. Chester Williams, a leading expert in Passerism, had given a speech at the anti-Passer protest in Denver earlier that morning, and choice segments were being replayed throughout the evening.

“No one can argue,” he was saying with educated eloquence in a long-suffering tone, “that our lives have become more meaningful and safer with the help of the spirits, to whom we owe so much and can offer so little. Our world has made progress in leaps and bounds since the first of the Passers began visiting and speaking to us. It saddens me that so many of you believe otherwise.”

The image lingered on Williams while the sound of the news anchor’s reportage continued; Chester’s eyes showed keen irritation. He pursed his lips and sighed deeply just before the scene cut away.

Tammy had come looking for a patient’s son in this waiting room, and hadn’t found him, but had paused to sit down on a chair and retie her tennis shoe while listening to the news report. When the sound of the ambulance’s sirens reached her ears, the nurse broke away from the distraction and ran out into the receiving hall to help.

Two paramedics, both young and newly minted, pushed in through the doors rolling a patient on a stretcher.

“Twenty-nine-year-old male,” one of the EMTs told the ER doctor who came to oversee. “Attempted suicide by hanging. Found by a neighbor in the nick of time, who initiated CPR.”

Tammy moved closer to get a look at the face behind the bag attached to the intubation tube in his mouth.

“I know him,” the doctor said before the nurse had a chance to. “He’s in here all the time.”

“Never self-inflicted injuries, though,” agreed Tammy. The stretcher was swiftly wheeled into one of the critical care rooms. “Are you sure it was suicide?”

Without speaking, one of the paramedics lifted the patient’s right arm by the wrist. Taped to the back of his hand was a piece of note card on which was clearly printed, ***They won’t stop.***

““They?”” asked the other EMT.

“The Passers,” answered Tammy.

“He *claims* it’s the Passers,” the doctor talked over her. “This is private information that we’re not allowed to discuss. Patient confidentiality.”

The paramedics scrunched their foreheads and shrugged, but left the doctor and nurses to do their work. While the former checked the patient’s chest with his stethoscope and another nurse bagged the patient, Tammy paused to stroke the young man’s brown hair off his forehead.

“Poor Aidriel,” she murmured.

Outside the open door, the ghostly figure of a Passer peered out from behind a curtain at the end of the corridor. It turned and walked away, vanishing through a wall.

The days passed with Aidriel alive and alone, spending hours staring off into space. Doctors and the other patients alike showed little interest in him, and eventually, how many days later, he didn't know, he found himself in a familiar ward, on the 4th floor among the crazies. He didn't spend any time in the main room with the couches where the visitors were. No one came to see him, and he was ashamed of the bruises on his neck and jaw; the evidence of his failure.

Aidriel resented the fact he was alive. He had only survived as long as he had because of happy accidental discoveries or miraculous rescues. When he was unconscious, the air gone from his lungs, the pulse gone from his heart, and the life fading from his brain, the Passers would save him. Indirectly, that is. They would alert anyone nearby and he'd be brought back at the last moment. Eventually, he began to think of those visits past the threshold of death as if they were dreams. Dreams of strange visions and of what awaited him when he escaped life. If only he *could* escape.

He was sitting cross-legged on his bed, staring out the window, when the patient named Clifford first came to see him. The mad, bearded old man peeked around the doorframe, mumbled something unintelligible, and widened his eyes maniacally when he saw Aidriel.

Aidriel turned to acknowledge the uninvited visitor, his face blank, his gray eyes pained.

Glancing up and down the hall to make sure no one was watching, Clifford slipped silently into the room and moved to stand right behind Aidriel. The old man looked closely at the younger, saw the marks on his neck and the edge of a previous scar barely visible beneath his collar.

"It's you, finally," Clifford said. "I knew this would happen."

"What are you talking about?" Aidriel whispered, his voice still hoarse from his ordeal.

"*Them*," answered Clifford. "You know what I'm talking about. There haven't been any of them in this ward since you got here."

"Leave me alone," murmured Aidriel. "You old fart."

Clifford reached out to lay his hand on the other patient's shoulder, and Aidriel flinched. Clifford smiled knowingly and left.

Later that evening, Tammy came up to visit Aidriel when her shift ended. He showed little sign of pleasure to see her, and turned his eyes once more to the window. The kindly nurse had been on duty most of the occasions he was brought to this hospital, and knew his history. She'd also been around long enough to remember his first time, when he was seventeen. He was a happier person then.

"How are you?" she asked, lingering in the doorway.

"Fine" was his whispered reply. He didn't want to talk to her. Tammy was just like the rest of the hospital staff; she pretended to believe him if she thought it would be of comfort. But he wasn't naïve enough to think she actually *did* believe him.

