

THOSE WHO WEAR GREEN

by

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THE NATIONAL - "TERRIBLE LOVE"

THOSE WHO WEAR GREEN - BOOK ONE

- INTERLUDE -

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THOSE WHO WEAR GREEN

~ INTERLUDE ~

MEANWHILE, OR DURING THE MIDDLE, & IN SOME WAYS, THE BEGINNING

## I

Sylvan The Magician had not seen his friend Jonas Tombstone for some time. But that was the life of a magician, one was always busy, or at least too busy for others.

This wasn't true of course. Sylvan was terribly lonely. But It was the sort of thing he was fond of saying, usually while trying to sound bored, at the sort of parties where it was hard to be invited, and even harder to find it boring. Magical parties where magical folk came to show off, and to drop the names of little-known foreign spells and enchantments. Sylvan had attended many of these. Until his recent decision to remain "celibate of all celebrations".

"I'm better in my head." he would tell well-wishers who rang him up with the newest invitations, or, "no, no I can't leave tonight I'm writing a new spellbook. Dreadfully busy." When pressed (not that he often was) but when pressed, he would tell people he had felt a change of heart, that magic was an artform, and that wanting to be seen as an artist, had nothing to do with being an artist. "I am very accomplished." he would tell his well-wishers, "and I have no time for those who are not busy also accomplishing."

This had been his official stance for some time now, ever since his last party, the invite only soiree that took place in an enchanted ballroom named Coffin Dark.

The room at Coffin Dark had been large, and yet that night everyone had clustered together, bumping into one another between screeches of feet being stepped upon, and mutterings of "Terribly sorry" or "s'yer fault!".

This was because the room, while the size of a standard or even deluxe ballroom, was pitch black. It was enchanted as well: anytime someone spoke, their face would light up, as if a torch was being held just beneath it. Sylvan hated it. Not only were his best pair of shoes being ruined--both a knight AND a vampire had tripped over him--but the darkness was a terrible way to show off his outfit. Also, Sylvan was a bit pale, and the first time he spoke, someone had shouted that he looked like a shy British lightbulb against the darkness. After this he had not dared to utter another word. Until of course, someone beside him had asked a question. Sylvan adored a good question. And he felt that any magician worth their weight in iron pyrite should feel the same. For Magicians knew the answers to all things (well, most of all things--eventually), and questions were always a chance to show off.

"What about the oranges and the lemons?" someone asked to the left of him, their face illuminated for the briefest amount of time it took to sound bored.

"I don't know that spell, but I've heard of it!" said Sylvan, feeling his face light up like a spark, but glad to have caught someone's attention.

"...er, I was asking about the magical fruit we had brought with us." said that same bored voice, now stifling a smug giggle. And then the whole room had lit up like firecrackers, as a hundred disembodied faces laughed together.

Sylvan had sworn off parties after that. And did the same the party after that, and the next one following. That was the life of a magician. It was days of back-breaking loneliness, split between nights of interrupted sleep and pretentious holidays spent drinking with strangers. It was a vicious cycle of high fashion and alcoholism, separated here and there by the occasional occult mystery or weaponless duel. Sylvan loved it as much as he grumbled about it. But the only person he ever grumbled to was his friend, The Wizard, Mr. Jonas Tombstone.

Jonas never went to parties. He liked to be mysterious.

Sylvan was young for his profession. While in his opinion, Jonas was unacceptably old, though he never looked a day over his late twenties. Jonas never mentioned his true age, but he spoke in a foreign manner, the way old people sound to younger ears. "Are you being sarcastic?" Sylvan would often ask. But Jonas The Wizard always meant what he said. And each word was chosen carefully before it was shared in a deep mumble.

By comparison, Sylvan looked older than he was. He was thirty-three. which by British and magical standards was a calm fifty, as he was fond of saying.

During some earlier adventures they had been rivals. But during a war neither of them much remembered, an uneasy truce had sprung up. Their shared enmity had blossomed into something between friendship and romance (though neither was likely to admit this). And so, if the weather was right, or some shared business cropped up, they would meet on the ninth day of the week, the name of which was known only to magical people.

Now Sylvan was waiting for his friend in one of the strangest places he had ever been. And this was saying something, because if someone could say they had been nearly everywhere, it was the magician in his best shoes and green suit, now standing amongst the snowfall and Joshua trees of a nameless place.

It was no great trick in how he got here: He had made his Kokemus Gestures.

One moment Sylvan had been standing in his modest living room, and making a shape with his fingers (one a certain mumbling wizard had taught him), and the next he was somehow stepping through his own hands and into somewhere else.

He had done this many times, often at the behest of Jonas, and often for the best reasons, some of which usually involved brunch.

But he had never landed in a place that looked like this. He knew two things about where he was standing: the first was it was not a real place at all, but a temporary domain, the sort of half-dream one visits while falling asleep; probably the last drifting thoughts of a child. He and Jonas often met in such places. Though he had to admit this one seemed different.

The second thing Sylvan knew was that it did no matter where he was, because Jonas Tombstone had told him to be here, and though it pained Sylvan to admit it, The Wizard was always right..

Standing inside the first bloom of a night's dreaming might seem impossible to anyone not versed in the strangest of arts, but for Sylvan it was nothing. He was after all, a magician. And an excellent one at that, But the real trick being performed here was not the act of a man in a green suit and brand-new (he just had to show it off) hip-length purple cape; any person with a spell or bit of bad

luck could end up in a place like this. No, the real magic had been performed by Jonas: he had found just the right dream to meet inside. This was a dual-dream. Sylvan was sure of it; the sort of dream that only happened when two memories were smashed together in the sheer act of subconscious thinking. Sylvan liked to think of it as a version of some of his own dreams growing up, the ones where all the houses he had ever lived in had combined into one large residence.

It was Jonas who had taught him the importance of finding such a dream.

"Life remembered poorly, is a door." The Wizard had told him, "There are places inside a person, you know; entrances that can be found, just past their memories. Doors which lead to other places."

This was back when Sylvan had only left his living room by thinking--that is to say, projecting his thoughts out of his body (using no small amount of alcohol, sugar, salt, and stains from the many chalk circles it took to perform such an accomplishment). Back then his visits to Jonas had been disembodied, as he pushed his spirit outside of his flesh and let it roam the many worlds of the unknown universe.

"You need to learn how to 'walk," The Wizard had said, in his gruff mumble and unplaceable accent.

Sylvan had been offended by the advice. "I know how to astral walk."

"You know how to astral crawl." Jonas said, correcting him. "Anyone can leave their bodies behind, to travel by consciousness. But who cares? Without your body you might as well be glancing at postcards."

And then Jonas had showed Sylvan how to make the Kokemus Gestures, and where to find

such doorways. "Look to where memories collapse into one another."

And so here Sylvan was, so many year later. Standing between two memories inside the mind of someone dreaming. Someone young if he had to guess. Sylvan made a few gestures in the air. Secrets could be gathered upon a fair wind, even in a dream. It only took a moment before he could feel them slithering between his fingers: strange letters strung together like banners pulled from fortune cookies.

He read the secrets carefully as they wiggled.

According to the spell he was indeed in the mind of a young boy, He tried to grab a name out of the air, but all he found was the age of the dreamer, who was twelve years old. He made a few more grabs in the air. There was nothing more about the dreamer in question, but a few hints about the dual-dream: The memory of snow falling about the place was from a certain Winter (Spokane, Washington. 1994). While the pokey landscape of Joshua trees was a slightly older memory (Palmdale, California. 1991).

And while all this should have been very fascinating, Sylvan only felt the specific annoyance of a delayed brunch. Where was Jonas? The memory of snow was beginning to ruin his homemade cape, and the eyeball he had painted on the back was sure to be a mess by now. Sylvan was beginning to worry. It was not good to linger between memories.

The Wizard had never been late before. He had always been waiting when Sylvan arrived. Always on the ninth day of the week, and always between two memories. And then, they would go have brunch together, always in the same place: the oldest and only restaurant on the Astral Plane: The Cloudburst Cantina. And so it was understandable why Sylvan would now be taken surprise by two

things which had never happened before:

The first was the realization of what had caught his eye in the distance. It was a mound of snow. And it was in the shape of a long-buried wizard. The memory of the flakes began to fall faster as The Magician trudged toward it. He glanced behind himself and found his footprints were already beginning to fade in the rising white. Even the Joshua trees were beginning to lose some of their pokier edges.

When he reached the mound of snow, Sylvan tilted his head in confusion. A strange growth had bloomed from the powder: it was nine black fingers, reaching up into the air.

As the snow continued to erase the landscape about him, Sylvan dropped to his knees, green suit be damned, and began to swipe at the mound, pulling great clumps of snow past him. Heart racing in his chest, he jumped away, stunned as he uncovered the face of Jonas Tombstone; his dark skin and blank eyes at contrast against the snow which had buried him.

“I fell asleep.” mumbled Jonas.

Sylvan, who hated to be caught unawares, shut his mouth quickly, adjusting his glasses as if this was an ordinary thing: to find a wizard sleeping under a mound of snow. And then he glared slightly, as if he did not approve.

“What do you mean, you fell asleep? I’ve been waiting in this memory for ages! My suit is now ruined!”

Jonas sat up, and pulled himself out of the snow, before leaning against a frosted Joshua Tree for support. Even like this, he looked resplendent as always, his midnight-blue cloak swimming about him like a spider-web carried on a breeze.

“I have been waiting much longer.” he told Sylvan. “As I’ve told you many times, magician,

time is more than relative. You will understand it someday.”

Sylvan brushed off his knees as he stood up, and continued to glare at his friend. “Shall we make our gestures and get on with it? I am famished and more than ready for a glass of Tiki Tea.”

But now it was Jonas’s turn to tilt his head in confusion.

“What?” Sylvan asked self consciously, “Brunch without tiki tea is just a late breakfast!”

But Jonas only pointed past his shoulder, and Sylvan turned to find the second unexpected moment in the dual-dream:

A young boy was standing in the snow behind them. He was so short the rising snow rose up to his knees. Even in his surprise, Sylvan knew who it was.

“That...is not good.” mumbled Jonas.

But all Sylvan could say was: “Dear me.”. For standing in front of them was the very child whose dreams they were currently inhabiting. “How can he be here?” he asked.

But all Jonas could say was: “It is impossible.” And his face, for the first time in their long friendship, held a look of concern.

“Hello!” said the boy. “I can’t remember my name! Am I dreaming?”

“How can he be here?” Sylvan repeated.

“The child has appeared here, in his own memories.” whispered Jonas. “Probably the result of a wizard, having fallen asleep in his mind for one-thousand telepathic years.”

Sylvan shot a glance at his companion. “You were asleep inside his mind for one thousand years? This boy is only fourteen!”

“I told you. Time moves differently in each world, and this is no more true than in the mind of

a child.”

“One thousand years?!”

“I fell asleep.” Jonas reminded him.

“Then perhaps we should leave right now and be done with it.”

Again the child called out to them. “Who are you supposed to be? I think I'm dreaming. It's snowing here but I'm not cold!”

That was when Sylvan began to notice just how much snow had fallen. Now the landscape of the dual-dream more like a blank canvas than anything else.

“Yes, it certainly does seem to be snowing a bit harder. Just what is happening here?” he asked Jonas, “The memories shouldn't change while we're between them.”

“It is becoming another place.” said Jonas. “This place is collapsing, and becoming another, called The White. We do not want to be here. Make a door with me, and let us leave.”

Sylvan shot a concerned glance behind him. “What about the boy?”

In the distance, the child had yet to move, but was now waving at them in a friendly manner.

“We take him with us.” said Jonas. “I would not leave a child, in a place as empty as this.”

“We can't take him out of his own memories!” said Sylvan. “It would drive the child insane!”

The wizard put a hand on his friend's shoulder. “If the boy is here, his mind is already lost. And at the rate of this snow, we are soon to be leaving his mind as it is. This is becoming another place. We need to hurry. Whatever happens will happen.”

“Are you talking about me?” asked the child. “What's wrong?” He had now trudged over to them. “Look, my footprints are disappearing as soon as I make 'em! Because of all the flakes! Isn't that crazy?!”

“It certainly is.” said Sylvan, mumbling to himself.

For his part Jonas kneeled down until he was staring into the child’s eyes. “I am afraid our own footprints upon you will never heal so quickly. But do not worry, there is power in broken things.”

Then both The Magician and The Wizard made their Kokemus Gestures, and a sort of hole in the air appeared just in front of them, stretching down to touch the snow. A light wind pulled at their clothing, and several flakes were sucked into the pink light of the Astral Plane.

“Woah, what is that?” asked The Child.

“Life remembered poorly, is a door.” Jonas told him. “Before you, is the shared consciousness of all things that ever thought to think. It is The Minds of The Many.”

“Don’t listen him.” said Sylvan. He couldn’t even look at the boy. “It’s an escape to brunch. Would you like to come with?”

“Um,” said The Child, thinking to himself. “I am actually pretty hungry!” said The Child.

“What a coincidence.” said Sylvan, as all three of them stepped through the doorway.

After this, the nameless place, with all it’s snow and Joshua Trees, collapsed into nothing.

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There was a blink, and then a pop: the sound of three travelers appearing.

Their feet touched down with a splash, before hitting upon firm ground. The Astral Plane was the worst of any desert landscape, except for this: covering the dirt, stretching to the infinite dawn, was an

ocean that rose to their ankles. The waters were clear as glass, and rushed past with enough force to keep the travelers on their toes. Sylvan glanced down at his shoes and sighed. He was sure they were ruined.

"Where are we?" asked The Child.

"Hallowed ground." answered Jonas.

Sylvan rolled his eyes. They had stolen a child from his own dreams (mostly by accident, he reminded himself). The least Jonas could do was explain things without a sense of mystery.

"We are standing between the thoughts of all things." he explained. "I always find it smells like home, don't you?"

"Yeah." said The Child, but his voice was small and awestruck.

Sylvan would have found it endearing, if he didn't feel so guilty.

"But." said The Child, still confused. "Is this...not a dream, anymore?"

"As I said," Jonas mumbled beside them. "hallowed ground."

"Do try to be more helpful." said Sylvan. And glaring at Jonas he shot a meaningful look in the direction of The Child.

Jonas gave a nod, more to himself than anyone else. "These are The Waters of If." he told them. "Some of us have been here before, and might have remembered not to wear such fancy shoes."

"Good clothes look good even when their ruined." Sylvan told them. "Though someone might have warned me it was Autumn in The Astral Plane--that means it's telepathic flood season," he added, before The Child could ask.

"Is it now?" asked Jonas. he was ankle-deep in the water, and did not seem bothered about his robes becoming drenched.

"I don't know how I forgot about the damn Water-Wastes." Sylvan grumbled to himself. But glancing up, he knew the truth, that it only took the sight of the astral sky to forget anything else about this place. "Just as lovely as ever." he whispered.

