

Colors of Earth

J. S. Anthony



a story from the
Children of the Storm
anthology

Chapter 1

The Needle's Eye

Kelvin 31st, 1394

It was stormy and it was dark. Rain glistened thick, like mercury against the overcast horizon. Sable heavens churned. Somehow in the distance, an old orange sun filled the east. Its dying rays glittered beneath the black of the storm. It was like an angry eye, set under a coiled brow of darkness. It lay there, watching. Afar, it was the eye of fate, beholding and commanding. Between were many stormclouds. Yonder sun labored neath an evening's thunder. It lay befallen, as if by terrible misfortune. As if barred from sovereign daylight—it reminded it should soon return with vengeance. The skies' indifferent canopy roiled. Their onyx features were lined with the orange light. Lit like forges, burned that sky. Cold, indifferent, rolling booms shrilled its winds and fell its rain. The chill of such gales found Lord Cordwell through the pane of the study window. Thither he removed his hand.

With a sigh he returned a glance to the man who furrowed upon him. The oiled mustache held his jaw in a permanent and hirsute frown, adding to an already stark demeanor. Cordwell rather thought the thing became him. *Serious folk ought to have such serious features*, he thought. *It helps the rest of us point them out straight away*. Ignoring the obvious plea, which held in the silent look of the serious man, Cordwell turned back to the burning world beyond the pane.

“Tis a rare sight,” marked Cordwell to himself.

“Eh?” asked the serious man, now lost.

“*The Sun*,” said Cordwell with a nod to it. “We don’t see much of it these days. Not in the East.”

“Ah. Yes...well,” his guest attempted. Then he shook his head and began anew. “Mr. Cordwell, I really must insist that you...”

“—the whole world seems on fire these years!” interrupted Cordwell again. He seemed determined to remain lost in thought. “The hue of the earth had turned from spring to autumn. Then we are to the terrible winter. *You can feel it in the bones*. Can’t you, Mr. Segraves? It’s not just the color itself, though I feel that too has changed. I feel that in my youth the whole aura of the world was blues and greens! Now it seems tarnished. Like a cauldron, it burns like that baleful sun. Don’t you remember

your childhood? You're not too young, are you? Was not the Sun a gentle thing? Why with such spite does it now turn its venom on us?"

Segraves hardly listened. Instead he engaged an inward contemplation of his likelihood to catch the next veiled-train, should he leave the manor presently. Dismayed at his findings, he groaned and reset his glasses. It seemed he was remiss to remain at least another hour-half in this estate.

"Sir—can we not discuss the very reason I am come?" he urged his host once more.

Cordwell sighed. "Why yes...all right. If we must," he at last consented. "Do ask away, Mr. Segraves." The nobleman's eyes remained askance, unto the angrily setting sun.

"At last!" elated an exasperated Segraves. He ran a relieved hand through his neatly oiled rightward part. This final request had been more in acceptance of its rejection, than had it held his hopes. Now these returned to him. Grunting softly he wet a thumb; the parchment scratched as he turned it and found his place. "Ah. Well, then! When last we spoke, Mr. Cordwell, you made mention of your willingness to discuss what affairs you know of your former employer. I should like to ask a few questions on this point—if I may?"

Cordwell sighed with an ambivalent and acquiescent wave.

Segraves cleared his throat. "Then, well... I suppose there is not but to come right out with it. *Infinite Industries* has been recently held under a measure of suspicion. This is with regards to the activities within its more clandestine departments. Don't misunderstand me sir, I do grasp the nuances of all this; the corporation is a global superpower, and many of its divisions do a great deal of good! But your work in *this* arena is of particular interest to me. No one involved with *The Kingdom Project* has spoken a word to the press, much less been interviewed! I suppose my first question before we begin then, is *why*? Why contact me to talk about all of this?"

Cordwell shrugged. His eyes looked ever out through the crepuscular showers.

Segraves cleared his throat suggestively. His host did not respond. Then agitatedly: "Sir, to be curt—if you are determined to be difficult, I *will* leave! I've no use of you but to speak on Infinite and its Kingdom Initiative. If you are intending to waste my time further I shall certainly hasten to spend it elsewhere!"

Cordwell looked over to the flustered man. Tinges of embarrassed zeal reddened his guest's serious cheeks. Their tint drew further contrast with the jet of his mustache and oiled hairline.

The host nodded. He turned in his sofa chair from the window at last. "Yes, you are quite right," he answered. "Of course you are. 'Twas rude of me. You have my compliance and attention, sir. 'Why,' you asked me? Why to approach you at the *Ézraleon* a fortnight ago and illicit this meeting? 'Tis simple, Segraves. Firstly, as you shall soon learn, I am a man who loves intrigue and being in-the-know! No sooner had I spotted you than had I wished to relay what I could. I've held onto my tale long enough that the release of it should be a pleasure to me. I simply wish to speak to someone that wishes to hear me! That is all. I am alone overmuch in such a way of isolation. I simply wish *to speak*."

Segraves looked down and began to scribble upon a notepad. His well-groomed head began nodding rhythmically as his host spoke.

“Though, that can’t be all of it,” continued Cordwell. “*No. I think not...*” Almost begrudgingly the elderly man turned a weary eye back to the far horizon. The distant red of the falling sun met him with a knife of fiery light. It seeped, as if from neath a cracked door. The forlorn fires of its hearth mingled with Cordwell’s mixed emotions. It caught a look of remorse across the nobleman’s face. It drew it out, as poison from his veins. “No. I think this is more than simply needing an ear. I need *confession*, Segraves. I need penance. This, I think, is the way of it.”

“Hmm.” Segraves stopped his pen. “Then, this is to be cathartic for you and revelatory for me?”

“It would seem so,” agreed Cordwell.

“I see.” Segraves wrote another note. “Then let us begin eighteen years ago, when the Kingdom project first began. I’d like you to tell me all you can about its conception, and more so to speak to its aims. We in the public sphere can only guess at its true motives.”

Cordwell gave his guest a cryptic gaze. “My dear, Segraves. Kingdom *itself* is far younger. That name hadn’t even been imagined, while I yet walked the Industries’ halls. And yet, the Kingdom Initiative *also* has roots dating back well before the emergence of The Storm. To begin at its *true* beginning, we must precede it. I must again be but a youth, not five and twenty working at Infinite Industries at the request of my Father, the late Lord Carson...”

Segraves eagerly began to jot as his host began his tale.

“Ah—Segraves! But you also speak of motives! That is a tiresome task indeed,” Cordwell slipped deep into nostalgic thoughtfulness; the past began to unfold before his weary eyes. “Intention is a complex thing. So too are outcomes. A person by a single want may unleash a torrent of mingled results. Yet another, having many jaded desires may achieve a single, and noble goal. Who of us can call the latter into question by the evils of their outset? Who may throw blame upon the former by their outcomes, when their hearts were true? For Infinite’s part, I should like to think their motives, at least at the outset, were noble. If they have since fallen to baser means, tis not mine to judge. But for original intents, this I know. I was there, when the thing was first conceived. It was early in the days of old November. I came eagerly to the halls of what was then called: *Project Odysseus...*”

Chapter 2

Cattle of the Sun

November 8th, 1324

My father once sat me down. His eyes were a sage dispassion meeting mine—a then youthful and rabbitly wonder. The blindness of that hour was my own. The whole world was caught up with starlit eyes! So were they benighted in the vast expanse of darkling space. For this ever surrounded the brighter stars. There lay that blindness, ready to feast upon our ignorance.

The late Lord Carson laid his somber looks on me. Peering back to that day, I can see myself with the same eyes he saw me. I was too filled by the world's rising weakness. He perceived that my current in-house tutelage should not correct such myopia. I see this now too, looking back. So came I to his study that fateful day, and he looked me over a moment in silence. He grunted to himself.