Once, she had seemed willing to believe, though. Aidriel was in the emergency room with a broken tibia, blunt force trauma, and she was helping prepare his leg to be set. She noticed the claw-mark scar on his forehead, and realized it had never been there before.

“What happened to your face?” she’d asked, reaching impulsively toward him. Aidriel had caught her hand defensively, and though he said nothing, he had recalled the cause of the wound.

One of Aidriel’s many professions over the years was maintenance in one of the old government buildings downtown. The crawl space beneath the structure was long and narrow, and the plumbing and wiring pipes ran along the top of it. There had been problems with intermittent telephone failures, and Aidriel and two other maintenance workers had gone down to investigate.

Aidriel had been elected to get into the crawl space, mostly because he was the smallest and least lazy of the three. He’d put on a hard hat and headlamp, securing his gloves and tool belt. While the other two men lingered, shooting the breeze, Aidriel had climbed into the narrow tunnel and begun his inspection of the communication cables.

For several minutes he’d crawled along with little thought of his surroundings. He could faintly hear his colleagues talking over the sound of his own breathing, but when he stopped breathing to wet his lips, he heard another voice. Straining to see down the tunnel, he thought he could detect movement outside the range of his lamp. A familiar sick feeling overtook him and he heard ringing in his ears. Though he had begun to frantically back up, he wasn’t fast enough. From out of the darkness ahead rushed a Passer, pale and translucent, like all the spirits, galloping on its hands and knees like an animal. It resembled an old woman with empty white eyes, its mouth open in a blood-curdling shriek, its ghostly fingers reaching out to claw him.

The other two workers heard Aidriel screaming, and, peering into the crawl space, they saw him lying several yards into it, panicking and trying to back up.

“What’s going on?” they shouted.

“Pull me out!” Aidriel yelled back.

After a brief, bewildered hesitation, the nearest worker dove into the crawl space, grabbing Aidriel by the leg and dragging him out to safety. Aidriel collapsed to the floor, shaking and breathless. His face and arms were streaked in blood and scratches; his headlamp was broken. He was too disturbed to explain what happened besides saying, “Passer.”

His coworkers didn’t believe him.

“Did you try to kill yourself?” the police officer asked Aidriel when he regained consciousness after the hanging. He was still in the medical wing, and they’d removed the ventilator. It hurt to breathe or swallow or talk, but he nodded.

“Why?” Tammy asked him. The policeman directed an icy stare at her, and she turned her attention back to the IV bag she was changing. She didn’t notice the expression of pain and betrayal on Aidriel’s face.

“You know why,” he whispered to her. Tammy’s attempt at compassion came off as condescending.

“The Passers don’t want to hurt anyone,” she told him. “They’re here to help and guide us so that they can pass on into eternity.”

Aidriel couldn’t argue with her and simply shook his head. He’d harbored a childish resentment for her since and didn’t care when she came to see him. She had come into the

room and sat beside him the first time, but because of the cold shoulder she'd gotten in return, she now remained standing in the doorway.

"Most Passers stay away from hospitals," she said, as she often had before.

"Most," he muttered bitterly.

"The old assumptions of hauntings, being bound to a certain location, are false, you know."

She'd said that before as well. Many times. Everyone knew that anyway. Children learned about Passers the same way they'd learn about their own families, because so often the spirits lived like members of the households they watched over.

Even though these ghostly companions only existed in cases of violent deaths, many Passers eventually avoided the locations of their actual passing away. Often they lingered in sites of meaning, particularly old houses or cemeteries, until they answered an unspoken call to their living companion. Sometimes their death was of little meaning to them, and they were not of much comfort to the sick or mourning. It was a strange concept that had often been discussed in detail among scholars, but no cut-and-dried explanation had ever been ascertained.

"Is it at all reassuring to you that Matilda sends good wishes?" asked Tammy, referring to her own Passer. Aidriel had fortunately never seen Matilda as far as he knew, nor did he care to.

Rising off the bed, Aidriel moved to the door and slowly closed it, shutting Tammy out. Waiting near it for a moment and hearing nothing from her, he wandered over to the window and peered down into the parking lot. Visitors and medical workers came and went here and there, though there were no Passers that he could see. As he watched the darkness gathering, he became aware of one visible ghost. It stood unmoving in the shadow beneath a tree beside the parking lot, staring toward the building. Aidriel knew it was looking right at him; he shuddered and the hair on his arms stood up.

Eventually the spirits would grow impatient; they always did. He could only stay safe in the hospital for a certain amount of time before the Passers would break their own boundaries and come looking for him.

Clifford sat down on the bed the second time he came to see Aidriel, and received a glance of indifference for his trouble. The old man held out his arms, the insides of which were crisscrossed with scars and recent wounds.

"These," he said, pointing at the fresh scabs, "are because of you."

Aidriel looked from Clifford's arms to his face, but pretended to be unmoved.