"Hmm. Is it?" asked Jonas. The Wizard didn't seem to be paying much attention to anything. He had one hand up over his eyes, searching the distance.

"Yes. It truly is." said Sylvan.

And it was. The clouds were roiling and cascading shapes, like bubbles boiling in a pot. But it was the colors that drew Sylvan's gaze, the sky was a rainbow that shifted from one hue to another with each passing moment.

A shout came from behind them. Sylvan jumped, and forgot about the sky.

"What is that!" shouted The Child, pointing down to the waters at their feet.

Sylvan lifted a leg in terror, before realizing what The Child was pointing at. Below them swam fish of all shapes and sizes, each of them a pearlescent white. Other things were in the water too, strange looking crabs, and shrimp, and other shelled creatures.

"They are only thoughts." explained Jonas. "And thoughts should never be feared."

"And you shouldn't be afraid to touch them, either." added Sylvan, "We will need them to find the cantina."

"Oh." said The Child. In a voice that said he was confused, but trying to play the whole thing off as disinterested.

"Grab hold." said Sylvan. "Just pick up a thought, and hold onto it-keep it down in the water." Sylvan bent toward the river and found a thought swimming in a circle around his ruined

loafers. This one was in the shape of a common carp. He made a grab for it. After three tries, the thought was in his hands. He pushed it to the desert floor, to keep the current from dragging them away. "I'll wait for you." he told The Child. "Just grab one."

Jonas glanced beside himself to find a particularly odd looking shark. He leapt at it and grabbed the fin along its back, and was swept away from quickly. Sylvan watched him disappear into the horizon, the end of his cloak waving behind him.

"Where is he going?" asked The Child.

"The same place we are." explained Sylvan in annoyance. It wasn't his fault the child was with them. It was Jonas who had fallen asleep and caused all the trouble. Sylvan didn't see why he should have all the responsibility. He gave a resigned sigh and turned to the task at hand.

"Grab a fish." he repeated gently. He was trying his best to sound kind and wise, and not as he felt, like a brunchless magician with a hatred of others.

The Child looked around before spotting a thought of his own. But before he could touch it Sylvan stopped him.

"Wait. Not that one." Sylvan gave the creature in the water an untrustworthy look as they watched it past. He had seen thoughts in the shape of every sea creature imaginable, but he had never seen one such as this: It was bleeding; the scales upon its side bent at odd angles; as he watched they fell in flakes about it, like piles of unswept confetti. Behind the thought, a trail of red was leaking like a trail of smoke through the water.

"Never mind." he told the child, just grab my hand. We can share a thought."

Sylvan felt the boy's small hand fit inside his own.

"I can hear the thought in my head!" said The Child excitedly.

"Yes." said Sylvan in agreement. "It's rather annoying, isn't it? Thoughts can be like that, sometimes."

And then he let go of the fish at his feet, just enough to let the current pull them quickly away.

Sylvan was beginning to think he could not hold his breath any longer. And then he remembered that the ocean was only a foot or so deep. And then he remembered, even more importantly, where he was. There was no need of breath in the Astral Plane. He felt the small child's hand in his own, and the scales of the their thought trying to slip away from his fingers. He could even hear the fish inside his head; the idea of it blooming along his memories:

*If The Martian could be described in just one word, it would be the word lost.*

Odd. Thought Sylvan, But without another thought the fish darted out of his hand.

Sylvan and The Child slid to a stop in the water, and stood up together in the wastes, rubbing clear water from their eyes.

"This water tastes funny." said the child. "Like...it reminds me of home."

"Yes." agreed Sylvan. "I always thought so too."

"But like...a home you lived in, like a lot time ago. I guess. Is that stupid?"

It was a mature thing to say, and Sylvan was taken aback. He licked the top of his lip and wiped his face clean. "No, you're right, of course. It does have a sort of nostalgia to it. And I don't like it."

"Did you like your home growing up?" asked the child.

Sylvan glanced down at the boy. "No."

"Me neither."

"Well there's some cold comfort."

Sylvan looked over to Jonas, sitting some ways away, and then toward the promise of brunch. They had arrived at The Cloudburst Cantina.

Thunder peeled across the wastes. Above them, the clouds were spun into a peculiar shape, like that of a bulbous lightning infested restaurant. Below this, sticking up from the water as a sort of entrance. This was an ornate frame of crystal, and set within the arch were two doors of the same material (though one of these was shattered to the point of barely resembling anything).

Jonas was sitting with his legs were crossed, and he was checking his pocket watch; it was a magical device, and he was always very secretive about it. The sides of it were blackened, and there were marks within its charred hide. These were runes which moved like insects if one looked at them too hard. Sylvan hated the object. Mostly because Jonas never let him touch it, and in all their long years together, had yet to explain its purpose.

"It is nothing. It is my one final vice." was all he ever told The Magician. "Save perhaps for my time spent with you."

But Sylvan had noticed the watch only ever seemed to appear during moments of uncertainty. In this way, seeing the watch just now was a welcome relief. If Jonas felt worried, this made Sylvan feel better about kidnapping the child. Brunch was all well and good, but how would they ever get the child back where he belonged?

"Shall we be off then, master Wizard?" he called over to Jonas. "I do believe I've earned myself a Tiki Tea."

But Jonas only continued dangling his watch in front of him, as if trying to hypnotize his own eyes. And then with one finger, he pointed past them to the broken gate of crystal. Sylvan looked past the gate, where a familiar spiral staircase would take them up into the clouds. But then his eyes noticed something else: the three of them were not alone. Someone else was here, standing at the gate with their back to them. And they seemed to be shouting at no one in particular.

“I was doing the arcane-can-can before pharaohs worshipped serpents, you fucking pharisee!” cried the stranger.

Sylvan now realized was yelling into a large conch shell, as if it were some sort of mobile device. He watched as the person shouting made a slow turn in the water, continuing to shout into the phone and stare at their own feet, unaware of three travelers who now watched with interest from afar.

Everything about the stranger was genderless. Their hair was cut in a manner which Sylvan had seen before, during a brief stint in Japan; the sort of look people would have worn in a new-wave band. But it was the rest of the stranger’s look that caught his eye: a trench coat that was cut off beneath the ribs, and beneath this, a billowing white romper, cinched at the waist and ankles. The jumpsuit was covered in drops of blood, and Sylvan could guess who had broken the door.

The Magician sighed. It was always so hard to tell if someone were crazy, or just particularly magical. “Is this one of your friends?” he whispered to Jonas. “Are you expecting anyone?”

The Wizard shook his head. “I don’t have friends.”

“Yes. That’s true.” agreed Sylvan.

Just then the person seemed to notice they were being watched, and whipped a look toward them in alarm.

“Shit.” they said into the shell, “They’re here!” then they paused as if listening to someone else’s voice, before throwing the shell up a sleeve and giving Sylvan and his friends a nervous but genuine smile. “Hey! The Padroni will see ya!” they said by way of greeting. They tossed the shell up a sleeve and walked forward. “You might know me by my traveling name, Esperanto Crown-Cutter.”

“Er, sorry. No.” said Sylvan, nodding at their outstretched hand.

“I remember that name.” said Jonas. “The Library of Doom remembers it too. The books you took, tell me, do you still have them? If so, you would do well to leave them far away from you, or the library might claim you once more.”

“Jonas! I thought that was you. Damn you look different now, what a trick!”

“The books I found in those halls have changed me, yes.” said Jonas, his voice carrying a tone Sylvan had never heard before.

“I’m sorry.” Sylvan asked the person named Esperanto Crown-Cutter, “But are my companions--am I to believe we are expected inside the cantina?” He adjusted his glasses nervously as he turned to Jonas. “Do you know anything about this?”

“No.” Said Jonas.

Sylvan glanced from the wizard, to the child who stood silently beside them. “I don’t suppose you know anything about this?”

The child shook his head slowly, his young eyes looking as if they might burst from taking in the entire ordeal. “What’s a Padroni?” he asked.

“What?” Sylvan replied, caught off guard. “It’s Italian. Come on.”

With a care, all three walked through the crystal gate, toward the spiral staircase along the other

side. If the stranger named Esperanto Crown-Cutter meant to follow them, they seemed to be waiting. Again, they were on their conch shell, shouting at someone else.

Above them, the rainbow clouds gathered into a darker and rumbling storm front. Sylvan narrowed his eyes as the wind picked up, and took care to unbutton his jacket, letting his necktie fly about with the short cape along his back. He turned to the child behind him and gave a shout against the growing weather.

“The winds of fortune! They bring us the monsoon clouds of the cantina!” Then he pointed to what he knew was probably the strangest looking staircase the child had ever seen. This was a set of hundreds of crystalline steps, without a railing and unconnected but for the spiraling shape that rose into the sky.

“We have to climb all the way up there?!” The Child shouted.

“Just step foot on the bottom!” Sylvan told him, his hands now cupped over his mouth in an attempt to defeat the wind. “Do you have any questions?!”

“Yeah!” said The Child, now also cupping his hands. “What does Padroni mean?!”

But it was Jonas who answered, his mumbling voice still louder than any storm, “It means someone who is in charge.” he told them. And with that, The Wizard walked past them, put a foot on the bottom-most stair, and was pulled by the storm, up the spiral like a mote of dust, his robes casting behind him like curtains in a hurricane.

“Woah.” said the child.

Sylvan let the child go first, and watched as he was pulled up the steps in a fit of laughter. The Magician cocked his head, wondering at the smile which had grown along his own face. It had been a strange brunch so far, but it wasn't all bad. After a moment, when he was sure The Child had already

reached the top, he let his nice ruined shoes touch the bottommost step.

And then, the wind died.

Sylvan stared around himself in confusion. And then he craned his neck to stare up at the flight of stairs, the ones he would now have to ascend on foot.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” he asked. Then glanced back at Esperanto Crown-Cutter, who only gave a shrug.

Sylvan sighed. “Well, that’s astral wind for you.” he said, consoling himself.

But before he could lift a foot, he was interrupted by the strangest sound: like a small creature trying to pull itself onto a riverbank. Sylvan looked down to find another white thought swimming past him. Only it wasn’t really swimming at all, it was floating on its side, a trail of blood following it like Jonas and his robes.

“What in creation?” mumbled Sylvan, watching the thought drift past the staircase.

But then with a crack of thunder, the storm had returned, harder than ever, and pushed Sylvan up the stairs so fast he gave a shout to rival The Child’s laughter. Higher and still higher he rose, his feet tapping and dancing along the steps as he tried to stay upright. The whole expanse of the desert and its waters now fell before him.

Then, suddenly he was there, past the steps and into the foyer of the oldest and only restaurant in the astral plane.

PART ONE - THE WHITE

## Chapter One

### The Beginning

If The Martian could be described in just one word, it would be the word lost. If he were truly pressed to use a sentence for his predicament, it would be this:

He remembered the sound of breaking glass, and then a revelation, an idea which had bloomed inside of him until he realized it was more like a type of amnesia, and he knew nothing about himself, or his life, or his purpose; only a great fear of the unknown universe.

And if The Martian could, he would have added that he thought he might be thirsty. Not for water, or anything familiar. But there was a taste in the back of his mouth. It was something he recognized, like a nostalgic smell. But for the life of him, he couldn't remember what it was. And then a name came to him, a strange memory of a type of drink: Tiki Tea. But for the life of him, he couldn't remember how he had ever heard of such a thing.

The Martian had awoken on the ground. When he had fallen asleep, he could not say. And how he had come to such a place, he could not remember. Around him there was nothing. Just an empty field of white. And stretching out before him, in every direction, was more white and nothingness. He was alive. He could feel the breath in his lungs. But everything else was gone, as if the rest of the universe had gone missing, leaving only The Martian and his concerned thoughts behind.

He propped himself up and let his eyes trail slowly from the immeasurable distance to first his feet, and then his legs. It was just more white. He could feel a sense of ground beneath himself but when he turned to look what lay under his back it was more of the same. More white and nothing. Then something dripped from his face, a small drop of blood which fell to his gloved hand and then, miraculously, fell past it, down through the nothingness beneath him. Like a pebble dropped down a well the length of eternity.

He felt along his face and found a series of small cuts which stung at inspection. He was injured and sitting in the middle of nowhere. The Martian thought about all of this, and looking back on recent events, began to recall what might have been his death.

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He pushed himself up with the tips of his gloves from the nothing. Standing felt awkward. There was something firm beneath him, not quite ground, but more like a memory. Like his feet knew to pretend there was something to stand upon. He forced himself not to look down.

Off in the distance there was nothing but white; like he was standing in the halo of a star going supernova, or stuck in a wave of polar fog. But The Martian had been in explosions and bad weather before (even managing to do both at once during an early mistake in his military career). This was something different. He was sure of it. But blinking his eyes he realized he had been about this place. And twice over as well. This place wasn't just an empty white. There was a light here too. A small brilliance emanating from nowhere and everywhere at once. He checked his boots for a shadow, to determine a light source, but found none (and just as quickly looked away from the groundless ground beneath him). And there was something else he hadn't noticed it before: he wasn't alone. There was an object sitting beside his feet. Anyone else might have seen it as a piece of junk. But to The Martian, who knew the shape from the corner of his eye, as if the object were the only thing he had ever truly loved, seeing it now was worse than the mystery of the nothingness. He gave it the saddest of glances before turning away. There would be time enough for grief in a moment.

First, there were procedures to follow. There was a communications device on his wrist. He clicked the buttons marked for help. No response. Not even the comforting hiss of silence. With a heavy sigh, he began to inspect his belongings with the care of a former naval officer. As he worked through each pocket and piece of equipment upon his person, he was disheartened to find his jetpack was out of fuel (worthless without an electrical source) yet relieved to find the revolver, which was also electric, still held a charge. A few good shots if he was careful on the trigger.

The Martian had many enemies; he would not choose to enter the afterlife without a weapon.

Next he spared a glance to his moon boots (scuffed) before unfastening his green coat (torn). He shrugged this off to check for any wounds he might have sustained during his death. This was done quickly, as he never liked disrobing. It made it harder to ignore the marks upon his skin. He

ignored them as best he could and checked himself for any new blemishes. There was a gash along his side, which thankfully had missed both his jetpack and every hidden pocket. But whatever had cut into him had also torn right through the lining, and its embroidered map of the known galaxy. The star map was impractical but was standard issue along the lining of every uniform tailored for a soldier of the British Galactic Navy (or, in *The Martian's* case, a deserter of that once hallowed tradition). He did not mind wearing it, even after he had fled the *BGN* and their damn crusades. He found the embroidery a comforting thing. He let his eyes roam over the silk and thread constellations before shrugging it back over his shoulders.

