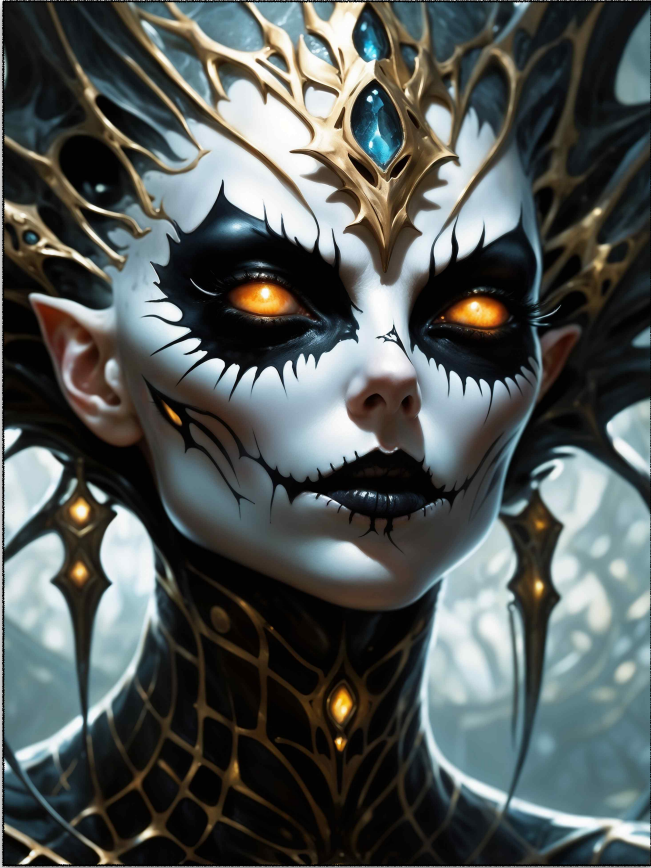


# PROLOGUE: THE DARK MOTHER



*Reality twisted violently, the floor crumpling like a  
discarded piece of paper.*

“Ana...” The name whispered through the messy flat, an otherworldly breath so remote and spectral it might have been a serpent sliding over a decaying crypt in an age-old cemetery. A murmur so faint it became a withered echo of its origin. “Ana...”

“Huh? What?” Ana’s voice cut through the silence, her sleep disrupted. Her heart hammered against her ribs like a merciless metronome, her skin damp with chilling perspiration. Her body resisted the instinctive urge to sit upright, to face an invisible foe. Instead, an unseen clamp tightened around her jaw, forcing her teeth together until they ground against each other. A strangled cry lodged in her throat, froth and saliva seeping past gritted teeth.

Just another seizure... Fuck. Why me? But did I hear my name? “Arrgh!”

She stopped fighting or analyzing; she needed to endure this wild ride until its end. She yielded to the pain radiating from her contorted spine, spreading like a rampant blaze across her skin. Within seconds, the feverish affliction sparked at the ends of her tingling extremities and flooded her consciousness with hallucinations of celestial bodies— or perhaps a warped, shadowy cosmos. An inky abyss, speckled with twinkling constellations and spiraling starry formations, cradled a lackluster orb akin to a scuffed jet-black marble. Suddenly, a gust of gritty power swept across the planet’s crust, reverberating a tremor throughout the globe before it echoed into the silent void with an ominous vibration, a sound somehow heard in space: “Ana...”

She either lost consciousness or was submerged in sensory overload for an indeterminate period. Reality returned to her in disjointed fragments of sight.

After such ordeals, Ana knew she should get up and check herself for injuries. But right now, she couldn't. She lay there, staring at the ceiling, her mind spinning like a pinwheel. She waited for the telltale sting of fresh bruises or cuts to make themselves known. Nothing so far. The ceiling's stucco swirls contorted into enigmatic shapes, bathed in the urban glow filtering through her curtains. They mirrored the bizarre cosmos from her feverish hallucination. Had there been a voice as well? Sudden nausea washed over her, threatening to spill out any second now—that was what finally snapped her out of her stupor. With a groan, she forced herself to sit up and swing her legs over the side of the bed, ignoring the sharp spikes of pain that shot up her spine like a demonic pianist playing a discordant tune.

This never gets easier. Hydration and medication—go.

Leaning heavily on the wall, Ana limped past a window pulsing with the strobe of passing car lights. Each burst of illumination sent another throb through her skull. She managed to stagger into the kitchenette, navigating the tight space of her studio apartment with difficulty. Her hand fumbled in the cabinets for her pill bottle, always kept within reach, while she groped for a glass with her other hand.

Instead of success, she was met with the sharp clatter and crash of something falling into the sink. Damn it. That was probably one of her mugs. As a librarian living paycheck to paycheck, replacing kitchenware wasn't high on her priority list. Everything held value when you were scraping by.

Careful now, she found a tumbler, filled it clumsily with water, and downed two Carbatrex pills before exhaustion claimed her, dragging her down onto the cool linoleum floor. She slumped against the cabinets, legs splayed before her while focusing on slow, measured breaths.

Soon enough, warmth bloomed in her chest like a shot of peppermint schnapps, and the tremors in her hands stilled their frenzied dance. The medication worked fast but came at a cost—it left Ana feeling foggy and detached for most of the day—an effect she loathed about this new prescription.

It led to darker thoughts, too, questioning whether Dr. Marrow—whose name she often joked about—might not just be some modern-day necromancer experimenting on his unwitting patient with some mystical concoction.