Clifford smiled wide, exposing large yellow teeth behind his tangled beard.

"It's alright," he murmured, his voice trembling with emotion. "I'm glad to finally meet you. It's been a long time coming. A long, long time."

Aidriel turned away and closed his eyes. Getting up to leave, Clifford warned him, "You have only hours left. They are slow sometimes, but they always arrive."

CHAPTER 2

Night fell and wore on slowly into the wee hours. Aidriel slept shallowly and awoke agitated, rising to pace around his room. He hated the quiet and the shadows. He measured the time not by the hours but by how long his recovery was taking, and how often he was visited. He was in no hurry to leave, but soon it wouldn't matter where he was.

At a soft knock on the doorframe he looked up to see a brunette in scrubs carrying a little organizer tote.

"Hi, I'm Dreamer from the lab," she said. "I'm here to draw some blood."

She paused as if waiting for his reaction, and he wondered if she expected a comment about her name. He understood how being constantly asked about one's moniker could quickly grow tiresome. There was no point in making small talk. Besides, it still hurt to speak.

Aidriel passively sank down onto his bed, keeping his eyes on her. She approached with a hint of shyness, and he noticed as she put on her gloves that her hands were shaking.

"Could you spell your last name for me, please?" Dreamer asked softly. She set her supply tray on the chair beside his nightstand and began preparing the items she'd need without looking at him.

"A-K-I-M-O-S," he whispered. She looked up questioningly, but saw the marks on his throat and just nodded and smiled, thanking him.

Dreamer's hands steadied as she positioned his arm on the bedside table, tying on a tourniquet, softly speaking—or rambling, he thought—about what she was doing.

"You've got great veins," she murmured with a smile.

Aidriel wasn't listening to her, and had turned so he could better hear the hallway, his eyes to the side and fixed on the door. The ward was very still, and over the classical music drifting from far away somewhere, his ears caught the whisper of ragged breathing.

Instantly, Aidriel became restless and flinched away from Dreamer, who paused patiently and apologized. With a calm warning, she inserted a needle into his vein and attached a tube, waiting for the stream of blood to fill it.

"Do you work with animals?"

She was trying to make conversation, noticing the claw marks on his skin. Aidriel was mostly ignoring her, but perceived the pause in her words while she waited for an answer. He shook his head and whispered, "Hurry up."

He was still watching the doorway when the Passer came to stand in it. The spirit was a middle-aged man with long hair and long nails. He was wheezing loudly and had a glower of hatred on his face. Everyone had a Passer; this was Aidriel's.

Dreamer glanced up at him uncomfortably and noticed his anxiety. She followed his gaze to the door, but saw nothing there.

"Is it a Passer?" she asked, removing the tube from the needle to push on another. "Bothering you, is it? They don't cause these, do they?" She indicated his injuries.

Aidriel was startled that she knew immediately what was wrong, and was turning to say so when the Passer attacked.

The spirit came flying forward in a blur, a guttural growl rising in its throat. Aidriel jerked swiftly to try and get away, but found himself cornered by Dreamer and the nightstand. His sudden movement pulled the needle in the phlebotomist's hand out of his arm, but he didn't notice the blood streaming out of the puncture wound.

There was no protection against a Passer attack, though it was human nature to at least attempt self-defense. Aidriel was not unused to being treated harshly, but had endeavored unsuccessfully to fight back before. There could be no trading of blows with the spirits. The result was always frustration or despair and inevitable harm.

The ghost leapt up onto the bed and clawed at him, snarling and howling, swiping its hands up and down like a slashing cat. Aidriel pulled his legs up against his chest and wrapped his arms around his head, shouting for the Passer to stop. Sometimes it heeded him; more often it didn't.

Dreamer had shrunk back in shock at the spectacle, and Aidriel accidentally kicked her in his initial attempt to protect himself. The needle in her hand flew up toward her face but fortunately didn't poke her. She had the presence of mind to snap the safety cover over the sharp end and discard it.

"What's happening?" she asked, stepping back to avoid Aidriel's defensive swings. He didn't answer her, and she saw that the tourniquet was still tied around his arm, causing profuse bleeding and purpling in his fingers. Without thinking, Dreamer reached out for the rubber strip, and her hand passed through the invisible shoulder of the Passer. Enraged, the ghost turned on her and slashed several times at her arm before Aidriel realized the Passer was actually harming her, and intervened.

His first attempt to block the blows with his own arms proved futile. Seeing no other option, Aidriel scrambled forward, shoving Dreamer as hard as he could out of the way. The young woman had managed to catch the end of the tourniquet, and being thrown off balance helped her to pull it loose, but it tangled in Aidriel's sleeve. He reached for the night table to prevent his fall off the bed and onto the phlebotomist heaped on the floor.

