

# **THE SOMNAMBULIST'S PROPHECY**

*A Fractional Fiction Novel*

David Boles

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*This novel contains depictions of suicidal ideation.*

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## **Dedication**

*For those who have seen what they could not prevent, and spoken  
when silence would have been easier.*

*Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows. But once they  
have seen, they must find the words.*

## Epigraph

*Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows.*

—David Boles (after Robert Frost, “The Strong Are Saying Nothing,” 1936)

*It is not a small thing to make a man’s fate go crooked on  
him.*

—J.M. Synge, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1910)

*You must become Caligari!*

—*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920)

# The Record

I am writing this because someone must. The clinical literature on prophetic somnambulism is thin, speculative, and largely useless. What documentation exists treats the phenomenon as curiosity rather than crisis, as though a man who speaks the future in his sleep were merely an interesting deviation from the baseline rather than a rupture in the order of things. I intend to correct this deficiency. I intend to record what I have witnessed at Emain Institute with the precision the subject demands.

My name is Francis Cathbad Morrow. I hold a doctorate in neuropsychology from Columbia University. My specialty is disorders of consciousness: the boundary conditions between sleep and waking, the liminal states where volition fractures and the self becomes uncertain of its own territory. I am attached to Emain Institute in the capacity of—

But here I must pause. The nature of my attachment to Emain has become, over the months of this documentation, less clear to me than it was when I began. I arrived as a researcher. I remain as something else. The distinction between observer and observed is not as stable as the scientific method requires. I acknowledge this. I proceed anyway.

The subject of this case study is a man named Cesare. His given name—an allusion he would come to embody—was borrowed by his parents from a film they loved, a German picture from 1920 in which a somnambulist speaks prophecy at the command of his hypnotist master. The borrowing was not innocent. Nothing in this record is innocent. But Cesare—my Cesare, the man sleeping and speaking in the room three doors down from mine—appreciated the allusion. He was a scholar of such allusions before he became their embodiment.

What follows is my attempt to document his case: the onset of his prophetic episodes, the content of his utterances, the accuracy of his predictions, and the events that followed from them. I have tried to maintain clinical distance. I have not always succeeded. Where I was not present, I have reconstructed events from the accounts of those who were, from recordings and documents, and from my own understanding of the people involved. The reader will judge whether this reconstruction serves the truth or distorts it.

I should note, before proceeding, that I had a wife. Her name was Jane. She was murdered in our home eighteen months before I arrived at Emain, and I watched her die in a dream the night before it happened, and I said nothing, and I

did nothing, and she is dead.

I mention this not because it is relevant to Cesare's case but because it is relevant to mine. A man who has failed once to act on foreknowledge cannot be trusted to act on it again. A man who has kept silent about one prophecy will keep silent about another. I am that man. I am writing this record. The reader should proceed with appropriate skepticism.

Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows.

I have seen.

PART ONE

# The Cabinet

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# The Institute

Emain Institute occupies forty-three acres on the eastern bank of the Hudson River, seventeen miles north of Tarrytown. The main building is a Georgian revival structure erected in 1892 by a railroad magnate whose wife suffered from melancholia and whose guilt demanded architectural expression. The wings added in 1936 and 1971 do not match the original; they lean toward it at angles that seem, from certain vantages, to suggest supplication or accusation. The effect is of a building arguing with itself, unable to agree on what it is.

I arrived at Emain in October, when the trees along the river were shedding their leaves in colors I would have called beautiful if I had been capable, at that time, of calling anything beautiful. My wife had been dead for eighteen months. I had published nothing in that period, attended no conferences, answered no correspondence. My department chair, a patient man who had supervised my dissertation and tolerated my grief longer than anyone had a right to expect, finally suggested that a change of environment might restore my capacity for work. Emain Institute was accepting research fellows for a study on hypnotic suggestibility in parasomnia patients. The position was mine if I wanted it.

I did not want it. I took it anyway. Wanting had become irrelevant to my decision-making. I moved through actions as through water, feeling resistance but not caring whether I reached the other side.

The grounds of Emain are maintained with a precision that approaches the obsessive. The lawns are edged with military exactitude. The hedges are trimmed to geometric perfection. The flower beds, even in October, displayed chrysanthemums arranged by color in gradients that suggested someone had consulted a mathematical formula before planting. The effect should have been reassuring. Instead, it produced in me a sensation I can only describe as architectural unease: the feeling that the order imposed on the landscape was a defense against something the landscape would otherwise reveal.

The main building's interior continues this theme. The corridors are long and regularly proportioned, the floors polished to a reflective sheen, the walls painted in institutional greens and creams that have not varied since the 1950s. And yet the building seems, to me, to twist. The corridors do not run straight. The rooms are not where I expect them to be. I have concluded that the building was designed by someone who understood that the mind in distress perceives space differently than the mind at rest, and who wished to accommodate that perception

rather than correct it.

Or I have concluded that my own mind is in sufficient distress that I can no longer navigate a building designed for the healthy. The evidence supports either interpretation.

Dr. Calixto Gari, the director of Emain Institute, received me on my first day with a warmth that seemed genuine and a curiosity that seemed clinical. He is a small man, precise in his movements, with silver hair and dark eyes that register everything they see without revealing what they conclude. His accent retains traces of Havana, where he was born, though he has lived in the United States for forty years and received all his training at American institutions. He has published extensively on disorders of volition: patients who cannot control their actions, who act without conscious will, who are driven by compulsions they do not understand. His work is controversial. His results are undeniable. His methods remain, to many of his colleagues, suspect.

"You are here to study the boundaries of consciousness," he said to me that first day, in his office overlooking the Hudson. "I am here to cross them. We will either complement each other or collide. I look forward to discovering which."

I did not know how to respond to this. I said something polite and meaningless. Gari smiled as though I had said something revealing.

"You have experienced loss," he said. It was not a question. "The loss has changed your relationship to your own mind. You are no longer certain where you end and your grief begins. This is not a clinical observation, Dr. Morrow. It is a personal one. I have been where you are. The landscape is familiar to me."

I said nothing.

"Emain will help you," Gari continued. "Or it will not. The Institute does not promise healing. It promises only environment. What you do with the environment is your own affair. I ask only that you document what you witness. The documentation is the contribution. The interpretation can wait."

He assigned me to the parasomnia ward. There were eleven patients at that time, men and women who walked in their sleep, who acted out their dreams, who spoke and moved and sometimes became violent without waking. Most were being treated with medication and behavioral intervention. Two were considered research subjects: their conditions were unusual enough to merit extended observation before treatment was attempted. One of these was Cesare.

I did not meet Cesare immediately. I spent my first weeks reviewing files, observing other patients, learning the rhythms of the Institute. The days at Emain have a structure that feels both rigid and elastic: meals at set times, therapy sessions scheduled to the minute, but long stretches of unstructured hours in which patients and staff circulate through common areas in patterns that shift and repeat without apparent logic. I found myself spending hours in the library, reading nothing, watching the light move across the windows. I found myself

walking the grounds at dusk, following paths that seemed to lead back to where they started.

I was not healing. But I was, perhaps, becoming something other than broken.

The first time I heard Cesare's voice, I was in the corridor outside the research ward, reviewing a chart for another patient. It was late, past midnight. The corridor was empty. The lights had been dimmed for the night, casting the institutional green of the walls into shades of shadow that seemed to pulse at the edges of my vision.

The voice came from the room at the end of the corridor. It was not loud, but it carried: a baritone that seemed to resonate in registers I could feel in my chest rather than hear with my ears. The voice was speaking in fragments, phrases that did not connect, words that repeated and circled back on themselves. I moved toward it without deciding to move.

The door was open. Inside, a young man lay on a narrow bed, his eyes wide and fixed on the ceiling, his mouth moving in the regular rhythm of the voice I had heard. A nurse sat beside him, taking notes, not attempting to wake him. She glanced up when I appeared in the doorway and raised a finger to her lips.

I watched.

The young man—Cesare, I would learn—was tall and thin, his dark hair disordered against the pillow, his face pale in the dim light. His eyes were open but unseeing; the pupils were dilated far beyond what the low light would explain, the irises nearly swallowed by black. His hands rested on his chest, the fingers extended and slightly curved, as though he were holding something invisible.

He spoke.

He spoke of soil turned soft and damp for planting, of the insignificance of weeds in the face of what would grow. The words evoked the planting poems my father had loved, the verses about farmers and silence and seed.

The words struck me with a force I could not explain. I knew them. I had known them since childhood, when my father spoke them over the harrowed ground. They were not Cesare's words. They were my father's words, spoken in my father's voice, in the springs before my father died.

Cesare continued, speaking of the hoe's work, of selected seeds, of the careful preparation that precedes growth.

I gripped the doorframe. The nurse looked at me with concern.

"Are you all right, Dr. Morrow?"

I did not answer. I could not answer. Cesare was not reciting the poem from memory; he was speaking it as though it were prophecy, as though the words were being transmitted through him from somewhere else, as though he were a vessel being filled by a voice not his own.

He stopped. His eyes closed. His breathing slowed. The nurse checked his pulse, made a note, and looked up at me.

"He does this most nights," she said. "Speaks in his sleep. The content varies. Sometimes it's poetry. Sometimes it's names and dates. Sometimes it's warnings." She paused. "Sometimes the warnings come true."

I found my voice. "What did he warn about?"

The nurse hesitated. She was young, perhaps thirty, with the tired eyes of someone who had worked too many night shifts. Her name tag read LAVINIA.

"Three weeks ago," she said, "he predicted that a patient named Elmore would die before the week was out. Elmore was being treated for depression. There was no indication of physical illness." She paused. "Elmore died of a heart attack four days later."

I looked at Cesare. His face, in sleep, was peaceful. The angular tension that had animated his features while he spoke had dissolved into ordinary rest. He looked young. He looked like any graduate student who had stayed up too late studying and finally collapsed.

"Has Dr. Gari witnessed these episodes?"

Lavinia nodded. "He's conducting research on them. That's why Cesare is here instead of in a hospital. His condition is unique enough to justify extended observation."

"What condition, exactly?"

Lavinia considered the question. "Prophetic somnambulism. That's what Dr. Gari calls it. Cesare speaks while asleep, and what he says comes true. Not always. Not reliably. But often enough that it can't be coincidence." She glanced at the sleeping man. "He doesn't remember any of it when he wakes. He doesn't know what he says. He doesn't want to know."

I looked at Cesare again. I thought of my wife, of the dream I had the night before she died, of the way I had woken with her blood on my hands though she was still alive and sleeping beside me.

"Does he know what he predicted about Elmore?"

Lavinia shook her head. "Dr. Gari thought it would be better not to tell him. The knowledge might influence his future utterances. Might contaminate the data."

"Or might contaminate him."

Lavinia said nothing.

I left the doorway. I walked back down the corridor, which seemed longer than it had before, the shadows deeper, the walls leaning inward at angles that could not have been architectural. I returned to my room—my office, my patient room, the distinction was already blurring—and I sat at my desk and I did not sleep.

I thought about prophecy. I thought about speech and silence. I thought about the planting verses emerging from the mouth of a man who had never worked a field, never planted a seed, never watched his father's body swing from a rafter in the barn.

The poem speaks of wind moving across farmland without revealing what the planters hope for. Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows.

I had heard Cesare's voice. I would hear it again. I would record what he said. I would document the accuracy or inaccuracy of his predictions. I would maintain clinical distance.

I would fail at all of this. But I did not know that yet.

During those early weeks, I met Alan Firth.

Alan was a visiting researcher from Johns Hopkins, a neurologist specializing in sleep disorders who had come to consult on Cesare's case. He was my age, perhaps a year or two older, with the confident bearing of a man whose career had proceeded without significant setback. We recognized each other immediately as fellow skeptics trapped in a place that seemed designed to erode skepticism.

"Gari's a showman," Alan told me over coffee in the staff lounge. "Brilliant, don't get me wrong, but he's been chasing paranormal phenomena his entire career. He wants Cesare to be prophetic. He needs it to be true. That's not science. That's faith dressed up in lab coats."

"The predictions come true," I said. "Elmore. The fire eighteen miles east. The match rate is too high for coincidence."

"The match rate is exactly right for coincidence, if you interpret the data generously enough." Alan stirred his coffee, not looking at me. "Cold reading. Barnum statements. The prophecies are vague enough to fit almost anything. And the ones that don't fit get quietly forgotten."

I wanted to believe him. It would have been easier to believe him. But I had heard Cesare speak verses about planting and silence, and I knew that no cold reading could explain how a young man from Boston had accessed the precise imagery my father had recited over Nebraska cornfields.

"Have you witnessed an episode?" I asked.

"Tonight, apparently. Gari wants me to observe and consult." Alan smiled, the smile of a man who expected to be vindicated. "I'm looking forward to it. Nothing like direct observation to puncture an inflated reputation."

That night, I stood beside Alan in the corridor outside Cesare's room. It was past two in the morning. Cesare had been restless for an hour, his monitors showing the approach of an episode, his body shifting beneath the sheets in patterns that Lavinia had learned to recognize.

When the episode began, Alan watched with the detached interest of a clinician observing a familiar phenomenon. Cesare's eyes opened, fixed on nothing. His voice emerged, deeper than his waking voice, rhythmic and declarative.

Alan leaned toward me, his skepticism intact. "Watch this," he whispered. "I'll prove it's cold reading." He raised his voice, addressing the sleeping man with theatrical sarcasm. "All right then, prophet—how long do I have to live?"

Cesare's head turned toward the sound, though his eyes remained fixed on nothing.

"Until dawn," Cesare said. "The man who does not believe asks his question, and the answer is: until dawn. Not long enough to change his mind."

Alan's face changed. The confident skepticism flickered, replaced by something I could not read.

"This is theater," he said, but his voice had lost its certainty. "He heard my question. He's performing for an audience."

Cesare continued, unhearing, unseeing. "The man who does not believe carries his death in his chest. The vessels narrow. The pressure builds. He laughs at prophecy, and prophecy does not care. Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows. He will see. He will see too late."

"Enough." Alan stepped back from the doorway. His face was pale. "This is suggestion. Autosuggestion. He's trying to frighten me into a stress response."

"He answered your question," I said quietly. "The moment you asked it."

"He knows. On some level, he knows. The unconscious perceives more than we credit." Alan was already moving down the corridor, his footsteps too quick. "I'm going to file my consultation report. Gari won't like it, but the truth is the truth."

I watched him go. I did not follow. I stayed in the doorway, listening to Cesare's voice continue its recitation, speaking of soil and seeds and the things that grow in darkness.

Alan Firth died at 5:47 the following morning—before dawn, exactly as Cesare had said. The cause was a massive myocardial infarction, sudden and catastrophic, in a man with no documented history of cardiac disease. He was found in his room at the inn where visiting researchers stayed, his consultation report unfinished on the desk beside him.

I learned of his death at breakfast. Gari told me, his face carefully neutral, his voice betraying nothing of what he thought or felt.

"A tragedy," Gari said. "Dr. Firth was a respected colleague. His loss diminishes the field."

I said nothing. I was thinking of Cesare's words: *Until dawn. Not long enough to change his mind.*

Alan had asked his mocking question, and Cesare had answered it. Alan had laughed at prophecy, demanded evidence, insisted on skepticism. And he had died before dawn, exactly as predicted, his disbelief unchanged, his consultation report forever incomplete.

I did not tell anyone what I had heard in the corridor. I did not document the prophecy that had answered Alan's question while he stood there refusing to believe. The documentation would have raised questions I could not answer. The documentation would have made the prophecy real in ways I was not ready to accept.

Instead, I returned to my room. I sat at my desk. I opened my notebook and stared at the blank page.

Silence. Seed. Waiting.

I had seen. And I was saying nothing.

The Institute settled into its nighttime quiet. Somewhere below my window, the Hudson moved south toward the sea, carrying what the land had given it, carrying what the land could not keep. Above the river, the stars were visible in a way they never were in the city: fixed points that the ancients had used to navigate, to predict, to prophesy.

My mind turned to my wife.

To the dream I had not spoken of.

To Cesare, sleeping three doors down, his mouth moving in the dark, speaking words he would not remember, predicting futures he could not control.

I began to write.

## The Somnambulist

Cesare Naoise Keane was twenty-three years old when he was admitted to Emain Institute, though his subjective experience of time had become, by then, unreliable. The episodes had begun two years earlier, during his second year of doctoral work at Columbia, and they had progressively colonized his nights until the boundary between sleeping and waking lost its clarity. He would fall asleep in his apartment on 116th Street and wake in Riverside Park, or on the steps of Low Library, or once, memorably, in the lobby of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where a security guard found him at 3 AM standing before a case of Irish gold torcs, weeping without sound.

I learned this history in fragments, over the weeks following my first encounter with his trance state. Cesare was reluctant to discuss his condition. He preferred to speak of other things: his research, his childhood in Boston, the books he was reading, the films he had studied before the episodes made concentration impossible. He had a gentle manner when awake, a hesitancy in his speech that suggested he was weighing each word before releasing it. His eyes, which had been so disturbing in trance—dilated, fixed, unseeing—were warm and thoughtful in his waking hours, the color of coffee with cream, quick to register humor or concern.

“I was writing about prophets,” he told me during one of our early conversations. We were sitting in the library, a room of dark wood and tall windows that looked out over the Institute’s formal gardens. Outside, November had stripped the trees to their essential architecture. “That was the subject of my dissertation. The figure of the prophet in tragic narrative. Cassandra, Tiresias, the seers of Irish myth. I was interested in the paradox: the prophet speaks truth, but the truth is useless. No one believes Cassandra. Oedipus ignores Tiresias. The knowledge of the future changes nothing.”

“And now?” I asked.

Cesare’s mouth tightened. “Now I am the paradox. I speak truth in my sleep, and I don’t remember it, and I can’t use it, and I don’t want it.” He looked out the window. “I would give anything to go back to studying prophets instead of being one.”

I had reviewed his file before this conversation. The clinical notes were detailed but ultimately unhelpful: onset of somnambulistic episodes at age twenty-one, progressive intensification, no apparent organic cause. Brain scans

showed nothing abnormal. Blood work revealed no metabolic irregularities. Psychological evaluation indicated high intelligence, mild anxiety, no psychotic features. He was, by every measurable standard, a healthy young man who happened to walk and talk in his sleep.

The prophetic content of his utterances was documented in a separate file, one that Dr. Gari kept in his office rather than in the general patient records. I had seen it briefly; Gari had shown it to me as part of my orientation to the research project. The file contained transcripts of Cesare's trance speech, annotated with dates and, where applicable, notes on subsequent events that matched the predictions. The match rate was not perfect—perhaps sixty percent of the utterances that could be interpreted as predictions corresponded to later events—but it was far higher than chance would allow. Far higher than any rational framework could explain.

"Tell me about your research," I said to Cesare. "Before the episodes. What were you finding?"

He smiled, and for a moment he looked like what he had been: a graduate student, bright and eager, full of the particular enthusiasm that comes from discovering a subject that feels like it was waiting for you to find it.

"I was finding patterns," he said. "Across cultures, across centuries. The prophet is always marginal. Cassandra is a prisoner of war. Tiresias is blind. The Irish seers—Cathbad, Fedelm, the others—they stand outside the social order. They have access to knowledge that others don't have, but the knowledge isolates them. They can see the future, but they can't participate in it. They're observers, not actors."

I thought of my father, standing at the edge of the harrowed field, looking out at what he had planted, saying nothing.