Still, the specters of the undead and shadowy spellcasters were nothing more than figments of her imagination, born from a few summers immersed in live-action role-playing. Alas, a mortifying seizure incident a few years ago had deterred her from attending the yearly LARPCon in San Sorento. She no longer communicated with her old acquaintances—they'd severed ties just as swiftly. With a detached sense of realization, she acknowledged her only companions were her psychiatrist and the comforting blue pills that lulled her into oblivion.

Though Ana had a deep-seated aversion to the way these meds messed with her, she couldn't deny their effectiveness. The side effects were practically non-existent; no extra pounds piling on, no bladder issues or erratic mood swings—just the occasional sensory glitch. This wasn't unfamiliar territory for Ana; she'd dabbled in everything from coke to

micro-dosing shrooms before turning to prescription drugs. So when the shadows rolled down from the ceiling in a silky wave, coiled like a serpent ready to strike above her bed, then burst outwards like smoke billowing from an unseen fire, Ana didn't panic immediately. But as that shadow morphed into a smoky orb at the height of its arc, anxiety began nipping at her nerves. Could it be that popping two pills instead of the recommended one had sparked a slight drug overdose? The doc's instructions were clear: just one pill daily. She wiped at her weary, red-rimmed eyes and took another look. That's when the ghostly skull that had formed stared back through two glimmering points of light that flared into golden eyes.

Creak! Smash! Whoosh!

Reality twisted violently, the floor crumpling like a discarded piece of paper. The nearest window detonated inward, shimmering shards of glass suspended in a stunning nebula as otherworldly light blasted through the imploding walls. A detonation catapulted the bookcase through the yawning void where the window once stood. Ana's scream echoed around her, her nails scraping against the wooden cabinets as gravity seemingly went haywire—she was lost amidst this spiraling pandemonium.

Gale-force winds screamed through her collapsing apartment, tiles ripped away, and cabinets disintegrated into dust. She clung to her kitchen sink, a terrified shriek tearing from her throat as she watched chunks of her home being devoured by a glimmering abyss. Then, that feeble anchor was consumed by an insatiable cosmic appetite. Even sound fell victim to this black void, leaving behind a haunting silence that made Ana's ears throb with pressure.

Once the whirling chaos ceased, Ana found herself marooned within the cosmic void. She stood solitary on a shard of celestial rubble, remnants of stardust crunching beneath her feet, clad only in socks. The void swallowed every familiar comfort, replacing them with an alien terrain where darkness held dominion. Her gaze scaled the heavens, wide and swimming in a potent brew of awe and terror as it wrestled with the immense figure that loomed above.

From the abyss, an entity of unfathomable scale ascended—her grandeur dwarfing even the loftiest skyscrapers to mere footnotes in her majestic presence. Her form was swathed in cosmic tapestry, galaxies trapped within her silhouette like tempests ensnared in crystalline orbs. Crowned with a pulsating golden tiara, an obsidian skull rested atop this celestial titan—an eerie illusion bereft of mouth, its sockets ablaze with radiant starlight.

The crown was no ordinary adornment; it was a menacing weave of arachnid limbs crafted from stellar minerals, their joints twitching ominously as though primed for sudden action. From beneath this spectral countenance unfurled a myriad of appendages—limbs or tentacles perhaps—their substance oscillating between the tangible and ethereal like wisps of smoke performing ballet in capricious gusts.

Each languid movement sent shockwaves rippling through space-time itself, causing the stellar tapestry behind to tremble and distort. Beyond this gargantuan Goddess hung an eerily familiar black planet suspended in the lifeless vacuum. Its jet-black surface greedily absorbed

all light around it, creating a menacing backdrop for the Goddess's spectral grandeur.

Ana knew she was witnessing only a fraction of this entity's boundless might; its full majesty could fracture her fragile human comprehension into shards. Yet she remained rooted by the awe-striking spectacle unfolding before her eyes, entranced despite fear—poised at the intersection of divine beauty and cosmic terror. I hear you, Dark Mother. Finally, I hear you. I'll find him. I will. I will, she repeated like a mantra amidst the swirling chaos.

The Dark Mother reached out further to her unsuspecting devotee, her edicts delivered as blasphemous detonations that shook Ana's very atoms. Each word tore at fragments of her psyche until she was consumed by oblivion.

Roused from sleep for a second time that night, Ana's scream broke free from her cringing body—a prolonged, guttural wail that echoed through the thin walls and stirred her apathetic neighbors into pounding on shared barriers while casually speculating about possible homicide next door. She felt as if she had died—or at least part of her had been extinguished under the oppressive summons of that entity.

Once her voice had rasped into silence, she huddled deeper into herself—a whimpering heap stained with tears. When she finally summoned enough strength and sanity to move, she rose and navigated through the deceptive cleanliness of her studio apartment to clothe herself.

The entity hadn't spoken in any language known to humans; its demands were more instinctual than verbal—its will branded onto her consciousness through blinding

jolts of pain searing into memory. Amidst the engulfing madness, four humanoid shapes emerged in stark relief against the insanity around them—an inexplicable connection binding them all together—and Ana accepted this uncanny reality.

Wolf. Find, it had commanded. Or translated into more familiar terms: Find the Wolf.