Then he checked his pockets. In one he found a small box. It was survival kit which included the following: two matches, a bar of something called “space chocolate”, various protein cubes, a wand for measuring oxygen, and a small booklet entitled:

The Astro Do's & Do-Naughts  
of  
Safe and Happy Space Travel

For the last step in his procedures, *The Martian* took an oxygen reading. He extended the wand, and waved it about in front of him. After a moment it gave a quick chime in the voice of a small child shouting *DONE!*. He checked the color of it closely. It was a bad reading, but he tried not to think about it too much as he closed the wand back up and put it away carefully. He was not surprised to find a lack of oxygen in the afterlife. But he could feel his chest rising up and down as he continued breathing in air that wasn't there. Maybe it was only force of habit that kept him breathing

like this. It would be just like him to spend an eternity reminding himself it was unnecessary.

The Martian took another confusing breath and whispered to himself for the first time since waking:

“I’m dead, alright.” he said with a sigh, and then he cast his gaze down at the object waiting beside him. “And so are you.”

#

He picked it up with one hand. It was a small metal orb the size of a sports ball. There was a lens protruding from the surface, like a telescope poking out from a bubble. And below this, on the side of the orb was a small plaque stuck along the side. The Martian had put it there himself, after a particularly harrowing adventure. On the plaque were letters, in several different languages. The letters said this:

Little 7ohn

It was a nickname The Martian had given his friend. The small robot had been a close companion for many years. And now they had even died together. It looked as if perhaps his friend had taken the worst of the death. For one thing, the robot was usually floating. Finding the orb on the ground was a bad sign, to be sure. The Martian held its casing up to an ear and listened for the tell-tale sign of a clockwork heart. But there was nothing to be heard. And then a great fear swept over The

Martian.

It was the fear of being alone.

#

The Martian sat down on the groundless ground, and checked his reflection against the side of the orb. He searched his face for signs of spectral appearance, straightened his mustache with gloved fingers, and found he looked perfectly fine for a dead man. The cuts along his face were thin. Only the one above his right eye, the one which had bled impossibly beneath him into the white, seemed to have any severe depth. But what had cut him like this? How had he come to be here?

When he was bored of waiting to look like a ghost, he clicked open the orb and looked inside. After only a moment's hesitation, he began to pull at the wires, cutting and twisting different colors together. He worked quickly for someone with no previous experience, except of course for his remedial knowledge of how to find luck when he needed it. He smiled when the orb began to click and whirl to life. But as the orb began to speak, it was not his friend that greeted him, it was the voice of someone else, as if a recording of someone's voice were being played very slowly.

It sounds crooked, thought The Martian, who knew a bad voice when he heard one. But it wasn't the strange voice that caused his smile to fade, it was the words the voice was saying. The same phrase, over and over again. They were the very last words his friend had said before they died:

“Those aren't stars, they're enemies...”

#

Long moments of time passed without measure.

The Martian had barely moved from the spot he had awoken, keeping a vigilant watch on the distance. He was beginning to trust the ground that wasn't there, enough to pace around in a pointless circle.

The useless warnings continued to echo from the orb in his hand.

--Those aren't stars, they're enemies. Those aren't stars, they're enemies--"

Something about it made him feel vulnerable, as if he were being watched. He squinted off into the unseen distance, even looking above his head, or down below his feet. Without a horizon there was no sense of scale. This place could be limitless or as small as a room. But The Martian had a feeling, deep down, somewhere primal, that this was a great and vast land, as endless as the cosmos, and as unchartable as the most unfamiliar sea.

It was hard to tell how big a circle he was pacing, but he did his best not to stray too far from where he had awoken. As he walked in his circle he made it a point to star down into the middle where he had picked up the orb, letting the invisible spot be an anchor against the rising panic of so much white. He felt as if the color could almost slip inside his pointless circle, could somehow asphyxiate him with the silence he could feel between the chanted words of his friend. The Martian shut his eyes against the white. And felt a very childish need to hide himself from the unknown.

He shook the little orb to quiet it, but it was no use. It only continued to warn him about stars and enemies. The Martian thought he might twist the shell apart, imagined grabbing at the wires inside like the meat of a shellfish. He would pull them tight until they spat and the thing was silenced. And then he remembered how lonely he might feel if the voice ever did stop, and so he did nothing.

Just as he thought he might be getting used to the voice, the orb in his hands gave a click, and the voice was gone. This was followed by a sharp blast of feedback. The Martian looked down at the orb. There was another click, followed by the sound of a mechanical fan, before a light began to project from the lens upon the orb. It showed an image at the Martian's feet, and this became a film which began to play.

#

“What's this?” The Martian asked, using his fingers to adjust the little lens upon the orb. The image below him began to focus. There was no sound to accompany what he saw, except the whir of the machine, but even without volume he recognized the footage below him.

“Yes, I know.” he told the robot. “I snuck us into a trap. You don't have to show me.”

More footage played. A valiant rescue attempt gone horribly wrong, all caught on film, starring The Martian and the last moments of his life. As the film continued, a song began to play. It was a little soundtrack to accompany the end of his life. It was quiet at first, but grew louder as the film continued. The music was composed of strings and other unhappy sounding instruments. The Martian tried his best not to feel sad about it. He supposed the orb was trying to communicate, to celebrate one last grand adventure. He found the intention of this very nice, but the music made him feel awkward and removed. It was like the person in the video was him, but also it wasn't. Like he was watching some hollow reenactment of a terrible moment. The Martian found himself reflecting upon his life, and a great feeling of meaninglessness began to steal over him.

“Turn it off.” He asked his friend. “Turn everything off. Please.”

The orb did not respond. The film played on, and the music continued. In the footage there was a flash and then a brilliant explosion. The Martian watched himself on film, now it was just a shot of his face, a grainy reflection, twisted in fear. And then he watched as his pre-recorded body was pulled through the window of a rocketship out into the darkness of space. Now the footage spun and swirled in a mess of colors. The film had finished. It cut to darkness. Still the projector continued to click-click-click without purpose. The sad music played on, now louder than ever.

“No man should have to watch himself die.” said The Martian.

To his surprise, the orb had a reply, in the same crooked voice as before.

“You’re not dead.” it told him.

With these words, the projector snapped off with a crack. The orb grew hot to the touch, and a pink smoke began to boil out of the casing. It smelled of aluminum. The Martian gave a shout and dropped it, then watched as it hit the groundless ground and rolled away from his boots with a soundless finality. His friend was gone.

The Martian stared out past the pink smoke and into the nothingness. After a few moments he realized something important: He could still hear the sad music that played during the film. And it wasn’t coming from the orb.

#

He made a valiant attempt to bury his friend, but it was useless to try; there was no ground to dig for a grave. Deciding against an officer’s burial, he opened the inside of the orb and unscrewed a small fastener, and slipped it on his finger for safekeeping. The Martian told his friend he would bury the

ring if he ever got the chance, and then parted company with the orb. He decided to leave it where it lay as a marker of sorts. After walking away, he looked over his shoulder and was relieved to see his friend growing farther away. It gave him a sense of distance in a world without landscape.

#

He followed the sad music through the nothing. As he walked he listened to the song and tried to listen for specific instruments or motifs. It sounded like strings and electric hums, but in an old way he couldn't describe to himself. It was the sort of song with no beginning, or ending. It was just a well-played beautiful wailing. It began to move through his mind, as if the song were alive, and the footage of his death had only whet its appetite; as if it were trying to search for other memories to play along with.

Blurry snippets of his life began to appear in The Martian's thoughts. He could feel it almost physically, like flickers of warmth creeping up through his chest. Now hazy recollections of a life once lived were starting to appear in his memories. Each new thought igniting another, like vines of fire growing in an oven.

He ignored the worst of them. And walked.

To his surprise it almost seemed as if the music would grow clearer in a specific direction. It gave him a course to walk through the nothingness. And as the music grew, The Martian thought of his death, and how much he regretted dying in a failed rescue attempt.

#

Between the music and his steps there was no measure of time. As he ventured further he found himself glancing backward, checking to see how far he had travelled from the orb. When he couldn't see his friend anymore, The Martian knew he had walked for a long time.

He felt spooked about this place, and the crooked voice. He felt as though someone might be watching. So he pulled his revolver in warning, glancing down at the familiar lettering stamped in the bottom of the handle:

RayVolver Industries

He always liked those letters. He liked names and titles in general. He had even scratched his own name for the weapon along the barrel. The name he had chosen was Cathedral. But on the revolver it was spelled like this:

CA+HEDRAL

The Martian had spent countless nights of his youth giving weapons, friend, and the stars of the map inside his coat new names. Making up names for things had made him feel safe. And as he walked through the nothingness he decided to name it, and he called it *The White*.

#

He stopped walking when the first ember fell from above. It was a speck of light, the color of an emerald. It danced slowly through the air before melting into nothing.

The Martian thought it looked like snow, except for the glow of it. He glanced up at the sky. Countless lights were starting to fall from the heavens. Lazy pinpricks of sparks, tumbling like confetti in a small parade for the dead.

*Glow Flakes*, he decided to call them.

The Martian walked. The music was louder now, and the sparks continued to fall and melt into nothing. He could feel them in his hair and along his arms. It made him think of the pollen that fell in his childhood. How every Spring the red pollen of Mars would bring sickness and fever. And perhaps it was the sad music, or because he had just watched himself die, but The Martian felt his memories growing harder to ignore. He missed those red trees, and their terrible pollen. And as he thought of them swaying in the outer winds, other memories arose:

There was a new house where it was always cold. And a family where no one felt they belonged, but only seemed whole when together. A childhood hoping he might be special, and a lifetime spent trying to convince others of it. He remembered countless winters with friends, drunk in the dark, and one Autumn he spent alone, falling in love from afar. The Martian could see every moment he had ever left behind him, as if the beauty of the glow flakes had uncovered a trail he had forgotten was behind him. It was the madness of someone just discovering they had been lost for much longer than they realized.

He realized with some sense of unfamiliarity that he wanted to cry. And although his vision began to blur, he was surprised to find he couldn't remember how. He squinted up at the falling green, and before he could blink, felt a glow flake land in his eye. He felt a harmless sting, and then

remembered the last time he had cried. And he thought of his lover in an ornate bathtub.

“Are we not close, you and I?” she had asked.

“Close is good.” he had said, “Touching is better.”

And they had touched, his hands moving across the tattoos on her body, the little green flowers which grew and spread, jumping from his own skin to that of his friends, the petals that marked him a traitor to both kingdom, and crusade.

“I think they bring out your eyes.” she had said, curling under the water and giggling.

But they had brought her eyes out as well. The crusaders had dragged her from the bathtub screaming, while he ran through her castle for safety. The Princess of Mars had soon been exiled.

It was said her tattoos faded during her journey, that as The Martian hid from her family, her petals had withered and died. Their love betrayed by his fear of death, and her fear of living without him. And she was not the only one. The last of his merry band were soon gone as well. Exiling themselves by hiding in far-flung star systems, away from the crusades and the fall of Mars. Those who did not were captured or killed. The last seasons of The Martian’s life had brought political and romantic destruction. Life had become unexpected and hopeless, and he had been pushed and pulled into the cracks of his later years until he was trapped without choice or purpose. Only his friend The Friar had been left alone in the empire. Until he too was caught with petals along his arms.

The landscape of The White was now a neon curtain of wind-driven sparks. The Martian bowed his head against the strange storm and rubbed his eyes clean, keeping them covered with an arm for good measure. As he walked in blindness he thought of the last moments of his life. He thought about The Friar, and the failed rescue mission. About the film he had just seen of himself dying. And

then he tried, once again, to think of nothing.

#

The music was now playing louder than ever. After some time he began to open his eyes and peer down at his feet. The glow flakes were falling less it seemed. Soon he could see nothing left of them. He looked up and put his arm down.

In the distance he saw something new, and as he walked further, The Martian began to realize what he was looking at.

It was a circle of windows. Each was made of a green stained glass.

## Chapter Two

### Windows & Dreams

There was no horizon, but he was pretending there was. And at the end of that imaginary distance, growing nearer which each step of his moon boots was a circle of nine windows. Each was tall and narrow, ending with an arch at the top. The Martian approached them with caution, circling the structures as if they were a herd of fragile animals. He was trying to ignore how they made him feel. He was ignoring the soundless steps of his feet and he was pretending there was a horizon. Above all else he was absolutely not thinking of the strange vision of the windows growing steadily closer as he moved through The White. Instead, he was trying to remember the difference between the words intrepid and trepidation. Someone had once told The Martian he was both things at once. He ignored the world and its lack of ground as he thought about the words.

“Intrepid.” He whispered to himself. “I am unafraid of danger.”

Still. The windows grew closer. He wiped his eyes, his vision still blurred from the last of the glow flakes.

“Trepidation.” he whispered. “I am having a panic attack.”

There were gaps between the windows, it looked as if the middle of the circle was empty, but it

was hard to tell from a distance. The Martian kept his revolver drawn, and hoped anyone watching might respect the weapon more than his tears.

As he grew closer he realized he had been wrong: the windows were not all the same color. Each was a different hue than the other. Still green, but different. For all this vast and terrible white, it seemed more than a coincidence to find windows and sparks of green.

He was nearly in front of the windows when the realization struck him: It was his uniform. Beneath the dirt and stains of war, his coat and trousers were just as green as everything else.

You're not dead. the crooked voice had told him.

But if this were true, then where could he be? The Martian pushed it out of his mind. The mystery would only take his attention. And if The Martian had learned anything from his recent possible death, it was this: the wrong amount of mystery and interest could make a man sluggish.

When he finally reached the windows he could see for certain between them, and into the circle. And he knew he was alone. There was nothing inside the circle, though he dared not enter. Not just yet.

He kept his revolver drawn.

It was obvious to him the music he had followed was coming from inside the circle. But whether the song was generated by the windows themselves, or some outside force, he could not say.

#

The music was playing quieter now, like a whisper in another room. The Martian had never been sure what instruments he was hearing--sometimes it sounded like strings, and other times of whooshes and

winds--but it now sounded as if some of those might be leaving the song, like an orchestra falling asleep. It was as if the only purpose of the song had been to lead him to these windows. The Martian didn't like that. He took care not to pass into the circle, or touch any part of the structures.

The most interesting thing he discovered was finding the bottom of each window was floating at about the height of his chest (without a horizon it had been impossible to know this). He walked around the circle twice, marveling at the sense of gravity he felt in his own steps versus the way the circle hung in the air. He could see no lines, magnets, or signs of technology to keep them afloat. And even in his fear, he found it magical.

There were pieces of mortar and brick crumbling off the arches, as if each window had been ripped from a different wall somewhere, and hung in this empty place. And many of them also carried cracks in their emerald panes. Some of these were as small as cobwebs, while others appeared as large as lightning bolts reflected upon a lake. At least one of the windows appeared to be nearly split in two. The Martian wondered how long the circle had been here, and noticed that some of the windows were a dull green, as if he were staring through a frosted glass on a rainy day, yet others were lit with the brilliance of an evening glow, as if a sun were setting on the other side. There was even one window that looked so dark he imagined a void just waiting on the other side.