The Passer took a few more swings at the side of Aidriel's face before two orderlies came running into the room in response to the ruckus. At the sight of the patient balanced precariously over the phleb on the floor, they reached across the bed and seized Aidriel by his other arm. The Passer was between the hospital workers and its target, but it turned invisible when two more physical bodies came in contact with it. The attack ended.

Aidriel and Dreamer were scratched and bloodied, both shaking and incapable of answering any of the orderlies' or responding nurse's questions. Aidriel was vaguely aware of the restraints they placed on him to keep him bound to the bed. A droopy-lipped nurse told him that it might be temporary as she bandaged the deep gouges in his skin. Dreamer had already been led away, and while Aidriel listened and watched the door for a return he wouldn't see, he was uncomplaining.

Though he loathed admitting it, he was relieved. No one had ever been directly influenced by his Passer like that before. Often well-meaning people had tried to restrain or even protect him, but none of them had caused any change in the Passer, neither had they been affected themselves. But Dreamer felt the claws too. Now someone would believe him.

A woman in a lab coat sat down noisily beside Aidriel's bed while he was drifting off to sleep and abruptly awakened him. Her hair was styled in an elaborate twisting updo secured with bobby pins, and a pair of tortoiseshell glasses was balanced on the end of her nose. She reviewed her clipboard in silence for several minutes while he looked around dazedly.

"Would you prefer to be called Aidriel or Mr. Alkimos?" she asked in a no-nonsense tone.

Aidriel just shrugged and ran his tongue over his lips. They must have given him some kind of sedative and it was making him groggy.

"Mr. Alkimos it is, then."

"Akimos," he corrected her.

"Ah. Right." She wrote a few quick notes, then crossed her legs at the knee. "I'm Dr. Ana deTarlo. I'm a psychologist, and will be taking over your mental health treatment for the time being."

"Dr. St. Cross is my shrink," he murmured.

"St. Cross has retired and has yet to be permanently replaced."

"He was here a few weeks ago."

"There was an accident," Dr. deTarlo said, looking distracted. "Why did you attack the phlebotomist?"

"I didn't." Aidriel's voice was improving.

"You didn't." It was obvious by the psychologist's manner that she didn't believe him.

"My Passer did."

"Your *Passer* attacked the phlebotomist."

Her tone was making Aidriel angry, and it didn't help that he was still bound to the bed and wanted to sleep.

"Yes, my *Passer* did it. It attacks me all the time; all Passers do. But all of you quacks and eggheads brush it off and tell me I'm wrong. I'm *not* wrong, you're all just too damn arrogant to listen to me."

"What's your Passer's name? Is it nearby, that I might have a talk with it?"

She pretended to look around the room in case the ghost was visible to her. Aidriel didn't answer for a long time and glared at the shrink.

"Its name is Rubin," he spat finally. "If it was around, it'd be sharpening its claws on me."

Dr. deTarlo didn't seem to be listening, and was writing on her clipboard.

"Have you been vigilant in taking your antidepressants?"

"No."

"Why is that?"

"Because I'm not depressed."

The faintest of smiles curled one side of deTarlo's lip as she transcribed.

"Why did you attempt to take your own life, then?"

Aidriel shifted uncomfortably and looked listless.

"Your wording makes it sound like I tried to steal something," he evaded.

"Suicide is illegal."

"That only encourages people to make sure they're successful."

“Is that why you tried to hang yourself? To break the law?”

Aidriel began to laugh, his voice rough. It hurt to use his throat that way, but he was too bitterly affected to stop at first.

“That is the dumbest theory for suicide I’ve ever heard,” he commented. Ana allowed the slightest hint of agitation to show on her face.

“Why did you try to kill yourself?” she asked again, her tone relaxing.

“I know you’ll be shocked by the answer,” replied Aidriel with hostile sarcasm, “but I tried to kill myself because I want to be *dead*.”

DeTarlo effortlessly smoothed any expression off her face.

“And why do you want to be dead?”

“You’ve got my file. Do your research.”

“You claim that the Passers attack you.”

“Yeah, I *just* told you that.”

“Passers are not aggressive like ghosts used to be.”

“You and I are not talking about the same Passers.”

“Know Passers well, do you?”

Aidriel chuckled humorlessly.

“You could say that.”

“Do you want to die to become a Passer?”

Aidriel stared at her in unpleasant surprise before answering. It never failed to shock him when a shrink said something to him that was more out-there and crazy than anything he could fathom. Perhaps psychosis was contagious.

“I want to die,” he said, lowering his voice, “because life’s a burden, and death is better.”

“How can you know?”

“I’ve done it before. It can be sudden or gradual, but peace overtakes the fear and pain. It’s like a dream that is all the more intoxicating and vivid because it’s real.”

“Have you been planning your suicide for some time?”

She had not heard a word he had said. He wondered what she *would* hear.

“For years,” he answered indifferently.