I asked him the meaning of this.

He told me he had, just now, decided that I was in need of occupation. My life of luxury should be halted for a time. My well-funded education must be put to use, that I gain some sense of things beyond my own small diversions. I was, in his opinion, too groomed by our society and in want of true experience to culture me.

I, of course, did as most twenty-something children did in such situations—I pined against this. But the thing was set. Our family, as you know, made our fortune being the largest financier of Infinite's research & development department. My great *great* grandfather was a founding member of its board. As such, my father had only need to speak the word, and I should be assigned to any team in that division. My relative lack of qualifications did not, to my chagrin, count against me.

Lord Carson leaned back in his armchair. Resting an elegant elbow on that arm, he lifted a casual hand: empty in the air. Flicking his thumb outward, his eyes mistily glazed over. Those perfectly transparent spectacles turned opaque as he activated their devices. Then, proceeding to flick that hand lazily about, I could see his sundered gaze quickly scanning the contents scrolling before him.

"All right then, Winston," he said at last. "Hear all these, and tell me your interest. I shall let you chose your field. There: that is all the mercy you'll get of me in this! Be glad of it." He cleared his

throat. “Here let’s see. We have: genetic mutations, technological advancements, dimensional studies, phenomena investigation...”

I stopped him.

“Phenomena, eh?” he chuckled. “Yes, well at least you can *appear* educated, while baffled alongside equally bewildered minds! Though I suppose your own degree could be of some use too, eh? What was it again? Your field of study? Oration? Diplomacy? Good then. I will make a call and you will head there in the morning. Pack your things. I do not expect to see you a good many weeks.”

At once, Lord Carson turned his chair from me and faced outward to the window. It was nearly as if I had quickly become alone. Angrily I stood, and was to leave the room. It had been my intention to spend the rest of my free day skulking about the manor, and complaining on the ear of any servant near to me.

“*Eh—Winston?*” he called after me.

I glanced upon the faceless back of his large armchair. The study’s rustic calm seemed picturesque without sight of its master. It was as if, once turned upon the window this way, the Lord Carson was one with its timeless tomes: a piece of its great furniture. So too his voice fell out. It was a voice without fount, the quintessence of its axiom.

“Yes?” I answered the arm chair. My brow lifted from its brooding. It was the *idea* of my father that spoke, his essence. The man who *in time* I’d felt banished me to labor...he dissipated altogether. What remained was his ghastly spirit. It haunted my every unspoken aspiration, this like every son and daughter. Thus confronted, and without a true audience to witness my pouts, I found my disposition leveled. Indeed, without a reason, I suddenly clung upon what should next be spoken.

“*Good luck,*” drifted out his soft reply.

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Then the hour was golden. Purpose seemed an endless thing in those days. Like a song it seemed to beget a cool sense of vigor that soothed across the friendly skies. So was the world inebriated by the opiate of a then indulgent calm. It spilled over every breaker with its bounty. It filled the world with that aforementioned purpose. That was the critical thing, which marked us then. Twas our boundless intentions. Those fateful aspirations blinded.

I walked amid the friendly lights that hour, as I first came into the halls. The outer courtyard held verdurous beneath the white noon. The scent of its various floral array refreshed with their aroma. A lovely wind carried this in a quick gust. Such a breeze then greeted me in a wave, as I breached the confluence of the daylight and the department lobby. Remaining determined upon my choleric aura would be difficult on such a morning. Beside all that, I’d dreamt that night of what a day with the phenomena projects could entail! My reckless visions wove a grand narrative that evening while I slept. Twas forgotten in the day, but for its intrigue. This lingered with me. It should be loved, a grand adventure, when one is caught up in some wondrous mystery! So I revealed.

The cooling ambience of the vast parlor held numerous members passing to and fro. For all its industry, the forward wall of the complex was glass; its transparency let in the noonday askance as the pleasant sun fell overhead. So the scattered plant-life, which was potted about the corridors, were enlivened. Likewise were the spirits of the staff therein. The vaulted lobby ceiling stretched many levels high. Countless departments faced overlooking the hundred-story entryway. The light therefore reached to all, and all beheld it. I entered on that rush of air, which equilibrated the fresh indoors.

Spirits high, I pressed straightaway to the wide circular reception. The gentleman who operated there met my approach with an inviting look.

“Winston Cordwell, here to see Director Marks,” I introduced.

The gentleman nodded. His spectacles glazed over opaquely as he searched for my appointment. Then they cleared. He smiled. “Yes, Mr. Cordwell! The Director is expecting you in her department on level eighty-six, room twelve.” He motioned leftward to an elevator.

Thanking him, I made on.

My journey was swift up to the heights of that tower. Before long I stood on the threshold of that very level. The insignia of Infinite Industries, the five tallies, held about the greeting face of the steel wall. This emblem was brushed on the furnished metal with a subscript that lettered: *Project Odysseus*, engraved beneath. So was it a microcosm of the whole. I had entered upon a cell of a greater organism, both within the whole and yet the source and blueprint of its majesty.

Again the rush of mystery found me. I was like a child. Not only in that thence was our adolescence believed to extend until thirty, though this was indeed so in those days. But it was also that I held a sort of wonder; Infinite was a new world to me! Its network ran vast across the Globe, surely. But it was also like a *separate* thing to it. It was like some parallel world upon the Earth. It reached to and fro, along and beside the face of the planet—unknown to all who passed it by, but for those a part of its hidden workings. I felt exhilaration then, to have passed into its doors. For all my dislike of being commanded thence, I was yet glad to be. How odd the human heart—that it loathes what is good for it, and loveth what is foolish! Given to our own way: we find torment. Yet bent against our former wills, then we come to find true joy! Tis a mystery to me. For it flies even still against thoughts I have of my own independence and belief in my own rights.

Yet here I was.

The Project’s level held its own reception desk too, if in miniature. This attendant had expected my entry; she was no doubt told as much by the one below. She greeted and led me through the inner hallways. Countless rooms passed me by. I could only wonder at their secrets.

Passing thus, we made to the twelfth chamber. Here she stopped, and opened the door.

I cheerily entered, thanking her.

The chamber within held five persons. Their heated discussion met my ears beyond the door, even as it hushed upon my entry. They looked up to me as an intruder to their sacred temple.

“—*Mr. Cordwell*,” introduced my guide. Then she was quickly gone. The door shut behind her.

“Ah yes, Mr. Cordwell. I’ve *expected* you,” greeted the woman the far end of the tabled chamber. Her tone was level, but her expression was less than cordial. “Everyone, I introduce Winston Cordwell, son of the Lord Cordwell. He will be...joining our team.”

The effect was catastrophic. The rest of the room whirled from mild disdain upon me, to set their Director with a glance of genuine dismay. Yet Director Jillian Marks flashed a venomous glare quickly silencing any vocalized dissent.

“We have the *honor*...” she said emphatically, with a cold look at her staff, “...of having the Lord’s son on our project’s team. We are *happy* to bring him up to speed on our current endeavors, and we hope the Lord Carson continues to be pleased with our performance in our *jobs* with Infinite’s R&D division.”

The room sobered under her rebuttal—begrudgingly understanding that my father could send any of them on their merry way, if he so wished. Of course, I knew it was ridiculous that he should ever do such a thing. He so very little valued my opinion on business matters; it was more likely that, on recommendation of Director Marks, he was to send me off and look for a more suitable son! But understanding this to be their opinion, I let it remain.