To his surprise, one of the arches had writing along the side of it. He could make out the graffiti if he stood with the window facing him at an angle. The marks and letters were an odd color, and to The Martian, who found comfort in names and description, it was not really a color he had ever seen before. It was something between gold, and light, and purple, and (though it bewildered him to admit it) darkness. There was a slight glow to the marks as well, but none of this was surprising as finding that some of the words he could read. Some of it was strange to him, but there was English as

well. The Martian made a face as he attempted to make sense of the words. They were old, so archaic that he could only make a sort of half-sense from them. There was an arrow to one side of the graffiti, pointing in a direction away from the windows (though slightly down, if he was being honest), and another arrow pointing up and into the circle. This is what it looked like:

<----- בְּרֵאשִׁית יָצְרָה (Frymþ Nonce) /TO THEN ANES ----->

The Martian looked from the glow to the nothing behind him, and then read the words one more time before continuing to study the windows.

After a slow and uneventful walk around the perimeter, curiosity overtook The Martian. And he walked into the circle.

#

The music was gone. Only the silence of the glass remained.

It was unsettling to have the windows facing him in this manner. The Martian spun around slowly, watching for movement. But there was only his reflection there to greet him; bending and shifting throughout the circle. He studied himself in one of the windows. His hair was disheveled, and his mustache now hidden in the beginning of a beard. How much time had passed, he wondered, since he had awoken in The White? His eyes looked tired. He found their sadness familiar, and stared into them for comfort.

The Martian was just turning away when he caught something in the reflection. Something moving, just behind him. He spun around, the battery in his revolver giving a microscopic shudder as

it began to power beneath his finger.

But there was nothing.

He flicked his grip from the trigger and felt the revolver power down. Across the circle was just another window. This one a duller shade of green, but filled with many cracks. Then he jumped again, because someone new was there. And she was watching him.

A young woman standing on the other side of the window. She was pointing at him. Her eyes were frightened and wide.

The Martian moved toward her without thinking. Then he stopped short, blinking in his confusion. She was gone. The gloomy window was now empty.

Could it have been his reflection?

He kept his revolver trained on the phantom in the windows, and moved his head slightly this way and that, as if trying to make the young woman appear again. And then, moving back a step, she was there once more; only this time she looked different. Now her face was distorted and skewed. A pair of tired eyes stared back at him from above an overgrown mustache. The Martian gave an embarrassed sigh of relief and walked over to the gloomy window. There was a string of ivy growing around the broken stones of its arch. The Martian brushed the plant with his gloved fingers, and wondered if it too had died somewhere else and woken up in this place. He leaned toward the green glass, and backed away, watching himself change and exaggerate. For a moment he thought he almost saw her again--the young woman from before. He brushed his hand along the window, wondering at the strange effect the cracks seemed to have on his reflection. To his surprise, his fingers vanished, dipping into the green field like sticks being pushed through a puddle.

The Martian stared at his fingers in shock before pulling them back with a yelp. Something

had stung him! No, not a sting. A burn. It was as if the liquid glass had cut through to the bone. He pulled his glove off and waved the fingers in front of his face. There was no markings. And even now the pain had subsided. He checked his glove and found to his surprise that it was covered in a thin glittering of frost. He wiggled his fingers in front of him once more. Then he stared at his own wide-eyed reflection in the gloomy window. Only now he didn't think it looked so gloomy, He thought it looked more like a green window staring out on a Winter's day.

#

The Martian had several procedures in his training for dealing with unexpected situations (and oddly enough, windows that might be traps). But there was nothing in his handbook for what he was now calling The Winter Window. He put the glove back on his hand, pulled out his oxygen wand, and before he could think better of it, stuck his entire arm through the window. Again, the glass bent around it, like a field of water filled with cracks.

It was indeed cold on the other side of the window. The Martian gave a shudder and then began to walk toward the edge of the window, keeping his arm inside the glass. Then he glanced around the other side of the arch. He was not surprised to find his arm was now missing, it had gone through the window entirely and into somewhere else.

The Martian pulled his arm outside of the glass, and checked it for signs of damage. He removed his glove, holding cold fingers to his unshaven cheek. Even now the cold was subsiding from it. Then he checked the oxygen wand and saw the color green at the end of it. Wherever the wand and his arm had gone, there was breathable air on the other side of it.

Before he could think better of it, The Martian did the sort of thing that had left him dead in the first place. He holstered his revolver, grabbed the bottom ledge of the window, and plunged his head through the glass.

#

He was watching, just like a dream. The White was gone, and so were the windows. He was looking into a flat in an abandoned building. Broken windows showed a grey Winter's day.

He was staring at someone. He couldn't believe it, but it was the young woman from his warped reflection. She was small. Her hair was done in a ponytail. It looked like the top of a carrot. Her skin was darker than his. She was wearing a green dress with the same color leggings. A small eye-mask had fallen across her throat like a necklace. The mask was the same color as the rest of her outfit; the same as the sparks, and his uniform, and the stained glass windows.

The girl was crying on a cheap metal chair. Her hands were tied behind her, and her knees were shaking. Behind the girl was a hole in the wall. Judging by the view they were pretty high up in the abandoned building. She was not alone. Great big men in fanciful costumes stood around her. A small machine was placed on the floor beside them. This was spitting out paper and beeping.

The Martian thought to hide, but it seemed no one could see him. He reminded himself that he was only watching, just like a dream. He could still feel his hands gripping the ledge of the arch of the Winter Window. Wherever this young woman was, he was only from The White.

And then, because it was a dream, or very nearly like one, The Martian found he knew things. He knew the young woman. Her name was Victoria. She was almost old enough to drive, but she

couldn't afford a car.. And the more he thought about it, the more he knew about Victoria, and how she had become tied to a chair in a room filled with costumed men. He knew these men were called Beefeaters. The year was Nineteen Eighty-Three. Crime-fighting was illegal. And there was someone named Thatcher. The machine on the floor continuing to spit out paper was called a fax machine. And he knew the girl was about to die.

#

The Martian pulled himself from the window and fell backwards into The White. On the groundless ground he breathed slowly and started to work his mouth as if he wanted to say something. His face was cold and he removed a glove to brush some of the ice from his beard. Then he stared up at the Winter Window and thought about the girl in the chair. It had felt like a dream at the time, but the more he thought about it, he wasn't sure. There an urgent feeling that came over him. Something between panic, and the worry that he might not smart enough to understand what was happening.

She needed his help. He was sure of it. The Martian, as he stood up and found his own reflection staring back at him. Had he not just died during a failed rescue attempt? Was he was so foolish he would try again?

He looked away from himself, and past the other windows. It still felt as if someone were watching him. But at this point, he was finding it hard to trust his instincts.

The young woman had been in trouble. Victoria, he reminded himself, her name had been Victoria. But wasn't it only a dream?

He would have to look through the window again. If it was real, he would have to help the

young woman, if it were even possible. So taking another breath, he stuck his head through the glass once more. Then pulled it back out immediately. The dream in the window had changed. The young Woman was gone. Wherever it was on the other side of the glass, time had passed. It had been the same view, of the same abandoned building with a hole in the wall. But the room was empty. The chair and fax machine were gone as well.. Instead there was a hole in the floor where the chair had been. And now it was bright and warm outside the building. More like a Summer day.

The Martian thought about dipping his head into the dream again, and then remembered there were eight other windows. Did they have dreams as well?

Too overwhelmed for any conscious decision, The Martian ran across the circle and stood in front of another window. This one looked as if it might be the oldest out of the arches. There were more cracks in this window. The Martian wondered if that mattered. What if it were to shatter while he looked inside of it? Could dream glass cut someone? He tested the window with his fingers. They slipped into the green just the same as before.

The Martian leaned forward, and dipped his head into the dream.

#

The light was dull and dark, such as the light from a fading sun. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust, and when they did, he was staring at bookshelves. These were covered in books. And the shelves were so tall, that they cast the cobblestone aisles below in shadow.

In the distance something drifted toward The Martian. It moved like a fish swimming through darkness. The Martian knew it was a thief, and that they were both in a library. It was just as the other

dream, with the beefeaters and the fax machine. He knew things because they were dream knowledge.

He squinted further into the gloom, trying to catch a glimpse of The Thief.

Soon he could just make out a small rug, like the sort of embroidered carpet found on the floors of those who could afford them, only this one wasn't on the floor of the library. It was floating in the air and slowly coming toward him. On top of the rug was a man sitting with his legs crossed beneath him. This was The Thief. He was staring at the books on the shelves, perusing the spines carefully. Some he pulled and kept with him, others he tossed along the ground like a trail. The Martian knew the trail was on purpose. The Thief was trying not to get lost. The Library of Doom was vast, and perhaps even endless. The man on the rug drifted closer. There was a mote of light in the path, where the dust of countless books sparkled as they passed. The Thief floated into the light, his head bowed low as he searched through another book. He was wearing a green turban with green robes. The Martian watched The Thief take a book and snap it shut before adding it to the path with the others. Now The Martian could see the face of The Thief. His eyebrows were bushy and prominent, furrowed in what must have been either thought or anger, and the circles under his eyes were so dark it might have been makeup. The rest of his face was hidden in a fanciful beard. This was stained and dripping. Caught in the grips of his dream logic, The martian wondered at first if The Thief might have been drinking from the books, as if each page were a puddle to slake his thirst. But then he noticed the color of the beard as The Thief drifted closer, and The Martian saw that his robes were also stained. The stains were red, just like the gore across his face. It was blood. The Martian could just make out little scratches in the stained material, lik the claw marks of little fingers. And then, much to his horror, The Thief looked up, and stared directly at him.

#

The Martian pulled his head out of the glass, holding his revolver in front of him. He stared up at the cracks in the window, and waited for the silhouette of someone to rise up along the other side. He could just imagine The Thief standing upon his rug, eyes wide as he crawled out through the glass to find him. The Martian stood up, keeping his revolver trained on the library window. As he did this, he glanced all about himself, checking the other windows for red hands reaching up through an arch.

Had The Thief actually seen him? And if so, why hadn't Victoria or The Beefeaters done the same? The Martian wondered if The Thief was more knowledgeable due to his books. And then he had a new thought: If someone could step through a window and into The White, what if The Martian could do the opposite? What if he could step through a window completely, and mount an expedition into a dream?

When he was sure there were no further signs of danger, The Martian stowed his revolver, and began to look at the windows not as a mystery to be solved, but as a method of escape. And because it always made him feel better to name things, he named them Dream Windows, and felt safer.

There were seven Dream Windows left to choose from, but his eyes were drawn to the darkest of them. Though at first he had deemed it black, as if looking out into a void, upon closer inspection he realized this was wrong. It was still a shade of green, but that of the shadows in trees just before morning. It was also heavily damaged. The cracks were patterned in circular marks, as if a fist had tried to break it down. In some places the cracks were so thick they hid his reflection from him, like a white paint made of edges.

If it were possible to step through a window completely, then it was also feasible that he might

never return. The Martian decided to check each window thoroughly before making a decision. And since he was afraid, he chose the dark window first.

He closed his eyes and dipped his head through to the other side.

#

Inside this dream was a room. The familiar hum of an air conditioner kept the place a little colder than necessary. There were chairs in the room. Some were wooden with low tables in front of them. And others were softer with nice padding and desks attached to them. There were shelves of books as well. It was another library. But The martian was almost sure this dream had nothing to do with the last. For one thing, the light here was different. It was bright in this room. Electric lights hung overhead, and the walls were made of wood paneling and great big windows, looking out on a sunny day filled with great big trees. The whole dream appeared very scholarly.

Then he noticed the sound of the air conditioner had been joined by another. A constant click and tap that seemed to be coming from somewhere to his left. It sounded like someone typing, but unlike the other windows, he found there was no dream knowledge here.

It must be the result of all the cracks in the glass, he decided. Perhaps this window is broken.

If he wanted to see what was making that strange typing noise, he would have to crawl further into the dream. He did so carefully, making sure to keep his hands gripped firmly on the stone arch back in The White.

To his left there was a low shelf filled with books. To his surprise, he recognized the style of writing along the spines. It was English, the native language of his former home! He read through the

titles of the books and noticed several of them seemed to share the same subject. One book in particular caught his eye, as the spine was a familiar shade of green.

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The typing continued somewhere past the low shelf. The Martian strained to see where it was. After a tremendous and precarious stretch, he could just make out the end of a wooden table, and beneath it, the legs and feet of someone typing. A pair of cast off shoes lay upon the carpet beside them. If he could move just a little further into the dream, he was certain he might see what the person was typing. But at this point The Martian had an entire shoulder in the window.

Best not to risk it, he told himself. If he fell through, he might be trapped in the dream of the dark window, as peaceful as it seemed.

He was just about to return to The White when he heard something else join the air conditioner and the typing. It was music. The same unhappy and endless song from before.

The Martian knew it was goading him, trying to lead him further into the dream, just as it had led him to the windows. Had it been coming from inside this dream the whole time?

And then something else occurred to him: It was the same feeling from before: that he was being watched. It was the person typing. They must have seen him!

But no. He corrected himself. They were still typing. He could still see their feet, now bobbing up and down with the oblivious rhythm of someone focused on their task. So, it wasn't the typist

watching him. It was someone else.

The martian began to squirm desperately, trying to see who else was in the room with them. And he was just about to pull himself further into the dream, when he realized the music wasn't coming from the room at all. It was coming from behind him, somewhere in The White.

#

The Martian pulled himself from the dream. The song was now so loud, it sounded like pulling his head from the ocean while an orchestra played just behind him. He drew his revolver, and turned to face the music.

He was not alone. A stranger stood in the circle of windows.

## Chapter Three

### The Stranger

The Stranger was almost as tall as the windows. Their lanky frame was nearly folded in half, like an insect taking a bow. Unseen eyes studied The Martian behind a mask made of unpolished wood. The face carved upon this was two hollow eyes above a slight smile.

It took The Martian considerable effort not to blow that expression into wooden pieces. Even now, he could feel the trigger of the revolver resting against the back of his finger, like twins in a womb, pulling against each other for safety. Yet somewhere in the back of his mind, in the small spaces left between the memories of a violent life, something warned him against taking action. To find safety in such destruction was fine during a shootout or holy crusade. But this was a strange land, and he was under dreadful circumstances. Something inside him pleaded to wait. It was the instincts of someone who had seen worse.

The Martian stayed his hand, and waited.

#

In his split-second hesitance, this is what he saw:

The Stranger was bent forward with what appeared to be unmalicious study. They were wearing silver robes that shimmered like waterfalls of sand. Gnarled fingers were stained by cuts and bruises of countless ages. They cradled a strange object between them. And where The Martian expected to find a weapon, he found instead a musical instrument. This was made of wood and strings. It looked very old, even compared to the hands cradling it.