# *PART 1: FOUR DIRECTIONS*

## CHAPTER 1: PRODIGAL SON



*“Listen to your spirit. Raven is cunning. He sees what many do not.”*

Sullen, muttering heavens menaced with rain that refused to fall, cast an oppressive sense of inevitability over the assembly gathered within the melancholic funeral estate. In a chamber as opulent as a grand theatre, from a polished pulpit before an ocean of grieving faces, Malachi delivered his eulogy for Auntie Jewel amidst a room largely devoid of tears. This stoicism sprouted not from bitterness towards the departed but from the joyous spirit Jewel had kindled in every encounter.

The multitude, originating from all reaches and layers of the Great White North and territories far more southern, composed of Indigenous people, urban dwellers, rural folk, wealthy scholars, impoverished and uneducated individuals—all had come to honor the memory of the nurse whose profound benevolence had healed their bodies and spirits alike. What an intricate tapestry she spun, mused Malachi, observing the subtle nods across the crowd as he hovered on the fringes of his own consciousness. Ethereal and detached, he concluded his speech and drifted away from the pulpit while another mourner ascended to take his place.

Like an apparition, he lingered by Jewel’s casket throughout the afternoon, whispering hollow condolences to those who offered their sympathies for his loss and their gratitude for his departed auntie. In solitude, his gaze fell upon the open coffin and the serene, slightly waxen image of the raven-haired beauty resting within, who no gallant hero would ever rouse from her eternal slumber. The

mortician had skillfully crafted a lifelike facsimile of Jewel; however, her lustrous tresses were as deceptive as the notion she might stir at any moment—cancer had stripped her bare of her hair.

Despite the savagery of her demise—gasping for air through a plastic conduit forcefully inserted into her throat, convulsing and unresponsive—Malachi contemplated that leukemia was arguably more merciful than many fates endured by those in his community. Women who managed to leave the reserve often did so in mortuary shrouds or disappeared along I-66—or rather, I-666 as it was locally dubbed—the desolate artery slicing through Innsmont and extending across most of Canada.

The echo of a past sorrow clouded Malachi's mind, pulling him back to the somber memory of his last encounter with death: Tamara's funeral. She had been an effervescent soul, her dreams as vibrant as her personality, always talking about escaping the confines of the reservation and making it big in the fashion world. But those dreams had led her down a path that ended not on a glamorous runway but in a desolate ditch between Innsmont and Toronto.

His heart clenched at the recollection of Sherrif Longfeather recounting how they'd found her—life extinguished too soon, her body marred by the savage teeth of wild dogs and an anonymous killer's cruelty. It was as if no matter how high or far any young Indigenous boy or girl dared to dream, the reservation's invisible chains always found a way to drag them back.

Malachi couldn't help but wonder if his attempt at freedom was just another illusion waiting to shatter.

“I need some air,” said Malachi to no one.

Numerous individuals had dispersed, assembling in the softly lit parlors visible through the ornate archways flanking both sides of the chapel. Eschewing company, he seized his jacket—draped over a nearby pew—and purposefully strode down the aisle, eased open the weighty doors, and ventured into a dimly lit corridor. A hushed tranquility enveloped him, rendering the funeral and its subdued chatter nearly imperceptible. He ambled past obscured windows, shrouded in folded velvet drapes, which overlooked a verdant lawn trembling beneath a nebulous hand from the heavens poised to grasp it, reminiscent of one of Rembrandt’s more somber works.

Christ, you’re pretentious, thought Malachi, smiling at his pedantry.

Jewel had been the catalyst for his intellectual blossoming and, perhaps, his elitism. His beloved late auntie had managed to carve out moments from her already brimming schedule to engage him in profound discourse almost every twilight, diving into his scholarly debates or artistic musings. But she claimed she was left with no alternative. After all, his first articulate sentences had spilled from his lips when he was just a toddler of two years. By three, he was harmonizing with the radio in a high-pitched soprano, his voice ascending into the very soul of the melody. At four, his diminutive fingers plucked their initial chords on a guitar. As they witnessed this remarkable transformation, Jewel and Cynthia exchanged an understanding glance—a shared acknowledgment that they were blessed with a child who surpassed the mundane—a virtuoso or maestro, perhaps. They immersed him in music,

acquainting him with various instruments without nudging him towards any specific path. Let the clay shape itself—they were merely conduits for the Creator’s masterpiece.

Cynthia often recited age-old proverbs like that as if passing down sacred wisdom. In contrast, Jewel eagerly embraced modernity, leaving those old traditions behind, even turning back to faith as she neared her end. Cynthia’s face had tightened in indignation as her sister’s will was read aloud—a Christian funeral, Jewel had requested.

Malachi continued his journey down the corridor, a gentle chuckle escaping him at the stark disparity between two of his beloved aunties when an imposing oil canvas affixed to the wall seized his attention and provoked an unexpected surge of melancholy within him. He paused, scrutinizing the woman depicted in a flowing white dress, her hair a dark cascade suspended in an obscure abyss. Was she deceased? Submerged? Another adage from Cynthia reverberated within him—a verse.

Oh, woman in the deep, not mortal mother nor daughter  
But Mother of Ojibwe, beckoning from ancient water  
She dreams of the four; no god can save  
An effigy of flames in remembrance of brave  
Sage and light burning bright at night’s hour  
Creator grant us the valor to face ancient power

The origins of the verses in her anthology of tales remained a secret Cynthia kept locked away, as did the curious echo of ancient Anglo-Saxon that reverberated through them. One day, an urgency she refused to explain caused her to rush from their shared abode. In her wake, he

stumbled upon a poem hastily scrawled on a piece of parchment. The words danced before his eyes but felt incomplete—like a fragment torn from a larger tapestry.