“I’m glad to be joining you,” I seconded the Director. “Please, uh, just go ahead like I’m not here! I’ll jump in, in any way that’s helpful.” I pulled a chair nearest to the door and sat. *It should be enjoyable*, thought I, *to hear what thing brought such folk to their former heated discourse.*

The Director tipped her head slightly to me. “Thank you, Mr. Cordwell, we’ll do that,” said she, tone revealing a bit of her own dislike. Then, glad to be back on her way, she turned a glance to a man. He sat along the middle of the long oval table. “Now, Greg...” she spoke to continue, “if there’s no defense for your theory, I’m not signing off on this experiment.”

The man huffed. “Of course there is, Jill,” said he. “There’s as much defense for mine as yours. Only *mine* doesn’t require waiting till the last possible moment to begin. We can get ourselves to the open seas as soon as we wish! We could go tomorrow, if we liked.”

“There’s the matter of cost,” began another man. He sat opposite Gregory Thomas. “Observing the event at sea would require a great deal more equipment—notwithstanding the cost of the vessel itself being fitted for such a force of nature to act upon it.” His eyebrow elevated as high as his word choices. “That should take much longer than a single day to manufacture.”

Dr. Greg Thomas shook his head. “Fine: so it’d take some time. But risk? No. I don’t think you guys are listening to me. *Waiting* until the Storm has reached the mainland, is a greater chance for catastrophe than risking damage to a single ship. Trust me on this.”

“That is the issue Dr. Thomas,” said the poised man again. “I do not think the Director contests your methods necessarily, only your lack of justification for them. We much constrict our actions to causes that are sturdier. Odysseus already has brought a certain level of...shall I say *scrutiny*, from the board. This is owed to recklessness. We are obligated to act by just cause. So, typically I would agree with you, against the constraint of our management. But not in this. I must agree with the Director. We should hold off for now.”

“We just don’t have enough information,” persisted Director Marks.

“Of course we don’t!” Thomas retorted emphatically. “*Information is our objective*. Can we not go to the moon by reason of having not yet been? Can we not clone a rat, by reason of having never done so? This is ridiculous! I thought you were scientists? Caution should inform your methods not your imaginations. We’ve done great things because *we dared* to do them. How could we stand still? This the eruption of the Storm upon our *own* era! Every piece of information we have, says these coming years represent the grand nexus of its appearance on our timeline. How long should that last? You know as well as I that it isn’t going anywhere...” at this point the Director and her advocate gave Thomas a challenging look. Undaunted, he shook this off. “Now that may *seem* like it furthers your points—but it doesn’t. We need a *control*. Once the Storm envelopes the mainland how will we be able to accurately estimate it apart from the rest of space? It will dominate our scope of focus!”

“Yes, but Greg...” began Director Marks, but she caught herself.

I could nearly see the thoughts of regret pass across her forehead: *Damn... I saw them curse, as they wrestled on her brow. I need to be less familiar with him, it’s not helping the man bear with me!*

“...Dr. Thomas,” she restated, “that’s the very issue. We don’t *know* the Storm is finding a nexus here. We can only estimate as much with our minimal amounts of data.”

“Is that a risk you’re willing to take?” he posed.

“Yes,” she answered him emphatically. “It’s one that we’ll have to. It would be irresponsible to do otherwise.”

“What would be *irresponsible*, is to wait for a trans-dimensional hurricane to ravage the world,” he challenged. I could feel his charisma; it was an infectious thing. “Avoiding this issue won’t absolve us of its threat,” he pointed out with characteristic social grace.

Director Marks crossed her arms. She seemed quite immune to his affronts. “Our ignorance of the issue doesn’t manufacture its danger,” she returned in kind. “For how much we truly need information, the haste of this need is all too speculative. There’s no definite way to tell how much of a threat the Storm constitutes.”

Gregory Thomas frowned. “You feel it too, Jill,” said he, “you feel it looming over us. Somewhere in the back of your mind, you can sense it coming. There must be a reason this ethereal sense of dread correlates with a dimensional eruption. And that reason’s not a good one.”

The Director sighed at this, and the other man gave a cryptic smile.

I now had too many questions to remain silent.

Raising my hand, “I—em, a dimensional what-now?”

The room looked to me yet again. It seemed they’d quickly forgotten I was there! For upon my word, it was as if I had just reentered. It appeared now, that I was yet to transpierce more fully the new world of Infinite Industries. I still moved as if across a plane, sundered from those within its walls. Their purposes were not yet my own, and their words beyond me. But of intrigue, theirs had gripped me. A thing reached out from their secret world and pulled me in.

Something dangerous it was.

It gathered me.

The Director sighed at my confusion.

But Gregory Thomas spoke first. “Our world, Mr. Cordwell, is likely about to change forever.”

The other man nodded ambiguously from behind the veil of his visor-lens. “The reach of light, and even darkness,” said he, “is running thin against the coming of its true sire.”

Chapter 3

Chaos and His Coming

The Same Day

I frowned at this. The oddity of the strange man’s words held little meaning for me then. Yet, searching the face of Dr. Gregory Thomas, I saw that he held the phrase as *contemptuous* as I held it *confusing*. The distain across his features was perhaps the clearest thing of all I had just borne witness.

“What Dr. Huo *means* to say,” Dr. Thomas clarified, “is that if our theories are correct, a force of unparalleled dimensional magnitude is swelling into existence at this point in time. In shorthand, we call it simply ‘The Storm.’”

The other man, called Dr. Huo, simply smiled softly. His soft smile was a thing almost unsettling. “I do not mean *only* this, Dr. Thomas,” he responded. “*You* may ignore what we have all come to know. But I shall not. You’ve admitted it yourself, just now! You feel it too, that piece of madness in you, which is called out by such terror. That sense of adventure surely isn’t lost from you entirely! I heard once you were quite the man for such endeavors.”

“That was ages ago,” frowned Gregory. “I don’t make a habit of fieldwork any longer.” As he said this he could not help but steal a quick glance upon the Director.

This quick exchange of looks between them caught me. Greg with a single flash of the eyes conveyed some measure of burden; the Director’s eyes caught this too, flashing with regret. Then the thing passed as quickly as it had come, resigned back into the folds of some memory between those two. But I’d caught it. I’m a man of intrigue as I’ve said; social subtleties are my forte. My interest of them then, only grew.

“Furthermore,” continued Greg, “the matter’s not one of finding the courage to act. You spoke of resources and using them wisely. Your Dimensional Projects have a greater budget because their equipment’s indoors—it’s a safer investment on the Board’s part. Ours are constantly exposed to harsh environments. And yes, I know what you mean to say, Dr. Huo. But, goodness gracious! The religious obsession the staff in your department hold for that outdated manuscript is borderline fanaticism.”

“*The Theory*,” Dr. Huo defended, “has not been shown false yet, Doctor. Nor does it show vulnerabilities to affront.”

“A thing which is *unreasonable*, doesn’t need an absolute refutation by experiment to be falsified. Especially when that thing is as ethereal a philosophy as what the *Splinter Theory* constitutes.”

Dr. Huo just shook his head. “And yet, if it’s so, we’ll all know well enough in time,” he chided. “The ancients knew what we’ve forgotten: that the sense of order is but within: *we order the universe*. The universe is the object on which order acts, but *only* because it is the force which exerts chaos. This means we, Dr. Thomas, are the objects on which chaos acts. This is no great and esoteric thought.”

“True,” agreed Gregory. “Yet in this you have reduced and simplified the writ in question to vague meaninglessness. Sure—I could concede the theory as you’ve summarized it. But it’s the nuance of the dimensions to which I hold my main objections. The Odyssean thought, on our side, is less ethereal. Simply put: the event is documented—we ought to document it further. You Splinter Theorists cling onto your delusions notions at the sake of objectivity.”

“You yourself, Doctor, said not moments ago that you could sense the coming of the Storm. Somewhere deep at the back of your mind, did you say? The dimension of thought is also met in such a nexus, Dr. Thomas. This is the reason. It fits the theory.”