"And Synge's Deirdre?" I asked. "You were studying that play, weren't you?"

Cesare's expression shifted. Something passed across his face that I could not read.

"Deirdre is different," he said. "She's not a prophet, exactly. She's the subject of prophecy. The druid Cathbad predicts, at her birth, that she will bring sorrow and destruction to Ulster. She doesn't choose this. She doesn't speak it. It's spoken about her, and she spends her whole life trying to escape it, and she can't." He paused. "Synge understood something about that. About what it means to be trapped in a story someone else is telling about you."

"What did he understand?"

"That the only freedom is in how you walk toward the ending. Deirdre can't escape the prophecy, but she can choose how she meets it. She convinces Naoise to return to Ulster, knowing they'll die there. She says it's better to die at the peak of their love than to grow old in exile, watching their happiness fade." Cesare's voice had grown quieter. "I used to think that was romantic. Now I think it might

be the only kind of agency available to someone who knows their fate.”

I wrote this down in my notebook. I wrote everything down. The documentation is the contribution.

“Do you know your fate?” I asked.

Cesare looked at me. His eyes, in the gray light from the windows, seemed older than his years.

“I know what I’ve said in my sleep,” he said. “Lavinia plays the recordings for me sometimes, when I ask. Most of it is fragments. Poetry, names, numbers that might be dates. Some of it is clearly prediction—warnings about specific people, specific events. But I don’t know which predictions apply to me. I don’t know if any of them do.” He shook his head. “Maybe that’s a mercy. Deirdre knew her fate from childhood. She had to live with that knowledge for years. I only have to live with the uncertainty.”

“Is uncertainty better?”

“I don’t know. Ask me again when I find out how this ends.”

We sat in silence for a moment. Outside, a groundskeeper was raking leaves into piles that the wind immediately began to scatter.

“There’s a recording,” I said carefully, “that Dr. Gari has flagged. From three weeks before I arrived. You mentioned a woman.”

Cesare’s expression did not change, but I saw his hands tighten on the arms of his chair.

“I’ve heard of that one,” he said. “The woman of sorrows. Lavinia told me it existed. I refused to listen to it.”

“Do you know who she is?”

“No.” The word came too quickly. “I’ve never—the phrase is from Irish mythology. Deirdre is called Deirdre of the Sorrows. It’s probably just... material from my research, surfacing in the trance.” He looked away. “It doesn’t have to mean anything.”

I did not press him. I had learned, in my years of clinical work, that patients reveal truth in their own time, and that pressure produces only resistance. I changed the subject. We talked about his childhood, his family (a mother who taught music, a father who sold insurance, neither of whom knew what to make of their son’s condition), his years at Columbia before the episodes began.

But I noted, in my records, the way his hands had tightened. The way his eyes had shifted. The way the denial had come too quickly to be believable.

He knew something about the woman of sorrows. He would not say what.

The recordings of Cesare’s trance speech were kept on a secure server accessible only to Dr. Gari and the research staff. I had been granted limited access: I could listen to the recordings, but I could not copy them or share them outside the Institute. Gari was protective of his data. He had reason to be. If word spread that Emain housed a genuine prophetic somnambulist, the Institute would

be overrun with journalists, skeptics, believers, and the merely curious. The research would become impossible.

I spent long hours with those recordings. I sat in my office—my room, the distinction no longer mattered—with headphones on, listening to Cesare’s voice speak words he did not remember speaking.

The voice in trance was different from the voice awake. The waking Cesare spoke with hesitation, with qualification, with the academic’s habit of acknowledging complexity. The trance Cesare spoke in declarative certainties. His voice dropped an octave. His pacing became regular, rhythmic, almost liturgical. He sounded, I realized after several hours of listening, like a man reading from a text he had memorized long ago—except that no such text existed, except that the words emerged from some source I could not identify.

The content varied. Sometimes he spoke fragments of poetry: Yeats, Synge, passages I recognized from the Irish mythological cycles. Sometimes he recited names and dates in sequences I could not decode. Sometimes he made statements that seemed, on their face, to be predictions:

“The man with the silver watch will not see the spring.”

“Fire in the eastern wing. Eighteen days.”

“The child of the accountant will speak late but speak truly.”

I cross-referenced these utterances with the records Gari had kept. The man with the silver watch was a patient named Hartwell, who wore an antique pocket watch his grandfather had given him. He died of pneumonia in March, two weeks before the vernal equinox. There was no fire in the eastern wing within eighteen days of the recording, but there was a fire in a building eighteen miles east of Emain, an apartment complex where three people died. The child of the accountant remained unclear; there were no accountants on the Institute staff, and no way to trace the prediction to a specific person.

The match rate was imperfect. The predictions were often ambiguous. The confirmations relied on interpretation, on finding patterns that might have been coincidence. A skeptic could dismiss the entire phenomenon as cold reading, as the Barnum effect, as the mind’s tendency to find meaning where none existed.

But I was not a skeptic. I had had a dream, eighteen months ago, in which my wife died. I had woken with the taste of copper in my mouth and the image of her blood on white sheets. I had said nothing. Twelve hours later, she was dead.

I believed in prophecy. I believed in it the way one believes in gravity: not as faith but as observation, as the weight of evidence pressing down on the chest.

The recording about the woman of sorrows was dated September 14th, three weeks before my arrival at Emain. The transcript read:

*The woman of sorrows will die by her own hand before the spring planting. Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows. The cabinet opens but does not close. The soil receives what the sky refuses. She walks toward him in the dark*

*and he cannot move and she is beautiful and she is dying and he loves her and he cannot move.*

I listened to this recording seventeen times.

The first sentence was clear enough: a prediction of suicide, sometime before spring. The second sentence evoked the planting verses, unmistakable, though Cesare had no connection to agricultural poetry that I could find in his history. The third sentence suggested Caligari, the film Cesare had been studying, the cabinet from which the somnambulist emerged. The fourth sentence was obscure—agricultural imagery, perhaps metaphorical. The fifth sentence—

The fifth sentence stopped my breath each time I heard it.

*She walks toward him in the dark and he cannot move and she is beautiful and she is dying and he loves her and he cannot move.*

I had dreamed this. Not these exact words, but this exact feeling: the paralysis, the beauty, the love, the death approaching. I had dreamed my wife walking toward me, and I had not been able to move, and I had not been able to warn her, and she had died.

Cesare had spoken my dream.

I did not know what this meant. I did not know if it meant anything. The mind, under the pressure of grief, finds connections where none exist. The pattern-seeking faculty becomes hyperactive. Every coincidence becomes a sign. I knew this. I had studied it.

But I also knew what I had heard. Cesare had spoken words that described my experience, an experience I had told no one, an experience he could not possibly have known about. Either he had access to knowledge no rational framework could explain, or the universe was constructed in ways I had not previously considered.

Either option terrified me.

I sought out Cesare the next day. He was in the common room, playing chess with another patient, a middle-aged woman named Eleanor who suffered from night terrors. The game was friendly; neither player was particularly skilled. Cesare looked up when I entered and smiled.

“Dr. Morrow. Want to play winner?”

“I’m not much of a chess player,” I said. “But I’d like to talk, when you’re finished.”

“I’m already finished,” Eleanor said, tipping over her king. “He’s been destroying me for the past twenty minutes. I’m just too stubborn to resign.”

Cesare laughed. The laugh was warm, unguarded, nothing like the voice on the recordings. I reminded myself that this was the same person, that the man who spoke prophecy in his sleep and the man who played chess with fellow patients were not two beings but one.

We walked to the library. The light was better today; the clouds had parted enough to let weak November sun through the tall windows. Cesare sat in what I had come to think of as his chair, a worn leather armchair near the fireplace where no fires were ever lit.

"You've been listening to the recordings," he said. It was not a question.

"Yes."

"And you have questions."

"Many."

He nodded. He did not seem surprised or distressed. Perhaps he had grown accustomed to being questioned about things he did not remember saying.

"I won't be able to answer most of them," he said. "I don't remember the trance states. I don't know where the words come from. I don't know why some predictions come true and others don't. I don't know why this is happening to me." He spread his hands. "I've been poked and scanned and analyzed by a dozen specialists. Nobody knows."

"I'm not asking about the mechanism," I said. "I'm asking about the content. The recording from September 14th. The one about the woman of sorrows."

Cesare's face changed. The warmth drained from it.

"I told you," he said. "It's probably just material from my research. Deirdre of the Sorrows. The phrase comes from Irish mythology."

"And the rest of it? The line about planting in silence—my father used to say something like that. It's from an old poem about farmers. Did you study agricultural poetry?"

"No. I've read him, like everyone has, but he wasn't part of my research."

"Then how do you explain it appearing in your trance speech?"

Cesare was silent for a long moment. When he spoke again, his voice was quieter.

"I don't explain it. I can't. Things come out of me when I'm asleep that I don't understand and can't control. Poetry I've never studied. Names of people I've never met. Dates that turn out to be significant in ways I couldn't have known." He looked at me. "Do you think I like this, Dr. Morrow? Do you think I want to be a... a radio receiver for information I didn't ask for and can't use?"

"No," I said. "I don't think you like it."

"Then why are you pressing me?"

I considered my answer carefully. The documentation is the contribution. But documentation without honesty is merely data, and data without context is meaningless.

"Because the recording describes something I experienced," I said. "Eighteen months ago. Before you could have known anything about me."

Cesare stared at me. His expression shifted from defensiveness to something more complex: curiosity, concern, and beneath both, a flicker of fear.

“What did you experience?”

I told him. I told him about the dream, about my wife, about the paralysis and the beauty and the death. I told him about waking with copper on my tongue and blood on my hands that wasn't there. I told him about saying nothing, doing nothing, watching her leave for work that morning as though the dream had been only a dream.

I told him about the phone call, twelve hours later.

When I finished, Cesare was pale. His hands gripped the arms of his chair the way they had the day before, when I asked about the woman of sorrows.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I'm so sorry. I didn't—I don't—”

“I'm not telling you this to make you feel guilty,” I said. “You didn't cause her death. You didn't even know about it. I'm telling you because I need to understand. How could you speak words that describe something that happened to me, more than a year before we met?”

Cesare shook his head slowly. “I don't know. I don't know anything anymore.” He looked at the window, at the bare trees, at the sky beyond them. “What if prophecy isn't about the future? What if it's about everything at once. Past, present, future, all folded together into something we can only perceive in fragments.”

“That's not a scientific explanation.”

“No,” he agreed. “It's not. But I stopped believing in purely scientific explanations the night I woke up on the George Washington Bridge telling strangers how they were going to die.” He turned back to me. “You want to understand this, Dr. Morrow. I respect that. But I've been trying to understand it for two years, and all I've learned is that understanding might not be possible. Some things just are. Some things happen without explanation. Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows.” He paused. “Perhaps we're not meant to see. Perhaps we're only meant to record.”

I wrote his words in my notebook. I had nothing else to offer.

The light in the library dimmed as clouds reclaimed the sun. Cesare returned to the common room to continue his chess game. I remained in my chair, looking at what I had written, trying to find a pattern in the fragments.

The documentation is the contribution.

But contribution to what? Understanding? Or merely the accumulation of mystery upon mystery, question upon question, until the weight of not-knowing became its own kind of answer?

I did not know.

## The Woman

I first saw Deirdre Lavery in the garden, three days after my conversation with Cesare about the September recording. She was standing beneath the skeletal remains of a trellis that had, in summer, supported climbing roses. November had stripped the roses to thorned canes, and the trellis itself listed to one side, giving the impression of a doorway that had forgotten what it was meant to frame. She stood within this frame, motionless, looking out at the river.

Her hair was dark red, the color of autumn leaves before they brown. Her skin was pale in the way of people who do not spend much time outdoors, though there was nothing sickly about her pallor; it seemed, rather, a natural condition, as though she had been made for northern latitudes and gray light. She wore the standard patient clothing—soft trousers, a loose sweater, slip-on shoes—but she wore it as though it were armor, as though the shapeless garments were a deliberate refusal to be seen.

I approached her carefully. I had learned, in my months at Emain, that patients responded differently to being approached: some welcomed company, some fled from it, some became aggressive. Deirdre did none of these things. She remained motionless until I was beside her, and then she turned her head and looked at me with eyes the color of river water.

“Dr. Morrow,” she said. Her voice carried the rhythms of western Ireland, musical even in two words. “Lavinia said you’d want to speak with me eventually.”

“Did she say why?”

“She said you’re researching disorders of consciousness. Prophecy and premonition. The places where the mind touches what it shouldn’t be able to touch.” She turned back to the river. “She thought I might be useful to your research.”

I took a position beside her, both of us facing the water. The Hudson was the color of pewter, moving south with the implacable patience of geology. Somewhere far below the surface, currents ran that no one could see.

“Are you?” I asked. “Useful to my research?”

“That depends on what you want to know.”

“I want to know about your visions.”

She was silent for a long moment. A bird called from somewhere in the bare trees, a harsh cry that might have been warning or might have been greeting.

"My visions," she said finally, "are why I'm here. My husband told the doctors I was delusional. Hallucinations. Psychotic features. He had private psychiatrists evaluate me, sign the paperwork, certify that I was a danger to myself." She smiled, but there was no warmth in it. "He was very thorough. Very convincing. Very wealthy. Wealth makes many things convincing."

"And were you? A danger to yourself?"

"I was a danger to his control over me. That was my real crime. I tried to leave him, and he couldn't allow that, so he found a way to keep me." She gestured at the grounds around us, the manicured lawns, the Georgian facades, the Hudson sliding past. "A gilded cage is still a cage, Dr. Morrow. Even one with such a pretty view."

I noted the bitterness in her voice. I noted also the precision of her speech, the clarity of her thought. Whatever her diagnosis said, this was not a woman in the grip of psychosis. This was a woman in the grip of something else entirely.

"Tell me about the visions," I said. "Not the diagnosis. The experience."

Deirdre turned to look at me. Her eyes searched my face, assessing, calculating.

"Why should I?"

"Because I'm not your husband. I'm not trying to control you. I'm trying to understand something that I don't understand, and I think you might be able to help."

"And if I help you, what do I get in return?"

It was a fair question. Patients at Emain were subjects of study, objects of treatment, rarely partners in investigation. The power differential was built into the architecture of the place, into the locks on the doors and the medications in the dispensary and the charts that recorded every aspect of their lives without their input.

"I don't know," I said honestly. "I can't promise you freedom. I can't promise you anything concrete. But I can promise to listen. I can promise to take what you say seriously, not as a symptom to be managed but as an experience to be understood."

Deirdre considered this. The wind off the river stirred her hair, lifting strands of red-brown that caught the weak light.

"I've had the sight since I was a child," she said. "That's what my mother called it. She had it too, though she never spoke of it outside the family. In Ireland, in the parts where we lived, such things were accepted even if they weren't discussed. You knew who had the gift. You went to them when you needed to know something. You didn't ask how they knew. You just accepted that they did."

"What kind of things did you see?"

"Small things, at first. I knew when my grandmother would die. I knew when the fishing boats would come back empty. I knew when rain was coming, not from

watching the sky but from watching the space behind my eyes, where images appeared without being invited." She paused. "My father thought it was nonsense. He was a practical man, a skeptic. He drank himself to death by the time I was fifteen, trying to drown out a world that refused to conform to his understanding of it."

I thought of my own father, standing at the edge of the harrowed field. A practical man. A man who said nothing until he saw. A man who saw something, eventually, that made him tie a rope around a rafter.

"And the visions got stronger?" I asked.

"They got more specific. When I was young, I saw impressions, feelings, shapes of things to come. As I grew older, I began to see scenes. People, places, events. Not always clearly—sometimes the images were fragmented, overlapping, contradictory. But sometimes they were sharp enough to cut."

"And your husband?"

Deirdre's expression darkened. "Conor. I met him at a function in Dublin, a reception for American investors interested in Irish cultural properties. He collected antiquities—torcs, chalices, illuminated manuscripts. Things that belonged to the land, that he wanted to take away and own." She shook her head. "I should have seen what he was from the beginning. Perhaps I did see, and I refused to believe it. The sight doesn't protect you from your own foolishness."

"What did you see about him?"

"I saw that he would possess me the way he possessed his artifacts. I saw that his love was not love but acquisition. I saw—" She stopped. Her hands, which had been loose at her sides, clenched into fists. "I saw many things. I chose to ignore them. I was young. I was flattered. I wanted to believe that I could have a normal life, a husband, a future that wasn't shaped by visions I didn't ask for."

"But you couldn't."

"No. The visions don't care what you want. They show you what they show you, and you can accept it or deny it, but you can't make it stop." She unclenched her hands slowly. "Conor has business interests that don't bear scrutiny—there's been SEC attention, questions about provenance on some of his acquisitions, a board seat he nearly lost last year. He can't afford scandal. So when I tried to leave him, he didn't drag me back publicly. He had me committed. Quietly. Privately. A wife with psychiatric issues, committed for her own protection. The hearing was sealed, the records buried so deep no journalist would ever find them." Her voice had dropped to nearly a whisper. "I saw this place. I saw myself walking these grounds, month after month, year after year. I saw the locks on the doors and the medications in the cups and the slow erosion of everything I was. And then it happened. Exactly as I saw it."

I wrote nothing in my notebook. Some things should not be reduced to data.

"How long have you been at Emain?"

“Eighteen months. It feels longer. Time moves differently here. The days blur together. The seasons change outside the windows, but inside it’s always the same temperature, the same light, the same routine.” She looked at me. “Do you know what’s worse than being imprisoned? Being imprisoned in a place that’s designed to seem like it’s helping you. Being told every day that this is for your own good, that your perception of reality is the problem, that if you would just accept the medication and the therapy and the diagnosis, you could be well.”

“But you’re not taking the medication.”

She raised an eyebrow. “How do you know that?”

“Your eyes. Your speech. The medications they give patients here for psychotic features have effects—cognitive slowing, flattened affect, a particular dullness in the gaze. You don’t have any of those.” I paused. “Either you’re not taking the medication, or your diagnosis is wrong, or both.”

Deirdre smiled. It was the first genuine smile I had seen from her.

“Both,” she said. “Lavinia helps me. She palms the pills, flushes them, keeps the records consistent. She’s been doing it since my third month here, after she realized that the medication was making me worse, not better. Making the visions worse, I mean. Blurrier, more frightening, harder to interpret.”

“That’s a significant risk. For both of you.”

“Lavinia understands what it means to be trapped by forces outside your control. She grew up on a farm in County Mayo. She knows about weather and seasons and the things you can’t fight, only endure.” Deirdre’s smile faded. “She’s the only person in this place who treats me like a human being instead of a case file.”

“And Dr. Gari?”

“Gari.” The name came out flat, toneless. “Gari is interested in me the way Conor was interested in his antiquities. I’m a specimen. A curiosity. He wants to study my visions, to document them, to understand how they work so he can write papers and give lectures and advance his reputation.” She shook her head. “He’s not cruel. He’s not deliberately unkind. He simply doesn’t see me as a person. He sees me as data.”

I thought of my own research, my notebooks filled with observations and transcripts. I thought of Cesare, whose trance speech I had listened to for hours without once asking how it felt to be the vessel through which such words emerged.

“I’ve been guilty of that too,” I said.

Deirdre looked at me with something like surprise. “Have you?”

“Yes. I came here to study disorders of consciousness. I’ve been treating the patients as subjects, as sources of data. I’ve been so focused on documenting what happens that I’ve forgotten to ask what it means to the people it happens to.”

“And now?”

“Now I’m asking.”