Years later, during the frost-kissed heart of Yuletide season, he found her nestled in an armchair. A glass of brandy rested loosely in her hand, its amber liquid nearly forgotten as sleep claimed her. Her lips moved subtly, whispering the same fragmented verse he'd discovered years ago.

Yet despite his gentle prodding and earnest inquiries, she never unveiled the significance or birthplace of those cryptic words. Instead, she met his every question with a ferocity that was as unyielding as unexpected.

Eventually, Malachi shook off the image's icy enchantment and swiftly moved down the corridor; suddenly, inhaling became strenuous, and the air was harshly permeated with mortuary aromas. He stepped into an ornate entrance hall where his footfalls echoed against checkered tiles. A grandfather clock tucked away in a shadowy niche beneath a grand bifurcating staircase sounded an additional pulse. Overhead, a crystal chandelier shimmered while Tiffany lamps bathed the area with soft orange light, and plush sofas and armchairs beckoned invitingly.

Despite this opulence, Malachi's discomfort hadn't eased since encountering the painting, and this luxurious ambiance seemed eerily deceptive—akin to a Venus flytrap's scent. His heart pounded erratically, and his palms grew clammy. Was this what a panic attack felt like? He dashed across the room and flung open the heavy door leading

outside into an atmosphere that seemed more twilight than daylight.

The refreshing breeze thankfully calmed him down considerably. Leaning against one of the large pillars on the porch allowed him to regain control over his nerves. Time slipped by unnoticed, like grains of sand falling meaninglessly through an hourglass. When Auntie Jewel passed away, the world seemed to have lost some vibrancy. Malachi wondered if life would ever regain its previous luster. As melancholic as the overcast sky, he heard the door opening and closing several times while shadowy figures strolled past him down the stairs, occasionally acknowledging him. Regardless, he didn't turn around or respond to any newcomers nor tear his gaze away from the mist-enshrouded fields and forest that held an air of intrigue.

Malachi fixed a resentful gaze upon the sky, where his auntie was said to have ascended. He funneled all his sorrow and fury into that single, searing look. I wish it would just rain. Noah's fucking flood. Wipe the whole world clean. Abruptly, the heavens rumbled in response, illuminated by an intense white phosphorescence while a forceful gale shoved him against the pillar. Shouts of surprise echoed as people stumbled and slipped on the parking lot's surface. A woman's handbag was whisked away like a rogue kite by the wind's whimsy. After a brief frenzy, tranquility returned, befitting the somber atmosphere of a funeral once more. Malachi chuckled nervously at the absurd idea that he had somehow commanded this atmospheric tantrum.

The familiar scent of Cynthia—vanilla laced with a hint of pepper—hinted at her patient presence behind him before she broke his brooding silence.

“Thought I saw you sneak off,” she commented.

“Had to stop pretending for a bit. You know: that everything is alright. The circle of life and death and all that crap.”

“We are part of a cycle, little Raven.”

The pet name she had given him after an intense spiritual journey, his first sweat, failed to lift his spirits today. “I’m not little anymore.”

“Big man now, all grown up at twenty-one,” she retorted with her usual sharpness contrasting her deceased sister’s gentler demeanor. “Spends one year in university for the gifted and thinks he’s unraveled all the mysteries of our Creator’s vast green world.”

“It’s a college for the arts, not a university.”

“You always have some clever remark ready. Keep talking like this, and you’ll miss out on important things over your inflated ego.”

“Why are we arguing?”

“We aren’t arguing; you’re just blabbing.”

His lips curled into a smile; Cynthia’s confrontational nature had managed to penetrate his gloom. Her knack for challenging behaviors and bad moods often mended more relationships than it damaged. He turned towards the attractive woman, her hair neatly pulled back, dressed in a suit reminiscent of a K.D. Lang impersonator. Yet her face radiated an enduring femininity despite its weathered beauty. She extended her arms, and he gratefully accepted the offer of an embrace.



“I’m sorry, Auntie Cynthia.”

“All is forgiven.”

“I just feel so restless right now. And I miss her.”

“You’ll keep missing her today and tomorrow until you two are reunited, which I hope is far in the future.”

Malachi let his pent-up grief flow freely as tears streamed down his cheeks, dampening his auntie’s lapels. Before he could completely break down into a sobbing wreck, he pulled away and wiped his eyes and nose on his sleeve before sliding on sunglasses from his pocket.

“Isn’t it a bit dark for those?” Cynthia asked.

“I feel like hiding today.”

Malachi surveyed the parking lot, which was congested with vehicles and sprinkled with a few mourners departing now that the ceremony had concluded. “I think that’s Mr. Miller down there. He’ll probably give me a lift to the bus stop. When I get home, I can drown my sorrows with all those Goddamn casseroles in the fridge.”

“You sure you don’t want to wait? I’ll only be another hour or so.”

“Nah, it’s fine. Baamaapii.” (Later.)

Malachi wrapped himself into his windbreaker, offered his auntie another embrace, then descended the stairs. A debilitating flash seized him, causing his knees to buckle, and he paused to steady himself. The forest ahead seemed threatening, fog unfurling from the trees like an exhale of a dragon. A clap of thunder cautioned him against venturing further.