“All the same,” avoided Gregory, “it’s merely speculative. Our hypotheses are based in trial.”

“Indeed,” intercut the Director. “And yet, Dr. Thomas, you’ve just said it yourself. Ours is but a *hypothesis*. That’s all it is.”

Visibly agonized, Thomas turned back to her. “Not in the manner of being *unverified*,” he affirmed, “only so in not yet fully being an inarguable fact! But few things are, if any at all. We know the Storm’s occurred throughout time in small fluxes: erupting for a few hours, a week, or even as long as thirty to forty days at a time. We further may reason that all these past signs point to a more permanent eruption in our time. Documentation suggests these former ripples center around a singularity, if you will: where the stone lands upon the water. What this department’s dimensional experiments began a generation ago is finally proving fatal...!”

“As a representative of said Dimensional Projects,” interjected Dr. Huo, “I fail to see how something as cosmic as *The Storm* itself was caused by our hand. Do I not represent *also* a collaboration of our projects working together? Odysseus is not an isolated creature, Doctor. We are a joint project.”

“I must concur with my colleague,” said another man beside Dr. Huo with a frown. “There’s a certain toxicity in the direction this discussion is headed...”

““I’m sorry. Of course you’re right, Jon,” Gregory apologized to the man, then quipping back to Dr. Huo: “But you know what I mean, Connor.” He answered this sideways, undeterred from his press upon the Director. “The *Splinter Theory* may be some sacred manifesto to you, but even you have yet to regard its *full* warnings. We’ve been tampering with things we shouldn’t. Surely: the theories passed down from those early days are proving accurate...*at least to some degree*. Traversing the dimensions had caused too many splintering ruptures to accrue in the void spaces, and *this* is the result. But if that is

so, if the text *is indeed* accurate, we should make all haste to remedy the thing! Wasn't that the major caution it urged of us?"

"We can't *know* that without testing," said Director Marks with a sigh.

"Then let's go and test it! We can't wait until it's come upon us!" exclaimed Gregory.

"We can't *afford* to do it any sooner," reminded Connor Huo yet again.

Yet...then I interjected once more.

The weight and mystery of what this body endeavored upon was yet lost on me. But what I did experience just then, was the opportunity to truly be a part of this team. This may seem odd to you, given my former rejection of such assignment. But indeed, being thrust upon a task has a strange manner of conforming one into such things.

"Um..." I began, drawing their looks, "maybe we can." The thought took hold in me then. Perhaps that is fate? Perhaps it was just sheer damn luck. But either way, here I found myself excited by the new world I had been brought upon! Further to the point, I saw an avenue to suddenly become more important to them...and remain less a burdensome 'other.'

"What's that?" another woman, yet to be introduced to me, asked as for them all.

"Maybe we *can* afford both of your ideas," I began again. "I'm not certain what exactly that entails. But if you don't mind laboring to explain it to me, I am certain I could speak with my father about further funds for this Project's needs. Mediation and diplomacy are, in fact, my areas of expertise. It seems your needs are largely in the realm of funds and appeals to your superiors. That, you see, is my gift."

Brows lifted. I suddenly became thrust into a new light before their eyes.

"It'd take some time to brief you fully..." marked Gregory.

I nodded. "Surely. Yet for this, I don't think I need all the technical information: just the general ideas. Let me know the general needs you have so I can relay them well. If I know enough, I'll be able to give them a good spin... I'd like to be of help."

The Director smiled. "Indeed!" she exclaimed. "Well, Mr. Cordwell, it seems providence would have you come to us at the perfect time. Yes. Let's get you up to speed. Quickly though, as this matter you've stumbled on is quite timely. As Greg, err...*Dr. Thomas* has already explained:

"We are currently engaged upon tracking a trans-dimensional contusion we believe will erupt in these coming years." She laughed to herself, "I see now it's truly fortunate for us that you've come this exact hour; had I the time to've given your Father any objection, I would have placed you in *literally any other project* that I oversee. How providential. The serious nature of this endeavor has restricted our team to these few—" she gestured around the room at each name "myself, Dr. Gregory Thomas, and Dr. Helen Moroe, are from the once *twenty* senior associate on Project Odysseus. Yet we have also brought in two senior members of the Xanadu Dimensional Division: Drs. Jon Yao and Connor Huo. Together, aside from Infinite Industries High Directorship, we are the only who know about this coming event. Yet if we're correct, everyone will know soon enough. Odysseus' goal is to probe this storm the moment it

erupts, enough to glean the needed information. This way, we attain data that our Xanadu team can take and use to countermand it.”

I nodded. “Wow... I... how does no one know about this?”

“An excellent question,” answered Dr. Huo.

The other Xanadu scientist, whom the Director named as Dr. Yao, gave a grim smile from beside him. “The occurrences of the event have been so far apart,” Dr. Huo explained, “that any eruption’s significance is often lost to the public’s concern long before another comes. Furthermore, Agents of Warning have only continued to arrive with increased concentration in recent times as...*others* yet also arrive to make their own attempts against it.”

“Others?” I asked.

“Discussing the Agents is for another time,” cut in Gregory. “we’re faced with two choices. One is to venture into the center of the Atlantic where we believe the event will first touch down. This will allow us to get data the quickest. I also believe that by being on the sea itself, we’ll get the most accurate data, even should the Storm already have fallen on the land. This is a more technical point—but past data inclines us to believe that the Storm has an internal movement to it, circling within itself. The Sea, I feel, allows for the most frictionless environment for this interior revolution to occur without bringing unnecessary destructive force on us.”

“And the other option?” said I.

“That would be to climb,” answered Director Marks. It’s clear this was her preferred tact. “We would get to the top of Mount Hera. Then as the Storm begins to lower itself upon the mainland, it would first cover our mini-station on the peak, and there we’d get our readings.”

I believed then, that I understood. Of course, such belief had been unfounded. Yet I suppose so then were the notions of *all* those present. How little we knew of what thing was come upon us in those days! My father’s wish for me was truer than he could have known. I was gaining perspective on our world, better it seemed, than most others in those days.

“All right then,” said I. “Let me see what I can do.”

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I’m not exactly certain how I expected the conversation to have gone. At the time, I’d had some worries of rejection. To think, for all my airs of confidence before Odysseus, that I should be cast aside by my Father when I made my request of him! This frightened me some. It is a puzzling thing to me now, looking back to my thoughts then. I was so consumed with what might be allowed *for*, or barred *from* me. I was so much concerned with restrictions and how to overcome them! Yet I was truly then found in the most fortunate care of my whole life. Indeed, at present I can’t reasonably imagine my appeal to have occurred another way.

My father’s voice on the other line had been quiet. He had listened as I went on with grandiose lines of humanity and dimensional garble, of which I truly knew nothing. It was not but after the first fifteen minutes of my lengthy speech that I realized he’d not said two words in retort.

There was something of my former youth warning me. Its voice ever magnified his swift rebuttals of my insolence into hyperbolized rants against my very character. Yet something of new adulthood found me now. For in his quiet listening, I found that he accepted me. He seemed to perceive what maturity was newly grown upon me. Yet today, I have another unshakable notion. I believe the maturity he *found* was come to arrive only by *his very acceptance* of me. I saw then, they were inseparably linked together. His care and my development were one. So also was my desire of my current path, and his placement of me within its way—these also were one. Yet I had not seen that then.

Instead, like the youth I still was, I rambled on. Then I paused. I waited. I held after my great appeal. No doubt was I glaring with many such errors in logic and thought as to deserve a quick denouncement! No doubt had I also such stutters of emotional plea as should be an affront to he who loved reason. Yet it seemed, as I learned then, that he also loved me.

For, to all of this, he simply paused a moment in silence. And I waited.

“All right, Winston,” said he, “you have whatever you need.”