“Why haven’t you tried before now?”

Aidriel allowed the emotional reaction to the question to sink in without realizing it, and once more showed a glimpse of vulnerability.

“I never thought I’d need to,” he murmured painfully. “I have lived for years believing I would be dead by the next day. If I only have today, there’s not much point in killing myself.”

That seemed to be a satisfactory response for deTarlo, who persisted in her detailed note-taking. The longer she wrote in uncaring silence, the more the tenderness of Aidriel’s emotional wound turned to the heat of anger. She wasn’t taking him at all seriously.

“I’ll be reviewing your psychiatric record and talking to you further about these ‘attacks,’” she informed him finally.

“How lucky for me,” he bitingly answered.

Without replying, deTarlo got to her feet and left, passing Clifford loitering outside the door as she went. She noticed how paranoid the old man looked, but it was not an

unfamiliar sight to her. Halfheartedly she shooed him away, though he came right back once she was out of sight.

Making sure no one else was nearby, Clifford stepped into Aidriel's room and swung the door closed behind him. Aidriel pulled against his binds, watching his visitor distrustfully.

"Now don't resist this, I've been waiting for this for a long, long time," Clifford stammered, looking around tensely. His arms had new scratches on them, and his face was injured also. He fumbled in the waistband of his pants, and brought out a pair of desk scissors.

Aidriel took in a deep shaky breath, but didn't speak. He kept his eyes locked with Clifford's, hoping the old man would snap out of whatever psychotic state he seemed to be in. He recognized that look; he'd almost succumbed to it himself. But being in that state of mind for the brief time when he had indulged in it was far scarier than being aware and sober. There weren't any rules in that no-man's-land of insanity; no hope or lies to lessen the anxiety. The paranoia of what *could* happen had almost become worse than what actually did.

Clifford held the scissors carefully in his knobby hand and examined them, exposing his yellow teeth in a smile again. It was anyone's guess how he had managed to obtain a pair of such dangerous implements and why he wasn't in a straitjacket in solitary. He drew nearer to Aidriel, who tightened up in an effort to lean away.

"I want to tell you something first," Clifford said, sitting on the edge of the bed, still scrutinizing the blades. Aidriel scowled and opened his lips defensively, but remained quiet. He had, with difficulty, overcome this sort of mental torment, and he did not at all wish to fall victim to it again simply because this old guy had failed to resist it as he had.

"There were many of us at the beginning," began Clifford, "and we've been dwindling down, passing our portion of the burden on to the next one and making their load heavier."

He adjusted his grip on the handle of the scissors as if preparing to do something.

Aidriel didn't want it to be this way. He had spent hours planning his suicide, and stabbing had not been high on his list of ways to do it. Besides, if he was going to be stabbed at all, he wanted to be sure he would actually die of it. Judging by the half-brained manner of Clifford's actions, Aidriel was not willing to trust the blow would be fatal and not just exceedingly painful.

"Hey!" he called out, trying to sit up. "Could someone get in here?"

Groping with his bound hand for the remote with the call button for the nurses caused the heavy wand to slip out of his reach and fall off the edge of the mattress. The straps around his wrists were too tight to allow him to press the button on the side of the bed.

"Don't you understand what I'm saying?" Clifford asked. "I mean there were others of us. Others tormented and ignored, written off as crazy, delusional."

"You don't seem to be in your right mind to me," Aidriel answered.

Clifford just smiled again and sighed heavily, looking wistfully around the room.

"I've had enough of it," he said. "Your arrival's my chance for escape."

"Someone get in here!" Aidriel yelled out again, ignoring the pain it caused to his voice.

Clifford turned the scissors in his hand so his fingers were wrapped around the handles while the blades pointed down. He raised his arm, his eyes on Aidriel's face, and murmured, "There used to be two of us."

He swung with surprising force for an old man, jamming the scissors without a hint of hesitation into his own stomach.

"Someone *get in here!*" Aidriel yelled again, straining against the straps on his arms and legs. He couldn't break his gaze away from Clifford's eyes and watched as the life drained out of the old man's face like a tap being shut off. Clifford clung to the edge of the bed for several painful minutes, his focused attention on Aidriel, who was helpless to do anything but attempt comfort.

"It gets better," Aidriel tried to ease the old man's obvious fears. "It can be better on the other side."

Clifford grunted a couple times in response before too much of him was gone and the heat went out of him. His weak form crumpled to the floor with a low wheeze.

Though Aidriel began once more to shout for help, it seemed that an eternity was passing and no one was coming. He couldn't see Clifford's face when the other man fell to the floor, but saw the ghostly mist forming around the body. Death was transforming the person swiftly into a Passer, and already Aidriel could see the pale silhouette rising back to its feet.