The wind picked up, sending dead leaves skittering across the path. Deirdre pulled her sweater tighter around herself, though she did not seem cold.

“I’ve had a vision about you,” she said.

The words struck me with unexpected force. I had been asking about her visions as though they were historical, as though they pertained to events already completed. It had not occurred to me that I might be part of them.

“What did you see?”

“You, sitting in a room, writing. The room was dark, but there was light from a single lamp, and you were bent over a notebook, and your hand was moving, and you were weeping.” She paused. “I couldn’t see what you were writing. But I felt the weight of it. The grief in it. Whatever you were recording, it was breaking your heart.”

I thought of my room at Emain. The single lamp on my desk. The notebooks in which I documented Cesare’s prophecies.

“When?” I asked. “When does this happen?”

“I don’t know. The visions don’t come with timestamps. They show what will be, not when.” She looked at me steadily. “But it will happen. Everything I see about others happens. That’s the curse of it, Dr. Morrow. The sight doesn’t show you what might be. It shows you what will be. And you have to live with that knowledge, knowing you can’t change it, knowing that the future is already fixed and you’re just walking toward it.”

I thought of Cesare’s words: *The only freedom is in how you walk toward the ending.*

“Have you seen your own future?” I asked.

Deirdre’s expression shifted. Something closed behind her eyes.

“I’ve seen several futures,” she said. “They can’t all be true.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I’ve seen myself dying in different ways. By my own hand. By Conor’s hand. By accident, by illness, by violence I don’t understand.” She spread her hands. “The visions contradict each other. Usually that doesn’t happen. Usually the sight shows one path, one outcome. But when I look at my own future, I see multiplicity. Branching paths. Possibilities that should exclude each other but somehow don’t.”

“Maybe the future isn’t as fixed as you think.”

“Or maybe my sight is failing. Or maybe there’s something about my own fate that I’m not meant to see clearly.” She shrugged. “I’ve stopped trying to interpret it. I just live with the uncertainty. It’s not comfortable, but it’s better than the alternative.”

“What’s the alternative?”

“Choosing one of the futures and walking toward it deliberately. Deciding how I’m going to die and making it happen on my own terms.” Her voice was calm, matter-of-fact. “Deirdre of the Sorrows did that, in the legends. She knew she would die, and she chose how and when. She wouldn’t let Conchubar have her, so she took her own life.” She met my eyes. “I’ve thought about it. I won’t pretend I haven’t. But I’m not ready to make that choice. Not yet.”

I did not know what to say. The clinical part of my mind noted that she had just admitted to suicidal ideation, that I should document this, report it, ensure she was monitored more closely. The human part of my mind recognized that she was telling me something true, something that required not documentation but acknowledgment.

I did not report it.

“I’m glad you’re not ready,” I said.

Deirdre smiled again, that faint, surprised smile. “Are you? Why?”

“Because I think there’s more to your story than the ending. Because I think the visions don’t have to be inevitable. Because—” I stopped. I did not know how to finish the sentence.

“Because you want to believe that the future can be changed,” Deirdre said. “Even though you’ve seen evidence that it can’t. Even though your own experience tells you that prophecy comes true, that warnings go unheeded, that knowing the future doesn’t help you prevent it.”

I thought of my wife. I thought of the dream I did not speak of.

“Yes,” I said. “I want to believe that.”

“Then we want the same thing.” Deirdre turned back to the river. “That’s a start, at least.”

We stood together in silence, watching the water move. The bird called again from the trees, and this time it sounded less like a warning than a question.

That evening, I observed Cesare and Deirdre together for the first time since I had become aware of the connection between them—the prophecy about the woman of sorrows, Cesare’s discomfort when I mentioned the phrase, Deirdre’s visions of multiple deaths.

They were in the common room, not speaking to each other, but positioned in a way that suggested awareness. Cesare sat at a table near the window, reading a book I couldn’t identify from across the room. Deirdre sat in an armchair by the fireplace, her eyes on the middle distance, present but not present. Between them stretched fifteen feet of institutional carpet and a silence that seemed to vibrate.

I took a seat near the door, where I could observe without intruding. I opened my notebook, pretending to write, but my attention was on the two of them.

Cesare looked up from his book. His gaze found Deirdre, lingered, returned to the page. A minute later, he looked up again. This time, Deirdre was looking back. Their eyes met. Neither looked away.

I had seen many things in my years of clinical observation. I had seen patients form connections with each other, sometimes healthy, sometimes not. I had seen the particular intensity that develops between people who share a ward, who see each other in their worst moments, who understand each other's suffering in ways that outsiders cannot.

But I had never seen what passed between Cesare and Deirdre in that moment. It was not attraction, though attraction was part of it. It was not recognition, though recognition was part of it too. It was something older, something that felt less like the beginning of a relationship than like the continuation of one—as though they had known each other for years, for centuries, and were simply resuming a conversation that had been interrupted.

Cesare closed his book. Deirdre rose from her chair. They moved toward each other without haste, without urgency, but with the inevitability of water running downhill.

They met in the center of the room. They did not touch. They simply stood, facing each other, and the silence between them was no longer empty but full.

I heard Cesare speak, though I could not make out the words. I saw Deirdre's lips move in response. They were too quiet for me to hear, and I would not have intruded even if I could.

I thought of the prophecy: *The woman of sorrows will die by her own hand before the spring planting.*

I thought of Deirdre's vision: *I've seen myself dying in different ways. They can't all be true.*

I thought of Synge's Deirdre convincing Naoise to return to Ulster, knowing they would die there, choosing death at the peak of love rather than survival into diminishment.

I did not know what was beginning in the common room of Emain Institute. But I knew that it was significant, that it was dangerous, and that I was powerless to stop it.

I was seeing. And I was saying nothing.

## The Director

Dr. Calixto Gari's office occupied the corner of Emain Institute's original building, where two walls of windows met to frame a view of the Hudson that must have cost the railroad magnate's widow a considerable premium in 1892. The room was furnished with the deliberate eclecticism of a man who wanted visitors to understand that his mind ranged widely: a Persian rug, a Bauhaus desk lamp, bookshelves mixing neurology texts with philosophy and poetry, a small bronze sculpture that might have been pre-Columbian or might have been purchased at a gallery in SoHo last year. On the wall behind his desk hung a single painting, a dark canvas dominated by angular shadows and a figure that seemed to be emerging from or receding into a doorway. I recognized the style but not the specific work.

"German Expressionism," Gari said, following my gaze. "A minor painter, not one of the famous names, but I find it speaks to me. The uncertainty of the threshold. The figure caught between spaces." He smiled. "Much of my work concerns thresholds, Dr. Morrow. The boundary between sleeping and waking. The line between volition and compulsion. The point where the self becomes uncertain of its own territory."

I had heard him use this phrase before, in his welcome address to me on my first day. I noted the repetition. Gari was a man who had refined his self-presentation, who knew which phrases worked and deployed them strategically.

"You wanted to discuss Cesare's case," I said.

"I wanted to discuss a proposal." Gari leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers in a gesture that felt rehearsed. "You've been observing him for several weeks now. You've listened to the recordings. You've spoken with him about his experiences, his history, his understanding of his condition. I'd like to know your assessment."

I considered my answer. The clinical part of my mind wanted to offer a careful, qualified evaluation. The other part—the part that had listened to Cesare speak my dead wife's story in words he did not remember—wanted to say something else entirely.

"He's genuine," I said. "Whatever is happening to him, it's not performance. It's not delusion. It's not a conventional psychiatric presentation of any kind I've encountered."

“And the prophetic content?”

“The match rate is too high to dismiss as coincidence. Some predictions are ambiguous, but others are specific enough that chance cannot explain them.” I paused. “I don’t have a framework for understanding how it’s possible. But I’m increasingly convinced that it is happening.”

Gari nodded slowly. His dark eyes revealed nothing of what he was thinking.

“I’ve been studying phenomena like Cesare’s for thirty years,” he said. “Cases of apparent precognition, of knowledge that cannot be explained by normal sensory channels, of information that seems to arrive from sources outside the self. The literature is sparse, contaminated by fraud and wishful thinking, but there is a residue of cases that resist explanation.” He leaned forward. “Cesare is the most significant case I’ve encountered. The clarity of his utterances, the specificity of his predictions, the consistency of the phenomenon over time—he represents an opportunity that may not come again.”

“An opportunity for what?”

“For understanding. For documentation. For science.” Gari’s voice had taken on an intensity that seemed at odds with his measured demeanor. “We stand at a threshold, Dr. Morrow. The boundary between what we know and what we don’t know. Cesare’s condition offers a window into something fundamental about consciousness, about time, about the nature of reality itself. But the window is small, and it may close.”

“What do you mean, close?”

“Prophetic somnambulism is not a stable condition. The cases in the literature show a pattern: the episodes intensify over a period of months or years, reach a peak, and then diminish. Sometimes they cease altogether. Sometimes they resolve into conventional psychiatric presentations—dissociative disorders, schizophrenia, conditions that can be medicated into silence.” Gari spread his hands. “We don’t know where Cesare is in this progression. We don’t know how long the window will remain open. That’s why I want to act now, while we still can.”

“Act how?”

Gari rose from his chair and walked to the window. The light from the river silvered his profile.

“The episodes occur spontaneously,” he said. “We can observe them when they happen, but we can’t predict them, can’t control them, can’t study them systematically. What I’m proposing is a series of induced episodes. Using hypnosis to trigger the trance state deliberately, under controlled conditions, with full monitoring and documentation.”

I felt something tighten in my chest. “You want to hypnotize him into prophecy.”

"I want to create conditions in which prophecy can be observed scientifically. The hypnotic state shares certain neurological features with the somnambulistic state—similar brainwave patterns, similar alterations in connectivity between brain regions. If we can use hypnosis as a bridge, we may be able to access the prophetic material more reliably, more completely."

"Has this been done before?"

"Not with a subject like Cesare. Not with the monitoring technology we now have available. The historical cases were documented anecdotally, without physiological data, without the ability to observe what's happening in the brain during the episodes." Gari turned to face me. "We have the opportunity to change that. To produce data that could transform our understanding of consciousness."

I thought of Cesare in the library, his gentle hesitancy, his discomfort when asked about his condition. I thought of his words: *Do you think I like this? Do you think I want to be a radio receiver for information I didn't ask for?*

"What does Cesare think about this proposal?"

Gari's expression shifted almost imperceptibly. "I haven't discussed it with him yet. I wanted your assessment first. Your perspective as a researcher, as someone who has been observing him closely."

"My perspective is that he doesn't want this. He's told me explicitly that he doesn't want to know what he says in trance, that he finds the experience disturbing, that he would give anything to go back to being a normal person."

"Many patients are ambivalent about treatments that might help them. That's why we have clinical judgment, to help them see past their immediate discomfort to the potential benefits."

"What benefits? You're not proposing to cure him. You're proposing to study him. The benefits are to your research, not to his wellbeing."

Gari's eyes narrowed slightly. "You're being naive, Dr. Morrow. Understanding a condition is the first step toward treating it. The research I'm proposing could lead to insights that help not only Cesare but others like him. Future patients. People suffering from disorders we can't currently explain, much less address."

"Or it could lead to publications with your name on them and a damaged patient who was never able to give meaningful consent."

The words came out more harshly than I had intended. Gari regarded me for a long moment, his expression unreadable.

"You have objections," he said finally. "That's understandable. You've formed a connection with Cesare, as clinicians sometimes do with patients. But I would ask you to consider whether your objections are based on scientific reasoning or on emotional attachment."

"I would ask you to consider whether your enthusiasm is based on scientific reasoning or on ambition."

We stared at each other. The river light moved on the walls, indifferent to our conflict.

"I'm not going to force anyone to participate in research they don't want," Gari said. "That's not how I operate. I will discuss the proposal with Cesare, explain the potential benefits and risks, and let him decide. If he agrees, I would like you to be part of the research team. Your observations have been valuable, and your skepticism could serve as a useful check on my own biases." He paused. "If he refuses, I will respect his decision. But I want to give him the choice. That's all I'm asking."

I did not trust Gari's assurances. I had seen how institutions could pressure patients into compliance, how the power differential between doctor and patient could make "voluntary" consent into something closer to coercion. But I also knew that refusing to participate would not protect Cesare; it would only remove me from a position where I might be able to advocate for him.

"I'll be present when you discuss it with him," I said. "As an observer. To ensure that the consent process is genuinely informed and voluntary."

Gari smiled. It was not a warm smile.

"Of course, Dr. Morrow. I would expect nothing less."

The meeting with Cesare took place two days later, in a conference room on the second floor of the main building. The room was designed to feel less clinical than the examination rooms, with upholstered chairs and a wooden table and windows that looked out on the garden. The effect was undermined by the presence of recording equipment, which Gari had insisted on using to document the consent process.

Cesare entered looking wary. He had agreed to the meeting at my request, trusting me enough to hear what Gari had to say. I felt the weight of that trust like a physical pressure.

"Thank you for coming," Gari said, gesturing to a chair. "Please, sit. I want to discuss something with you, and I want to be completely transparent about what I'm proposing."

Cesare sat. His eyes moved from Gari to me and back again.

"Dr. Morrow told me you have a proposal," he said. "Something about hypnosis."

"Yes." Gari folded his hands on the table. "As you know, we've been documenting your episodes since you arrived at Emain. The recordings, the physiological monitoring, the correlation of your utterances with subsequent events. This documentation has been valuable, but it's limited by the spontaneous nature of the episodes. We can't predict when they'll occur, which means we can't prepare to observe them systematically."

"And you want to make them happen on demand."

"I want to explore whether hypnotic induction can trigger a state similar to your natural trance states. If it can, we would be able to study the phenomenon under controlled conditions. We would have baseline measurements, real-time monitoring, the ability to ask questions and observe responses." Gari leaned forward. "This could be the key to understanding what's happening to you. And understanding is the first step toward control."

"Control," Cesare repeated. The word came out flat.

"The ability to manage your condition. To decide when and whether the episodes occur. To have agency over what is currently happening to you involuntarily."

Cesare was silent for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was careful.

"What would this involve?"

Gari described the procedure: a series of sessions in which Cesare would be hypnotized using standard clinical techniques, with the goal of inducing a trance state. During the trance, his brain activity would be monitored using EEG and functional imaging. His utterances would be recorded and transcribed. If he entered a prophetic state, the research team would document everything that occurred.

"How many sessions?" Cesare asked.

"We would start with three to five, to determine whether hypnotic induction is effective in triggering the trance state. If it is, we would discuss continuing with additional sessions based on the results."

"And if it doesn't work? If hypnosis doesn't trigger the state?"

"Then we would have learned something valuable about the nature of your condition. The negative result would be data in itself."

Cesare looked at me. "What do you think?"

I had been dreading this question. I could not lie to him, but I also could not undermine Gari's proposal in front of Gari without consequences for my position at Emain.

"I think you should make this decision based on what you want," I said, "not on what anyone else thinks is best for you. You're the one who will experience the sessions. You're the one who will have to live with the results."

"That's not an answer."

"No. It's not." I met his eyes. "I have concerns about the proposal. I've expressed them to Dr. Gari. But I'm not going to tell you what to do. I don't have that right."

Cesare turned back to Gari. "What are the risks?"

"Hypnosis is a well-established clinical technique with a strong safety profile. Some patients experience minor side effects—headache, fatigue, temporary disorientation. In rare cases, hypnosis can trigger emotional responses, memories, or associations that are distressing." Gari paused. "Given the nature of your

condition, there's a possibility that induced trance states could be more intense or disturbing than your natural episodes. We would monitor closely and stop immediately if you showed signs of distress."

"You can't promise that nothing bad will happen."

"No. I can't. No researcher can promise that. But I can promise that we will take every precaution, that your wellbeing will be our primary concern, and that you can withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason, without consequence."

Cesare sat back in his chair. He looked tired, older than his twenty-three years.

"Can I think about it?"

"Of course. Take as much time as you need."

"I want to talk to someone first." Cesare's eyes moved to the window, to the garden beyond. "There's another patient here. Deirdre Lavery. I want to talk to her before I decide."

Gari's expression flickered. I saw something pass across his face—surprise, perhaps, or calculation.

"May I ask why?"

"Because she understands what it's like. To see things you don't want to see. To know things you didn't ask to know." Cesare stood. "I'll give you my answer by the end of the week."

He left the room without looking back. Gari and I sat in silence as his footsteps receded down the corridor.

"Interesting," Gari said finally. "He wants to consult with Ms. Lavery."

"They've formed a connection."

"So I've observed." Gari began gathering his papers. "That could complicate things."

"How?"

"Ms. Lavery is not a fan of my research methods. She's made that clear in our interactions. If she advises Cesare against participating, he may decline." He looked at me. "You've spoken with her. What's your assessment of her influence?"

I thought of Deirdre in the garden, her clarity, her bitterness, her refusal to be managed.

"I think she'll tell him the truth as she sees it. Whether that helps or hinders your proposal is not something I can predict."

Gari smiled that cold smile again. "No. I don't suppose it is."

He left. I remained in the conference room, looking out at the garden where Deirdre had stood beneath the ruined trellis. The sky was darkening toward evening. Somewhere in the building, Cesare was walking toward her, seeking guidance from a woman whose visions had shown her multiple deaths.

Alan Firth came to mind—my colleague who had asked Cesare how long he had to live and received an answer he did not believe. Alan, who had laughed at

prophecy and died before dawn.

My wife followed. Walking toward me in a dream I did not speak of.

And the recording I had listened to seventeen times: *The woman of sorrows will die by her own hand before the spring planting.*

Gari wanted to open the window wider, to let more prophecy through. He did not seem to consider what might come through with it. He did not seem to consider that some windows, once opened, cannot be closed.

I gathered my notebook and left the conference room. The corridors of Emain were quiet, the light dimming toward evening. I passed the common room and saw, through the doorway, Cesare and Deirdre sitting together on a couch, their heads bent toward each other, speaking in voices too low to hear.

They did not see me. I did not interrupt.

I was beginning to wonder whether seeing was enough. Whether documentation could substitute for action. Whether the careful observation of tragedy as it unfolded made one a witness or an accomplice.

I returned to my room. I sat at my desk. I opened my notebook and began to write.

Three days later, Cesare came to my office. His face was calm, but I could see the tension beneath the surface, the way he held his shoulders, the tightness around his eyes.

"I've made my decision," he said.

"And?"

"I'm going to do it. The hypnosis sessions." He sat in the chair across from my desk. "Deirdre thinks I shouldn't. She says Gari is using me, that the research serves him, not me, that I'll regret opening myself up to whatever comes through." He paused. "She may be right."

"Then why agree?"

Cesare was quiet for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was different—softer, more uncertain.

"Because I need to know. I've spent two years being afraid of what I am, of what I say in my sleep, of what it means. I've avoided the recordings, avoided the truth, avoided everything that might make it real." He looked at me. "Deirdre said something that changed my mind. She said that running from your fate doesn't free you from it. It just means you meet it out of breath."

"That sounds like something from Synge."

"Maybe. She knows the play well. Better than I do, even though I was the one writing about it." A ghost of a smile crossed his face. "She said the only freedom is in how you walk toward the ending. I've been running. I want to try walking instead."

I thought of Deirdre in the garden, speaking of the Deirdre of legend, the woman who convinced her lover to return to Ulster knowing they would die. *It's*

*better to die at the peak of their love than to grow old in exile, watching their happiness fade.*

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"No. But I'm going to do it anyway." Cesare stood. "I wanted you to know. And I wanted to ask if you'll be there. During the sessions. As—I don't know—as a witness. Someone who's on my side."