Then I, stumbling even more so now in confusion, thanked him.

He hung up.

I, in my stupor, informed Jillian Marks of my success in this. But I could not do so with joy. I was too taken aback by the subtleties the Lord Carson, *my father*, had shown me. These, as like the weight of the task I was thrust upon, were things that sobered me. I spent the rest of that day alone in my new apartment, lost to thought and contemplation.

Chapter 4

The Calm Before

Julius 23rd, 1325

Wouldn't we love that wiser men are wont to cast thought on our work? Wouldn't we wish, that others revel with us in our heart's delight? How much our souls loveth to glory in what ardor they so find! That all be damned, once tasted beauty...we hunt it like the lions.

Upon those hunts, we find the ages to have turned: darker as they go. There was a golden hour once. It carried from the foggy marshes such wondrous minds, as should claim the heights! They flew without thought of all but this: what beauty should lay thereon. They, through the heights, so pierced the veil by which the gods bound up their secrets. They plundered that promethean fire and there lit was the world. After them, came those who lived recklessly with their newfound might. To the sorrow of their fathers who toiled, their sons and daughters tore the Earth.

We are not that golden age. Neither are we they who after burned the world, or still they who later wallowed in post-apocalyptic horror! Our generation? But we are who, surrounded by a world of ash, behold the daylight sifting once again amid the gray.

It calls out with a friendly voice, entreating once more from beyond.

Yet...we mark its voice as what villain decimated and destroyed the former glory! So we, untrusting of its gentle hand, glower sideways on its furrowed eye. Perhaps that is the way of things, my friend: that we look upon a thought born of our own fears. 'Tis a thing mirrored on that watching face. Perhaps we fear only figments of our dementia. Yet it remains... yet it stays...

There. There the Sun keeps beyond the gray, awaiting.

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I grew under the waxing darkness. Unlike the many who knew not what sudden bouts of cold and wind and darkness plagued the world, I was wizened. In the months that followed, my thoughts had entered the Infinite. Their steady hand both sobered and encouraged. For at once, I was told of terrible comings of

things beyond our scope of knowledge! Yet second I learned of many others, which worked to save us from its grasp.

In those months we labored, as I learned. Gregory Thomas thence completed what could only have been called a ‘true mechanical marvel.’ His sea-ship possessed unparalleled capacity to withstand the forces of nature, as well as to sufficiently house its operator during the coming experiments. That is, it was *nearly* unparalleled. But this point will come later.

Early in our work on the ship’s elementary construction, I stumbled across a hushed conversation in the upper halls. As you see, I was wont to indulge curiosity at the expense of better etiquette. Yet it also seems *you* are the better for it.

Listening from around a further corner, I immediately recognized the voices. It was Drs. Thomas and Marks. The two held a heated argument not five meters past where I stood. If this had been all, I’d have simply passed them by with a casual wave. They’d ever been ones for debate with each other, and this ad nauseam. He was apt to dissent and she was apt to quickly deny his appeal. Thus I’d have ignored them. But one thing halted me. I was engaged upon them by their raspy whispers, in which they unsuccessfully attempted to conceal themselves. This was uncommon for them. For Dr. Thomas ever wished his objections well known...near as much as Director Marks wished known her swift denouncements! Thus their voices found my ear strangely. Intrigued, I listened in.

“...after all of this!” Gregory exclaimed. His passion rasped the boundaries of a whisper. “After everything we’ve accomplished, you would just pull the plug?”

“That’s not what I’ve said! You always put words in my mouth, Greg! That isn’t fair.”

Immediately, I was struck by how straightforwardly the Director spoke. I’d always known her to converse...how shall I say it? *Highly?* She was ever *above the fray*. She was never one I’d seen stoop to a boggy back-and-forth. She’d chose instead to *end* discussions, rather than join them. This was a new face of hers I’d yet to see. Though, given my clandestine condition... I suppose I’ve still not beheld it, at least visually.

“*Have* I misspoken, Jill? *Have I really?* That sounds the way of it to me.”

“No—*no!* I mean, yes! You have! I said that the delicate nature of the test should require a *more* expert hand. *That’s all.* It should still run, Greg. We just need more technicians brought to expertise for the task!”

“You know full well the time needed to accomplish that! That’s time we don’t have; this *is* an effective shut down. A normal staff-pilot should be able to operate it fine. I designed it to be as such.”

“The design it too complex. This is just the case, despite our best intentions.”

“Being *Director* doesn’t magically grant you more experience in what is too complex and what is simple! We have both worked these tasks equally as long!”

“That’s all good and fine. But being Director *does* give me the right to make the call, regardless of your disagreement. Please tell me we do not need to have this discussion again... I’m tired of all this, Greg. *I’m tired of fighting with you.* These past four years have been hell at every turn. If directorship means that much to you, I’m just going to step down and let you have it.”

There was a pause.

“It’s not like that, Jill.”

“Oh, really? It was enough of a factor to call us off, but suddenly it’s nothing at all? What then?! Why can’t you just for once support one of my decisions! You are on this team for a reason—trust me. If you weren’t necessary, I would remove you, Greg. I *need* your support!”

“I’ve never gone against you in front of the others. I just do things my own way...”

“Never gone against me—*HOW CAN YOU EVEN SAY THAT?* All you do is fight me! And all the time in front of the team!”

“Arguing is not the same as going against you; if you didn’t want anyone to ever challenge you, you should only have *junior* associates on your projects. You know full well that hiring seniors with equal time in the field as you opens the gates for multiple opinions.”

“No! I just... now see, you’ve done it again!”

“Done what? I’m only pointing out facts. What I said makes perfect sense...”

“No—you get me all going on a topic that isn’t what we are talking about, and I lose track. Now just... just hold on a minute.”

She caught her breath. I could almost picture her crossed arms and furrowed face. I certainly could entertain the image of Dr. Thomas’ placid and unaccommodating stare.

“Okay,” she began again at last, “the way of it is that we *will have* an expert hand in the ship, or we won’t have sea experiments at all. That is the line I am drawing. Respond to it as you will.”

“All right,” he said determinedly. Apparently he’d already found his conclusion. “Then I’ll pilot it, *myself*.”

“What?” she gasped. “But you...! How could...?”

“I am the only technician with enough experience to qualify your demands in the time we have. I know the craft better than most, or need I say better than *any*. I designed it. I am the most logical choice. *That* is the way of it, Jillian.”

“If you are doing this just to spite me, Greg—don’t. This is no small thing.”

“I know what it is, *Dr. Marks*. As the foreman of the sea-based test, that is *my* decision. Will you countermand this also? Have you any actual objections—?”

“Of course I have! You promised...!”

“—any objection on the basis of *Odysseus*,” he finished.

She grew silent again.

“No. No, I’ve not. *Fine*. Godspeed with your ship, *Dr. Thomas*.”

With that, I heard her speed quickly away down the hall. I too made back the way I’d come, careful not to make a sound. A further corner was rounded in haste, afore Dr. Thomas passed me by.

I can still recall that day with clarity! For not only was this argument had, but also was it and other things made known. Indeed, later the same day the Director announced this change to the plan in our project team meeting: that Dr. Thomas would now pilot *Theseus*, the sea-ship. Yet more was revealed. A second matter was told also, shocking news to us all...



“You cannot be serious...!” began Dr. Thomas, but no sooner had the objection escaped his lips than did a flat stare from the Director bring him to silence. I am certain the room wondered at this wordless shut down by the Director, upon that impassioned Doctor of applied physics. Perhaps they wondered if Dr. Thomas simply came to agree with her? Or perhaps he was without words, through another means?

I knew better.

I now felt myself especially privileged to such wordless exchanges as these two held. I could almost imagine the silent exchange that would go between them! So did Gregory Thomas immediately hush himself. I knew it was out of avoiding hypocrisy. He dreaded such things. Yet, fortunate for him, another took up his stead.