"Someone help!" he yelled. This was not at all how he wished for things to be, and though he envied Clifford's flawless execution, he knew it could not be the same for him. Passers were not like humans, that way. The wounds they inflicted were different.

Clifford's Passer was at first confused to find itself upright once again, but realizing what state it had changed to, its expression took on a glower of hatred. It happened even to the nice Passers. Technically, all Passers were nice, when they weren't in close proximity to Aidriel. Even Clifford, a man himself tormented by the spirits while he was alive, became vicious and violent now that he was dead.

"It passes on," the spirit told him. It looked down at its hands and saw the nails were long, like all the other angry Passers. It held a paranormal equivalent of the bloody scissors still in its hand, and glanced from them up to Aidriel. The hatred deepened.

Aidriel dropped back to the bed and closed his eyes, bracing himself for what he knew would happen next. He felt the bed shake when the Passer leapt up on top of him, pressing down so firmly it was hard to breathe. The first stab to his chest surprised him and he opened his eyes, staring up at Clifford.

"There were two of us," the ghost stated angrily, stabbing again and again with the transparent weapon. "I pass my burden to you."

Each blow felt as real as any natural blade would. Aidriel couldn't breathe or call for help, and the metallic flood of blood in his mouth was spilling out at the corners of his lips. He turned his head to the side, unable to close his eyes but unwilling to look at the Passer anymore. It caught his notice that the battery-operated clock on the bedside table had stopped, and as the attack continued, the tube lightbulb in the wall fixture above his bed shattered.

The door to the room finally opened; a nurse and two orderlies appeared, stopping to stare in shock at Clifford's body on the floor and the effect the Passer was having on Aidriel. With a shriek, the nurse fled.

“Oh my god,” one of the orderlies murmured, dropping to his knees beside Clifford and checking for a pulse.

“We need help in here, stat!” shouted the other, gripping Aidriel’s shoulders and trying to hold him still.

“Is he seizing?” the first asked.

“Must have bit his tongue,” the second answered. “Look at all that blood.”

Aidriel wanted to tell them that they were wrong; it was his lungs. He couldn’t breathe.

The Passer stabbed him with the scissors twice more after the arrival of the orderlies, then stopped in its attack and leaned in closely.

“All the burden,” it whispered in an inhuman voice, “is yours.”

Aidriel felt as if his chest was deflating like a punctured life raft. His eyes remained focused on the clock on the table. The Passer stepped back to watch, still frothing with hate.

The movement in the room continued on around the patient and his tormentor. He remained conscious, but very little registered. He’d stopped breathing, and when a defibrillator was brought in, it failed, just like the clock had. Though he could not see the Passer, Aidriel could hear its hissed wheezing. It faded away as the room became more vibrant. Once the Passer was gone, Aidriel could breathe again.

“That,” panted a nurse, holding Aidriel’s wrist and shaking, “was the scariest thing I’ve ever witnessed.”

That night in Salvador, Bahia, on the southeastern shore of Brazil, a group of teenagers were gathered on the beach beneath the concrete wall supporting the city. Chattering in Portuguese and sharing cigarettes, the youngsters at first did not notice the cloudlike haze rising from the frothy sea in the darkness.

One of the boys in the group glanced out and saw the vague pale shape, but dismissing it as the crest of a long wave, turned to his friends again. Several minutes later, when he happened to look out at the water again, he realized the faint line was still there and getting closer.

“What *is* that?” he asked, pointing.

At first, the other teens paid him little mind. He repeated himself twice, then his companions began to follow his gaze out to sea. All conversation faded into silence, and as the group of youth watched in awe, shapes began to appear in the glowing haze. Dozens of ghostly heads rose out of the water, approaching them. Frozen in shock and fright, the teens watched as Passers emerged from the sea, migrating without speaking toward the land. They walked out of the surf and up the beach, passing through the concrete barrier and entering the city.

For several minutes after the Passers vanished, the young Brazilians looked at one another, mystified. Then they dashed off home to tell their parents what they’d seen.

CHAPTER 3

“Now this is an interesting case,” said Dr. Ana deTarlo, tossing a thick manila file onto her wide fabricated desk. The man sitting across from her raised an eyebrow, then leaned forward to pick up the folder and open it. His Passer watched in the background.

Chester Williams was thirty-four and young for the influence he wielded as the leading voice in the country in *Passerism*, which along with *Passerist*, were terms he had coined for himself as an expert in the study of Passersby – or as they were commonly called, Passers. He did not take requests for medical consultations lightly, though he rarely reviewed them in person. That was what his assistants and affiliates were for. But the problem with a personal favor was that it had to be, well, personal.

He smacked his lips in mock patience as he read the information in the folder, his icy dark eyes skipping quickly through it. More than once, Williams had been referred to as a “punk” or “arrogant little twit” by his critics, and he had the looks and attitude to support their statements. He even seemed to embrace conflict.