"I'll be there," I said.

"Thank you." He moved toward the door, then stopped. "There's something else. Something I didn't tell Gari."

"What?"

"The recordings. The ones I've listened to, the ones Lavinia plays for me when I ask. There's a pattern I've noticed. The prophecies aren't random. They're not about strangers, about events I have no connection to. They're about people I know, people I'll meet, people whose lives will intersect with mine." He turned to face me. "You're in the recordings, Dr. Morrow. Not by name, but I recognize the descriptions. The man who lost his wife. The man who dreams true and says nothing. The man who watches and writes while the world burns around him."

I felt the blood drain from my face.

"What do the recordings say about me?"

"I don't know exactly. The passages are fragmentary. But there's one phrase that keeps recurring." Cesare's eyes held mine. "The witness becomes the witnessed. The recorder becomes the record."

He left before I could respond.

I sat at my desk, my notebook open before me, my pen motionless in my hand. The witness becomes the witnessed. The recorder becomes the record.

I had thought I was documenting Cesare's story. It had not occurred to me that I might be part of it.

I looked at the pages of notes I had accumulated, the careful observations, the transcripts, the analyses. Documentation of a case. Evidence of a phenomenon. Material for a paper that might never be written.

Or evidence of something else. A record of my own entanglement, my own trajectory toward an ending I could not see.

The light in my room was fading. I reached for the lamp, turned it on, and bent over my notebook.

The pen moved. The words came.

## The Recording

The night before Cesare's first hypnosis session, I could not sleep. I lay in my bed—my narrow institutional bed, in my room that was either an office or a patient room depending on how one chose to see it—and I listened to the sounds of Emain settling into its nighttime quiet. The building creaked and sighed like a living thing, its old bones shifting in the cold. Somewhere below me, a door opened and closed. Somewhere above, footsteps moved down a corridor and stopped.

I thought about what Cesare had told me. The witness becomes the witnessed. The recorder becomes the record. I thought about the recordings I had listened to, the fragments of prophecy I had transcribed into my notebooks, the patterns I had traced without understanding what they meant.

I rose from my bed. I put on my robe and my slippers, and I crossed to my desk—the desk that shared this room with my bed, that made this space simultaneously office and sleeping quarters, research station and cell.

The building was dark except for the emergency lights that marked the exits. Beyond my door, the corridors stretched into shadow, longer than they should have been, the darkness pooling in the corners like something liquid. I told myself this was an effect of sleeplessness, of the hour, of my own unsettled mind. I did not entirely believe myself.

I sat at my desk. I opened my laptop and navigated to the secure server where Gari kept the recordings.

I had listened to many of them. I had listened to the September 14th recording seventeen times. But there were others I had avoided, recordings flagged with warnings, recordings that Gari had noted as “requiring further analysis” or “potentially significant.” I had told myself I was being methodical, working through the material chronologically. In truth, I had been afraid.

Tonight, I was still afraid. But I was also tired of running.

I found a recording dated October 3rd, nearly three weeks after the September 14th recording, just days before my arrival at Emain. The file was flagged with a red marker and a note in Gari's handwriting: *Extended episode. Multiple themes. Possible self-reference.*

I put on my headphones. I pressed play.

The recording began with silence, then the soft sounds of movement—sheets rustling, a body shifting on a bed. Then Cesare's voice, in that deeper register I had come to recognize as his trance state, began to speak.

He spoke the opening lines of the planting verse—the same poem, the same images of soil prepared for planting.

The poem again. But this time, instead of continuing with the familiar text, Cesare's voice shifted.

He spoke of farmers working alone, their fields separated, each man isolated in his labor.

A pause. The sound of breathing, slow and regular.

"The man who lost his wife works alone. His lot is plowed far from the others. He plants seeds in the dark and does not speak of what he hopes will grow."

I stopped the recording. My hands were shaking.

He was talking about me. Not in general terms, not in ambiguous phrases that could apply to anyone, but in specific, unmistakable detail. The man who lost his wife. The man who plants seeds in the dark.

I pressed play again.

"The woman of sorrows walks the garden at dusk. Her hair is the color of leaves before they brown. Her eyes are the color of the river. She sees what others cannot see, and she does not speak of it, because speaking would make it real, and she is not ready for it to be real."

Deirdre. He was describing Deirdre, a woman he had not yet met, in details he could not have known.

"The somnambulist does not know that he speaks. The words pass through him like wind through a doorway. He is the cabinet from which prophecy emerges. He is the vessel, not the source."

A long pause. The breathing continued, slow and steady.

"They will meet in the common room. They will not speak, but they will know. Recognition is older than language. Recognition is older than time."

I thought of watching Cesare and Deirdre meet, their eyes finding each other across fifteen feet of institutional carpet. The silence that vibrated between them.

"The man who lost his wife will watch them. He will write what he sees in his notebook. He will think he is documenting a phenomenon. He does not understand that he is part of the phenomenon. The witness becomes the witnessed. The recorder becomes the record."

The words I had heard from Cesare three days ago. He had been quoting himself, quoting a prophecy he did not remember making.

"Spring will come. The plum tree will bloom. The bees will come or they will not come. Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows."

Another pause. Then, in a voice that dropped even lower, that seemed to come from somewhere deeper than the throat:

"The woman of sorrows will die by her own hand before the spring planting. This is what is written. This is what will be."

I stopped the recording. I sat in the dark, my headphones pressed against my ears, listening to the silence that followed.

This is what is written. This is what will be.

I had heard the prophecy before, in the September 14th recording. But hearing it again, in this context, surrounded by details that proved Cesare's foreknowledge of events he could not have witnessed—it was different. It was no longer a fragment that might mean anything or nothing. It was a sentence. A judgment. A fate.

I pressed play. There was more.

"The man who lost his wife will try to stop it. He will fail. His failure is also written. His failure is part of the pattern."

I felt something cold move through me.

"The somnambulist will love her. His love is written. His love will not save her. Nothing will save her. The only question is how she walks toward the ending."

The recording continued for another twelve minutes. Cesare spoke of other things—names I did not recognize, dates that might be significant, fragments of poetry in Irish that I could not translate. But I was no longer listening. I was staring at my laptop screen, at the waveform of his voice, at the evidence of a future that was already fixed.

*The man who lost his wife will try to stop it. He will fail.*

I had failed before. I had dreamed of my wife's death and said nothing, done nothing, and she had died. Now I was being told that I would fail again. That my failure was written. That nothing I did would change the outcome.

I wanted to reject this. I wanted to believe that prophecy was not fate, that knowing the future created the possibility of changing it. But I had listened to enough of Cesare's recordings to know the pattern. The predictions came true. Not always, not perfectly, but often enough that coincidence could not explain it. The man with the silver watch. The fire eighteen miles east. The deaths on the George Washington Bridge.

If Cesare said Deirdre would die by her own hand before the spring planting, then Deirdre would die by her own hand before the spring planting. And if Cesare said I would try to stop it and fail, then I would try to stop it and fail.

Unless.

Unless prophecy could be broken. Unless foreknowledge created a crack in the structure of fate through which something unexpected could slip. Unless the act of trying, even knowing you would fail, changed something in ways the prophecy could not account for.

I did not believe this. But I wanted to believe it. And wanting, I was beginning to understand, was not nothing.

I did not sleep that night. I sat at my desk until dawn, listening to the recording again and again, transcribing every word, searching for something I might have missed. A loophole. A condition. A way out.

I found nothing. The prophecy was absolute. *This is what is written. This is what will be.*

When the light began to seep through my window, I put away my headphones and closed my laptop. I washed my face. I dressed in clean clothes. I went down to the dining hall and ate breakfast without tasting it, surrounded by patients and staff who did not know what I knew, who moved through their morning routines unaware that one of them had been sentenced to death by a voice speaking from sleep.

Deirdre was not at breakfast. Cesare was not at breakfast. I did not know if this was significant or merely coincidence.

After eating, I walked to the garden. The morning was cold, the sky the color of old pewter, the trees bare against it. The ruined trellis where I had first seen Deirdre stood empty, its frame casting angular shadows on the frost-whitened ground.

I stood where she had stood. I looked out at the river. I tried to imagine what she saw when she looked at this view—not the physical landscape but the other landscape, the one visible only to those with her gift. Did she see her own death? Did she see the multiple versions she had described to me, the contradictory futures that could not all be true?

Or did she see something else? Something the prophecy had not mentioned?

I heard footsteps behind me. I turned.

Deirdre stood at the edge of the garden, wrapped in a heavy coat I had not seen before. Her hair was loose, stirring in the wind off the river. Her face was pale, her eyes shadowed.

"You listened to it," she said. It was not a question.

"How did you know?"

"I saw you. In a vision, last night. Sitting at your desk with your headphones on, your face lit by the screen." She moved closer. "You heard what he said about me."

I nodded. I could not speak.

"I've known for weeks," she said. "Not from the recording—I haven't heard it. But I've seen it. My own death. Not the specifics, not the method, but the shape of it. The way it feels." She looked past me, at the river. "It's not as frightening as you might think. Knowing. It's almost a relief. The uncertainty is worse than the certainty."

"You don't have to accept it."

"Don't I?" She smiled, but there was no warmth in it. "The sight doesn't show what might be. It shows what will be. You know this. You've seen the evidence."

"The evidence shows that Cesare's prophecies come true more often than chance would predict. That's not the same as saying they're inevitable. That's not the same as saying they can't be changed."

"Can't they?" Deirdre turned to face me. "You had a dream about your wife. You saw her death before it happened. Did you change it?"

The question struck me like a blow.

"No," I said. "But I didn't try. I didn't speak. I didn't warn her. Maybe if I had—"

"Maybe nothing. You saw what would happen, and it happened. That's the nature of the gift. That's the curse of it." Her voice was gentle, almost kind. "I'm not angry at you, Dr. Morrow. I'm not angry at Cesare. I'm not angry at anyone. I've had time to make peace with this."

"It's November. Spring planting is months away. There's time—"

"Time for what? To run? To hide? To pretend that if I don't think about it, it won't happen?" She shook her head. "I tried running from Conor. I tried hiding from my visions. It didn't work. It never works. The only thing that works is acceptance."

"Acceptance isn't the same as surrender."

"Isn't it?"

We stood in silence. The wind picked up, carrying the smell of the river, of decay, of something cold and clean beneath the decay.

"Cesare's having his first hypnosis session this morning," I said.

"I know. He told me last night."

"He's doing it because he wants to understand. Because he thinks knowing is better than not knowing."

"He's doing it because he's in love with me," Deirdre said quietly. "He thinks that if he understands his gift, he can control it. That if he can control it, he can change what he's prophesied. That if he can change what he's prophesied, he can save me."

"Can he?"

Deirdre looked at me for a long moment. Her river-colored eyes held something I could not name—sadness, perhaps, or pity, or a wisdom I was not equipped to understand.

"I've seen many things," she said. "I've seen myself dying in different ways. I've seen futures that contradict each other. But I've never seen a future where I grow old." She paused. "That could mean something. There could be a limit to how far the sight can see, and I simply haven't lived long enough to see past it. Or it means what I think it means."

"What do you think it means?"

"That I don't have a future. That whatever happens this spring, it's the end of my story." She pulled her coat tighter around herself. "I've made peace with it, Dr.

Morrow. I'd ask you to do the same."

She walked past me, toward the main building. I watched her go, her red hair vivid against the gray morning, her figure growing smaller until she disappeared through the door.

I remained in the garden. I looked at the river. I thought about prophecy and fate and the difference between acceptance and surrender.

I thought about Synge's Deirdre, convincing Naoise to return to Ulster. *It should be a sweet thing to have what is best and richest, if it's for a short space only.* She had known she would die. She had walked toward death anyway, preferring a brief time of happiness to a long life of exile and diminishment.

Was that acceptance? Or was it surrender? Or was it something else—a third option, a way of being that was neither passive nor active but something in between?

I did not know. But I knew that I could not accept what the prophecy said. I could not sit in my office and document Deirdre's trajectory toward death without trying to change it. Even if my failure was written. Even if trying was futile.

The witness becomes the witnessed. The recorder becomes the record.

If I was part of the story, then my choices mattered. Even if they were predetermined. Even if the outcome was fixed. The meaning of a life was not in its ending but in the shape of its unfolding.

I walked back to the main building. In an hour, Cesare's hypnosis session would begin. In an hour, Gari would try to open the window wider, to let more prophecy through.

I would be there. I would watch. I would document.

And I would try to find a way to change what was written.

Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows.

I had seen. Now it was time to speak.

PART TWO

# The Exile

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# Awake

The hypnosis session lasted forty-seven minutes. I watched from behind a one-way mirror, my notebook open, my pen moving across the page in patterns I would later struggle to decipher. Gari sat beside Cesare in the examination room, his voice low and rhythmic, guiding Cesare down through layers of consciousness like a diver descending into dark water.

It did not work.

Cesare entered a hypnotic state—the monitors confirmed it, his brainwaves shifting into the characteristic patterns, his body relaxing into the chair—but he did not enter the prophetic trance. He responded to Gari’s suggestions, followed simple instructions, answered questions about his childhood and his research and his feelings about his condition. But the deeper voice, the angular declarative voice that spoke prophecy, did not emerge.

After forty-seven minutes, Gari brought him back up. Cesare blinked, stretched, looked around the room as though he had just woken from an afternoon nap.

“Did it work?” he asked.

“We collected valuable data,” Gari said, which was not an answer.

I watched Cesare’s face as he registered the evasion. Something shifted in his expression—relief, perhaps, or disappointment, or some mixture of the two that defied simple categorization.

“I didn’t prophesy,” he said. It was not a question.

“The trance state we induced was not identical to your natural somnambulistic episodes. That’s useful information. It tells us something about the specificity of the prophetic phenomenon.” Gari was already making notes, his attention divided between Cesare and his tablet. “We’ll try again tomorrow, with some modifications to the induction protocol.”

Cesare nodded. He did not argue. But as he stood to leave, his eyes found the one-way mirror, found the spot where I was sitting, and held there for a moment as though he could see through the glass.

I did not look away.

After the session, I went to find Cesare. He was not in his room, not in the common room, not in any of the usual places where patients gathered between scheduled activities. I finally found him in the library, standing at the window, looking out at the garden where November had stripped the last color from the

landscape.

"You were watching," he said without turning.

"Yes."

"Did you see anything I should know about?"

I considered lying. It would have been easy, would have spared him the knowledge that his attempt to understand his condition had produced nothing useful. But I had resolved to speak rather than remain silent. I had resolved to stop protecting people from truths they had a right to know.

"The hypnotic state wasn't the same as your natural trance," I said. "Your brainwave patterns were similar but not identical. Whatever triggers the prophetic episodes, it's not simply a matter of altered consciousness. There's something else, something we don't understand yet."

Cesare nodded slowly. "Gari will keep trying."

"Probably. He's invested in this research."

"And you? Are you invested?"

The question caught me off guard. I thought about my notebooks, my transcripts, my hours of listening to recordings. I thought about the October 3rd recording, the prophecy that named me, the prediction of my failure.

"I'm invested in you," I said. "In your wellbeing. In making sure this research doesn't harm you."

Cesare turned from the window. His face was difficult to read in the gray light.

"That's not the same thing as being invested in the research."

"No. It's not."

He smiled, a small smile that did not reach his eyes. "You're an unusual researcher, Dr. Morrow. Most of them care about the data first and the subject second. You seem to have it reversed."

"I've learned some things about priorities," I said. "Some of them the hard way."

Cesare studied me for a moment. Then he looked past me, toward the door of the library, and his expression changed.

Deirdre stood in the doorway.

She was wearing the same heavy coat she had worn in the garden that morning, though she must have been inside for hours. Her hair was pulled back from her face, revealing the sharp lines of her cheekbones, the paleness of her skin. She looked at Cesare, and Cesare looked at her, and I felt suddenly that I was intruding on something private.

"I'll leave you," I said.

Neither of them responded. I moved toward the door, passing Deirdre, who did not acknowledge me. As I stepped into the corridor, I heard Cesare's voice behind me:

"You came."

And Deirdre's response, so quiet I almost missed it:

"I always come. Don't you know that by now?"

I walked away. The corridor stretched before me, longer than it should have been, the shadows pooling in the corners. I did not look back.

I learned later what they said to each other in the library that afternoon. Not from eavesdropping—I would not have done that, could not have done that—but from Cesare himself, who told me weeks later, when everything had changed.

They talked about the hypnosis session. Cesare described the experience of being guided into trance, the strangeness of consciousness folding in on itself, the disappointment of emerging without having accessed the prophetic state.

"I wanted it to work," he told her. "I know you thought I shouldn't do it, but I wanted to understand. I wanted to see what I see when I'm asleep."

"And now?"

"Now I don't know what I want. The prophecies happen without my consent. They happen whether I understand them or not. Maybe understanding isn't the point."

Deirdre sat in the chair across from him, the chair I had come to think of as Cesare's chair, and she looked at him with those river-colored eyes.

"What is the point, then?"

"I don't know. Living, maybe. Just living, without trying to control everything, without trying to know everything." He paused. "You said something to me, when I asked if I should do the experiment. You said running from your fate doesn't free you from it."

"I remember."

"I've been running for two years. From the episodes, from the prophecies, from everything that makes me different. I thought if I could understand it, I could control it, and if I could control it, I could be normal again." He shook his head. "But I'm never going to be normal. Whatever I am, whatever this gift or curse is, it's part of me now. Running from it is running from myself."

"What's the alternative?"

"I don't know. Acceptance, maybe. The kind of acceptance you were talking about." He looked at her. "You've accepted your fate. You told Dr. Morrow you've made peace with it."

"I have."

"Teach me how."

Deirdre was silent for a long moment. When she spoke, her voice was softer than Cesare had heard it before.

"I can't teach you acceptance. No one can teach that. It's something you have to find on your own, in your own time." She paused. "But I can tell you what helped me."

"Tell me."

“Stopping. Just stopping. Stopping the running, the fighting, the desperate search for a way out. Sitting still and letting the truth be true.” She leaned forward. “The visions show what will be. I can’t change that. But I can change how I meet it. I can choose to meet it with fear, or I can choose to meet it with something else.”

“What else?”

“I don’t have a word for it. It’s not courage, exactly. It’s not resignation. It’s more like... presence. Being fully here, in this moment, instead of always reaching toward a future I can’t control or running from a past I can’t change.”

Cesare considered this. “That sounds Buddhist.”

“Maybe. My mother was Catholic, my father was nothing, and I’ve never been much for organized religion. But there’s wisdom in a lot of traditions if you look for it.” She smiled, the first real smile Cesare had seen from her. “The Stoics had a version of it. Amor fati. Love of fate. Not just accepting what happens but loving it, embracing it, making it yours.”

“How can you love something that’s going to kill you?”

The smile faded, but something remained in Deirdre’s eyes—a warmth, a softness, something that had not been there before.

“I don’t know if I can,” she said. “But I’m trying. And the trying is better than the running. The trying lets me be here, now, in this library, with you, instead of somewhere else in my head, fighting a battle I’ve already lost.”

They sat in silence. The light through the windows had shifted, the gray afternoon deepening toward evening. In a few hours, the dinner bell would ring, and they would have to rejoin the world of schedules and medications and institutional routines. But for now, they were outside all of that. For now, they were just two people in a room, talking about things that mattered.