The last instance of such profound gut feeling gripping him was when he’d discovered Jewel’s affliction. Upon answering the phone, Malachi had been sure that Jewel

was going to deliver news of a terminal prognosis. A similar certainty had saved him as a child when he'd stubbornly refused to eat the daycare's egg sandwiches, which later caused a salmonella outbreak among a dozen children—resulting in two fatalities. This uncanny instinct had also shielded him throughout his life in the crime-ridden reserve, guiding his social choices and helping him avoid precarious situations. His knack for discerning genuine affection from pretense and truth from falsehood seemed to stem from an extraordinary perception of empathy, synchronicity, and human predictability. Yet, he dismissed these moments of serendipity as cognitive prowess rather than subscribing to the mystical notions that dictated Cynthia's worldview—spirits, dreams, destiny, magic. He considered himself highly intuitive but not a psychic medium.

“Malachi?” Cynthia's voice broke through his thoughts.

“Just a chill,” he responded dismissively.

“You sure?”

Humoring her superstitions momentarily, Malachi honed his senses toward their path ahead. When no threats materialized, he felt foolish for prioritizing mysticism over logic.

“Listen to your spirit,” urged Cynthia as she moved closer to place a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Raven is cunning. He sees what many do not.”

Nonsense. The one instance when he'd sought divine intervention from his ancestors and their gods—for a miracle or just another day with Auntie J all he'd received was proof of the absurdity of trusting ethereal protectors. So he shrugged off Cynthia's hand nonchalantly and

plugged in his earphones—the cacophonous string music drowning out her pleas for conversation—and her words fell on ears rendered deaf by choice.

As thunder rang ominously overhead, he remained oblivious to the raven soaring above them and its echoing cries.

# CHAPTER 2: THE WALKERS



*You haven't even scratched the surface of insanity. I could give you a proper tour, thought Brock.*

A fierce storm ravaged Innsmont, emerging from a sinister, swirling eye embedded in the darkened clouds. A claw of thunderous darkness enveloped the land from the creaking Lover's Lane bridge to the distant glow of Innsmont in the east and the scattered modular homes near the thrashing river to the west. Creatures and humans alike quaked in their shelters as the tempestuous winds lashed out, toppling ancient trees with resounding cracks, scattering their broken limbs across the treacherous road slick with rain. In the distance, sporadic flashes of eerie light pierced through the blackened sky above the vast evergreen forest known to the First Peoples as wanní'maj-manidoo: the Devil's Trap, a name that seemed fitting on this ominous night.

The storm exuded a palpable sense of malevolence, as if nature sought retribution against its inhabitants, reminiscent of the tragic floods of 1999. At a weathered bus stop, Malachi contemplated the history and spectral legends that enshrouded these woods. Despite his attempt to appear composed in his sunglasses and behind a speckled plexiglass barrier, he strained his eyes for any glimmer of approaching headlights amidst the obscurity. The relentless symphony of rain and wind outside harmonized with Beethoven's turbulent 9th symphony flooding his earphones, inducing a contemplative hush within him.

While Malachi usually found solace rather than fear in nature's might, tonight was different. A chill crept down his spine as he buried his hands deeper into his jacket, acknowledging that he was not immune to nature's awe-inspiring yet terrifying power.

Where is the Goddamn bus? I should've waited for Cynthia.

A gleam surfaced amidst the rain, catching his attention. He ventured into the deluge, peering through misty sunglasses to identify the phantom image ahead. A flash of light flickered again, gentler, bluer, and not from an automobile as he had initially assumed. An inexplicable wave of nausea-inducing dread surged in his throat, and a prickling sensation spread across his skin. Disturbed, he retreated to the shelter, his gaze locked onto the distant fog that seemed to swell and roll like smoke under his watchful eyes. What was lurking out there? Was he succumbing to paranoia? His body was buzzing with an ominous warning. Cynthia's voice echoed in his mind: Listen to your spirit.

He remained frozen by superstitions for a moment longer before they shattered in the absence of any immediate disaster. Lightning illuminated the woods, the road, and what appeared to be headlights in the farthest reaches of grey visibility, dismissing his anxiety as baseless. Sighing heavily, he reminded himself that emotions were not facts and reason triumphed over belief in the unknown when it came to leading a productive life.

The back-and-forth trips to the funeral home and reservation, followed by an unending stream of mourners expressing their condolences, had made this day seem interminably long. He was drained—his nerves frayed and emotions raw. He slumped on the bench, finally acknowledging his fatigue. He regretted assuring Cynthia that he would find his way home alone because every decision he made in Innsmont seemed destined for misfortune.

I'm here without Auntie J now... that's my reality... I wish I hadn't come back to this hellhole... I love those ladies, but I doubt I'll ever return here again... I miss you so much, Auntie J...

Thump! Thump!

Startled by these strange sounds, which felt like two taps on his back, Malachi removed his headphones and scanned the surroundings. The rain had lightened to a drizzle, yet the fog stubbornly persisted. An eerie blue glow began to seep across the landscape, illuminating the murkiness that seemed to twist and coil with serpentine forms. His skin prickled in response.

“What the fuck...?” A pungent, briny stench enveloped him, causing him to wrinkle his nose in disgust. “What’s that smell?”

Clink! Clink!