This caused him more than a considerable amount of alarm.

The song which had led him to the circle was now barely a memory to him. Without a melody the noises had slipped away from his thoughts. But he knew in his heart, that no lone instrument had played the song. Nothing short of an orchestra had led him during his travels through The White.

So where were the other instruments?

The Martian backed away from The Stranger, moving along the inner circle, checking the windows and endless white for signs of other musicians in waiting.

“Who are you?” he called, keeping his revolver trained on The Stranger’s shimmering robes. He was trying to guess at the anatomy of such a tall creature. Where to put a bullet if he needed to.

For his part, The Stranger said nothing, only tilted their head to the side, as if the question was unexpected.

“I know there are others!” The Martian cried, trying and failing to keep his voice from rising, “I know you led me here on purpose! You have not caught me by surprise!”

But if The Stranger understood what The Martian was saying, they were ignoring it. Instead they chose to walk in a hapless stroll around the circle, bobbing their head up and down like a bird waiting to feed. Now they were both pacing the circle, The Martian keeping as much distance between

them as possible.

“I have a weapon!” he shouted, waving his revolver. With nervous habit, The Martian pushed his thumb against the name scratched along the side of his revolver. He found the ridge and jag of each letter to be calming.

Ca+hedral. The name had been there since the crusades. It had become a famous riddle on fields of battle, from one backwater stellar system to the next. Sometimes his enemies would ask why he chose the name, often even wasting last words on the question. The Martian would laugh whenever this happened. It was a joke. A joke for the departed. He never told anyone else but the dead. It was one of his rules.

#

The Martian realized he would need to modify his plan of escape. The luxury of choosing the best window was gone. He would need to choose from a dream he had already visited, or take a terrible chance on a glass portal of unknown quality. The big library with The Thief on the rug was off limits, but the other library, the one with familiar books and typing, that one had seemed promising. His eyes searched the circle for the broken looking window, and found his hopes were dashed. The Stranger had now stopped just in front of it, the permanent carve of a smile staring back in silence at The Martian, as if it had guessed his plan.

The Martian backed up a little more until he felt the ledge of another window just behind him. He reached for it with one hand, and felt the familiar sense of ivy growing around the old stones. He was standing in front of The Winter Window, the first dream he had visited. Perhaps he might still be

able to help the young woman.

*Victoria*, he reminded himself, *her name was Victoria*.

The Martian was careful to not bring attention to himself as he slipped his hand further onto the ledge. Slowly, he pushed his fingers through the glass once more, terrified it wouldn't work. That somehow the dreams had been shut off or somehow closed by The Stranger. But no--he could feel the cold air once more biting into his glove. It would work. All he had to do was jump up onto the ledge behind him, and fall backwards into the dream. The Martian watched for his chance.

For his part, The Stranger did not seem to care what The Martian was doing. In fact, they had even turned their back to to him to study the broken looking window. The Stranger traced the cracks in the glass, until their shoulder fell in sadness. Then they shook their head.

The Martian realized it was now or never. But again, something warned him to wait, and he watched in mild interest as The Stranger moved onto the next arch. In the reflection of that window, The Martian could see The Stranger's silent smile. And though he couldn't be sure, he felt those hollow eyes might be staring back at him, as if making sure The Martian might be watching.

Then, with two long fingers, The Stranger reached up to one of the smaller cracks in the glass, and pulled it away, as if it were only a cobweb. The Martian watched in surprise as The Stranger turned toward him, holding the small crack in his fingers. It was alive. The crack was dancing and moving slowly, like a worm being held in a storm. The Stranger dropped it to the groundless ground, where it began to writhe and crawl toward The Martian, spreading and growing into fractured lines. The Martian stared at it in horror, but even as he moved his revolver toward the growing mass of lines, he watched as they suddenly shivered with a seizure, and fell beneath his boots into the nothing far beneath them.

The Stranger tried to grab at another crack in the window, but this one was thicker, and their hand pulled at it to no effect. It made The Martian think of a gardener, tending to the windows. The Stranger stuck their hidden face through the glass, and then pulled it back out with a shake of their head. The Martian found his gaze drawn to The Stranger's hands. They were filled with cuts and bruises. Was this from the cracks in the glass?

He wondered if it were true, or if the glass ever broke completely.

Again The Martian caught a glimpse of The Stranger's mask, reflected in a window, and a terrible thought occurred to him. What if a crack formed in the glass while someone was looking through it? The Martian had the sudden vision of a man in silver robes, their face disfigured by the very objects he spent his time caring for. Then he imagined that man covering himself with a piece of wood, perhaps even one he had found in a dream. The idea of a sad man, carving a smile on a mask, just to make his face bearable to look at in the loneliness of the circle and its nine reflections. The Martian began to imagine someone much like himself, only taller, and dressed funny, waking up in this white nothing. Stuck here for eternity, caring for a bunch of magic windows just because he thought he should. But if this, or something like it, was indeed The Stranger's story, why would they keep silent in the face of a new visitor?

The Martian could almost hear the sound of a window shattering against an unprotected throat. Perhaps their silence was not a choice.

The Stranger turned around, their mask now tilted to the side in curiosity. This reminded The Martian of a nervous child listening to a room full of adults; someone waiting for the right moment to speak. Perhaps The Stranger was only waiting to feel safe. Maybe that was why the other musicians were still hiding.

The Martian glanced around the windows again for signs of a company, making sure to redouble the grip on his revolver. Pity would stay his hand, but not his senses. It was obvious from the start that someone had brought him here on purpose. He glanced again at the object in The Stranger's hands, and decided to try a different tactic.

"You were playing music with other people," he said, nodding his head toward the instrument. "The song that led me here."

The Stranger continued along the circle, his head swaying slowly, like a tree in a breeze. But had The Martian just noticed a slight nod of agreement?

The Stranger began to pluck at his instrument, just one string and then another. And The Martian knew he was understood, that this tall creature was trying to communicate with him. He also knew, beyond a shadow of doubt, that they were both of them alone. There were no other musicians. He knew this because the very same song which had led him here was now emanating, somehow, from the instrument.

The Martian lowered his revolver in astonishment.

The Stranger continued to play at his strings. And suddenly The Martian was thinking of things, just like before, as if the music were a film score working like a net to fish out old memories. Only this time he was remembering things which had never happened to him.

#

...In his mind he saw a window. It was older than anything anyone had ever seen before. There were cracks growing throughout the glass. Next he saw the window break, and the pieces fall beneath

it. These hung like low clouds in the sky. Soon they began to spin, drawing themselves back together...

...He saw children growing inside pieces of glass, and then he saw himself, dying in a failed rescue mission. After this he heard snippets of his life, and the sound of laughter, and he saw The Stranger reaching down...

#

The Stranger stopped his music, and began to walk around the circle once again.

The Martian realized he was holding his breath. What had he just seen? And how did the music make him see it? He raised his revolver to a more sensible position and asked his next question.

“Is this...is this the afterlife?” he asked, “Am I dead?” For some reason, he felt ashamed for asking this. It was like admitting his fears to nine mirrors. He took care not to look at any of the reflections in the circle.

The Stranger shook his head as they walked. There was no mistaking it this time. Then once again, they plucked at the strings, and the song from before filled the air like perfume. And again, for The Martian, more thoughts and visions. This time they came much clearer, and quicker.

The music stopped, taking the thoughts away with it.

The Martian shook his head to try and push the melody away. The revolver was down at his side. It felt heavier after hearing the song twice.

“Why?” he asked. “Why have me follow a song to you?”

The Stranger did not answer this. Instead they walked into the middle of the circle, folded

their legs, and sat down. They were less tall now, less imposing.

The Martian kept his revolver lowered, but did not join The Stranger. After all, he still had his back against the ivy of his chosen window. He would not give up his escape route, even for answers to a mystery. Instead he called across the circle.

“I know you understand me. I also know you can’t speak...or refuse to, so I’ll just speak for the both of us.”

The Stranger did nothing.

“I know you watched me as I walked here. And I know you played the song on purpose. If you won’t give me a reason to stay, than I’m going to leave.” The Martian shook his revolver again in warning. “If you try to stop me, I’m going to kill you. Do you understand?” He did his best to make sure to keep his voice light, and friendly. But did not smile or break eye contact with the carving on the mask.

Again, the Stranger did nothing. And this was taken as a sign of agreement. The Martian waved his free hand around himself, gesturing at the white nothingness.

“How did I get here?” he asked.

The Stranger gave no answer. The carving only seemed to mock his question.

The Martian shrugged and made a calculated false effort to hoist himself up onto the ledge of the window behind him. And just as he predicted, The Stranger responded, jumping up as quick as a flash of lightning to stand at the full spire of their body.

The Martian smiled, and pulled the trigger on his weapon. There was a crack of electromagnetic energy, the same miniature thunderclap of any electric revolver. Then The Stranger’s

head snapped back in a spray of blood and splinters, but their robes stood unmoving, as if they were a silver tree, rooted to the ground.

The Martian scrambled behind himself to escape, but found he had miscalculated the height of the ledge. He spun back around and found The Stranger still in the center of the circle, their head tilting back into place. Now The Stranger was staring down at The Martian, a small trail of blood boiling slowly from an empty socket.

“I warned you.” said The Martian. “And now I’m going to leave.”

As if in response, The Stranger lifted his hand in the air, holding their fingers in a strange gesture, just above their chest.

The Martian paused, unsure of what The Stranger was trying to say. He lifted his hand in the same way before shaking his head. “I don’t understand--” he began, but his voice was cut short as The Stranger dropped their fingers to strum against the strings of the instrument.

It was apparent by that first ringing note, The Martian had never heard those strings played together, all at once. Now the full force of the music was upon him, and instead of a song, this was more like a wave. It sounded discordant, but also sweet, like wind chimes dropped in honey. All around him, the glass of the Dream Windows shook. The Martian felt his legs give out beneath him. And though he couldn’t say why, his eyes filled with tears as he crumpled. His revolver fell out of his hand before he even hit the groundless ground. Then, he experienced a dream.

#

In the dream, there was darkness. And in the darkness, there was a window. The window was green and made of stained glass. The Martian knew it was old. This was the first window.

There was a light. A small line of white brilliance piercing the dark. The window caught the light and reflected it. Now the glass was illuminated. It began to spin, slowly at first, and then quickly, moving so fast it began to change. Now it looked less like a window, and more like an orb. The Martian watched as the orb began to slow down, slower and slower, until it looked like a globe of green glass.

The Martian could hear whispers behind him. He was surprised when one spoke to him:

“This is the first world.” It said to him.

And he knew that voice, but couldn't place it. It was an old friend. Someone he had liked perhaps, but never truly known.

The glass world before him continued to spin. And then he saw it was not a world at all. It was a womb. A small child was growing inside of it.

“He was the first.” said a voice. It sounded sad and melodic. “There were countless children in the first world, but this child was the first to wear the green.”

In the vision a full grown man was now spinning inside the glass womb, sleeping with his knees beneath his chin. And just as the voice had described, the man was dressed in green.

“This. is how. the beginning. is remembered.” said a gruff voice.

“The beginning of things is hard to explain.” said someone slowly, in a patient and reverent tone. The voice was pained, as if to took all they had to speak through some unknown sense of loss.

The voice of a small child entered the fray. "The beginning of things is hard to explain!" repeated the child, "But they're important, y'know. They gotta be remembered. But just remember," he added, "nothing happens the way you remember it!"

"Do you understand?" said another voice with a friendly laugh. "'Cause I sure don't."

In the dream, The Martian shook his head slowly. He was glad the voices were behind him, and that they could not see his looks of confusion.

And then, the dream changed once more:

The white light in the darkness was still cast against the glass womb, only now the light began to change. The Martian watched it rise and fill the emptiness surrounding the womb. He knew the light had grown on purpose. That it was sentient and aware of the man growing in the womb. Now the dark around the world was gone, and in its place, stood a white nothingness.

Again, a new voice spoke. It was the voice of a man who seemed tired and disinterested. "True nothingness is white, and empty." he explained. "You see that man in the womb? He chose to be something, instead of nothing. He chose to make choices, and dressed himself in such a way that his choices would be seen...I couldn't tell ya why."

Another voice shushed the man. It was a young woman. She sounded familiar to The Martian as well. He realized it was the voice of someone who was scared, but trying to sound strong.

"That bloke put on some green, and it was good, do y'know what I mean? He did things when others did not, and it made him a hero." The voice of the young woman moved closer, and The Martian could feel her breath just behind his ear. "But there is always a balance, yeah?"

As The Martian watched, cracks began to appear in the glass, they spread across the spinning green womb, trying to break it, trying to shatter the world of the hero.

“The beginning is important.” said another woman’s voice. “But there are many beginnings.”

The Martian thought he detected the scratch of alcohol in her words, and wondered how many voices were behind him.

“Do you see the cracks in the glass, Darling?” asked a man with the dictation and long vowels of someone who dressed themselves well.

“Yes.” said The Martian. “I see the cracks. I think it’s all the white. I think that blade of light from the beginning is trying to break the glass.”

And now for the first time The Martian felt a presence move up to stand just beside him. He did not dare look over. The voice was wounded, and gasping for breath. But even as it shook the voice was regal. It made The Martian sad.

“Very good.” Said the voice. “The white nothing was jealous of the hero. It wanted to be something as well. So they gave it a name.”

The Martian spoke for the first time in the dream. “What was the name you gave it?” he asked.

In response, he felt a small hand enter his own. His heart began to beat faster. He knew the hand was someone who needed comfort. He held the hand tightly, wondering who it was.

“I will tell you the name we gave the nothing.” said the sad melodic voice from behind him.

“Tell me.” Said The Martian.

“We named it Nottingham.” a young voice whispered in his ear, and then The Martian felt a small hand slip away from him.

The green glass spinning in front of him was now so cracked he could no longer see the shape of the man inside of it. And it had slowed down as well, as if the white cracks were a web, holding it in place.

“Watch.” said a familiar voice.

In the vision, the cracks in the glass finally seemed to suffocate the window. And though no longer spinning, a light inside of it began to grow. After this there came a horrible sound, like a scratch, or a scream. And then with a crash, the first world shattered. Pieces of stained glass flew in all directions. The Martian made to cover his face.

“Watch.” the voice repeated, and The Martian was surprised to find it was his own voice. That his lips were moving as if he had no control over them. The Martian lowered his arm, and did as he was told.

He was surprised to find the green shards of the broken world were now hanging in the air, floating in orbit around the remains of the first window, like asteroids around a planet. There was something else too: he could almost see something inside each of the pieces. It was a reflection. He walked closer to one of the pieces, and saw the reflection was his own. Except in the shard he was a child, and he was floating in a glass womb. A child wearing green.