“You mean to say,” clarified Dr. Yao, “that not only will the hilltop base be exchanged for an ariel one, albeit one yet launched from atop the very mountain, but furthermore... you intend to operate this new sky-ship...*yourself*?”

The Director simply nodded.

Those present each took import of this quite differently. Dr. Moroe, a good friend of mine even to this day, saw this adjustment to the plan as a good one. The mountain station had yet to be constructed; Theseus had taken first priority. Thus, from a labor perspective, we’d only save further time by altering course now. There were practical advantages as well, for the sake of the experiment itself. For being air-born would, in fact, *most* detach a person to be immersed in the falling Storm. Additionally, as training a pilot for the sky-ship would fall into similar constraints as that for Theseus, the Director had the most in-field experience. She was the most logical choice to operate this second vessel, as Dr. Thomas had been for the sea. Dr. Huo seemed to also think this fine, despite his fellow Xanadu associate’s continued caution.

“In my opinion,” voiced Jon Yao again, “having our two most senior members thrust headlong into a hurricane is not our best option. This does not seem wise, considering that having one’s leadership on the frontlines of any opposition has seldom served to be a well-founded strategy in the long run. We need our generals on the metaphorical hill, overlooking. Being in the trenches doesn’t utilize your expertise, it negates it.”

I found myself seeing his viewpoint on this.

Yet Dr. Huo’s rebuttal was too well pointed. “Jon,” said he, “the primary task of Odysseus is to collect data. It’s you and I, of Xanadu, which are to work with that collection after. In fact, the best place for both Dr. Marks and Dr. Thomas is amid the very tempest! If any could possibly be equipped for such a feat, they are the foremost. Likewise are we the best to stay behind. I think this new plan will only benefit our aim.”

Dr. Yao relented then, conceding. I too, saw the logic of this, if I had my reservations...

Still I could not shake their hallway discussion from my awareness. Their feints of calm here in the meeting chamber shone clear to me now. Their glaring disguises fell deaf upon my ears. Even in

silence I could spy Dr. Thomas' dissent and anger laid upon the Director's decision to reenter the field at such an hour. Yet...he too had made such a resolution not hours before! Thus I could also see, behind the Director's calm demeanor the voiceless response in her eyes. They had a riotous back and forth, even now across the quiet room.

After all the crap you gave me for choosing to pilot my ship—now this, Jillian? Really?

If you can break our promise, Greg, can you truly hold it against me when I do the same?

I just—I cannot be all right with this. I just can't.

Neither can I. But here we are. That, too, is the way of it.

So did he turn his gaze aside from her. He was seething behind his held tongue. Victorious, Dr. Marks straightened and reset her reassuring look across the room. She had continued to outline her exact plan, how the airship would be constructed and the like. But I was still captured by what exchanges I'd imagined to have witnessed erupt between them. I'd imagined it, surely, but it certainly was so.

It was as if the veil of their past had been torn somewhat. For all their continued cordiality, I was perhaps apprised more than the rest as to their true intentions. Yet I remained silent.

To what had Director Marks referred, when stating of she and Dr. Thomas as formerly an 'us' in that hallway? Were they truly once a couple? It seemed the most obvious conclusion. Still, it was a thing hard to imagine given their contentious nature.

Though, I make myself laugh.

In a way, I suppose it's not too difficult to picture after all. The more I think on it, the more clearly it answers the question. Any wonder I had at their volatile relationship dissipated. I'd seen my parents bicker enough to mark it. And...not every couple had children, or some great fortune, between them to forestall a swift division. All the same, as certain as I became in this matter, I couldn't help but further investigate.

Sometime later I pressed Dr. Moroe on this point. She admitted to me that those two hadn't ever been more than workplace associates, at least as long as she'd known them at Infinite. Yet she further told me that other staff, who'd left after Moroe's own arrival, once made mention of their suspicions to those two doctors having once been engaged a short while. My prospects of their former relationship are perhaps too informed upon this hearsay, as should be healthy for me. But so it is. I concluded thereafter that they had once been engaged to be married, and that it was from dissolution of this, that time had found them in their current state. Such a thing would likely motivate animosity, or at least I reasoned at the time. I suppose I'll never know for certain. What truly happened between them long before? I could only wonder.

All the same, I now held a deeply rooted belief that our Director and our most Senior Associate, who now both were to pilot our handiwork, held some mysterious history that compelled them. Such a thing perhaps deserved being brought to light. Was our current aim was borne from the insistence they held against each other? And yet again, I remained silent.

The day and the months moved forward. The coming hour approached us. Upon Theseus' completion, our team shifted focus. Yet as plans for the Pegasus were drawn up, Dr. Thomas arrived less

and less to our staff meetings. He gave us little reason for this, apart from the bulk of his time being better be spent on Theseus. So was he there on the sea, over-ready and yet continuing to prepare.

Most thought Director Marks would enliven at this absence. She did not. Instead she grew quieter. A perpetual brooding fell across her richly colored features. Likewise, her thick blonde hair was often seen in a state of hurried bundles, rather than combed as once before. She worked in a frenzy to complete her own construction. Helen Moroe and I mostly avoided her warpath in those days.

It was two months later and both ships were now built. The *Theseus* would brave the waves. The *Pegasus* would dare the clouds. We were then to venture by sky and sea to plunge into the coming depths of chaos! Ever still did I stay silent about our two pilots and their true motives. Upon my own scientific illiteracy, I placed a great many reasons barring myself from exposing the two of them. I suppose this decision is found wanting. But I've not cared to think on it till now. I've banished it from thought.

Perhaps the fate of those two could have been spared if I'd the courage to indict them, for their own good and mine. Yet I was silent. Time would tell if this was wise.

Such a time drew swiftly on us.

Chapter 5

The Heavens Open

Augustine 28th, 1325 — The Day of Wrath

You know its way. I need not but to evoke its name...the terror will find you. All life knows this, though many feign forgetfulness. Shall we live with downcast eyes? Shall we cast our canopies above us and paint our skies a temperate thing? Yet, we cannot ignore it fully. We may not *fully* absolve our fright! How may we abandon fear? This thing alone is its very fount! Here is its rightful place. There is no sense of terror, which hath not its origin in this coming. For it alone hath the might to wreck our doom... while it yet holds us in its palm. We find ourselves under its terrible gaze, amid its very eye. Here around us it coils and turns creation. Somehow we are kept for a time within its center, where the winds but brisk and chill. How soon should its eye be turned? How soon shall we be lost to horrid end? For the life of me, I cannot see the reason in running. There has never been a hiding place where we may go! There is no nescience before the Storm. It captivates creation's imagination with wonder at its beauty. It plagues the mortal heart with horror at its wrath.

Even once, when far in its approach, did not its heralds warn us? Did not the countless eons tremble as the thunder fell from the great beyond? Could we not know its tremors quaking in our very souls? Thence from the new horizon lit the lightning of its fury! Tearing through the air, it came from the hidden corners of its own secret domain. What chilling furnace churns creation, gathering its skies from Ehtaran. So it rises like a terrible dawn of darkness! Darkness was its day.

It came with warnings sung from the dawn of life itself, resonant and endless.

It came without warning, suddenly out of the black depths of distant starlight.

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“WINSTON!! GET UP!!”

I was flung from slumber upon a state of flurried wakefulness. All at once, a dreamless sleep was thrust once more to consciousness! With its jolting re-emersion, my head whirled as I sat too-quickly up.

The world me spun. The unshakable panic, which accompanies premature ending of such deep hibernations are wont to bear, gave way to anger.

“What? What is it? Why’re you waking me—!” I glanced upon the red-lighted digits beside me. “Three a.m.? Really, Helen? This had best be damn important, you’ve no idea how tired I am...”