“I dreamed about you,” Cesare said finally. “Before I met you. Before I came to Emain.”

Deirdre’s expression did not change. “What did you dream?”

“I don’t remember the details. I never remember the details. But I remember the feeling. Recognition. Like I was seeing someone I’d known for a long time, someone I’d been looking for without knowing I was looking.” He paused. “When I saw you in the common room that first time, I knew. Not consciously—I didn’t think, ‘This is the woman from my dream.’ But something in me knew. Something deeper than thought.”

“I had a vision of you too,” Deirdre said. “Before you arrived. A man with dark hair and sad eyes, standing in the garden at dusk, looking at the river. I didn’t know who you were, but I knew you were important. I knew our paths would cross.”

“And now they have.”

“And now they have.”

They looked at each other. The space between them was no longer empty but charged, full of something that had no name but was nonetheless real.

"What happens now?" Cesare asked.

"I don't know. The visions don't show everything. They show fragments, moments, possibilities. They don't show the paths between." Deirdre reached across the space between their chairs and took his hand. "But I know I want to find out. I know I don't want to spend whatever time I have left running from this, from you, from whatever we might be to each other."

Cesare looked at her hand in his. Her fingers were cool, her skin pale against his darker complexion. He thought about prophecy, about fate, about the recording he had made that predicted her death. He had not heard the recording, but he knew it existed. He knew what it said.

He did not care.

"I'm not going to let you die," he said.

Deirdre's smile returned, sadder this time, wiser. "That's not something you can promise."

"I know. But I'm promising it anyway."

"Why?"

"Because some promises are worth making even if you can't keep them. Because the making matters, even if the keeping doesn't." He tightened his grip on her hand. "Because I've spent two years being afraid of what I am, and I'm tired of it, and you're the first thing in all that time that's made me want to stop being afraid."

Deirdre did not respond with words. She rose from her chair, still holding his hand, and moved toward him. He rose to meet her. They stood face to face, close enough that he could see the flecks of gold in her green eyes, close enough that he could feel the warmth of her breath.

"This is probably a mistake," she said.

"Probably."

"We barely know each other."

"I know."

"And there's no future in it. Not for me, anyway."

"I don't care about the future," Cesare said. "I care about now. I care about this moment, this room, you."

Deirdre studied his face. Whatever she was looking for, she seemed to find it.

"All right," she said. "All right."

She kissed him. Or he kissed her. Later, neither of them could remember who moved first. It did not matter. What mattered was the kiss itself, the taste of it, the warmth of it, the way it felt like coming home to a place neither of them had ever been.

When they pulled apart, the library was dark. Evening had fallen while they were not paying attention. The windows showed only their own reflections, two figures standing close together, their hands intertwined.

“What now?” Cesare asked again.

“Now we go to dinner,” Deirdre said. “We eat institutional food in the institutional dining hall, surrounded by institutional people. We pretend everything is normal. We don’t let anyone see what’s changed.”

“And after dinner?”

“After dinner, we find a place where we can be alone. And we talk. And we see what happens next.”

“I thought you didn’t know what happens next.”

“I don’t.” Deirdre smiled, and this time the smile reached her eyes. “That’s the point. For the first time in years, I don’t know what happens next. And it’s terrifying. And it’s wonderful. And I don’t want it to stop.”

They left the library together, their hands no longer touching but their shoulders close enough to brush as they walked. The corridor was empty, the evening meal not yet begun, the building settling into its twilight quiet.

I was in my office, writing in my notebook, when they passed my door. I did not see them. But I felt something—a shift in the air, a change in the quality of the silence. I looked up, but the corridor was empty.

Later, I would understand what I had felt. Later, I would recognize it as the moment when everything began to change, when the story I thought I was documenting became a different story, one I was not prepared for.

But that evening, I only felt a disturbance, a ripple in the pattern. I returned to my writing. I recorded my observations of the hypnosis session. I noted Gari’s plans for the next day’s attempt.

I did not know that love was unfolding in the rooms below, in the spaces between surveillance and schedule.

I did not know that the woman of sorrows had found something worth living for.

I did not know that this would make everything harder.

## The Experiment

Gari modified the induction protocol three times over the following week. Each session brought Cesare closer to the prophetic state without crossing into it. The monitors showed his brainwaves approaching the characteristic patterns of his natural episodes, hovering at the threshold, then receding as Gari's voice guided him back to ordinary hypnotic trance. It was like watching someone try to pick a lock with increasingly sophisticated tools, getting closer to the mechanism with each attempt but never quite triggering the release.

During this week, I observed Cesare and Deirdre together whenever I could do so without intruding. They had become careful, their public interactions muted, their intimacy hidden beneath the surface of institutional routine. They sat apart in the dining hall. They did not touch in the common areas. They maintained the appearance of two patients who happened to know each other, nothing more.

But I saw the way their eyes found each other across crowded rooms. I saw the way Cesare's hand brushed Deirdre's shoulder as he passed her in the corridor, a touch so brief it might have been accidental. I saw the way Deirdre smiled when she thought no one was watching, a private smile that transformed her face.

They were in love. It was obvious to anyone who knew how to look. I wondered if Gari saw it. I wondered if he understood what it meant.

On the seventh day, Gari tried something different.

"I've been approaching this incorrectly," he told me before the session. We were in his office, the river light cold through the windows, the Expressionist painting looming behind his desk. "I've been trying to induce the trance state directly, using standard hypnotic techniques. But Cesare's prophetic episodes aren't triggered by relaxation or suggestion. They're triggered by something else."

"What else?"

"I don't know yet. But I've been reviewing the recordings, looking for patterns in the circumstances surrounding his natural episodes." Gari pulled up a file on his tablet. "They tend to occur at night, obviously. But more specifically, they tend to occur during periods of emotional intensity. When he's anxious about something. When he's processing difficult feelings. When his defenses are down."

I thought about what Cesare and Deirdre might be doing at night, in the spaces between surveillance and schedule. I did not share this thought with Gari.

"You want to induce emotional intensity."

"I want to create conditions that more closely mirror the natural triggers. Standard hypnotic induction produces relaxation, lowered defenses, heightened suggestibility. But it doesn't produce the specific neurological state associated with Cesare's prophetic episodes." Gari set down his tablet. "Today, instead of guiding him into relaxation, I'm going to guide him into something else."

"What?"

Gari smiled. It was not a reassuring smile. "Memory."

The session began like the others: Cesare in the examination chair, monitors attached, Gari's voice low and rhythmic. I watched from behind the one-way mirror, my notebook open, my pen ready.

"I want you to think about your childhood," Gari said. "Not any specific memory. Just the feeling of being young. The feeling of not knowing what you would become."

Cesare's face, visible on the monitor, showed the characteristic slackness of hypnotic trance. His eyes were closed. His breathing was slow and regular.

"Good. Now I want you to think about the first time you realized you were different. The first time you understood that something was happening to you that didn't happen to other people."

A tremor passed across Cesare's face. His breathing changed, became slightly irregular.

"You don't have to tell me what you remember. Just let yourself feel it. The confusion. The fear. The loneliness of knowing something you couldn't explain."

I watched the monitors. Cesare's brainwave patterns were shifting, moving toward the characteristic configuration of his prophetic episodes. Gari was watching too, his eyes flicking between Cesare and the screens.

"Now think about someone you love. Someone whose fate is intertwined with yours. Someone you would do anything to protect."

Cesare's face changed. The tremor became more pronounced. His hands, resting on the arms of the chair, began to grip.

"Think about losing them. Not a specific scenario. Just the feeling. The fear of loss. The knowledge that you can't control what happens to the people you love."

The monitors spiked. Cesare's brainwave patterns crossed the threshold, entered the configuration I had seen in the recordings of his natural episodes. His breathing became deep and regular again, but different now, as though he were breathing from somewhere deeper than his lungs.

His mouth opened.

He began to speak the planting verse—the one about spring planting, about soil prepared for seed.

Gari leaned forward, his eyes bright with triumph. I felt something cold move through me.

The voice was the voice I knew from the recordings. Deeper than Cesare's waking voice, more resonant, stripped of hesitation and uncertainty. A voice that spoke not from thought but from somewhere beneath thought.

He continued through the poem's imagery—the hoe's work, the selected seeds, the farmers working alone in their separate fields.

Gari made a small gesture to the recording equipment, confirming it was capturing everything. He did not interrupt. He knew better than to interrupt.

A pause. The breathing continued, deep and slow.

"The woman of sorrows stands in the garden. Her hair is the color of autumn before the fall. She does not know that she is being watched. She does not know that she is being loved. She knows only that the river moves south and the sky moves east and the earth moves not at all."

I wrote this down, my hand shaking.

"The man who watches her believes he can save her. His belief is a seed planted in cold ground. Whether it grows depends on the weather. Whether the bees come depends on the warmth. Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows."

Gari shifted in his chair. I could see him considering whether to prompt, to direct, to try to steer the flow of prophecy. He remained silent. Wise of him.

"Fire comes before the thaw. Water comes after the fire. Earth receives what sky and fire and water cannot hold. This is the order. This is the pattern. This is what was true before language and will be true after."

The voice paused. Cesare's head turned slightly, as though he were listening to something only he could hear.

"She will choose. The woman of sorrows will choose. The choice is hers and hers alone. No prophecy compels her. No fate binds her hands. She walks toward the ending of her own will, as the first Deirdre walked, as all the Deirdres have walked, since the beginning of sorrow."

I stopped writing. My pen hovered above the page.

*No prophecy compels her. No fate binds her hands.*

This was different. This was not the absolute pronouncement of the earlier recordings. This was something else. Something that sounded almost like hope.

"The cabinet opens. The somnambulist emerges. He does not know what he has said. He does not know what he will say. He is the door through which futures pass. He is not the architect of those futures."

Another pause. The monitors showed Cesare's brainwave patterns holding steady in the prophetic configuration.

"There are choices within fate. There are freedoms within necessity. The river runs south, but the fish swim north. The sky moves east, but the birds fly west. The pattern contains its own exceptions. The prophecy speaks itself into being, but

speaking is not making. Speaking is not doing. Speaking is only speaking.”

Gari looked at me through the one-way mirror. I could not read his expression.

“The man who lost his wife will understand. He who kept silent when he should have spoken will learn that speaking does not save. But not speaking does not save either. There is no position of safety. There is only position.”

I felt tears on my face. I did not remember starting to cry.

“The spring will come. The plum will bloom. The bees will come or not come. The seed will grow or not grow. The woman will choose. The man will watch. The somnambulist will sleep and wake and sleep again, and the words will pass through him like water through a sieve, and what remains will be what was always going to remain.”

Cesare’s voice dropped lower, became almost a whisper.

“This is what the strong know, who say nothing: that saying changes nothing, and not saying changes nothing, and the only thing that matters is the quality of the silence. The only thing that matters is whether the silence is cowardice or wisdom. The only thing that matters is whether you are running from the truth or standing in it.”

A long pause. The monitors showed the prophetic patterns beginning to fluctuate, the trance state starting to destabilize.

“She will choose. Remember. She will choose.”

Cesare’s body shuddered. His eyes flew open, wild and unseeing. Then the wildness faded, replaced by confusion, by the disorientation of someone who has been far away and is only now returning.

“What happened?” he asked. His voice was his own again, hesitant, uncertain. “Did it work?”

Gari was already reviewing the recording. “It worked,” he said. “It worked better than I could have hoped.”

But I saw his hands. They were trembling. For a moment, the mask of professional enthusiasm slipped, and I glimpsed something underneath: not triumph but terror. He had spent his career chasing phenomena that defied explanation. Now he had induced one, had called it up like a spirit at a séance, and I think—just for that moment—he understood what he was dealing with. Something that could not be contained in papers or presentations. Something that looked back.

The moment passed. The mask returned. But I had seen it.

I lowered my notebook. My hands were still shaking. The tears had dried on my face, leaving tracks I could feel but not see.

*She will choose.*

Three words that changed everything. Three words that opened a crack in the wall of fate through which something unexpected might slip.

I did not tell Cesare what he had said. Not immediately. Gari wanted to analyze the recording first, to identify patterns, to develop a framework for interpretation. He was already talking about publishing, about the implications for consciousness research, about the doors this might open.

I did not care about publishing. I cared about three words.

That evening, I found Deirdre in the garden. She was standing in her usual place, beneath the ruined trellis, looking at the river. The light was fading, the sky streaked with colors that would be gone in minutes.

"Cesare had an episode today," I said. "Gari induced it through hypnosis."

Deirdre did not turn. "I know. Cesare told me."

"Did he tell you what he said?"

"He doesn't remember what he said. He never remembers."

"But you know anyway. Don't you? You've seen it."

Now she turned. Her eyes were unreadable in the twilight.

"I've seen fragments. I've seen him speaking in that other voice, the voice that isn't his. I've seen words emerging that he doesn't control." She paused. "I don't know what the words are. The visions don't include subtitles."

I almost smiled. "He said something different today. Different from the earlier recordings."

"Different how?"

"He said you would choose. He said no prophecy compels you, no fate binds your hands. He said the choice is yours."

Deirdre was silent for a long moment. The colors in the sky deepened, then began to fade.

"That's not how the sight works," she said finally. "The sight shows what will be. Not what might be. Not what could be. What will be."

"Maybe the sight is wrong."

"The sight is never wrong."

"Then maybe you've been interpreting it wrong. Maybe the visions show what will be, but 'what will be' includes your choice. Maybe the future isn't fixed from outside but generated from inside. From the choices people make."

Deirdre turned back to the river. The last light was fading, the water turning from silver to gray to black.

"That's a comfortable philosophy for someone who wants to believe they have control."

"It's also what your lover said in prophetic trance today. Take it up with him if you don't like it."

She laughed. It was a small laugh, almost surprised, as though she had not expected to find anything funny.

"He's not my lover."

"Yet."

"That's presumptuous."

"Is it wrong?"

She did not answer. The garden was dark now, the only light coming from the windows of the Institute behind us.

"I've spent nearly two years believing I was going to die," she said quietly. "I've made peace with it. I've found a kind of freedom in the certainty. And now you're telling me the certainty might be wrong. You're telling me I might have a choice."

"Does that change anything?"

"I don't know." She wrapped her arms around herself. "If I have a choice, then I'm responsible for what I choose. If my death is fate, it's not my fault. If my death is choice, then..."

"Then it's yours."

"Then it's mine." She turned to face me. "That's terrifying, Dr. Morrow. More terrifying than fate. Fate is an external force, something that happens to you. Choice is internal. Choice means you can't blame anyone else. Choice means the ending is on you."

"Choice also means you can choose differently. Choice means the ending isn't written yet."

"Maybe." She looked at me for a long moment. "You believe that, don't you? You believe the future can be changed."

"I want to believe it."

"That's not the same thing."

"No," I admitted. "It's not. But wanting to believe is where belief begins. You can't get to faith without first going through doubt. You can't get to certainty without first going through hope."

Deirdre smiled. It was a tired smile, a complicated smile, but there was something in it that had not been there before.

"You're a strange man, Dr. Morrow. You came here to study consciousness, and you've ended up preaching philosophy at patients in gardens at twilight."

"I've ended up in a lot of places I didn't expect."

"Haven't we all."

She walked past me, toward the Institute, toward the warmth and light and institutional routines that structured her captivity. At the door, she paused.

"Tell Cesare I want to hear the recording. All of it. I want to know exactly what he said."

"Is that wise?"

"Probably not. But I'm tired of being protected from the truth. I'm tired of other people deciding what I should know." She pushed open the door. "Tell him I'll find him tonight. Tell him I want to hear."

She disappeared inside. I remained in the garden, in the dark, looking at the river I could no longer see.

*She will choose.*

Three words. A crack in the wall of fate. A door that might open onto something other than the ending everyone expected.

I did not know if it would be enough. I did not know if anything would be enough. But it was something. It was a beginning.

I had seen. And I had spoken.

Now it was Deirdre's turn.

## The Courtship

They listened to the recording together, in Cesare's room, late at night when the corridors were empty and the staff had completed their final rounds. I was not present. I learned what happened from Cesare, days later, in one of our conversations in the library. He spoke haltingly, as though the memory was difficult to access, as though putting it into words diminished something that had been larger than language.

Lavinia had arranged it. She had logged into the secure server using my credentials—I had given her access weeks earlier, trusting her discretion—and left the session open on an Institute laptop before her shift ended. I knew what I was risking. Sharing research credentials was a terminable offense, a violation of every protocol I had agreed to when I joined Gari's project. I did it anyway. The clinical distance I had promised to maintain was already compromised beyond repair; this was merely the documentation of that compromise. Lavinia excelled at this kind of small rebellion: invisible, deniable, but meaningful to the people it helped.

Deirdre sat on the edge of his bed. Cesare sat in the room's single chair, the laptop balanced on his knees, the recording queued and ready. The only light came from the screen, casting their faces in pale blue.

"Are you sure you want to hear this?" he asked.

"I'm sure I need to hear it. Whether I want to is a different question."

He pressed play.

His voice emerged from the laptop's speakers, tinny and compressed but unmistakable. The deeper voice. The prophetic voice. The voice that was his and not his.

The recording began with the planting verse—the lines about soil prepared for planting, about weeds and seeds.

Deirdre listened without moving. Her face showed nothing. Cesare watched her more than he watched the screen, searching for a reaction, a sign of what she was feeling.

*The woman of sorrows stands in the garden. Her hair is the color of autumn before the fall. She does not know that she is being watched. She does not know that she is being loved.*

Something flickered in Deirdre's eyes. Recognition, perhaps. Or something else.

*The man who watches her believes he can save her. His belief is a seed planted in cold ground. Whether it grows depends on the weather. Whether the bees come depends on the warmth.*

The recording continued. Cesare's prophetic voice spoke of fire and water and earth, of patterns older than language, of the order that underlies all things. Deirdre listened. She did not interrupt.

Then the voice spoke the words that had changed everything for me:

*She will choose. The woman of sorrows will choose. The choice is hers and hers alone. No prophecy compels her. No fate binds her hands. She walks toward the ending of her own will, as the first Deirdre walked, as all the Deirdres have walked, since the beginning of sorrow.*

Deirdre's breath caught. A small sound, almost inaudible, but Cesare heard it.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No. Keep playing."

*The cabinet opens. The somnambulist emerges. He does not know what he has said. He does not know what he will say. He is the door through which futures pass. He is not the architect of those futures.*

The recording played on. The voice spoke of choices within fate, freedoms within necessity, fish swimming north while the river runs south. It spoke of position, of the quality of silence, of standing in the truth rather than running from it.

*She will choose. Remember. She will choose.*

The recording ended. The room was silent except for the hum of the laptop's fan.

Deirdre did not speak for a long time. Cesare waited, not wanting to push, not wanting to intrude on whatever was happening inside her. This is what he told me: that the silence stretched, that he could hear his own heartbeat, that he was afraid to break whatever spell the recording had cast.

Finally, she said: "Play it again."

He played it again. And again. Three times they listened to his voice speaking words he did not remember, describing a choice she did not yet understand.

After the third time, Deirdre stood. She walked to the window, though there was nothing to see in the darkness beyond. Her reflection looked back at her from the glass, ghostly and insubstantial.

"I've spent nearly two years believing I had no choice," she said. "The sight showed me my death. I accepted it. I made peace with it." She turned to face him. "And now your voice, speaking from wherever prophecy comes from, tells me I do have a choice. That nothing compels me. That the ending is mine to make."

"Does that change anything?"