“These were the first reflections...I think.” said the scratchy voice of the woman from before.

The Martian stepped away from the shattered pieces, and they began to float away from him, sinking into the nothingness. He realized they were becoming little windows and worlds of their own. Each of them began to fill with cracks as well, before shattering into other windows.

“Do you understand?” said the sad and melodic voice beside him. “This is the cycle of all true things: to break and make anew.”

The Martian did not answer. He felt unsure. He found the vision frightening, and beautiful. He turned to look for the first world, and found it had drifted away, off into the distance. It was spinning again now, only slower than before, still damaged and dropping pieces of itself. And The

Martian knew, in a familiar sort of way, the person inside the orb would struggle to stay alive as he grew older, as the cracks along his world continued to threaten him.

“The first window still exists, yeah?” whispered one of the young woman behind him.

The Martian nodded, then noticed something. “It spins slower than the others.”

“That’s good. That’s important.” said the girl with the scratchy voice. She sounded sarcastic.

He imagined someone rolling her eyes at him.

Somewhere else, there was music playing. The Martian could feel tears along his face. He had fallen. His revolver had fallen out of his hands; somewhere else, far away, in a world of white where he had followed a song after dying.

“You’re not dead, Darling.” said the man with the proper accent. And if the last voice had been rolling her eyes, this one must have been smirking.

In the dream The Martian turned to the voices behind him. And this is what he saw:

There were many windows. The windows were also worlds, and were also wombs, and each of them held a person wearing green. Silhouetted in the light of their choices, they had no faces to be seen.

In the distance, just behind the windows, stood The Stranger, playing the endless unhappy song on the instrument. The Stranger was not wearing a mask in the dream. The Martian walked forward to get a look at their true face, but the green windows began to obscure his vision; like balloons dropping in front of him at a special occasion.

“Like green sparks.” whispered The Martian to himself, not knowing what he meant, or why he had said such a thing. Then he felt a terrible fear steal over him, as if his own thoughts were about to catch up with him, like a stampede of understanding was just behind him.

“Where am I?!” he shouted at the now hidden Stranger.

“Who are you?!” his own voice echoed back to him.

And then, the spinning worlds of glass parted away from the vision, and The Stranger was standing there, closer than ever. But now their face was hidden once again, as it was currently dipped through a large green window, one filled with many cracks.

The Martian knew The Stranger was watching someone, just as The Martian himself had watched Victoria through The Winter Window. He walked up to the window slowly, and asked The Stranger to help him.

The Stranger made no sound or movement, but kept his head buried in the cracked glass. Because this was a vision, and he had no choice, The Martian walked to the other side of window, to stare at his own reflection. He could see the legs of the stranger beneath the window. Then, he too dipped his head through the glass.

In the window was another dream. And in this dream, The Martian saw his whole life. A string of moments. All without sound. Every memory he had cherished, even the ones he had forgotten. The Martian looked up and found the face of The Stranger. He was wearing his mask again. Only now his face was upside down. That smile carved into the wood was now a frown. The Martian looked away, and back down at the dream of his life.

He saw himself at the end, running through a failed rescue attempt. He did not think to cry out, to warn himself. He only watched. A small floating orb warned him of enemies. A rocket ship

came under fire. The memory of glass breaking. And then his body being pulled into the stars, the dark, and the nothing.

The dream began to jitter and shake like bad film strung through a projector.

“Am I dreaming?” The Martian asked.

“You are remembering.” said a voice. It sounded like his own.

And then the dream changed. One last time. And he knew it was almost over.

The Martian watched as The Stranger pulled someone out of a window and into The White. The body was a man. Lifeless and hurt, in his hands, he clutched a small orb. At first, The Martian was not sure what he was looking at, and then he realized it was his own face. This was his own body, in the recent past, just as he was dying. He was fast asleep in The Stranger’s arms, his head resting against those silver robes.

The Stranger looked away from the body in his arms, and directly to The Martian, who understood. This was a memory. The Martian had been pulled to safety. Straight from that green window. He was just like Victoria, he had a dream window too.

No, not a window, he told himself, a whole universe. Once, a long time ago, a piece had fallen from the first window, and spun into a world he called home. A womb where he grew, dressing himself in green, his whole life spent running from cracks he couldn’t see.

And then he realized something even more important. The crooked voice had been right. He wasn’t dead. He had been pulled to safety in a world of white nothingness, from a glass dream filled with cracks. What if he could find that window again? He could find his friends, and visit his family. He wasn’t dead, and neither was the life he had mourned for.

In the dream that was also a memory, The Martian began to run wildly toward the window in front of him. But as he ran, that terrible feeling, the stampede of his own thoughts, began to catch up him, to fill his chest with dread. It was those same two words. He tried not to think of them as he ran toward the glass. With a growing sense of horror, he watched as The Stranger hung their head in sadness. The lifeless body in his arms turned toward the Martian. And from his own face, came the words he was afraid to say: “green sparks”.

At that moment, the window to his home shattered. The cracks bursting the glass into tiny sparks of emerald green.

The Martian fell to his knees, a terrible wail escaping him. He could feel the sparks of his world falling upon him now, just as they had before.

“You’re not dead.” came the sound of the crooked voice. “Everything else is dead. Those aren’t stars.”

The Martian scrambled around himself frantically, searching desperately for any small fragment of his world that might remain. He told himself there was a chance that another world might appear, that a piece of his own window might begin to spin, somewhere down in the white and become another universe. A place for him to belong.

But there was nothing. And in the dream he understood why. The force of his own body being pulled from the window had shattered it past reflection.

The Stranger hung their head lower. The window continued to fall in twinkling grains. Each of them stung as they touched The Martian, flooding his thoughts with memories of a pointless life.

And as the truth of the dream and the sparks swept over him, The Martian closed his eyes and awoke.

#

When The Martian opened his eyes, he was laying face-down in The White. He pushed himself to his knees and looked at The Stranger. They were still sitting in the center of the circle. The blood trickling from the mask had now formed a pool of blood just below them. This was slowly dripping past them both, down into the endless white.

The Martian did not move, or think of anything to say. He did not think about the dream, or the first window, or the voices. He did not even spend a moment remembering the horrible sound of his own window shattering into nothing. Instead he looked at the revolver beside him, and thought of the name carved along the barrel.

“Why do you call it Cathedral?” His enemies would ask.

And The Martian remembered, with a sense of pity, laughing at the answer he would give them. “Because it brings men to their knees.”

## Chapter Four

### Cracks in The Glass

A great rumbling shook the glass, like the roll of a storm.

The Stranger cocked his head to the side, listening, then stood up in alarm as the circle began to move; the windows had begun to sway, up and down, as if dancing to the sound of their own terrible moans.

The Martian ignored the circle as it began to dance. He was still on his knees. Ignoring the sight of the revolver, and the windows, and The Stranger. Unable to see anything but the phantom remnants of the dream. Under the spell of the song, everything had seemed so clear to him; nonsense

and truth had melted into a sort of primal wisdom: the knowledge that everything he had seen was true, just because he knew in his heart that it was. But even now, the memories were drifting away like the smoke of a candle, his waking thoughts erasing everything but the most damning or impossible moments.

Windows. Cracks. Someone named Nottingham. A broken hero with endless reflections.

This was all too much. The Martian was almost relieved when the sound of glass splitting apart woke him from his pity.

The windows were now swaying violently.

Another splitting noise, this one worse than all the rest. The Martian and The Stranger watched as one of the windows shattered completely. Great pieces of glass fell past his knees and into the white below, tumbling away into the nothing. The Martian covered his face as a great cloud of glow flakes blew past him. He looked below himself and found the sparks and glass tumbling far below.

*That broken glass will create a new world.* He told himself. *A new hero dressed in green. Unless The White swallows all the pieces.*

His eyes looked up at the empty arch. There were jags of emerald still set in the sides, the last moments of countless things. Then he glanced around at the other windows. These were now bouncing in place so violently that he was sure each was about to break.

The Stranger was now running from one side of the circle to the other, trying to set the windows straight. First they took their instrument, and made it disappear up one silver sleeve before holding their hands out as if to tame the windows and settle them down. When this had no effect, The

Stranger went so far as to try and hold the arches in place as they bucked up and down like boiling kettles.

The Martian watched as The Stranger ran up behind him to The Winter Window, studied it for a moment, and then slipped round to the outside of the circle, as if examining it from another angle might yield a better solution. Now there was just two holds holding the side so the stone arch, and the ends of a long silver robe hung beneath it. The rest of The Stranger was a long silhouette behind the glass, bending and stretching as the bouncing cracks distorted their features.

For his part, The Martian was busy thinking about a young girl named Victoria, and the ivy growing along the arch. Had it only been just a few moments since the Winter Window had been his escape plan? Now that felt like a lifetime ago.

Then he noticed the small red drops pooling at the foot of The Stranger's robes, and he remembered, with great remorse it was he who had shot The Stranger.

The Martian grabbed his revolver and stood up, holstering the weapon in shame. He turned to look into The Winter Window, and the silhouette of The Stranger along the other side. They were holding the window tightly as it bounced in place.

"Thank you for saving me." he said, his throat dry from guilt and dreaming. "And I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I--" But The Martian stopped himself. What could he say? *I shot a magic gardener.*

There was a sound now, carried over the winds and the groan of the shaking windows.

At first, The Martian thought he could hear something familiar on that wind, another sound carried from somewhere else far away. But could not place where he knew it from. And then he realized it was voices. And that these were the very same whispers from the dream.

#

Now the whispers came louder. They were joined by other sounds: like falling glass and high winds and maybe, yes, even a scent of something. The Martian could smell a candle burning--no, that wasn't right. He corrected himself: it was a match blown out in the woods. No, it was a fire upon a hearth, a stone fireplace from a house that never existed.

*Something is wrong.* He told himself. Words began to enter his head: Michaud, Spokane, Hollander, tremble-shivers. *What is happening to me?* He asked himself. But he had no answer. He felt...well, if he was being truthful, not drunk, but slightly buzzed. He was not in the least bit dizzy. Nor was he sober.

“Am I still dreaming?” he asked.

The Stranger gave no reply.

And still, the whispers in the distance grew louder still.

The Martian could feel the last of his sanity dripping away like the red spots beneath The Stranger. He was broken. This place. The dreams. They had melted the ice of his heart until, now like a molten sea, it had threatened to rise up, to choke him--or worse yet, cause him to cry in front of this...this creature he had shot. This lonely man or whatever he was, who had saved his life--and at such a cost. The Martian began to speak, words tumbling out of him before he could think of what to say.

“Listen,” he was speaking now to the silhouette of The Stranger. “firstly I should like to apologize. I shot you and I'm--” he paused, stuck on the lameness of his own words. What could he say? That he felt bad for attacking a defenseless magical gardener? “I'm sorry. You rescued me from a

bad turn and...well if anyone knows how hard a rescue attempt is, it's...the man who had to be rescued from one.”

The Stranger said nothing.

The Martian watched the silhouette twist and shiver as the window bounced between them.

“But I guess you would know,” he continued, “about the mission I mean. The one you rescued me from. I saw that in the dream, the one I had during the song...” The Martian sighed, gave it up as a bad job. And then tried again.

“Listen, I can't pretend to know what just happened to me. But you made me see something, didn't you? And in the dream I had, you were watching me. That's what you wanted me to see, right? You were showing me the past--my past, and that you were watching me in those last moments before I should have died. But why? Why were you looking through my window? Was it just coincidence or...”

He was thinking again now of Victoria. How he had stuck his head through The Winter Window and found her tied up to a chair. He had seen the last moments of her life as well, hadn't he? Was that just a coincidence as well? Had the Stranger just been tending to another cracked window and accidentally stumbled upon The Martian's failed attempts of heroism?

He found that question answered when he noticed The Stranger's hands on the arch. One of those old bruised hands was now pointing a finger directly at The Martian.

“Me? You were watching me?” he asked.

The Stranger's hand returned to the frame of the arch.

“You were watching me.”

The Martian began to scramble for understanding. Why would The Stranger be watching him, unless perhaps the stranger needed him, had pulled him into the white for some unknowable purpose. But if that was the case, why would the stranger wait until he was dying?

The answer came to him as quick as the question.

“You needed me to be dying, to pull me out of the window, didn’t you?”

No response.

The Martian tried another question. “How long have you been watching me?”

At this the stranger’s hand once again rose from the buckling arch, only now it was making a closed fist.

“What?” asked The Martian, “I don’t understand.”

But as The Martian watched, they opened the hand slowly, expanding the fist into first a circular shape before opening their palm completely. Now The Stranger was holding their hand out toward The Martian, as if presenting him in front of an audience. Even without words, the gesture was simple.

“You watched as I grew.” said The Martian. And as he said it, he noticed the strange silhouette seemed to give a nod along the other side of the window. “Why me?” he asked. But he knew the answer. He had already been shown it in the dream. It was in the green of his uniform, the same color of the windows jumping in place all around them.

He didn’t ask his next question. Could the window that broke as he was pulled through it truly have been a whole universe filled with people and memories, a pane of glass that was also an entire plane of existence? Part of The Martian couldn’t believe it. But the rest of him, the part of his

mind that couldn't think about it without tears brimming to the edge of his vision, knew that it was true.

And he did not ask his other question either, the one which hung like a photograph inside of him, a picture of something horrible which he could only glance at from the side. Because it was not the loss of the window which truly concerned him. Not yet, though he knew those feelings would come with time. No. What haunted The Martian was hiding in the eaves of every word he spoke to The Stranger. *If that universe and all its life were truly gone, was it my fault, or yours?*

Again the whispers interrupted his thoughts. They were closer now. He could hear voices mumbling as if they were in the circle. And once more he found his thoughts drifting away from his worry and his grief, tumbling like the windows all about him as he began to imagine things he had never thought of before.

He saw a train stuck in snow, and the expansive well-manicured lawn of a luxury hotel. He heard the voice of someone mourning through tears over the loss of a jar of bees, and blue lights streaking past in sheer darkness. He saw a girl named Victoria, tied to a chair and someone crashing down through the ceiling above her.

The Martian stumbled where he stood.

"Am I dreaming?" he asked once more.

And to his surprise, there came an answer from the silhouette behind the window. "No."

The Martian jumped. Had The Stranger just broken his silence?

"You can talk?" he asked.

The Winter Window shook between The Stranger's bruised hands.

Quickly, The Martian peeked around the other side of the arch, only to find The Stranger's face was now hidden, and pushed down through the glass of the window, presumably to check on the dream of the abandoned building.

"You are not dreaming." came another reply, and this time it was not just one voice, but a shouting, bustling mob.

The Martian stepped back into the circle of windows. Within each of them, staring through the cracks in the glass, was his own reflection. Only none of them danced or jumped in the sway of the windows. Instead they stood still inside of them, as if watching him from within their dreams.