“Can it, Winston,” my friend silenced me. She spared herself another of my inebriated retorts by punctuating her insistence with the overhead lights. The lamps blared on around me.

“Ack!” I rolled back, hiding my eyes from the glare.

“There!” she said at last, having fumbled a minute about my apartment’s entryway to locate it. “Winston—get up. This is no prank. It’s happening.”

I ceased my childish act. “What?” said I sitting back up straight. “You can’t be serious... Shouldn't we have at least a few seasons more?”

“So we thought,” said she soberly. “Get dressed. We need to get to the shoreline—stat.”

In a hurried frenzy, the buzzing rupture into wakefulness began anew. It was renewed in me as I rushed to and fro. For upon us was come a day different from all others! And we, all of us, had been found sleeping by its dawn.

In a dizzying blur, Dr. Moroe and I made after the rest of our party. The night sky was yet to light as the fourth hour came quickly on us. The witching chill of the predawn world fingered through our skin against the midnight air. I could not shake the notion that we were caught like school children unaware. For how long and carefully we endeavored in our studies and our measurements, here we rushed already behind! Already we had missed the train, which we’d beheld long in coming.

Level eighty-six was quickly come by and passed. Our arms were taken full of our equipment as we hastily then made therefrom. Junior staff hastened to help us from and to our coach. Thank god for our round-the-clock roster. These ones informed us that the rest of our team was made already to the beach. So we quickened. We came upon them. Our cab skid against the curb as we flew from its side and down to the shore.

Tentacles of lightning arced high against the eastern black! They froze at each eruption, like a fear of time forestalled each bolt upon its climactic peal! Such thunder shrilled horrid upon our ears as we descended the rocky cliffside. Almost preyful in our deference, we fixed our eyes upon our immediate paths, and off those terrible skies.

But we still heard it. The rolling force of those volcanic heavens opened such reverberations that trembled and shook within our very chests.

Downed to sea level at last, we joined our fellows. Director Marks and Dr. Thomas stood askance upon the starlit sand in silence. Drs. Yao and Huo were in discussion, hastily fixing their own small station upon the beach. We at last drew near.

“We’re here!” shouted Helen to the others. The skies dulled her shouts to muted and faint calls.

“Ah!” greeted Jillian Marks. She wore what looked a cordial smile. But something frantic ran about her features beyond this. “Good! We’ve need of you! Here—Winston? Help me fasten this.”

I jogged thence. The Director held a number of packs strewn about the sand. These were tied with cords to collect all their extremities. Quickly I knelt to aid her. Helen made past us to Dr. Thomas, who worked to ready his small cockleshell for its ferry to the Theseus. I stole a glance past her...to the horizon.

What I saw quickened in me such terrible reminders of mortality.

The sunless dawn held a vacuous hand rising from its curved depths. The grip of its titanic swell blanketed the stars, but for a silver aureola cresting its formless rise. Its chaotic distance struck me. Such a reckless air of destruction stored upon its boundless advance before us! Yet somehow I knew it wasn't this alone. Despite Dr. Huo's insistence of this force's peerless anarchy...somehow I felt it was no mere *destroyer* of time and space. It was too much the majestic. Although, it could still be the hand that unmakes them. To unmake is not to destroy. I had not known this until then.

It came not like a thing sundered from reason, but as One with its own reasons kept apart from me. It rose not like Chaos' pallid grin, depraved before the light. Instead it dawned as a solemn knight, furrowed against the world. So I felt. I had not confronted the faceless shark of nature, but the focus of a lion. It gazed without apathy, without spite, without love for its work...but zealous for it. Its features peered as the predator, watching through the ferns.

So came the dread.

That not to nature did we gaze, that its mindless stride might be prevented.

But to some thoughtful hunter looked we: the object and its quarry.

Like prey, we squirmed beneath its rays.

I snapped my gaze downcast once more and hurriedly completed my task. The others too completed theirs, and we engaged upon our foolish intentions as if reasonable alterations were out of the question. Our glances were rabbit things. Sweat poured from our brows beneath the rising of the cold sun. It was the sixth hour, and the day was dark. Before the sun, so held the Storm.

Its colors shone now. At once it held all the swirling intricacies of the glassy ocean. Though now great lucent eviscerations tore the atmosphere. Rivers of violet, emerald, and ruby flashed amid its celestial billows. Its wave caressed the young empyrean with colossal breadth and majesty.

We pattered and scurried like mice. Even then we did not avert our implausible aims. Why? I do not know. Perhaps we were too fraught with terror to contemplate another course. Surely if we had, such fright would have brought us from not toward the coming tide of wrath! It must be this, I feel now. We were lost from any great perspective unto wherever each footfall took us. For there we fled in our alarm! We ran beneath the very shadow of what falcon descended over us.

I wiped sweat from off my brow. A curious thing caught my eye to the side. About the further beach there lay a wooden bench overlooking the rolling midnight sea. In our haste, none of us had seen it. But I discerned it now. What's more, two gray heads of hair could be seen above its back.

"Winston! Come on—hurry!" Gregory Thomas hollered to me over the thunderous air.

I let out an unintelligible shout and rushed away toward the far bench. I think he must have discerned my aim, for he did not call out after me. Or perhaps he did call. The sky was deafening.

Rounding the bench, I found an elderly couple sat upon its starboard face. They sat hand in hand, drenched by the falling rain and sea-spray, looking calmly over the roiling heavens. I simply could not comprehend this.

“COME WITH ME!” I shouted to them, motioning urgently away from the perilous shoreline. I continued to wipe the falling raindrops. They stung upon my eyes, burning.

The couple, I can only assume, were senile in one sort or another. For instead of any other sane reaction, they simply smiled at me. *What a strange sort of smile.* Then with a look at each other, they stood. Thinking this their agreement, I rushed with all haste back to my fellows.

Our necessary endeavors were concluded, and naught was left but for a swift departure.

“WHAT WAS THAT?” shouted Helen to me as I neared. It was a barely audible scream.

I turned and pointed to what I thought would be the couple behind me. But on turning, I saw them yet afar. They were hand in hand, strolling down the beach toward a small enclave located north of the cliffs. “IT’S NOTHING,” informed her. All concern for the couple passed. I’m not sure if this was a thing born from self-interest filling my heart, or bewilderment at their ignorance to the world around them: their seemingly self-consignment to perish.

All the same, we looked back to the others. Dr. Yao finished plugging a device unto another and gave a weary thumbs-up. Dr. Huo nodded to us as well. Then there was as a still moment amidst us, while yet the world burned around.

Jillian Marks and Gregory Thomas locked eyes.

The past year had been spent in ceaseless pursuit of this moment. We prepared for her flight, and for his voyage on the sea. Here came the critical thing. This moment, where reason ought to have pleaded our return to batten down the whole Earthly realm of humanity from this cosmic fire, beheld them in a stalemate. Even amid the Storm, I could yet see it in their eyes.

You’ve forced me to this, he could have said.

You gave me little choice, she could have answered.

If you just asked me to stay—I would have kept my promise, she could have sworn.

If I just had the words... he could have wished. *Then I’d tell you—and I would also stay.*

But it was not the hour for them.

It was not the hour for any of us.

“IT’S TIME!” shouted Gregory, “WE HAVE TO GO NOW.”

Jillian nodded firmly. “ALL RIGHT,” she met him with a mingled look. It could only be called *mingled*. For all about her features were pouring all the hidden thoughts, which formerly were so well veiled. I’m not sure even now that any other saw this but me, for what was now made plain upon her face was thence quickly blurred by wind and rain. Gregory saw it though. It caught his looks like a wish. Too like a wish he resolved it as only fantasy. He turned aside his gaze. And the thing was complete. Her feints of dispassion were at last broken to whisper care. His guise of cordial suave was at last broken to rigid sorrow.