“Why would you call this patient interesting?” he asked, his eyes still on the file. “I’m familiar with this name; I think St. Cross sent me information about this, but my people decided it was nothing and blew it off.”

DeTarlo exhaled sharply as if in amused fortitude.

“Keep reading,” she answered. She was at least fifteen years Williams’s senior and had played no small role in building support for his reputation in the psychological field; she never let him forget it.

“Patient has been coming to the hospital with a variety of injuries and accidents for twelve years,” Williams summarized aloud, looking up. “Each time claiming that a Passer was responsible and offering no other explanation. There have been dozens of cases like this since the Sentience began. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Dr. deTarlo stood up and bent over her desk, rudely snatching the file back out of his hand and plopping it open before her. The light from her lamp reflected off the clean white sheets and illuminated her face in the semi-gloom caused by the closed blinds on her window.

“What kind of an idiot do you think I am?” she snapped.

Williams smirked and sat back in his chair, tapping his fingertips on the end of the hard plastic armrest.

“You tell me. I didn’t come all the way from Denver because I think that Fort Wayne is beautiful this time of year.”

Ignoring his response, deTarlo explained, “Just days ago, this patient was admitted to the psych ward after a botched suicide attempt. Since then, he has suffered two more ‘attacks’; the first time a phlebotomist was harmed in the process, and the second time, another patient killed himself in the same room.”

Williams arched an eyebrow, but didn’t speak.

“Sounds like a typical dangerous psych patient, I know,” Ana continued. “But the phlebotomist was adamant that the patient was ‘being attacked.’ She claims to have received injuries from the Passer involved, the one the patient identifies as ‘Rubin,’ though no spirits were visible at the time.”

There was a flicker of recognition in Chester’s eyes, though he said nothing.

“During the second attack,” said deTarlo, “the patient began seizing and bleeding from the mouth, at one point asphyxiating. When the nurses and orderlies attempted to revive him, the defibrillator malfunctioned and has been examined and shows signs of electromagnetic radiation.”

That caught Chester’s notice and both eyebrows went up. He remained motionless in his chair but appeared to pay closer attention.

“Also strange is that no injuries were found to the patient’s chest, heart, lungs, stomach, anything. The bleeding eventually stopped, but a source wound couldn’t be found. A significant amount of hemorrhaging occurred, yet there was no internal bleeding. He was covered in bruises and scratches, but no actual incisions.”

She paused to let the information sink in, and Williams began to lose interest again.

He began derisively: “Unless you pulled some strings to get me a doctorate without me knowing it...”

“I want to know about similar cases,” deTarlo snapped.

“You could have just had one of my interns look it up for you.”

“I don’t want a list. I want to *know* about the attacks.”

Chester remained still and looked at her for several moments as if waiting for an incentive, though his eyes glazed in thought.

“Dozens of cases at the beginning,” he started finally. “Less through the years, mostly because they were false and general bad opinion did nothing for attention seekers. Two dozen cases in the last twenty years has dwindled to less than half that in the last decade. Last I was up to date on the information, there have been only two—well, three now—recorded cases of possible legitimate Passer harassment in the country in the past six months.”

“Only *three*?” DeTarlo looked incredulous.

“That’s the possible *legit* cases,” Williams repeated. “I don’t suppose I need to tell you that it’s down to one where we thought there were none.”

DeTarlo appeared confused, so Williams clarified. “Case one, a woman, killed herself in Detroit over a month ago. Case two just stabbed himself to death in your psych ward. This one, case three, is all that’s left.”

“You appear awfully nonchalant about putting these pieces together, Chet.”

Williams narrowed his inky eyes at the nickname.

“Coincidences like this happen so often they become the norm,” he said. “I get so much information about these things, it’s no surprise to me anymore. The Passers have called in all debts with fate, and the world has become more balanced and symmetrical. You’d be surprised how much the natural and spiritual worlds mirror one another when you really get into the facts and figures. Behavior aside, that is. Since when are you interested in Passer hunts?”

Ana tried to hide a smile and turned her eyes down to the file in front of her again.

“I haven’t treated anyone with claims to this extent,” she responded with a blasé shrug.

“Uh-huh.” Williams waited to hear more.

“You know my fondness for fringe research. I’ve never read any reports that supported this sort of circumstance definitively. It’s advantageous that Dr. St. Cross has kept such careful and detailed reports, even if he *has* been overly secretive.”

“Isn’t it patient confidentiality or whatever?”

“Oh, is it?” Ana lifted her eyebrow, shadows cast on her forehead by the reflection of light off the papers before her, exaggerating the dark line above her eye. “You just told me he sent you this report.”

Chester shrugged, adopting the casualness she had just abandoned.

“St. Cross is a slug, I guess,” he said. “If that’s what you want me to think. He *has* been annoying.”