A sound akin to the gnarled talons of unseen beasts raking against the bus stop’s roof sent a jolt of terror through Malachi. He spun around in a desperate attempt to locate the source, his heart pounding like a war drum in his chest. Fear coiled around his throat and stomach like serpents, squeezing tighter with every passing second. The serene strains of Beethoven from his abandoned headphones were swallowed by his primal scream, creating a symphony of madness as the composition reached its feverish peak.

The abomination that clung to the glass mirrored his cry—an unholy echo reverberating through the night. It was an abhorrent fusion of octopus and spider, casting its monstrous shadow over Malachi’s fragile sanctuary. Its formless limbs sprouted from a bloated body marred by

pulsating pink sores that left viscous trails on the glass—  
were they mouths?

The creature possessed more legs than nature intended for any arachnid, grotesque appendages that stretched long and sinuous as if made from rubbery nightmares. They were studded with horn-like protrusions and cancerous growths that flexed with an unnatural strength capable of shattering the bus stop's glass into deadly shards. Each movement it made was accompanied by a sickening squelch—a chilling soundtrack to Malachi's impending doom.

Screeching in terror, Malachi stumbled backward, desperately seeking an escape route but unable to tear his gaze away from this abhorrent creature smearing ink-like secretions over the glass. Its mottled legs were crushing the metal frame as if it were made of foil while its multitude of fish-eyed stalks protruding from a spiny headpiece seemed fixated on him.

I see you...it seemed to communicate.

In sheer terror, Malachi wet himself.

The creaking of the bus stop signaled its imminent collapse. Malachi sprinted blindly into an unstable, alien world, crying for help. Behind him, he could hear the crunching destruction of the structure and the wet slurping sounds of a monstrous entity pursuing him in heavy, awkward leaps akin to a boneless rubber demon.

Hiss!

Overwhelmed by instinctive fear, he dropped to his knees just in time to dodge a large, moist mass that sailed past his head. It landed on the asphalt before him, and he scrambled forward and sideways to evade the sticky white substance, which was writhing like a snake pit reaching out



for him. He hadn't forgotten about the earth-shaking monstrosity behind him, either.

His sanity was teetering on the brink as his heart pounded in his ears; he couldn't stop tripping over himself. As he frantically searched for refuge like a panicked horse trapped in a burning barn, he noticed an uncanny sky above—a strip in the fog streaked with purple tears, black comets, and pulsating constellations—and realized this was not his Earth.

From within the depths of this dark night echoed slithering movements and scuttling sounds from more spider-like horrors similar to his pursuer. A brutal, horrifying end felt imminent, yet strangely enough, the rhythm of his pounding heart seemed almost soothing amidst this terror.

While Malachi's body moved on autopilot, his consciousness teetered on the edge of insanity. Yet something ancient and tribal within responded to this rhythm of fear—perhaps even attracted by it. With whatever senses remained intact, Malachi heard a loud rustle followed by a screech as loud as colliding trains—a cacophonous caw? Then came a gust of darkness that propelled him forward.

Honk! Honk! Malachi, caught in a sudden eruption of blinding radiance, tripped over his feet and crashed onto the hard, sodden pavement. A flurry of dark snow swirled around him in the rain; as it brushed against his face with a feathery touch, he realized it might not be snow. As he struggled to regain footing on trembling legs soaked in cold rainwater, slipping like a newborn foal slicked with its birth fluids, his mind was a whirlpool of disoriented thoughts.

His knees throbbed with pain, as did his hands and arms that had taken the brunt of his fall. The slap-slap-slap of approaching footsteps reached his ears, followed by an unfamiliar voice—a man—inquiring if he was injured. I'm alive. I'm okay. I'm okay, echoed in his brain on an endless replay. But he was far from being okay; nothing would ever be okay again.

The stranger's form blurred through Malachi's dizzying vision as he offered support in a warm, sturdy embrace.

"Are you hurt?" the man asked, concern lacing his deep, calming voice.

Malachi tried to respond but found himself incapable of forming words; instead, sobs tore out from him uncontrollably. The stranger simply held him tighter as tears streamed down Malachi's face.

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"Are you sure I can't take you to the hospital or something?"

Cracks in the sky...gateways to the otherworld. A grotesque beast lurked along a bizarre road. An ancient melody pulsed within him as he ran, a familiar tune that he could summon at will—

Malachi shook his head hard, trying to shake off the vivid nightmare. His fingers caught on something hidden in his hair. He pulled out a black feather, perhaps from a crow or raven, an oddity he couldn't explain, though a vague memory of feathers brushing against him on the pavement lingered. A rain of feathers? Ridiculous. He pocketed the feather, hoping his fellow traveler wouldn't notice anything more strange about him. Memories of his ordeal came and

went like waves of fever, making him frantic and hot one moment and cold the next—like now. His companion saw him shivering and turned up the heat from an old chrome dashboard. The man’s kindness helped pull him out of his daze, reminding him that he’d been asked a question.

“No, just need to make it home,” Malachi responded. “My auntie can take care of me.”

“Sorry that I can’t help you reach her.”

Right, a person without a cell phone in this day and age? Could this night get any weirder? Malachi wondered, recalling his earlier inquiry.

“We’re not far from the reservation,” the man offered, noticing a mileage sign in the pitch dark. “We should be there soon.”