"I don't know." She crossed her arms over her chest, a protective gesture. "I've lived inside the certainty of my death for so long. It's become part of how I

understand myself. The woman who is going to die. The woman whose future has already ended." She shook her head. "If that's not true, then who am I? What does my life mean if it doesn't mean walking toward that ending?"

Cesare told me he set the laptop aside. He rose from his chair and moved toward her, stopping a few feet away, close enough to touch but not touching.

"Your life means whatever you decide it means. The ending doesn't define the story. The story defines itself, moment by moment, choice by choice."

"That's easy for you to say. You don't remember what you prophesy. You don't have to live with the knowledge."

"No. I have to live with the not-knowing. I have to live with the awareness that words pass through me that might destroy people, and I can't control them, and I can't remember them, and I have no idea what I've said until someone else tells me." He paused. "I don't know which is worse. Knowing your fate or not knowing what you've said about other people's fates."

Deirdre looked at him. In the dim light from the laptop screen, his face was all shadows and angles, the softness of his waking self replaced by something sharper, something that reminded her of the voice on the recording.

"We're a matched pair, aren't we?" she said. "The woman who sees futures she can't change, and the man who speaks futures he can't remember. Both of us trapped by gifts we didn't ask for."

"We don't have to be trapped."

"Don't we?"

"The recording says you have a choice. Your own visions show multiple futures, multiple deaths. Maybe that means the future isn't fixed. Maybe that means we have more freedom than we think."

"Or maybe it means the future is fixed in a way that includes the illusion of freedom. Maybe the choice is part of the fate. Maybe I was always going to choose whatever I choose, and the prophecy knew it, and the knowledge doesn't change anything."

Cesare stepped closer. He reached out and took her hand, the way he had in the library, the first time they touched.

"Does it matter?" he asked.

"Does what matter?"

"Whether the choice is real or the illusion of choice. Whether freedom exists or we only think it does." He tightened his grip on her hand. "We're here, now, in this room, together. That's real. This moment is real. Whatever the future holds, whatever the prophecies say, this moment belongs to us. We're not giving it to fate or freedom or any other abstraction. We're living it. That's all we can do. That's all anyone can do."

Deirdre looked at their joined hands. His fingers were warm against her cool skin.

"You sound very certain for someone who says he doesn't know anything."

"I'm certain about this. About you. About wanting to be here, with you, regardless of what comes next." He met her eyes. "Is that enough? Is certainty about the present enough, even without certainty about the future?"

"I don't know," she said. "I've never tried it."

"Try it now. Just for tonight. Just for this moment. Stop thinking about prophecy and fate and endings. Stop thinking about what the sight showed you or what my voice said on the recording. Be here. With me. See what it feels like."

Deirdre was silent. The laptop's fan hummed. The darkness outside the window pressed against the glass.

"All right," she said finally. "Just for tonight."

She stepped into his arms. He held her, not tightly, just enough to feel her warmth against him. They stood that way for a long time, not speaking, not moving, just breathing together in the dark.

Later, she would tell him about the visions. The multiple deaths, the contradictory futures, the confusion that had tormented her for months. He would listen without interrupting, without trying to fix or explain, just receiving what she needed to give.

Later, he would tell her about the episodes. The terror of waking in strange places, the shame of speaking words he couldn't control, the loneliness of being a vessel for something that wasn't him. She would hold his hand while he spoke, anchoring him to the present, to the reality of her touch.

Later, they would talk about escape. About leaving Emain, about finding somewhere they could be together without surveillance or schedules or institutional walls. About whether such a place existed, whether such a life was possible, whether running would save them or only delay the inevitable.

But that was later. That night, in Cesare's room, they did not talk about any of those things. They held each other. They breathed. They existed in the moment, suspended between past and future, between prophecy and choice, between the certainty of sorrow and the uncertainty of everything else.

Outside, the river moved south toward the sea. The stars turned overhead, indifferent to human concerns. Somewhere in the building, a door opened and closed.

Cesare and Deirdre were not saying nothing. They were saying something, wordlessly, with their bodies and their breath and their presence. They were saying: *I am here. You are here. For now, that is enough.*

In the weeks that followed, their relationship deepened in ways I could observe but not fully understand. They developed a private language, a system of glances and gestures that communicated volumes in public spaces where words could be overheard. They found times to be alone, exploiting the gaps in Emain's surveillance, the moments when staff changed shifts or attention wandered.

Lavinia helped them. She had helped Deirdre from the beginning, palming pills and protecting secrets, and she extended that protection to include Cesare. She looked the other way when they needed her to look the other way. She provided alibis when alibis were required. She became, without ever explicitly agreeing to the role, a co-conspirator in their clandestine happiness.

I watched all of this from a distance, documenting what I could, trying to maintain the pretense of clinical observation even as my emotional investment deepened. I told myself I was protecting them by keeping records, by creating a paper trail that might someday prove useful. I told myself my involvement was professional, necessary, appropriate.

I did not entirely believe myself.

The hypnosis sessions continued. Gari induced the prophetic trance three more times over the following weeks, each session producing reams of material for his research. Cesare submitted to the experiments with a resignation I found troubling. He had agreed to participate; he did not resist. But I saw the toll it took on him, the exhaustion that followed each session, the haunted look that lingered in his eyes.

I raised concerns with Gari. He dismissed them.

"Cesare is an adult capable of making his own decisions," he said. "He consented to this research. He can withdraw at any time. Until he does, we proceed."

"He's in a vulnerable position. He's a patient in your institution, dependent on you for his care. True consent isn't possible under those conditions."

Gari's expression hardened. "You're letting your personal feelings interfere with your professional judgment, Dr. Morrow. That's a dangerous path for a researcher."

"My professional judgment is that we're exploiting a vulnerable person for data."

"Your professional judgment is colored by your attachment to the subject. And perhaps to another patient as well." He looked at me steadily. "I'm aware that Ms. Lavery has been spending time with Cesare. I'm aware that you've been facilitating their relationship. I haven't interfered because I believe their connection may be clinically significant. But don't mistake my tolerance for ignorance."

I felt a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature in his office.

"What are you implying?"

"I'm implying nothing. I'm stating facts. You've become emotionally involved with your subjects. That compromises your objectivity. It also gives you a stake in outcomes that may not align with the research goals." He leaned back in his chair. "I'm not going to remove you from the project. Your observations have been valuable, and your skepticism serves as a useful counterweight to my enthusiasm."

But I want to be clear: if I determine that your involvement is harming the research or the subjects, I will act accordingly.”

“Act how?”

“That depends on the circumstances.” He picked up a file from his desk, a signal that the conversation was over. “Continue your work, Dr. Morrow. Document what you observe. But remember where your loyalties should lie.”

I left his office with the taste of copper in my mouth, the same taste I had woken with the morning my wife died.

That evening, I found Cesare and Deirdre in the garden, walking together in the last light of day. They were not touching, but they walked in step, their shoulders aligned, their movements synchronized in the unconscious way of people who have become attuned to each other.

I did not approach them. I watched from the window of my room, hidden behind the glass, documenting with my eyes what I would later transcribe into my notebook.

They stopped at the edge of the garden, where the manicured grounds gave way to the wild slope leading down to the river. Deirdre pointed at something on the water, a bird or a boat, something I could not see from my vantage point. Cesare leaned close to look, his head nearly touching hers.

They stood that way for a long time, two figures silhouetted against the gray water and the grayer sky. I could not hear what they said. I could not know what they were planning.

But I knew they were planning something. The air around them had changed. The resignation I had seen in Cesare was gone, replaced by something that looked like purpose. The passive acceptance Deirdre had described to me in our early conversations had transformed into something more active, more engaged.

They were not waiting for fate anymore. They were making decisions.

Sometimes the strong say nothing because they are planning, and the plan requires silence.

I turned away from the window. I opened my notebook. I recorded what I had seen.

# The Farm

I dreamed of the farm that night. I had not dreamed of it in months, perhaps longer. The farm belonged to a part of my life I had sealed away, a room in my mind whose door I kept closed and locked and tried not to think about. But the door opened in sleep, and I walked through it, and I was twelve years old again, standing at the edge of my father's harrowed field.

The soil was dark and damp, turned over by the plow, ready for planting. The sky above was the color of pewter, the same color as the Hudson outside my window at Emain. My father stood at the far end of the field, a bag of seed slung over his shoulder, his hand moving in the ancient rhythm of broadcast sowing. He did not see me. He did not know I was watching.

I watched him work. His movements were economical, precise, the product of decades of practice. He walked in straight lines, his footsteps evenly spaced, his arm swinging in a consistent arc. The seeds fell from his hand in patterns I could not see but knew were there, each one landing in its appointed place, each one carrying the potential for growth or failure depending on factors no one could control.

He did not speak while he worked. He never spoke while he worked. The silence of the farm was different from other silences I would encounter later in my life. It was not the absence of sound but the presence of attention, the focused awareness of a man doing something that mattered, something that required his whole self.

I understood, even at twelve, that my father's silence was not coldness. It was respect. Respect for the work, for the land, for the uncertainty that hung over every planting season. To speak would be to pretend knowledge he did not have. To speak would be to make predictions, promises, claims about a future that belonged to forces beyond his control.

Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows.

I did not know, at twelve, that these words came from old poems about farmers. I did not know that poets had articulated what my father practiced. I knew only that my father was strong, and that he said nothing, and that this was connected somehow to the seed falling from his hand into the dark earth.

The dream shifted. I was no longer at the edge of the field but inside the barn, in the dim light that filtered through the gaps in the wooden walls. The smell was hay and manure and something else, something metallic that I could not identify.

My father was there. He was not planting. He was standing on a wooden crate, his hands working at something above his head.

I tried to call out to him. My voice would not come. I tried to move toward him. My feet would not obey.

He looked at me. His face was calm, resigned, the face of a man who had made a decision and was at peace with it. He did not speak. He did not need to speak. I understood.

The crate tipped. The rope went taut.

I woke in my room at Emain, the sheets soaked with sweat, my heart hammering against my ribs. The darkness was absolute. The silence was the silence of institutions at night, the hum of ventilation, the distant murmur of the building settling into itself.

I lay there for a long time, waiting for my heart to slow, waiting for the images to fade. They did not fade. They never faded. They lived in me, as present as the day I had found him, as vivid as the moment I understood that my father had seen something, finally, that made silence impossible.

My father killed himself in April of my nineteenth year, during a spring planting that had started badly and would never finish. The winter had been harsh, the thaw late, the ground cold and wet when it should have been warming. He had planted anyway, because that was what you did, because the calendar said it was time, because waiting for better conditions was not something farmers could afford.

The seeds rotted in the ground. The cold snap that came in late April killed what little had germinated. By the time the weather turned, it was too late to replant, too late to salvage the season, too late for anything except watching the empty fields and calculating the losses.

My mother had left twelve years earlier, when I was seven. I barely remembered her. What I remembered was her absence, the shape of the space she had occupied, the silence my father maintained about why she had gone and where. He never spoke of her. He never spoke of much of anything. He worked the farm, raised me as best he could, and kept his thoughts to himself.

I found him on a Tuesday morning. I had slept late, the privilege of a young man home from college with nothing useful to do. I walked to the barn to help with chores that no longer needed doing, and I found him hanging from the central beam, his body still, his face peaceful, the wooden crate on its side beneath his feet.

I do not remember calling for help. I do not remember cutting him down. I do not remember the hours that followed, the arrival of the ambulance, the questions from the sheriff, the paperwork and formalities that attend unexpected death. What I remember is standing at the edge of his harrowed field, looking at the dark soil, understanding that he had planted seeds he knew would not grow, and had

decided not to wait for the harvest that would never come.

He left no note. He left no explanation. He left only the farm, the debts, the failed crop, and me.

I sold the farm that summer. I used the money to pay off the debts and finish my education. I never went back. I told myself I was escaping, moving forward, building a life that had nothing to do with harrowed fields and rotting seed. I told myself I was not running from what I had seen.

I was lying. I was running. I had been running ever since.

The morning after the dream, I walked the grounds of Emain in the gray light before breakfast. The grass was heavy with dew, the trees bare against the sky, the river moving south with its endless patience. I thought about my father. I thought about the silence he had kept. I thought about the things he had seen and not spoken of, the knowledge he had carried alone.

Cesare, speaking prophecy in his sleep, words passing through him that he could not control and would not remember. Deirdre, seeing futures she could not change, visions that showed her death in multiple forms. And myself, dreaming my wife's murder the night before it happened, saying nothing, doing nothing, carrying the silence like a stone in my chest.

We were all farmers, in a way. We all planted seeds in uncertain ground. We all waited for harvests that might never come. We all knew things we could not speak of, saw things we could not prevent, lived with knowledge that weighed us down without offering wisdom.

My father's silence had been a form of strength. He had refused to pretend certainty where none existed. He had refused to make promises the weather might break. But his silence had also been a form of isolation, a wall between himself and everyone who might have helped him carry what he carried.

In the end, the silence had killed him. Not directly, not obviously, but inevitably. He had seen something, that final spring, that made continuing impossible. He had kept it to himself, as he kept everything to himself. And when the weight became too heavy, he had found his own way to put it down.

I did not want to end like my father. I did not want to carry silence until it crushed me. But I did not know how to speak, either. I did not know how to translate what I had seen, what I knew, what I feared, into words that might mean something to anyone else.

Planting. Silence. Waiting.

But I had seen. I had seen my father's body. I had seen my wife's blood. I had seen prophecies in Cesare's transcripts that described futures I could not prevent. And I was still saying nothing, still carrying the silence, still running from the weight of knowledge I could not use.

I found Deirdre in the garden, in her usual place beneath the ruined trellis. She was alone. Cesare was still sleeping, or in the dining hall, or somewhere else in

the institutional geography that structured their lives.

"You look terrible," she said.

"I didn't sleep well."

"Bad dreams?"

"Memories. They feel like dreams sometimes. Dreams feel like memories. The boundary gets blurred."

She nodded, as though she understood. Perhaps she did. The sight must blur boundaries too, the future bleeding into the present, what will be contaminating what is.

"My father killed himself when I was nineteen," I said. I did not know why I was telling her this. I had not told anyone in years. "He was a farmer. He worked the land his whole life, planting and harvesting, following the seasons. One spring, the crop failed. He hanged himself in the barn."

Deirdre looked at me with those river-colored eyes. She did not offer sympathy, did not say the expected things. She just listened.

"He never talked about what he was feeling. He never asked for help. He carried everything alone, and when it got too heavy, he found his own solution." I paused. "I've been carrying things alone too. My wife's death. The dream I had before she died. The prophecies I've heard in Cesare's recordings. I've been keeping it all inside, telling myself that silence is strength, that the strong are saying nothing."

"And now?"

"Now I'm not sure. Silence didn't save my father. Silence didn't save my wife. Silence isn't going to save Cesare, or you, or me." I looked at her. "Perhaps the strong are saying nothing because they haven't found the right words yet. Perhaps saying nothing is just the pause before speaking, not the end of the conversation."

Deirdre was quiet for a moment. The wind off the river stirred her hair.

"What would you say?" she asked. "If you could find the right words?"

My father's field came back to me. The seeds that rotted, the harvest that never came. My wife, walking out the door on the morning of her death, trusting that the world was safe because I had not told her otherwise. And Cesare's voice on the recording, speaking of choice and fate and the woman of sorrows who would walk toward her ending of her own will.

"I would say that I'm afraid," I said finally. "Afraid that everything I'm doing is useless. Afraid that the prophecies are right and the future is fixed and nothing I do will change anything. Afraid that I'm going to watch you die the way I watched my wife die, the way I watched my father die, standing at the edge of the field while the seeds rot in the cold ground."

"That's honest."

"It's not helpful. Honesty without action is just confession. And confession without change is just self-indulgence."

"Then what action? What change?"

I did not have an answer. I stood there in the garden, the November cold seeping through my coat, the river moving south toward destinations I would never see.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I don't know what to do. I only know that doing nothing isn't working. Keeping silent isn't working. Something has to change."

Deirdre stepped closer. She took my hand, the way she had taken Cesare's hand in the library, the way people take hands when they are making connections that words cannot capture.

"Cesare and I are going to leave," she said quietly. "Soon. We're going to escape from Emain, find somewhere we can be together without Gari and Conor and all the rest of it."

I felt a jolt of fear. "How? Conor has you committed. He controls your legal status. If you leave without authorization—"

"I know the risks. I've seen them in the visions. Some of them lead to death. Some of them lead to something else." She squeezed my hand. "The prophecy says I have a choice. Cesare's voice, speaking from wherever prophecy comes from, says that no fate binds my hands. I'm choosing to believe that. I'm choosing to act as though the future can be changed."

"What do you want from me?"

"I want you to help us. Not with the escape itself—Lavinia is handling that. But with what comes after. If something goes wrong, if we're caught, if the worst happens—I want someone on the inside who knows the truth. Who can tell the story. Who can make sure that whatever happens to us isn't erased or forgotten or rewritten by people who have reasons to lie."

I thought about my notebooks, my transcripts, my careful documentation of everything I had witnessed. The recorder becomes the record.

"I can do that," I said. "I can tell the truth."

"Even if the truth is dangerous? Even if it makes you complicit?"

"I'm already complicit. I've been complicit since the moment I started documenting instead of acting. At least this way the documentation might serve some purpose."

Deirdre smiled. It was a sad smile, a knowing smile, the smile of someone who has seen too much to believe in simple outcomes.

"You're a good man, Francis. A strange man, but a good one."

"I'm a man who's trying to stop running. I don't know if that's the same thing as being good."

"It's a start." She released my hand. "We're leaving in three days. I don't know exactly when or how—Lavinia is working out the details. But when it happens, you'll know. And then you'll have to decide what to do with what you know."

She walked away, toward the main building, toward Cesare, toward whatever future she was choosing to build.

I remained in the garden. I looked at the river. I thought about my father, planting seeds in cold ground, waiting for a harvest that would never come.

But sometimes the harvest comes. Sometimes the weather turns. Sometimes the bees arrive and do their patient work among the blossoms.

I did not know if this was one of those times. I did not know if hope was wisdom or delusion. But I knew I was tired of silence. I knew I was tired of watching from the edge of the field while others did the planting.

I had seen. Now it was time to stop saying nothing.

## The Vision

The visions came more frequently as the escape approached. Deirdre told me this later, after everything had happened, after the futures she had seen had collapsed into the single future that became the past. She described them in fragments, images and sensations that did not cohere into narrative, glimpses of what might be without the connective tissue of how or why.

She saw herself running through woods at night, branches tearing at her clothes, her breath ragged in her chest. She did not know if she was running toward something or away from something. She did not know if the running ended in safety or capture or something worse.

She saw Cesare standing at the edge of water, his face lit by moonlight, his eyes open but unseeing. The trance state. The prophetic state. Words emerging from his mouth that she could not hear, prophecies spoken to an audience of darkness and river.

She saw Conor. Her husband appeared in the visions more often as the escape approached, his face calm, his voice reasonable, his hands reaching for her with the proprietary certainty of a man reclaiming his property. In some visions, she went with him. In others, she did not. She could not tell which choice led to which outcome.

She saw me. Francis Morrow, standing at the edge of things, watching, always watching, my notebook in my hand, my pen moving across the page. Recording what I could not prevent. Documenting what I could not change.

She saw her own death. Multiple deaths, as before, but clearer now, more vivid. Drowning in cold water. Falling from a great height. Bleeding out on white sheets. Walking into darkness that did not end. The deaths overlapped and contradicted each other, a palimpsest of endings that could not all be true.