“Oh, I’ve told you what I want you to think.” She smiled deeply. A glimmer of pride and interest twinkled in her eyes at the mention of something she was familiar with and expert in. She was no stranger to how Williams’s mind worked.

Chester ignored her gloating and said as a disclaimer: “I would check and double-check that my statement about case three being the last one is correct. There’s no way my sources and interns are one hundred percent accurate all the time. Just because these are the only *recorded* cases of believable Passer harassment doesn’t mean there aren’t other cases out there that either aren’t taken seriously or just aren’t reported.”

DeTarlo still appeared very proud of herself and began shuffling through paperwork on her desk.

“I want you to reread the file in detail, and the other two cases as well,” she said. “Write up a statement and sign it.”

A look of intense annoyance and disappointment contorted Williams’s face.

“Oh gimme a break!” he exclaimed. “I have a life and responsibilities. I’ve got the whole of *A.S.M.* to deal with, and the riots, and I’m in the middle of getting another book through a final draft. I don’t have the time to write out reports for you.”

“Then have your interns write it,” deTarlo answered, unflustered. “But make sure you sign and agree with it. If we play our cards right, this could be just what we need to finally get just the subject we need for your Kelly Road project.”

Chester glared at the psychologist murderously, and his watching Passer began to shift tensely in the shadow cast by the open office door in the evening light. Ana was not intimidated.

“Yes, I know about it,” she said. “Do you think I wouldn’t hear about something like that just because you try to keep it all hush-hush? I know that St. Cross tried to connect these dots too, but he got nowhere.”

She stepped around her desk and cupped her hand to Chester’s cheek patronizingly. He slapped her away and got to his feet, whirling toward the door to leave.

“You’ll have your stupid report,” he snarled. “But there’s no way in hell I’d let you have the reins at Kelly Road.”

“It’s not up to you,” she replied, vaguely gloating. “I control the subject, and public curiosity is on my side. Passerism is a fad that’s becoming stale and obsolete.”

“While we remain among you,” answered Williams’s Passer, Rod, “the study and worship of our kind shall never be obsolete.” Dressed in a light-colored dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, the ghost was a sharp-eyed brunette that looked no older than Chester.

“Yes, and you’ll always be around, so long as people keep dying,” deTarlo said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Williams slammed her office door behind him as he left, and Rod passed through it to follow.

Aidriel tensely tapped his bare foot against the floor and rubbed at his eyes with his fingertips.

“I have no advocate, then,” he said grimly.

Dr. deTarlo crossed her legs at the knees, smoothing her pencil skirt. She leaned back in the plastic chair and rolled her eyes when it creaked.

“Why would you say that?” she smoothly asked, controlling her expression again.

Aidriel dropped his hands to his knees and eyed her before rising to pace in front of the window.

“Mr. Akimos,” the psychologist began when he didn’t answer. “You are under my supervision until I am satisfied you are no longer a danger to yourself or others. But you attacked a medical worker and are under investigation for a man’s death.”

She bobbed her head once in the direction of the orderly standing just inside the door, watching.

“Oh that’s bullshit!” Aidriel exclaimed. “I was strapped down for Pete’s sake. The man was tormented; he killed himself.”

“Are you implying his suicide was the result of mental illness?”

“That’s not what I meant,” Aidriel snapped. “I mean he’s dead because he couldn’t take having to suffer the same way I am. He just managed actually offing himself.”

“It’s under investigation,” deTarlo murmured.

Aidriel stared out the window at the horizon, shaking his head in disbelief, his hands on his hips.

“It’s your decision, ultimately.” Ana tried to keep her voice soothing. “You can either stay here or allow yourself to be transported to another, specialized facility.”

“Bullshit,” he said again. “If I say I want to stay locked in *this* prison cell, you’ll come up with some medical gibberish reason that I’m not in my right mind and transport me anyway. I don’t want any part of your stupid study.”

DeTarlo pretended to be preoccupied with taking notes and didn’t let his words register immediately.

“Why do you feel that way?” she asked without looking up.

Aidriel smiled bitterly and scratched at the back of his head. He knew the orderly was watching his every move like a hawk, and though the doctors had insisted he stay in bed, Aidriel just couldn’t. He was getting stir-crazy.

“I didn’t know this was about my feelings,” he commented snippily.

“It’s my job to evaluate your mental state.”

“Last time I checked, I was still pretty sane.”

“Then why did you attempt to take your own life?”

Aidriel exhaled deeply. For a brief moment he became very sad before pulling himself together.

“My mistake was botching something simple,” he stated impassively. “No one ever wonders how long I can put up with this. I’ve been trying to convince everyone for twelve years that I’m serious and this is real, but you just ignore it. You’re all wasting time trying to figure it out, but no one’s *that* unlucky.”

“Have you told Chester Williams?”

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