Malachi was momentarily speechless. He scrambled for something more to say, but his world had spun off its axis. Reflecting on recent events, he considered that Auntie J’s death or academic stress might have sparked some sort of psychotic breakdown. His rational explanations felt weak in light of the hazy visions of Hell and audible slithers from unseen horrors that continued to haunt him. A violent shiver coursed through him, and he burrowed into the jacket he’d been given. Eventually, warmth penetrated his wet clothes but brought with it the unpleasant smell of urine and a wave of embarrassment at his current state.

He had two options: remain silent and trembling, lost in confusion for the remainder of the ride, or appreciate the kindness extended by this stranger who had rescued him.

He turned to look at his savior under the glow of dashboard lights; an impressive figure with a chiseled jawline, full mouth, prominent chin, bronze skin tone, and

an aquiline nose that lent him a regal, timeless quality—like a Viking prince. The man’s disheveled sandy-blonde hair and scruffy beard hinted at a carefree nature or perhaps indifference towards appearances. This seemed likely given his casual attire—denim jeans, t-shirt, and varsity jacket Malachi now wore (the university remained a mystery despite the leather ‘M’ on its lapel).

Malachi speculated about whether he was on an athletic scholarship, considering how easily he’d been scooped up and carried to the car. It seemed plausible that he was studying engineering, given his sturdy hands and the vintage Beetle they were in—a vehicle that felt carefully restored, much like Malachi himself.

A Viking warrior, engineering student, and savior under the cloak of darkness. The imagined biography almost made him smile, but the reality of his current situation squashed any attempt at humor. He drew a deep breath and sank into the soft leather seat, watching as the rain-soaked woods rushed past under the gentle glow of the headlights. The rain had finally stopped, although he couldn’t recall when.

The soothing murmurs of an old big-band tune on the radio and the earthy blend of citrus and patchouli from his companion’s aftershave began to ease his anxiety. Gradually, he noticed less of his smell and fewer heart-pounding moments of terror. As they continued down the road, he found himself fighting off sleep.

“Don’t doze off,” warned his companion. “Just in case you’ve hit your head.”

“Yeah.” Malachi righted himself, adjusting his askew sunglasses. They were slightly warped at one arm, yet in

better condition than his shattered phone and throbbing knee and side—the casualties of his fall. “I believe I’m okay, though. Thank you.” For hoisting me from the asphalt. For saving me from extraterrestrials or a mental breakdown. He dismissed those thoughts hastily. “Sorry, I missed your name.”

“Brock.”

“Malachi.”

“That’s an ancient name. Biblical.” Brock spun around to flash him a swift, captivating grin that held a tinge of wildness—his canines and incisors were quite large, long, and white.

“Your vehicle isn’t exactly contemporary either.”

Brock affectionately patted the dashboard. “They don’t make them like this anymore: reliable, robust.”

“Sorry about the leather,” Malachi blurted out, a touch of panic in his voice. “I usually don’t—”

Brock cut him off with a dismissive flick of his hand.

“Man, I’ve had my fair share of wild nights. You could say I was hunting for the full-on uni experience—even if... Nah, scratch that. Never got behind the wheel pissed, but I’ve woken up in this very car more times than I can count. Even chucked up all over the seat you’re warming right now; it scrubbed up alright.” As they sped down the road, a sign loomed out of the darkness: Tecumtek First Nations. “Five more miles, and we’ll have you home to some clean pants.”

The joke lingered awkwardly between them.

“My sense of humor is awful, sorry,” Brock admitted.

Malachi wasn’t offended; survival on the reservation demanded a thick skin akin to a grizzly bear and an

appreciation for crude humor. “My Auntie J always said you either laugh or you cry.”

“Wise woman,” Brock responded earnestly. “She’ll be relieved to know you’re safe.”

“She’s dead—just came from her funeral.”

“Shit.”

They laughed, and the shared humor gave Malachi a sense of normalcy and grounding. He was alive, breathing, and would make sense of tonight’s eerie escapade with Auntie Cynthia’s guidance. His curiosity about his peculiar rescue also lingered; Brock’s story and continued camaraderie could illuminate the enigma.

“So you’re on break from college or university, too?” He asked, recalling the mention of uni, drunken exploits, and vomiting.

Brock’s forehead creased in thought. “Something like that.”

Their cordial exchange chilled abruptly like a winter gust against bare skin, giving way to an uncomfortable silence.

Beneath Brock’s calm exterior, an internal conflict roiled. Don’t ask me how I ended up here. Don’t ask about my nightmares. Or the talking snake or any of that insane stuff. Don’t ask me how I knew I’d find you stranded on a highway during a storm. Don’t ask me anything because I don’t have any goddamn answers. Do you? Brock’s gaze lingered on Malachi, taking in his slight figure swathed in the bulk of two jackets. His face bore a sculpted beauty akin to that of an artist’s muse; a sultry pout graced his lips, contrasting his sharp features. A cascade of raven-black hair tumbled down to his shoulders, framing him like a wild,

untamed portrait. Perched askew on his nose were sunglasses that attempted to shroud the captivating emerald eyes beneath them—eyes Brock knew all too well.

Those very eyes had invaded Brock's dreams time and again. In those ethereal encounters, Malachi was more than just an enigma; he was a shaman weaving spells of enchantment, a shapeshifter morphing into creatures beyond comprehension, and a guide leading Brock through labyrinths of mystery. He was a siren whose call echoed across realms, pulling Brock inexorably towards him—a potent call that had drawn him halfway across the world.

None of this makes sense, he thought silently.

Before Malachi could notice his distraction, Brock refocused on the steering wheel. Perhaps their destination would explain the tormented confusion clouding his life.