So they turned.

Gregory Thomas pressed off from the shore, and made for the *Theseus*, which lay anchored off the shoreline. Jillian Marks donned her packs and climbed the mount of Hera. It rose from the cliffy beach where the *Pegasus* lay moored on the turbulent sky.

I remember standing there amid that storm as both ships turned outward to their marks. I can still see their brilliant hulls, on which our craftsmanship was spent the former year...

Between cataclysmic flashes of light, we watched them vanish into the bleak abyss that grew upon the waking world.

Chapter 6

Of Great Price

Janus 1st, 1395

Segraves rested his pen. A catch in his host's voice brought his eyes up to the aged man. Courtesy returned them down. The rain scattered a lamp's light from beyond the pane. It lit upon the man's tearstained cheeks with a pale yellow wither. Their ghosting drops petalled his jaw with the memories that bore them.

Cordwell sighed.

The breath caught again, quivering slightly under the weight of its tragedy.

"That was the way of it," he marked. "We never saw either of them again. They'd vanished—gone from the circles of the world. The Storm grew, as you well know. Now we all live under its ceaseless watch..."

A flicker of the dawn caught the old man's eye from across the room. He gasped as it greeted him. Segraves followed the look with uncertainty, but then saw the thing. The whole night had passed. Across the room, the western window held a slight inkling of that great and distant star. The red glare of the former evening was lost to this slight glimmer of lemony light. It caught the old man's interest with a fixation Segraves could not understand.

"What is it, sir?" asked he to his host. "It is the morning?"

Cordwell nodded. A grim smile crossed his creased face. "It's a new year," he added.

Segraves' brow lifted. "Ah, it is indeed! I'd quiet forgotten."

His host sighed. As quickly as it had come, the sun's hopeful rise was vanished once more behind the thickly coated sky. Its meager slip on our horizon fell again behind the cosmic veil.

"And so do we all...*forgetting* is our way." Cordwell slid back into quiet thoughtfulness. His head too slid back to view his nearer panes, looking out into the stormy east by light of the streetlamp beyond his manor walls.

“So what then of Kingdom?” Segraves pressed upon his host once more. Detecting this conclusion to Cordwell’s narrative brought tinges of distress. He loathed that it should conclude thus, without his intended pieces of information.

“Ah,” said Cordwell with a nod. “Kingdom came directly after. After the loss of Marks and Thomas, Infinite took a great many of its project teams together, consolidating them. This was to work after three grand solutions for our current crisis. Odysseus was disbanded. So too were Xanadu, and a great many others in fields of genetic research, cosmology, and robotics. The whole of Infinite Industries became reduced to only its three heads. I’m certain you know them: Atlantis, Genesis, and Kingdom. So had we made to channel every effort upon this new threat! I further assume, then, you are familiar with these former divisions?”

Segraves nodded. “I have relatives who were selected in the lottery,” he affirmed, with reference to Atlantis. “And the recent developments of Genesis have likewise been made thoroughly public. But this is my aim, Sir. To know *Kingdom*, from the inside out! Why so great as a third of Infinite has spent its resources on something so clandestine? This is a thing of great intrigue!”

“Hmm,” answered Cordwell darkly. “Tis an eldritch thing indeed. Yet it was not always so, surely you can see that now. Its singular goal was to search out a haven for us! In this way it was not unlike Atlantis...but for its means. Ah...and what direction that pursuit has taken them now is wretched.”

Segraves began to quickly recollect his instruments, his parchment and his pen.

“...But I was only with Kingdom a short while, as its face and ambassador to the general public,” concluded Cordwell. “A few years after this though, my elder brother Simeon mysteriously disappeared. He and I were never close, you know. I was a squirrelly one in our youth; he was too stern and stoic for us to be good friends. But he was to inherit the estate when our father passed—his vanishing had my father summon my quick return. Reluctantly I left Infinite, and its Kingdom initiative. My involvement has since been removed. But I think it was for the best...not much of my soul remains after even so brief an occupation there.”

A second shudder passed through the old man, trembling as from the cold.

“It was that fear, Segraves!” seized Cordwell upon his own words. His eyes looked transfixed upon some unspoken tragedy. “It was that *terrible fear* I spoke of. How it drives men to madness and to otherwise unfathomable acts. I truly thought we were doing good work at first—we in Kingdom. Looking back, I cannot see how that was...that we could justify all we sought to destroy. I think it the best that I was taken away early on, before the horrors that were our selfish drives got too much the better of our judgement. Before Kingdom found their long awaited answer...and their terrible purpose was made clear.” Cordwell stopped then. “I’m glad to have at last said all of this. I’m glad you’ve come, and heard me out...”

“But what of Kingdom?” implored Segraves. “What sorts of things are you describing to be taking place? Surely you mean to tell me you know of it! Surely this too is a thing you wish to be made known!”

Cordwell shook his head.

“But, Sir! Certainly if you believe them to be villains, you would expose them—!”

But his host waved off his insistence. “Yes, yes,” said the old man. “But I do not think I can speak of it now, lad. I’m old, Segraves—I tire.”

“When, then?” persisted the journalist.

The Old Lord sighed. “Tomorrow. Or I suppose this evening, rather. Come back this evening, Segraves, and I’ll tell what you wish to know. I swear it.” And then he turned back to the rainfall and shut his eyes. The pale lamp fell coldly on him. It painted the weathered face and wispy hair with streaks of passing showers.

Segraves breathed a heavy remittal. Standing, he collected his things and took a glance down upon his pocket watch. Reasoning that a trip home would leave him but little time afore returning, he next contemplated what may occupy him in the surrounding city. *I should also have to get a coffee*, he thought, *should I not pass out and miss the very hour!* Thence he turned to leave the dimly lit chamber.

The only sounds around him were those raindrops. Even these were faint. He could hardly hear them. Their constant patter on the reinforced walls had grown silent to his numb attention.

As he passed the doorway he looked back, however.

His glance fell back upon the aged man, asleep upon his armchair. For reasons unknown to him he recounted the outset of the man’s tale—whence the former lord was said to have spake to his host from such a posture. Surely it was here, this doorway where his Host had stood, while young. Surely that armchair is near where his father had sat, while living. Something of this thought gripped him. Yet Segraves could not place the manner of it, so he left it there. That thought remained behind, in the quiet.

It stayed in the silent room, and he departed.

He felt almost as if it’s mindful notion...*waited* somehow. It’s untapped realizations lay untainted in the distance. It’s unspoken revelations lay quiet in the study. It stayed oddly in the room behind him, watching with unseen eyes. It was something held there about the shadows... seeking his swift departure. It did not *want* to be known.

This thought gave the young journalist a tickling chill about his spine. He did not like its touch.

He shuddered it quickly away.

Fastening his veiled-overcoat around him, he left. Rushed he out to occupy his time until the evening should come upon him. Behind, the pale lamplight set its yellow looks upon an outdrawn knife. It was the blade of what terrible thought he’d left forgotten in the shadows.

COMING SOON...

Did Book 3: *Colors of Earth*, excite you? The later books in the *Children of the Storm* anthology will contain many adventures... including those of Jillian Marks and Gregory Thomas into the dimensions! Stay tuned for their release, and please share this episode if you've enjoyed it! More is soon to come.

Book 4:

Splinter Theory

His intellect matched only by a general disregard for others' tempers, Dr. Christopher Anderson has come across a mystery he cannot solve. Confronted by the unknown, his notes and letters are compiled into a singular volume that has stood the test of time. *They call it the Splinter Theory*. Surely it will be passed down as a analysis of the dimensions! But what is to be of Christopher himself?

He may not make it out alive. Or else...his life will change forever.