And she saw something else. Something she had not seen before. Something she did not tell me about until much later, when it no longer mattered, when the future had already become the past.

She saw herself alive. Old. Gray-haired. Standing in a garden she did not recognize, looking at flowers she could not name, her face lined with years she had never expected to live. A future beyond the death she had been promised. A life that extended past the ending.

She did not know what to make of this vision. It contradicted everything the sight had shown her for eighteen months. It contradicted her own certainty, her

hard-won acceptance, the peace she had made with the knowledge of her death.

She did not tell Cesare. She did not tell Lavinia. She kept this vision to herself, turning it over in her mind like a stone whose shape she could not quite determine.

The night before the escape, she could not sleep.

She lay in her narrow bed, in her narrow room, listening to the sounds of the institution at night. The hum of the ventilation system. The distant footsteps of staff making rounds. The occasional cry from somewhere in the building, a patient disturbed by dreams or delusions or the simple weight of existence in a place like this.

The ceiling above her was white and featureless, a blank surface onto which she could project anything she wished. She had spent many nights staring at this ceiling, letting the visions come, receiving what the sight chose to show her. Tonight the visions were restless, fragmentary, cycling through possibilities without settling on any of them.

She thought about her mother—this she told me explicitly, sitting in the garden months later, her voice distant with memory. Siobhan Lavery, née O'Brien, who had possessed the sight before her, who had seen futures that drove her to silence and secrets and eventually to an early grave. Deirdre had been fifteen when her mother died, old enough to understand that the cause of death listed on the certificate, heart failure, was only part of the truth. Her mother's heart had failed because she had seen too much and carried the seeing alone.

Deirdre had inherited the sight but not her mother's solitude. She had Cesare, who understood what it meant to be a vessel for knowledge you did not choose. She had Lavinia, who protected her without demanding explanations. She had, in his awkward way, Francis, who documented what he could not prevent but at least bore witness.

She was not alone. That mattered. That might be the difference between surviving and not surviving, between carrying the weight and being crushed by it.

She thought about Cesare. His gentleness. His beauty. The way he looked at her when he thought she was not watching, a look of such tenderness that it made her chest ache. He had promised to save her, knowing he might not be able to keep the promise. She had let him make the promise, knowing it might be a lie.

Was that love? Making promises you could not keep, accepting promises that might not be kept, choosing to believe in each other despite the evidence? She asked me this later, and I had no answer. Perhaps love was not about certainty at all. Perhaps love was about choosing to act as though the future could be good, planting seeds in cold ground, walking toward endings that might be beginnings.

She thought about the escape. Lavinia had arranged everything. A car would be waiting at the edge of the grounds, hidden in the service entrance where deliveries came and went. The night staff had predictable patterns, gaps in their

surveillance that could be exploited. The gates were locked at night, but the service entrance used an electronic code that Lavinia had obtained through means Deirdre did not ask about.

They would leave at three in the morning, the dead hour when sleep was deepest and attention weakest. They would drive south, toward the city, toward anonymity, toward a life that existed outside the walls of Emain and the reach of Conor's lawyers.

It was a simple plan. Simple plans were best. Complexity created failure points, opportunities for things to go wrong. They would walk out, get in the car, drive away. Whatever came after, they would face together.

Deirdre closed her eyes. The visions continued, cycling through their contradictory possibilities. She let them come without trying to control them, without trying to determine which was most likely or most true.

She would know soon enough. In a few hours, the future would collapse into the present, and she would discover which of the many paths she had seen was the one she would actually walk.

At two-thirty, she rose from her bed. She had not slept, but she was not tired. Her body hummed with adrenaline, with anticipation, with the strange energy that comes from standing at the edge of irreversible action.

She dressed in dark clothes Lavinia had provided: black jeans, black sweater, a dark coat with deep pockets. She had nothing to pack. She was leaving with nothing except what she wore and what she carried in her mind.

She looked around the room that had been her prison for eighteen months. The narrow bed. The single window. The institutional furniture, designed for durability rather than comfort. She had hated this room. She had also, in a strange way, found peace in it. The walls had held her, contained her, given her something to push against.

Now she was leaving. Now she was choosing freedom, with all its terrors and possibilities.

She opened her door and stepped into the corridor.

The hallway was dim, lit only by the emergency lights that glowed at intervals along the walls. The doors of other patients' rooms were closed, their occupants sleeping or lying awake with their own visions and demons. Somewhere a clock ticked, measuring out the seconds until three o'clock.

Lavinia was waiting at the end of the corridor. She wore her nurse's uniform, her cover story if anyone asked what she was doing out of the staff quarters at this hour. Her face was calm, professional, betraying nothing of what they were about to do.

"Cesare?" Deirdre whispered.

"Already at the service entrance. He went twenty minutes ago."

They moved through the building with the efficiency of people who have planned every step. Down one corridor, through a door that Lavinia unlocked with her staff keycard, down another corridor, past the administrative offices where Gari's Expressionist painting hung in darkness, through the kitchen where the industrial equipment gleamed in the dim light.

The service entrance was a heavy door at the back of the building, designed for deliveries and maintenance access. Cesare stood beside it, dressed in dark clothes that matched Deirdre's, his face pale in the emergency lighting.

He reached for her hand. She took it.

"Ready?" Lavinia asked.

Deirdre nodded. Cesare nodded.

Lavinia entered the code. The lock clicked. She pushed the door open.

Cold air rushed in, carrying the smell of the river and the woods and the November night. Beyond the door, Deirdre could see the gravel path that led to the service road, and beyond that, the darkness where the car was supposed to be waiting.

"Go," Lavinia said. "Quickly. The camera at this entrance resets in three minutes."

Cesare stepped through the door first. Deirdre followed. The gravel crunched under their feet, impossibly loud in the silence.

They moved down the path, staying close to the building where the shadows were deepest. The car was there, parked at the edge of the service road, a dark shape against the darker woods. Lavinia had said the keys would be under the driver's seat.

They were almost there. Twenty feet. Fifteen. Ten.

A light came on.

Not a spotlight, not an alarm light. Just the ordinary light of a door opening, spilling yellow illumination across the gravel where they stood frozen.

"Ms. Lavery."

Conor's voice. Calm, reasonable, the voice of a man who had been waiting for exactly this moment.

"Did you really think I wouldn't know?"

Deirdre turned. Her husband stood in the doorway of the service entrance, silhouetted against the light. He was wearing a suit, as though he had dressed for an occasion. His hands were in his pockets. His posture was relaxed, confident, the posture of a man who holds all the cards.

Behind him, she could see Gari. And two private security guards she did not recognize. And Lavinia, her face stricken, her hands already being secured behind her back.

"The staff here are loyal to me," Conor continued. "I pay for their loyalty. I pay for many things." He stepped forward, out of the doorway, into the cold. "Did you

think a few whispered plans and a stolen keycard would be enough? Did you think I wasn't watching?"

Cesare moved in front of Deirdre, placing himself between her and Conor. A protective gesture. A futile gesture.

"She's not going back," he said. His voice was steady, but Deirdre could feel his hand trembling in hers. "She's not your property."

"She's my wife. Legally committed to this institution for her own protection. And you're a patient who's attempting to flee against medical advice." Conor smiled. It was not a pleasant smile. "Dr. Gari has already called the authorities. You'll both be returned to your rooms, and we'll discuss the appropriate consequences in the morning."

But Deirdre saw something in his eyes, a flicker of calculation beneath the confidence. He had called no authorities. He would call no authorities. Police involvement meant questions, paperwork, public records—exposure that a man with Conor's secrets could not afford. This confrontation was theater, designed to intimidate. The real power was elsewhere.

Deirdre felt the visions rising. Not the slow emergence of the sight, but a sudden flood, a torrent of images and possibilities cascading through her mind. She saw herself returning to her room, the escape failed, the brief hope extinguished. She saw Cesare sedated, restrained, punished for his attempted rebellion. She saw Lavinia dismissed, disgraced, prosecuted for her role in the plot.

But she also saw something else. A crack in the wall of fate. A door that was not yet closed.

"You're wrong," she said.

Conor's smile flickered. "I beg your pardon?"

"You're wrong about what's going to happen. You think you're in control. You think you've won. But you haven't." She stepped out from behind Cesare, stood beside him rather than behind him. "I've seen what comes next. All of it. Every possibility. And you're not in any of them."

"Deirdre, your delusions are not going to help you here—"

"They're not delusions. They've never been delusions. You knew that when you married me. You knew what I could do, what I could see. That's why you wanted me. That's why you're afraid of me."

Conor's face changed. The confident smile disappeared, replaced by something harder, something that looked almost like fear.

"Be careful," he said. "You're making things worse for yourself."

"I'm making things true." Deirdre looked at him, really looked, seeing not just the man in front of her but all the versions of him the sight had shown her over the months and years. The controlling husband. The jealous captor. The man who could not bear to lose what he considered his. "You're going to let us go."

“I’m not—”

“You’re going to let us go because if you don’t, I’m going to tell everyone what I’ve seen. Every secret. Every lie. Every crime you’ve committed that you think no one knows about.” She paused. “The sight doesn’t just show me the future, Conor. It shows me the truth. All of it. Every hidden thing.”

Silence. The cold pressed in around them. Somewhere in the distance, an owl called.

Conor’s face worked through emotions Deirdre could not read. Fear, anger, calculation. He was weighing options, assessing risks, trying to determine if she was bluffing.

She believed she was not bluffing. She had seen things, over the months of their marriage, glimpses of the man behind the polished surface. She knew about the financial irregularities. She knew about the other women. She knew about the business associate who had disappeared after threatening to expose certain transactions.

She had never spoken of these things because speaking would have changed nothing, would only have made her situation worse. But now, standing in the cold, with escape inches away and capture closing in, she had nothing left to lose.

“You’re lying,” Conor said. But his voice had changed. Uncertain now. Afraid.

“Try me.”

Another silence. Longer this time. The owl called again.

Then Conor stepped back. One step, then two. His hands came out of his pockets, empty, raised in a gesture that might have been surrender or might have been disgust.

“Go,” he said. “Take your lunatic boyfriend and go. But don’t think this is over. Don’t think I won’t find you.”

“You won’t,” Deirdre said. “I’ve seen that too.”

She took Cesare’s hand. They walked past Conor, past Gari, past the private security who stood uncertain, waiting for orders that did not come. They walked to the car, opened the doors, got inside.

The keys were under the driver’s seat, just as Lavinia had promised.

Cesare started the engine. The headlights cut through the darkness, illuminating the gravel road, the bare trees, the path toward freedom.

They drove away. No one followed.

Later, Deirdre would realize how much of it had been extrapolation. The sight had shown her fragments, glimpses, possibilities. She had filled in gaps, made guesses, spoken with more certainty than she possessed. Conor’s secrets were real, but she did not know them with the precision she had implied.

It had worked because Conor believed in the sight, even as he dismissed it as delusion. He believed because he had seen it work, over the years of their marriage, small prophecies that came true, knowledge that seemed impossible.

His belief had been his weakness. His fear of what she knew had been stronger than his desire to control her.

The visions had saved her. Not by showing her the future, but by giving her a weapon to wield in the present. The sight was not just perception; it was power. Power she had never fully understood until the moment she needed it most.

But one vision stayed with her as they drove through the November darkness, Cesare's hand warm in hers, the river falling behind them, the city rising ahead.

The vision of herself, old and gray, standing in a garden she did not recognize.

A future beyond the death she had been promised.

A life that might, against all expectation, continue.

## The City

What follows I pieced together from what Cesare and Deirdre told me separately, in conversations that took place after their return. Their accounts matched in the essential details, though the emotional coloring differed in ways I found instructive. Cesare remembered the escape as terror slowly giving way to wonder. Deirdre remembered it as a kind of waking, as though she had been asleep for eighteen months and was finally opening her eyes.

They drove through the night, south along the river, the headlights cutting tunnels through the darkness. Cesare drove. Deirdre sat beside him, her hand on his thigh, watching the trees give way to suburbs, the suburbs give way to the thickening lights of approaching civilization.

They did not speak. There was too much to say, and saying it felt impossible, as though words would break the fragile spell of their escape. They had done it. They had walked out of Emain, faced down Conor, driven away into the night. The future, which had seemed so fixed, so certain, had cracked open, and they had slipped through the crack into something new.

The city emerged from the darkness like a fever dream. Towers of light. Rivers of traffic even at this hour. The compressed energy of millions of lives stacked on top of each other, pressing against each other, generating heat and noise and possibility.

Lavinia had arranged an apartment. A sublet in Washington Heights, paid for in cash, rented under a name that was not Deirdre's and not Cesare's. The key was in an envelope taped under the mailbox in the lobby. The building was old, the hallways narrow, the elevator unreliable. But the apartment itself was clean, furnished, anonymous. A place to disappear.

They climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. Cesare unlocked the door. They stepped inside.

The apartment was small: a single room with a kitchenette, a bathroom barely large enough to turn around in, a bed that folded out from the wall. The window looked out onto an airshaft, a view of brick and fire escapes and the windows of other apartments where other lives were being lived.

Deirdre stood in the center of the room, taking it in. This was freedom. This cramped space, this borrowed furniture, this precarious anonymity. It was not much. It was everything.

Cesare closed the door behind them. The lock clicked. They were alone.

"We did it," he said.

"We did it," she repeated.

They looked at each other across the small room. Then they were in each other's arms, holding on with the desperation of people who have been drowning and have finally found solid ground.

The first days were a kind of honeymoon. They explored the neighborhood, walking the unfamiliar streets, learning the rhythms of a place that had no surveillance cameras pointed at them, no staff tracking their movements, no institutional schedules dictating when they ate and slept and spoke.

They bought groceries at a bodega where the owner spoke Spanish and did not ask questions. They cooked simple meals in the tiny kitchenette, eating cross-legged on the fold-out bed because there was no table. They made love in the afternoons when the light through the airshaft window turned golden, and in the nights when the sounds of the city filtered through the walls like music from another world.

Cesare did not have any episodes. His sleep was deep and dreamless, unmarked by the trance states that had defined his life at Emain. Deirdre's visions continued, but they were gentler now, less insistent, fragments of possibility rather than demands for attention.

They talked about the future. Not the prophesied future, the fated future, but the practical future of two people trying to build a life. Cesare could teach, maybe. He had his doctorate nearly complete; he could find work at a community college, or tutor privately, or write. Deirdre could work too. She had skills, education, a mind that had been wasted during her years of captivity. She could do something. She could be someone other than the woman of sorrows waiting for her death.

These conversations were fragile, tentative—Cesare's word was "precious," Deirdre's was "impossible." Neither fully believed in the life they were imagining. But they spoke of it anyway, because speaking made it more real, because naming a possibility was the first step toward creating it.

On the fourth day, Deirdre told Cesare about the new vision.

They were lying in bed, the fold-out mattress creaking beneath them, the sounds of traffic filtering up from the street below. The afternoon light was fading, the airshaft filling with shadows.

"I saw something," she said. "Before we left. A vision I didn't tell you about."

Cesare turned to face her. His eyes were calm, waiting.

"I saw myself old. Gray hair, wrinkled face. Standing in a garden I didn't recognize, looking at flowers." She paused. "I've never seen myself old before. All the other visions showed my death. But this one showed me alive, years from now, decades maybe. A future I didn't think existed."

Cesare was quiet for a moment. "What do you think it means?"

"I don't know. Maybe the other visions were wrong. Maybe this one is wrong. Maybe the sight shows possibilities, not certainties, and I was never as doomed as I thought." She reached out, touched his face. "Or maybe something changed. Maybe choosing to leave, choosing you, choosing to act as though the future could be different, actually made it different."

"The prophecy said you would choose."

"Your prophecy. Your voice, speaking from wherever prophecy comes from." She smiled, a small sad smile. "What if prophecy isn't prediction? What if it's permission? Your voice was telling me I was allowed to choose a different ending."

"I don't remember saying it."

"I know. That's the tragedy of what you are, isn't it? You give other people permission, but you can't give it to yourself. You speak futures you'll never see."

Cesare pulled her closer. She rested her head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat, the steady rhythm of a body that housed mysteries neither of them understood.

"I don't need to remember," he said quietly. "I don't need to see the futures I speak. I just need this. You, here, now. The present is enough."

"Is it?"

"It has to be. It's all any of us really have."

They lay together in the fading light, holding on to each other, holding on to the moment that was slipping away even as they tried to grasp it.

On the seventh day, the lawyers found them.

Deirdre had known they would. She had seen it in the visions, glimpses of men in suits, documents with official seals, the machinery of law grinding toward them with implacable patience. Conor had resources. Conor had connections. Conor had the legal authority of a husband whose wife had been committed for her own protection.

They came in the morning, three of them, knocking on the door of the apartment with the polite insistence of people who know they have the power to break it down if necessary.

"Ms. Lavery? We know you're in there. We have a court order for your return to the Emain Institute. Please open the door."

Cesare moved toward the door, his body tense, ready to fight. Deirdre stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Don't," she said. "It won't help."

"I'm not going to let them take you."

"You can't stop them. Not this way." She looked at him, her river-colored eyes calm, accepting. "I knew this was coming. I've seen it. Fighting will only make things worse."

"Then what do we do?"

Deirdre thought about the visions. The multiple deaths. The old woman in the garden. The contradictory futures that branched and tangled and refused to resolve into a single path.

She thought about Synge's Deirdre, walking toward her death at the end of the play, choosing the manner of her ending even if she could not choose to avoid it.

She thought about what it meant to have a choice.

"We go back," she said.

"What?"

"We go back to Emain. Voluntarily. On our own terms." She took his hands in hers. "The prophecy said I would choose. Your voice said no fate binds my hands. If I go back because they drag me, that's not choosing. That's being captured. But if I go back because I decide to go back, that's different. That's walking toward the ending instead of being pushed."

"That's insane. Going back means going back to Conor, to Gari, to everything we escaped from."

"And if we run?" Her voice was calm, practical, the voice of someone who had already worked through the calculations. "They'll find us again. Maybe not today, maybe not next week, but eventually. Conor has money, connections, legal authority. Every day we run is a day we're looking over our shoulders. Every apartment we hide in is temporary. We can't work, can't build anything, can't exist as real people. We become fugitives. We become the thing they say we are—unstable, irrational, dangerous to ourselves."

"At least we'd be free."

"Would we? Is that freedom? Hiding in borrowed rooms, unable to see doctors if we get sick, unable to go to the police if something happens? Lavinia's already facing charges because of us. How long before someone else gets hurt trying to help us?"

The concrete reality of it settled over them—this is how Cesare described it to me later, the weight of practicality crushing the romance of flight. This was not an adventure. This was survival, and survival required more than love.

"Going back changes things. The act of choosing changes the shape of what happens next." She squeezed his hands. "I don't know, Cesare. I don't know what's going to happen. But I know that running and being caught feels different than walking and arriving. I know that how we do something matters as much as what we do."

The knocking continued. "Ms. Lavery, we're authorized to enter by force if necessary. Please open the door."

Cesare's face was anguished, torn between the desire to fight and the knowledge that fighting was futile. He looked at her, searching for something, some sign that she knew what she was doing, that this was wisdom and not surrender.

"Trust me," she said. "Please. Trust that I've seen something, even if I can't explain it. Trust that choosing to go back is different from being taken back."

A long moment. The knocking stopped. Voices conferred on the other side of the door.