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The vehicle jostled along a mire-laden path, the solitude stretching into eternity. Every so often, decrepit off-white dwellings, perched on concrete stilts and bathed in the melancholic glow of flickering halogen lamps, emerged from the dense, velvety darkness of the forest flanking the car. Beyond even Brock's skilled repair capabilities, rust-consumed trucks littered many unkempt lawns. A well-kept modular home would occasionally appear, though these were rare gems amidst the decay. Wild or neglected dogs frequently darted across their path but never startled Brock; his senses alerted him to their gleaming eyes and rustling movements before they crossed his way. A palpable poverty pervaded like a bitter broth that he could almost taste. He pondered on how the tribal council had squandered wealth

from an Indian-run casino he'd heard about because no signs of prosperity were visible here.

What a depressing shithole, he thought.

"Did you say something?" Malachi roused from his semi-slumber against the window glass. He'd been drifting in and out of sleep but always alerting at each passing house to guide Brock. He thought he'd heard Brock murmur.

"No," replied Brock.

Guess I'm hearing things now, too. Great.

A familiar wave of anxiety washed over Malachi again as visions of cosmic spiders, torn skies, choking fog, and desperate flight haunted his mind. He kept his fear at bay when he recognized dirt bikes parked in a driveway they passed by—it belonged to Mary and Grace, two elders who lived together on this reserve. With their lights off and Range Rover missing from their driveway, they seemed unlikely to share their wisdom today despite Malachi's longing for their comforting presence and enriching tales.

I may have lost a mother, but I have three more...

"My auntie's house will be next on your right," he said.

Brock nodded. A heavy silence descended once more as the car continued its journey. A shadow darted from the woods, and Malachi, having faced supernatural horrors, acknowledged it as a sign and showed his respect.

"Raven," muttered Brock, who'd seen it too.

"Good eyes."

I can see things in the dark that no one else can. Brock thought for a moment before responding. "I did some lifeguarding one summer. Always on the lookout."

"That's cool," replied Malachi, sensing an opportunity to converse again: "Was it in Innsmont? Do you have family in



the area?” He still didn’t know what had brought Brock to Innsmont or led him to his rescue.

“I have no family. I’m an orphan.”

“Oh.” After a pause, Malachi shared more about himself: “That’s neat. Well, not neat—wrong word... Curious perhaps? I’m adopted, too, though I have more aunties than a boy could ever need. Jewel, Mary, Grace, and Cynthia raised and protected me since I was young.” As they approached a clearing on their right, Malachi’s heart fluttered at the sight of dream-catchers swaying under porchlight next to a familiar rocking chair outside a modular home with stone slabs laid before it. The screen door burst open as a woman rushed out brandishing a firearm.

Another orphan?

As Brock grappled with this revelation and myriad unanswered questions within him, an armed woman stood illuminated by his headlights like an antagonist from a horror film.

“Jesus!”

“No, just Cynthia,” said Malachi as he discarded Brock’s jacket and bolted from the car towards her with arms flailing: “Auntie! It’s me! I’m fine!”

The woman lowered her weapon and enveloped Malachi in a warm embrace. Still slightly shaken, Brock parked the car and stepped out onto the gravel driveway. The crisp, piney scent of untouched land washed over him as he approached the pair, whose conversation was drowned by the cacophony of crickets.

Where have you been? What happened? Who is that man? He heard them regardless of their murmuring.

Bathed in the distant light from Malachi's home and under a star-speckled sky, the woman appeared to possess an almost supernatural aura. Her blue-steel gaze cut through him more than her shotgun ever could. Her features were hardened with an elegant beauty, her jet-black ponytail streaked with silver lending her an air of wisdom rather than age. Her vibrant energy was evident in her sinewy brown arms and youthful attire—a cropped tee emblazoned with a pentagram rock logo paired with jeans on hips that would be envied by women half her age.

“Who is this zhaaganaash?” She inquired. (Who is this white man?)

“I come in peace,” Brock declared.

“Oh, this little thing?” Cynthia casually lifted the firearm she held to her side, deactivated the barrels, and enabled the safety. “You can never predict who might appear on your doorstep past midnight. I'm glad it's only you, Malachi, and your... friend.”

“Past midnight?” In the absence of a functioning phone and journeying within an antique vehicle devoid of contemporary conveniences, Malachi realized that he was oblivious to the time and had neglected to inquire. “I'm so sorry. My phone is busted and—” Tears began welling up in Malachi's eyes. The absurdity of his night, which he had yet not disclosed in any significant detail other than assuring his auntie of his safety, threatened to erupt from him in a torrent of words. Where would he commence? How much could he divulge without appearing deranged?

“Come inside; we'll have tea, and you can tell me your troubles,” Cynthia suggested.

Cynthia and Malachi pivoted around and commenced their walk towards the porch. Brock lingered behind, riddled with worries, immobilized by uncertainty and skepticism. Why am I here? What should I say? What do I do now—

“You’re welcome too,” Cynthia hollered back at him. “My raven rarely brings another animal home; I’m curious how you fit into tonight’s chaos. Vanishing for hours... You mentioned something about an accident... It’s one strange mess you’ve gotten yourself into, isn’t it, Malachi?”

The strangest, thought Malachi.

The strangest, thought Brock.

The young men shook their heads as if there’d been an echo.

*(Download Raven's Cry to continue!)*