"You are the voices from my dream." said The Martian.

"We are the choir of echoes." the whispers replied. "We speak to you, hero of a thousand faces. Our voices are not real. Just imagined. But in this place, that makes them real."

The Martian looked from one reflection to the next. The sound of their words was like ice splitting, like marbles being tossed across pavement.

"If I'm not dreaming, than something is wrong." The Martian told them. "I feel almost drunk. I have..." He struggled here to find the right words. Even if he was not dreaming, he certainly felt as though he was, and he found his lips felt looser, than anything he might say was alright, and would make sense to anyone listening. "I feel like joy and terror are one." he told his reflections. "I hear your voices but I also hear other things, the names of places and events that I can see in my memories, only none of them are things I have ever heard or seen before."

"You have creation sickness." said a lone voice.

The Martian spun from one window to the next, finding it hard to discern which of the reflections might be speaking.

“It is dangerous to play music here,” said another voice, “It is dangerous to dream in the nothing.”

“You are imagining.” said someone else. And this time The Martian could tell it was one of the windows just beside him. “And in this place, it is just the same.” The reflection was smiling as he said this, but The Martian was sure his own mouth was hung open.

“What is this place?” The Martian asked, “Where am I?” but now he had to raise his voice to be heard over the wind, which had grown enough to pull and push at his uniform.

“You know what this place is. You know of the nothing.”

“We must hurry.” said a voice.

“He is coming.” said another.

“I don’t understand!” shouted The Martian, “Who is coming?!”

“Nottingham.” said the choir.

And the name rang out as the wind and rumble died, each reflection blurring as the windows swung back into place. After this, the whispers were gone.

The Martian pulled his revolver back out, and turned slowly in place, checking each window to make sure they were back to normal. He noticed The Stranger was still hiding behind the theirs.

“Please.” he asked The Stranger. “What do you want of me?” He hesitated. “Why did you break my window?” As if they could hear him (and perhaps they had) The entire circle of windows twitched like a muscle.

“Your window would have broken without you.” said a voice. But it was not The Stranger who had spoken, nor any voice from his dreams. It was The Martian’s own reflection, skewed in the cracked pane of The Winter Window which had spoken to him. The Martian felt his muscles tense up at the site of his own lips moving in the window.

And then, to his surprise, The Stranger walked away to hide behind another window, and took the cracked reflection of The Martian with them.

The Martian cried out in surprise, running to the next window to catch up with them.

Then there came a terrible hum in the air, like the sound of glaciers being forced together like mismatched pieces of a puzzle. The circle of windows began to crack and pop, as if an ill pressure had fallen upon them. Already a new breeze was beginning to pull at The Martian’s hair.

“What did you want of me? Tell me, I beg of you!”

“I needed a hero.” said the reflection. Again, The Stranger lifted a hand from behind the arch, pointing a long finger at The Martian.

*I don’t understand.* That was what The Martian wanted to say. But he was filled now with a great sense of shame that left him uncomfortable and silent.

The Stranger’s finger was now jabbing the air, pointing past The Martian.

“Look.” said his reflection. And The Martian turned and saw a window that was now so filled with cracks, that it looked more like an insect’s web, filled with emeralds than anything else.

“The windows will fall, without someone to help them.” said the reflection.

And just then, as if to prove the point, that very window gave a cry, and shattered. The pieces tumbled down beneath the circle, some of them spinning as they fell, others carried away on the growing storm.

“You asked why you were pulled here.” said his reflection. “You asked why you were needed.”

“You needed a hero.” repeated The Martian. But he was looking away from the broken window now, and away from the eyes of his own reflection. He was staring at his gloved fingers, rubbing the greeve sleeve of his coat. And he was thinking about the tattoos which marked his skin beneath it.

“You broke a whole world for the wrong person.” he admitted, not daring to look at his own reflection.

“You are not the one we are seeking” agreed the reflection.

“I’m not?” The Martian said in surprise, looking up just in time to find his own embarrassed look on his face.

“No.” said his reflection. “But you will help us find him.”

The martian watched his face contort from confusion, to relieved, and then back to confusion.

“I found nine of the windows.” said the reflection. “Do you not understand?”

The Martian thought he heard another window crack open behind him.

“I could not find it.” said the reflection, “The first window: the world of the One True Hero. You will need to bring him here. The window of the first hero stands. cracked, but still standing.”

The Martian was just about to say that no, he did not understand, and that he most certainly would be doing nothing of the sort, when The Stranger darted away once more to yet another window, again pulling The Martian’s reflection with him.

With a sigh of frustration, The Martian began to follow, but found the winds of this new storm were now strong enough to impede his progress. His moon boots slipped with each step, and now the groundless ground of The White felt just like walking up a hill of snow.

“We can reverse the process!” called his reflection from across the circle. “Instead of the white cracks invading the hero, we’re going to rescue the hero and bring him to the white cracks!”

“But why me?” shouted The Martian, pushing himself forward. He had only just crossed the middle of the circle now. “You could have just pulled out the first hero! You said his window wasn’t broken!”

“I cannot find his window. But I found yours.”

The Martian reached the window, grabbing The Stranger’s outstretched limb and then the stone arch. It felt as though he could almost blow away now.

The Stranger’s arm pulled him up against the window, The Martian’s face nearly touching the liquid dream. He stared into his own eyes through the cracks in the glass, and watched the breath he should not have in this breathless place, as it fogged up against the green.

“Do not be afraid.” said his reflection gently.

“I am not afraid.” said The Martian. “But I don’t believe in rescue missions anymore. I don’t think I believe in anything.”

He felt the other hand of The Stranger reach out from behind the window, and put a comforting hand upon his shoulder.

“You will still do this.” said the reflection, the face he shared with it now filled with pity. “You will still do this impossible thing. Even without belief. That is what makes you a hero.”

The Martian did not look at himself. “It doesn’t matter.” he told The Stranger. “Your plan--what little I understand of it...you are speaking of the first window, you want to find the first window. And then you want to pull someone out of, and into The White. This place. Here. Just like you pulled me?”

The Stranger said nothing. But his reflection gave a slow nod in the window.

“Even if I were to...” The Martian paused, shaking his head. “Even if I forced myself to believe in a stained glass Genesis of a story...if you’re saying that metaphysical window was the start of all of creation...” he paused again, waiting to be corrected, “...then that would make such a thing incredibly old. I remember the dream. The first window survived after cracking. But surely the hero inside it died a long time ago.”

The Martian let go of The Stranger’s arm, and let himself be pulled back, his feet now off the ground, his fingers gripping the stone arch.

Now it was the reflections turn to look confused.

“Some windows move fast.” said the reflection. “And yet, others move slow. The first window is the slowest. It has stayed as frozen as any timeless tale.”

The martian thought about this for a moment, and looked past his dangling feet to the ivy of The Winter Window, the first world he had looked inside. He thought again about Victoria, and how the scene inside the window had changed so dramatically between each look into the glass. Had it not felt as though hours, if not days had passed in that time?

“Listen to me.” said his reflection, his voice now falling to a whisper. “Nottingham is a creature, just like any other. He has been fought before.”

The martian pulled himself closer to the arch, both his hands now gripping the stone edges. “What do you mean he’s been fought before?”

There was a loud snap just above them, and both the reflection and The martian stared warily at a new jagged line which had appeared upon the top of the window. The Stranger moved away from the window slowly, darting to the next one. Again, The Martian’s reflection followed.

If there had ever been a sense of ground before, it seemed impossible now. The Martian felt his feet dangling about as if he were floating in open space. With practiced ease, he pushed one away against the arch and then another, before letting go and allowing his body to cartwheel toward the new arch of The Stranger. He grabbed that ledge and leaned in once more. His reflection now cupping it's hands to whisper conspiratorially into The Martian's ear.

"Every window has a hero." said the reflection, "But it has lots of other people too. People like myself, who brought you here--Magicians, and other heroes, and those with knowledge about such things. They--along with many heroes, have fought the nothingness before, and will again. They will help us too. You won't have to do this alone!"

"What happened?" asked The Martian, but he to shout the words now. It was as if the wind had somehow heard the reflection, and had begun to howl in protest.

"That was a long time ago." the reflection shouted back. "Not many know what happened. But I have seen the cracks appearing. They are back. And so is he."

Now the pitch of the wind became something otherworldly. It made The Martian think of an electric whistle.

"What is that noise?!" he asked.

"The windows!" cried his reflection, "We don't have much time!"

The sound was growing louder now. The Martian felt himself pulling his legs tightly under the arch. It was such a frightful noise he felt naked, as if he were swimming in deep water.

"We need the first hero!" the reflection continued, "If his window can be shattered--if he can be hurt or killed, then so can Nottingham! They are the balance of one another: Purpose and Nothingness!"

Mulling these words over, The Martian spied a small pebble of glass upon his shoulder. He hadn't noticed it before. They were the same color. The emerald green of the windows and the first hero.

"I thought it was just a uniform." he said to himself.

The sound of the windows rang higher. Like an engine about to burst.

"Where are the others?!" he asked the reflection. "The other people?! The ones who will help us?!"

"We are standing in the nothingness!" replied his reflection, "The windows need to be watched, but it isn't safe! If everyone gathered here, they would be wiped out!"

"But if that were so..." asked The Martian, "why have you and I not been attacked. The two of us are gathered here. Why wouldn't this Nottingham fellow see my window break, and come to find us?"

But just as The Martian said this, a large crack split the window in half. The reflection screamed in terror. Now there were two of his reflections, one along either side of the split. Each was staring in a different direction.

"Of course he saw." said one of the reflections.

"He will be here, once the winds have died." said the other.

And before the Martian could respond, there was a loud crash in every direction. He felt his fingers let go of the arch. Then to his surprise, he fell to the groundless ground, all sense of wind and gravity now returned to normal. Above him the windows were now exploding in every direction. And green glass and glow sparks tumbled from the arches like ash being spit from a furnace. He closed his eyes against the onslaught, and covered his head as he knelt beneath it.

When he opened his eyes only a few of the windows remained.

#

The full might of the gale was now about them, singing and screaming through the shattered remains of the circle. But the sound was nothing compared to the amount of glass now flying about them. It was a sandstorm of sparks and shards. They swept against the Martian, threatening to pull his legs out from under him. Still on his knees, he dug the toes of his moon-boots into The White and let the current of broken windows crash against him. It reminded him of being a child, and family vacations in the ocean, when the tides would pull the sand from beneath his toes.

The Stranger was now standing in the middle of the circle. He Martian glanced up in time to see him pull something from up his sleeve. It was a stone. Next, The Stranger held a finger to the stone and began to push into it, as if the object were soft as clay. Then with great care, he began to carve his finger outward in a spiraling circle. The stone glowed where his finger touched it. When he finished there was a bright blue spiral of light along the side of the stone.

“What is that?” asked The Martian, standing up against the wind.

But before he could ask any further questions, the Stranger darted a hand into the air, and grabbed a shard of glass, holding it between his fingers as if it were only a wriggling fish.

The Martian thought it must have cut The Stranger, as something began to drip down from the glass and upon the stone. But it wasn't blood. It was shiny and green. It looked almost as if the spiral upon the stone lit up again at the touch of the tears, this time glowing a familiar green before fading away.

“This is a skipping stone.” said The Stranger. “And you’re going to need it.”

The Martian looked up from the stone to find The Stranger was now holding the glass up to the mask on their face. It was only large enough to cover the carving of their mouth. And just as before, The Martian found his own mouth was reflected in that piece of glass, as if The Stranger were using his own face to talk with him.

“But...what will the stone do?” he asked.

“Pull you.” replied The Stranger, walking over to The Martian and holding the stone up to his chest. They began to press it tightly against the front of his coat. “Landing in just the right window would be nearly impossible.” said The Stranger, “You might search for a grain of salt in the ocean.”

The Martian gave an uneasy look at the stone held over his heart. “What are you doing?”

“Binding it.”

The Martian was not sure what The Stranger had meant by this, but let them continue.

The Stranger pulled the stone away. “The carving will glow blue, burning down to the center of the stone like a fuse.” The Stranger palmed the stone and took a finger to the air, pretending to draw a spiral as he illustrated their point. “When the stone empties itself of light, it will travel to the next window, and pull you along beside it, skipping from one window to the next.”

“How will I know when I’m in the right window?” asked The Martian.

“The light of the stone will glow green.”

The Martian nodded in silence. He was staring past The Stranger now, into the vastness of The White. He dropped a hand down to where his revolver was stowed, and let his thumb brush against the word carved into it. His thoughts were interrupted by The Stranger, who began to tap the stone against The Martian’s head.

“Is it bound yet?” he asked.

The Stranger said nothing, only continued to tap the stone against him. First his head, then his heart, and stomach. Finally he asked him to kiss the stone. The Martian did so, but felt embarrassed about it.

“What was the point of all that?” he asked.

“You are now bound.” said The Stranger.

He gave the stone to the Martian, who held it tightly in one hand. Even with gloves on he could tell the stone was exceedingly smooth, except of course of the carving along the top. He would have preferred something more jagged, and less likely to slip from his hands.

“It will not be enough to find the first window.” said The Stranger, “You must be in proximity to the one true hero if you hope to bring him back here with you.”

“I got it.” said The Martian.

“Close is good. Touching is better.” The Stranger glanced at the arches about them. “There are a few unbroken windows left. We’ll need to find one with lots of magic so we can charge the stone. The first jump is going to feel like a fall--”

But the words of The Stranger were silenced as the glass shard pulled itself out from under his fingers, escaping along the dying winds with the rest of its kin. The Stranger watched it disappear into the distance. The carving of their face made it impossible to guess what they might be thinking.

“What do you mean by charging the stone?” The Martian asked.

But The Stranger was already running toward the nearest unbroken window, running their hands before sticking a finger up to their carved smile, as if licking or sniffing the glass would help them detect any useful magic. They did this to each of the remaining windows, shaking their head at

every arch.

Then The Martian watched as The Stranger pulled out their musical instrument once more from wherever it was hidden. One by one they plucked each of the strings, leaning toward each window as they did so. The Martian was grateful to find the music had no effect on him, as if the sound were a drug he was already familiar with.

*If I never have another dream again, I'll be grateful.* He thought to himself.

The Stranger seemed to have made a decision. They were standing in front of a window The Martian recognized from before: it was the one that looked as if the sun were setting along the other side of it. Only now it was so filled with cracks he was surprised to find it unshattered. The Stranger was sniffing the glass, and eyeing the breaks in the emerald pane carefully.

“Hang on,” called The Martian. “If I pull the first hero through his window and into here, won’t it shatter the first window--won’t we break the first world?” He could barely stomach the fact that his own world was now in useless pieces. He did not think he could bear being responsible for another.

The Stranger shook their head, pointing toward the stone in The Martian’s hand.

“Oh. That’s what this is for?” The Martian looked into the blue of the spiral, which was even now a dull sort of glow.

*He did say we would need to charge it.*

His thoughts were interrupted by a strange knocking sound. The Martian looked up to see what The Stranger was doing, but found that carved expression was staring back at him in concern. Neither of them were making the noise. But there it was: the sound of a hand, knocking against glass like a stranger at the door. Both of them looked around the circle until they spotted where it was

coming from. The Martian looked over to a familiar arch, it was the one with the darkest colored glass, the one containing the dream of the air-conditioned library and the typing; he was sure of it. It seemed so long ago that this had been his first choice as an escape route. But now the window was rattling. And to his horror, The Martian could see a silhouette on the other side. It was a long hand with a fist, knocking against the cracks. At first the knocking sounded careful and polite, but as they watched it began to hammer at the window, rattling the pane inside the arch.

#

The Stranger motioned frantically for The Martian to join them at the sunset window.

The Martian was walking backwards now, his revolver pulled and leveled at the shadow in the window. “How do we charge the stone?” he shouted, glancing over his shoulder.

The Stranger motioned to the ledge of the arch, and The Martian hopped up, holstering his revolver to pull himself up by the stones. With some effort he found himself sitting on the edge of the arch, his back to the liquid glass of the dream.

The fist across the circle continued to knock.

The Martian offered a hand to help The Stranger into the window. But The Stranger only shook their head.

“You don’t mean to join me.” The Martian realized. “But why?” But he knew the answer. The Stranger had already told him in the voice of his own reflection. “The windows will fall, without someone to help them.” he repeated.

The Stranger gave a slow, sad nod.

How long had The Stranger been here? he wondered. And then realized something even more important than his own feelings: The man with the wooden face didn't want to be alone either. That he was being brave by staying here. By leading the Martian towards escape.

“When I get back... we'll find a way for you to leave.” said The Martian.

The stranger nodded, as if genuinely touched.

With this, The Martian realized he had yet to ask the most important question of all. “Er, how will I get back to you, anyhow?” he asked. “If I find him, the first hero. How do I get back to The White?”

The Stranger again traced the shape of a spiral into the air, then pointed at the stone.

The Martian stared again at the carving on the stone. It wasn't just a spiral, not really. It was also a circle, folding in on itself. “The stone will bring me back to where I started, is that what you mean?”

The Stranger nodded. And then the sound of a fist punching through glass cut off any other chance of questions.

“Shit.” said The Martian, who made to ull his revolver once more, but The Stranger stopped him, motioning for The Martian to jump now through the window. The Martian nodded, and spun around on the ledge until his legs were dangling through to the other side, where a strong wind tugged at his moon boots.

For his part, The Stranger spun around to face the fist in the window. Holding their instrument like a weapon, they began to play a loud and raucous song.

The Martian closed his eyes and held the stone tightly, and imagine the song as a send off. And just as he was about to slip through the glass, he remembered the one question he had forgotten to ask.

“How do I charge the stone?”

But The Stranger only pushed him through the glass, and into the dream.

The Martian felt the arch slide up from beneath him, and his legs reach out for nothing as he began to tumble through the dream and into the air of an open sunset sky.

#

The Martian was falling. The sound of the sky rushed past his ears in a roar.

There was a stone held tightly in one hand. He knew it was important, so he clutched it all the harder, digging his fingers into the thing. His legs kicked out somewhere beneath him, impatient to hit the ground he couldn't see. His breath hung tight in his throat. He was waiting for impact.

*Why am I falling?* he wondered, but then he remembered the warning he had been given: “*This first jump is going to feel like a fall.*”

There was a terrible sensation of something burning in his chest. It was a lack of air. The Martian couldn't breathe, not with the rush of the fall crashing into him. He spun onto his back and exhaled, taking a deep icy breath as he surveyed the air about him. The sun was setting, peeking in between the clouds gathered like a storm.

*Why am I falling?* he wondered again. He was sure there was a reason. He had known it only a moment ago. There was something in his hands. But for the life of him, he couldn't remember what it was. He thought about opening his palms just a little. He wanted to see what it was.

*No.* Something in the back of his head whispered. *It is something special. You have to hold it tightly.* And then he remembered. He was holding a magic rock. it was called a skipping stone. And

that he was falling into another world that looked like a window.

*The stone has to be charged.*

He had jumped through a window, and the world below him was just like the others. Just like a dream. The Martian spun around again to see the world he was falling into.

The storm clouds parted, showing a green forest below. Trees of every emerald hue towered over everything, covering the world like the robes of a king. And just as before, The Martian found new moments of knowledge awake inside his mind. Newborn thoughts and memories that were only pretending to be old and familiar. It was just the same as hee had experienced in the other windows. Just like a dream.

He was still falling...

...But he was also in the forest below.

#

His vision swam through the trees like a wind, rustling the leaves on the ground below him. Above him a great canopy of evergreen covered the sky, leaving the forest a dim and beautiful color. Between the trees was more green, and even the dappled shadows seemed to paint the world with an emerald gloom. It felt less like a forest, and more like the halls of some vast castle. Endless and winding passages, hung with tapestries made of leaves and shadows.

On each tree hung ornaments the size of small glass marbles.

The Martian passed through the forest like a ghost. Swimming through the air and caught upon a current with no control. As he passed each tree, the ornaments upon them clinked together in

applause, swaying against each other in the wake of his spectral breeze.

*No.* The Martian corrected himself. *Not ornaments. They are growing on the trees. They are special.* The Martian named them glass berries. Each was the same shade of color. It was a color he had never seen before. They were everywhere but the forest floor.

*"This is the color of hope."* He told himself, but was unsure what this meant, or why he had said it. Then he felt the winds of time pull him forward. And the forest speed past him, faster and faster. As time passed, the glass berries passed with it. Disappearing one by one.

*They were taken.* The Martian knew. *This already happened. It happened a long time ago.*

And then, as he watched, the trees began to change. But this was not due to the movement of the seasons. This was life, seen as it passes into death. An ugly color began to grow along the branches and the leaves. A nasty shade of unpleasant. The Martian found it hard to look at.

*"This is the color of despair."* He said aloud, but again, was unsure what that meant, only that it was true. It was apparent to him the leaves of the forest could not support any coloring without their decorations. Like the green of them was sinking away, down the stems, and through the trunk. Now the true color of the trees had passed under the earth to hide. All their leaves began to fall around The Martian, and as they fell, he felt himself pulled further past them, as if he were falling.

*I am falling.* He reminded himself.

Now the forest was filled with cobwebs and white lichen. The branches of the trees looked like cracks in the darkness between them. The Martian was pulled between the dead trees until he found himself floating into a clearing. This was a small field of grass, surrounded by a copse of colorless trees.

Whatever had been pulling The Martian seemed to halt, as if he was supposed to be here.

*"Time has passed."* he whispered to himself. *"This is happening now."*

The Martian knew this place was sacred, it even seemed as if a rare patch of sunlight kept this part of the forest warm. And wherever the light fell, The Martian could see living grass, the color of jewels. A tree stood by itself in the clearing, and this held its colors too. Yet the unpleasant color of despair was beginning to pepper it in spots. The branches themselves were already lost. On the tree hung one last decoration the color of miracles.

And then The Martian noticed he was not alone. There was someone in front of the tree.

They were knelt in prayer, their back to him, and wearing a strange sort of clothing. It was all leaves and webs, but each piece was laid upon them in a graceful manner. The result was a familiar shade of green.

The Martian knew this was the hero of the world, and that she was called an elf.

“She prays to the last hope of the forest!” he shouted, before covering his mouth in surprise. He had not intended to say anything, let alone shout. But it was like being in a dream or a nightmare, and he found himself at the mercy of this world.

For her part, The Elf did not seem to notice. But she stood up, keeping her gaze on the last living tree. Standing up, The Martian thought she looked more like a tree than a person.

It was then he felt himself wanting to shout again. He held his hand over his mouth to try and stop it. He bit down on his fingers until his eyes filled with tears, but it was no use.

“The last hope will fall. It cannot hang alone!” he cried.

The Elf turned to The Martian. She did not see him, but looked past him, into the white of the dead woods. The Martian corrected himself. It was not just any tree she looked like, but a sad tree, alone in the winter.

The Elf had a face the color of birch, and much like her arms, it was covered in the smallest of

specks, like something between freckles and knots in wood. Her eyes were black, and wet. Like two stones in the bottom of a river. Her hair was green and wispy. It hung in the air about her head, like fog curled around roots in the morning.

The Martian let his gaze wander from The Elf to the last living tree and its glass-berry, and then to the lichen that choked the trees.

The Elf began to whisper, and The Martian felt his own lips whispering with her.

“The other side of hope is despair.” they said together.

He stared into her eyes and felt heartbroken. And she stared off into the gloom all alone. She was crying, silently to herself. And it touched him. Perhaps because it was a dream. But it felt wrong to see the colors in this world fading away. It was the same sense of loss The Martian had felt when realizing his own window was shattered. His world was now gone and so was hers.

*Is that what it takes? he wondered, to be echoes of a true hero?*

He watched the tears roll down her cheeks, and felt the same wetness upon his own. But The Martian’s tears were falling the wrong way. He could feel the little lines of salt water, rising up his face to hide in his hair.

*You are not here. he reminded himself. You are up in the sky. Hold the stone tightly. You are falling.*

#

Then he remembered he wasn’t in the forest. That he was falling through the sky. He was charging the skip-stone.

Opening his eyes, he stared down at the world below him. The ground was closer now, but the rich robes of green were now ragged and grey. The world beneath him was ugly, and without color. The winds rushing past him had died and become a new sound. There was a strange beeping from somewhere beside him. It sounded familiar. But he just couldn't think what it was.

*You know that sound.* He told himself.

His mind was filled with sleepiness, and dreams. He was too tired. And the knowledge of the forest was still growing into his memories. He could feel it. There were now a dozen different thoughts in the mind of The Martian. And each of them felt just out of reach.

He had been dreaming. He remembered that now. If he closed his eyes he could see the forest below. Something awful had happened.

There had been someone else. She was sad.

*The Elf guards the last miracle in the forest.* He told himself. *But from who?*

And then he could see it. She was not alone. There were others in the dead forest.

The Martian fell toward them, and thought about his mission, and The Elf, and how he needed to help her, needed to draw his weapon, to be ready for battle. And then his mind finally told him what that strange beeping sound was, and why he knew it so well. It was his revolver. And that alarm was the sound of the battery dying. By the time he reached the forest it would be useless.

The Martian closed his eyes, and forgot all of this. And as he slipped back into the dream of the forest, he saw who The Elf was guarding the tree from.

"They are coming for her." he whispered.

## AFTERWORD

Hello.

Blink. And Breathe.

Are we still in The White? Did we ever leave?

Thank-you for reading this rough beginning of the story which took over my life over a decade ago. It

was really hard to share it with people in this manner, through a download on a website (and not presented in some sort of pristine dust jacket after you found it among a green stack beneath a banner proclaiming it to be the best debut novel in a century). But the world we find ourselves in right now is different than the world of the late 2000's, when I started my journey of following *The Martian*, and then *The Elf*, and eventually Sylvan *The Magician* and all his friends.

*The Times They are a Changin'* and I don't really want to quote a song in this little afterward, but just as I typed the words, and before I could delete them, those very lyrics boomed out of a speaker in the coffee shop I started typing this in, and that sort of coincidence deserves respect (certainly in this case of this book, where a young boy you just met in that first interlude is destined to become a coincigician named Francois, among other things).

*Those Who Wear Green* is nineteen chapters long, and includes three interludes which take place both before and during the narrative (time gets funny when you're hopping between worlds). The story spans two additional books. It's not a real trilogy mind you, as it's all the same story. It just sort of kept growing as I wrote it, until it would not fit into one volume.

If I had to boil the story down to its roots, I would say it is a classic fantasy story about identity, told in an unconventional manner. The plot gets tricky in a few bits, and though it is written as a sugary pop-culture ready blockbuster, repeated readings will reveal a lot more going on behind the scenes.

I have a lot of (ever-modified) personal rules about how stories are told (I am an obnoxious person),

and the amount of time I have put into crafting this tale will hopefully show that. I did not plot anything out to begin with. I never do. I just kept writing until the pieces either began to connect (in which case I kept going, often rewriting every single scene many times over) or they didn't (in which case I would scrap months of work and rewrite until I got there).

My main goal, besides finishing it and not cringing at the end results, was to write the type of book I am always hoping to find: something with an intoxicating combination of embarrassing ideas mixed with moments that are so cool you can't help but enjoy the embarrassing bits too.

I have a first draft of the entire thing--all three books, but it's been a decade since I began, and most of that time has gone into rewriting and solidifying the first act, which grew and changed until most of it would have been unrecognizable to the twenty-five year old moron who thought "Oh, I'll just write a novel."

But why share the work at all? And why only part of it? Why not just sell it online with the rest of my wares on the rough-and-tumble landscape of SUBHEATHEN dot com? It's a very good question. I sell tabletop games I make online. And I sell music from my (three?!) bands too. And so I felt the need to write my thoughts out, in a small manifesto, which can also be found on my website.

### **We as a Society**

We as a society have not yet reached critical mass in terms of independent mass market products. It is

so easy to make something, and then just publish it. ...but we don't trust that. And for good reason. Making something good takes a frankly unexceptionable (for most) amount of time, craft, repetition, and luck.

An Object must be carved from nothing. It is impossible. Except for those of us with just the right amount of mental illness and discipline. Things take time. That is true for making Objects, as well as enjoying them.

It is for this reason, in our society, we have historically trusted Gatekeepers such as critics, publishers, and the psycho-kinetic blast of advertising to show us what is worth our time.

And though we have (always, effortlessly, every year, every decade) reached an upsetting point of homogenization in our products (everything is either a reboot, or sequel, or an idea anyone else could have had) we are not yet at a point where expected critical Objects can occur regularly in the wild west of online independent media. Beloved moments occur all the time. Yes. And for sure. But everything that jumps out as important, or original, or necessary to the future nostalgia of society is still (with the rare exception) shown to us by the golden-gauntlet covered hands of our gatekeepers.

Is there a chance that the novel I started ten years ago would/could/should turn the tide of war in our culture? If I share my work to the unwaiting masses is there a possibility our world shifts and begins to see the independent publisher with a new keen eye of critical clarity? Sure. But not without me raising a storm of attention and numbers; not without the white hot klaxon of noise that raises those self-same

gatekeepers and publishers awake.

TL;DR

Right now, “independent” is an English word that means (down down, whether you admit it or not) “unimportant”. But the world is changing, and the way it sees things is surely different than the year I started this story.

I hope you enjoyed the story. The rest is coming. Soon enough. In some form or another.

-mE.