"All right," Cesare said finally. "We go back. Together. On our terms."

Deirdre kissed him. A brief kiss, fierce and tender, the kiss of someone saying goodbye without knowing if they would ever say hello again.

Then she walked to the door and opened it.

The lawyers were surprised. They had expected resistance, negotiation, perhaps violence. They had not expected a calm woman in borrowed clothes opening the door and saying, "We'll come with you. But we walk. We don't get dragged."

The return to Emain took three hours. A car had been waiting, a black sedan with tinted windows, the kind of car that ferried people between unpleasant destinations. Cesare and Deirdre sat in the back, their hands intertwined, watching the city fall away, the suburbs emerge, the river appear alongside the road like an old enemy.

They did not speak. There was nothing left to say. They had chosen. Now they would live with the choice.

The car pulled up to Emain's main entrance, not the service door from which they had escaped. The building looked different in daylight, less ominous, more mundane. Just a large house on a hill, surrounded by grounds that might have been beautiful if anyone had cared to make them so.

Gari was waiting on the front steps. His face was unreadable, professionally neutral, revealing nothing of what he thought or felt.

"Welcome back," he said. "I'm glad you've decided to return voluntarily. That will make things easier for everyone."

"Where's Conor?" Deirdre asked.

"Mr. Lavery has returned to the city. He felt his presence might be... counterproductive." Gari's lips twitched, the ghost of a smile. "He's asked me to convey that he's willing to discuss the terms of your continued care. There may be more flexibility than you imagine."

Gari paused, then added something I did not expect: "He's not well, you know. Your husband. He doesn't sleep. He's lost weight. When he came to discuss your escape, his hands were shaking." Gari looked at Deirdre with clinical curiosity. "I think he genuinely loved you, in his way. I think he still does. What he fears losing isn't just a wife. It's the only person who ever made him feel like the world made sense. You showed him things, didn't you? Small prophecies, over the years. Enough to make him believe. Now he can't bear to live in a world without that certainty."

Deirdre said nothing. But something flickered in her eyes—not forgiveness, but something adjacent to it. Recognition, perhaps. The acknowledgment that even monsters have their reasons.

Deirdre did not believe him about the flexibility. But she nodded, because nodding cost nothing, because the conversation was just the surface of something deeper that would unfold in its own time.

They were escorted inside. Separate rooms, Gari said. At least for now. Standard protocol after an unauthorized departure. There would be evaluations, discussions, decisions about the appropriate level of supervision going forward.

Cesare squeezed Deirdre's hand one last time before they were separated. His eyes said what his voice could not: *I love you. I'm sorry. I'll find a way.*

She squeezed back: *I know. I love you too. Trust the choice.*

Then they were apart, led down different corridors, returned to the institutional geography that had defined their lives before the escape.

Deirdre walked to her room. The same room, the same narrow bed, the same window overlooking the garden with its ruined trellis. Nothing had changed. Everything had changed.

She sat on the bed. She looked out the window. The November light was flat and gray, the garden bare, the river moving south as it always moved.

She had chosen to come back. She had walked toward the ending instead of being pushed. Whether that choice mattered, whether it changed anything, whether the prophecy's permission meant anything at all, she did not know.

But she was still alive. She was still here. And somewhere in this building, Cesare was alive and here too.

The old woman in the garden. Gray hair, wrinkled face, looking at flowers.

Maybe. Just maybe.

Deirdre closed her eyes and waited for the visions to show her what came next.

PART THREE

# The Return

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## The Witness

I learned of their return before I saw them. Gari summoned me to his office on the morning they arrived, the Expressionist painting looming behind him, the river light cold through the windows.

"They came back voluntarily," he said. "Ms. Lavery made the decision. Cesare followed."

I did not know what to say. I had spent the week of their absence in a state of suspended animation, going through the motions of my work while my mind circled endlessly around questions I could not answer. Were they safe? Had they escaped Conor's reach? Would I ever see them again?

"I want you to resume your documentation," Gari continued. "The circumstances have changed. Their relationship is now overt, acknowledged. We have an opportunity to study the interaction between two individuals with unusual perceptual capacities under conditions of emotional intimacy."

"You want to study their love affair."

"I want to understand what happens when a precognitive and a prophetic speaker form a bond. The research implications are significant." Gari's voice was calm, professional, as though he were discussing laboratory protocols rather than human beings. "Your role remains the same. Observe. Document. Report."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I'll find someone else. But I don't think you'll refuse, Dr. Morrow. You're invested in their story. You want to know how it ends." He smiled, the thin smile I had come to distrust. "We all do."

I did not refuse. I told myself I was protecting them, that my presence offered some measure of oversight, some check on Gari's ambitions. I told myself that documentation was a form of witness, and witness was a form of protection.

I did not entirely believe myself. But I stayed.

The days after their return were strange, liminal, suspended between what had been and what would be. Cesare and Deirdre were kept in separate wings of the building, their contact limited to supervised interactions in common areas. They were not prisoners, exactly, but they were not free. The distinction had become meaningless.

I saw Deirdre in the garden on the third day. She was standing in her usual place, beneath the ruined trellis, but something had changed. Her posture was different. She stood straighter, her shoulders back, her chin lifted. The passive

acceptance I had observed before the escape was gone, replaced by something harder, more alert.

"Dr. Morrow." She acknowledged me without turning. "I wondered when you'd come."

"I wanted to give you time to settle in."

"Settle in." She laughed, a short bitter sound. "Is that what we're calling it? I chose to come back. I walked through the door of my own will. But now that I'm here, I'm not sure what I chose."

"You chose how it happened. That matters."

"Does it?" She turned to face me. Her eyes were the color of the river, gray-green, shifting. "I keep telling myself it matters. I keep telling myself that walking is different from being dragged. But I'm still here. Cesare's still here. Lavinia's gone, dismissed, probably facing charges. And nothing has actually changed."

"What about your medication? Lavinia was—"

"Gari discontinued it." Her voice was flat. "He wants to observe me without pharmaceutical interference. Clean data, he called it. The fact that the medication was making my visions worse doesn't interest him. What interests him is that I'm a better research subject unmedicated." She smiled without warmth. "I'm being studied instead of treated. I suppose that's a form of progress."

"Everything has changed. You proved you could leave. You proved Conor's hold on you isn't absolute. You proved you have power he didn't expect."

"Power." She tested the word like something unfamiliar. "I bluffed him, Francis. I implied I knew more than I did. He backed down because he was afraid of what I might reveal, not because I actually had the ability to reveal it."

"He believed you. That's what matters. His belief is a kind of truth."

Deirdre was silent for a moment, looking at the river. A bird flew across the water, a dark shape against the gray sky.

"I had another vision," she said quietly. "Last night. The first one since we came back."

"What did you see?"

"Spring. The garden, but different. The trellis repaired, covered with new growth. Flowers I didn't recognize. And Cesare, standing where you're standing now, looking at something I couldn't see." She paused. "He was crying."

"What does it mean?"

"I don't know. In the vision, I wasn't there. I couldn't tell if I was somewhere else or if I was..." She did not finish the sentence.

I thought about the prophecy on the October recording. *The woman of sorrows will die by her own hand before the spring planting.* Spring was still months away. The planting would not begin until April, perhaps May. There was time. There was still time.

"The other visions," I said carefully. "The ones that showed your death. Are they still there?"

"They're fainter now. Like photographs left in the sun, the images bleaching out. I still see them, but they feel less certain, less inevitable." She looked at me. "And I still see the other one. The old woman in the garden. Gray hair, wrinkled face. That one is getting clearer."

"That could be the true future. The death visions were possibilities that you've moved past."

"Perhaps." She did not sound convinced. "Or the death visions are the true future and the old woman is the fantasy. A wish, not a prophecy. The sight showing me what I want to see instead of what will be."

"Can the sight do that? Show you false futures?"

"I don't know what the sight can do. I've never understood it. I've just lived with it." She wrapped her arms around herself, a gesture I had come to recognize as self-protection. "My mother never explained it to me. She died before she could. I've been figuring it out alone, making guesses, hoping I'm right."

"You're not alone anymore."

She looked at me, something shifting in her expression. "No. I suppose I'm not."

We stood together in the garden, watching the river move south. The November cold pressed against us, but neither of us moved to go inside.

I saw Cesare that evening, in the library where we had first spoken. He was sitting in the same chair, but he looked different. Thinner, perhaps. Older, certainly. The week of freedom and the return to captivity had marked him in ways I could see but not name.

"She chose to come back," he said without preamble. "I wanted to fight. I wanted to run. But she said this was the way."

"Do you believe her?"

"I believe—" He stopped. Started again. "I'm hungry. Do you know that? We barely ate for the last three days. The apartment had nothing, and we were afraid to go out, and then the lawyers came." He laughed, a strange sound. "I'm sitting here talking about fate and prophecy, and mostly I just want a sandwich."

"I can find you something."

"No. Stay." He rubbed his face with his hands, the gesture of exhaustion. "I believe she believes it. I believe the sight showed her something that made this choice feel right. I don't understand the sight. I don't understand my own condition. We're both vessels for things we can't control, speaking and seeing truths we didn't ask for. But she seems to have made peace with it in a way I haven't."

"You haven't had an episode since the escape."

"No. Not one." He picked at a thread on his sleeve, not meeting my eyes. "The prophetic state seems to require... I don't know what it requires. Stress, maybe. The particular kind of anxiety that comes from being watched, studied, treated as a specimen. When we were in the city, I was just myself. Just a man with the woman he—" He stopped again. Swallowed. "Sorry. I'm not making sense."

"You're making perfect sense."

"Am I? Because it feels like I'm falling apart." He looked at me with something like fear. "It's going to happen again, Francis. The episodes. I can feel it returning. Like pressure building behind my eyes. Like words gathering in a place I can't reach. It's going to happen again. Soon."

"What do you think you'll say?"

"I never know what I'll say. That's the horror of it." He stood abruptly, moved to the window, looked out at the darkness gathering over the grounds. A muscle jumped in his jaw. "Do you know what it's like to be a door? To have things pass through you that you can't stop, can't remember, can't control? To know that your mouth has spoken futures that might destroy people, and you have no idea what those futures are?"

"No. I don't know what that's like."

He laughed again, that same strange sound. "Of course you don't. Nobody does. That's the loneliness of it." He pressed his hand against the window, his palm flat against the cold glass. "Deirdre has the sight. She sees things. But at least she remembers what she sees. At least she can hold it, examine it, try to understand it. I speak and forget. I prophesy and lose. The most important words I'll ever say, and I'll never know what they were."

I thought about the recordings. The October prophecy that had described my own history before I arrived. The hypnosis session that had spoken of choice and freedom, of fate that binds no hands. Words that had changed Deirdre's understanding of her own future, words that Cesare would never hear except through the mediation of technology.

"Would you want to know?" I asked. "If you could listen to the recordings, hear what you said in the trance state, would you want to?"

Cesare was silent for a long moment. His hand remained pressed against the window, his breath fogging the glass.

"God, I don't know." The profanity was unexpected, human, raw. "The prophecies aren't mine. They come from somewhere else, through me. Listening to them might feel like eavesdropping on a conversation I wasn't invited to." He paused. "But Deirdre listened. She heard what I said about her choice. And it changed something for her. Maybe it would change something for me too."

"I can arrange it. The recordings are in Gari's files, but I have access. If you want to hear them, I can make it happen."

Cesare turned from the window. His face was unreadable in the dim light.

“Let me think about it. Let me talk to Deirdre.” He moved toward the door, then stopped. “Thank you, Francis. For offering. For being here. For whatever it is you’re doing.”

“I’m not sure what I’m doing either.”

“That makes three of us, then.” A ghost of a smile crossed his face. “The witness, the seer, and the speaker. None of us know what we’re doing. But we’re doing it together. Maybe that’s enough.”

He left. I remained in the library, surrounded by books I had not read, watching the darkness deepen outside the windows.

The witness, the seer, and the speaker.

My father returned to me, planting seeds in cold ground. My wife, walking out the door on the morning of her death. Deirdre’s vision of spring, the garden transformed, Cesare weeping at something she could not see.

The prophecy said she would die before the spring planting. But Deirdre had seen herself old, gray-haired, standing in a garden full of flowers.

Both could not be true.

Or could they?

I had seen fragments, glimpses, contradictory possibilities. I had not seen enough to know which future was real. Maybe no one had. Maybe the future was still being written, word by word, choice by choice, in the space between prophecy and action.

I opened my notebook. The pen moved across the page.

Two days after my conversation with Cesare, I did something I had promised myself I would not do. I reported Deirdre’s suicidal ideation to Gari.

I told myself it was the responsible thing. The ethical thing. The thing any clinician would do when a patient admits she has “thought about it,” has considered “choosing one of the futures deliberately.” I told myself I was protecting her.

The truth was simpler and uglier: I was trying to stop it. The prophecy said I would try. The prophecy said I would fail.

Gari listened to my report with his characteristic attention, making notes on his tablet, asking clarifying questions. When I finished, he nodded slowly.

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Dr. Morrow. I’ll adjust her treatment protocol accordingly.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I’ll increase monitoring. Reinstate the medication regimen that was... informally suspended. Ensure she doesn’t have unsupervised access to means.” He looked at me over his glasses. “You did the right thing. Suicidal ideation in a patient with her history requires intervention.”

I left his office feeling hollow. I had done the right thing. I had also betrayed her trust. I had taken the conversation she had shared with me weeks earlier in

the garden—the admission that she had considered choosing her own ending—and handed it to the man who saw her as data.

The results were immediate. Within a day, the medication was being administered under direct observation, swallow checks, the whole protocol. Deirdre's visions became fragmented, chaotic, harder to interpret. She stopped speaking to me. When our paths crossed in the corridors, she looked through me as though I were glass.

I had tried to save her by reporting. I had succeeded only in making her visions worse, her situation more controlled, her trust in me destroyed.

Cesare found me in the library a week later.

"She knows it was you," he said. His voice was flat, without accusation, which made it worse. "She doesn't blame you. She says you did what you thought was right. But she won't talk to you anymore. She says she can't trust someone who uses her words against her."

"I was trying to help."

"I know." He sat down across from me. "That's the tragedy of it, isn't it? You tried to help. You failed. Not because you did the wrong thing, but because there is no right thing. There's no action you can take that changes what she has to choose for herself."

"The prophecy said I would try to stop it. That I would fail."

"And now you have. Now you know what failure feels like." He leaned forward. "But here's what the prophecy didn't say: it didn't say whether your failure mattered. It didn't say whether trying and failing was better or worse than not trying at all. It just said you would try, and you would fail. The meaning of that failure is still yours to determine."

I had no response. The prophecy had come true, as prophecies did. The man who lost his wife had tried to stop it. He had failed. The woman of sorrows was still alive, still carrying her visions, still walking toward whatever ending awaited her.

But the shape of the failure was not what I had expected. I had imagined dramatic intervention, physical prevention, some moment of crisis where I threw myself between Deirdre and death. Instead, the failure was quiet, bureaucratic, a form filed and a medication administered and a trust destroyed.

I had learned something about prophecy: it tells you what will happen, but not how it will feel. It shows you the outline of the future, but not the texture. The texture is where we live. The texture is what we have to bear.

## The Recordings

I brought him the recordings on a Tuesday, three weeks after their return. December had arrived, the grounds of Emain bare and frozen, the river sluggish with cold. The holiday decorations that someone had strung in the common areas only emphasized the institutional emptiness, tinsel and colored lights incongruous against the white walls and surveillance cameras.

In the weeks since my failed intervention, something had shifted. Deirdre still would not speak to me directly, but she had stopped looking through me. Gari, recognizing that the medication was producing diminishing returns, had reduced the dosage. Her visions were returning, clearer now, and she had begun sharing them again—with Cesare, though not with me.

Cesare was waiting in his room. Gari had relaxed the restrictions somewhat, allowing the patients more freedom of movement, more unsupervised time. I suspected this was strategic rather than generous. Gari wanted to observe what happened when constraints were loosened. He wanted data on their behavior under conditions of relative autonomy.

I carried a laptop configured for secure access to the Institute's server, six recordings queued from the months of Cesare's residence at Emain. The October recording that had first captured my attention. The November hypnosis session—which Cesare had heard with Deirdre, but which I thought he should hear again, alone, with full attention. And four others, shorter, more fragmentary, but containing material I thought he should hear: the September "woman of sorrows" recording, the Elmore prophecy, and two others with specific predictions that had come true. These were the flagged recordings—the ones Gari had kept separate, the ones that contained the most specific and disturbing predictions.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked.

Cesare sat on the edge of his bed, his hands clasped between his knees. He looked younger than his twenty-three years, vulnerable in a way that made me want to protect him from what he was about to hear.

"No," he said. "I'm not sure about anything. But Deirdre and I heard the November recording together. It changed something for her. These older ones—the ones you said predicted things before they happened—I need to know what's in them."

"And if it doesn't help? If hearing the prophecies makes things worse?"

"Then at least I'll know what I'm carrying. At least the weight will have a shape." He looked up at me. "Play the first one."

I opened the laptop. I selected the October recording, the one that had described my own history before I arrived at Emain. I pressed play.

Cesare's voice emerged from the speakers, but not his waking voice. The deeper voice. The resonant voice. The voice that seemed to come from somewhere beneath or beyond the person sitting in front of me.

It began with the planting verse—the lines about planting, about soil and seed.

Cesare's face went pale. He had heard his prophetic voice on the November recording with Deirdre, but those words had been about choice and freedom. These older recordings were different—darker, more specific, more unsettling. I could see the strangeness of it hitting him, the uncanny experience of listening to yourself describe a stranger's grief before you'd ever met him.

*A man will come to the house on the hill. He carries grief like a stone in his chest. His wife died with her blood on white sheets, and he dreamed her death the night before it happened.*

"That's you," Cesare said quietly. "The recording describes you."

"Yes."

"Before you arrived. Before we met. The prophecy knew you were coming."

"It seems so."

The recording continued. It spoke of the woman of sorrows, of the plum tree in the garden, of those who plant and wait in silence. Cesare listened without interrupting, his face cycling through expressions I could not fully read. Wonder. Horror. Recognition. Grief.

I stopped the recording before it reached the final section. There was something there I was not ready to share with him. Not yet.

"Play the next one," he said.

I played the November hypnosis session. The one where his voice had spoken of choice, of fate that binds no hands, of the woman of sorrows walking toward her ending of her own will.

*She will choose. The woman of sorrows will choose. The choice is hers and hers alone. No prophecy compels her. No fate binds her hands.*

Cesare's breath caught. "This is what changed things for Deirdre. This is what made her believe she could act differently."

"Yes."

"My voice told her she was free. My voice, speaking from wherever prophecy comes from, gave her permission to choose." He shook his head slowly. "And I didn't know. I didn't remember. The most important words I ever spoke to her, and I had no idea I'd spoken them."

*The cabinet opens. The somnambulist emerges. He does not know what he has said. He does not know what he will say. He is the door through which futures*

*pass. He is not the architect of those futures.*

"The prophecy describes itself," I said. "It acknowledges its own nature. You're the door, not the architect. The words pass through you, but they're not yours."

"Then whose are they?"

I had no answer. The question had haunted me since I first heard the recordings. Where did prophecy come from? What intelligence, what force, what pattern in the universe spoke through sleeping men and dreaming women? The research literature offered theories: collective unconscious, quantum entanglement across time, emergent properties of neural complexity. None of them satisfied. None of them captured the strangeness of hearing a voice predict futures it could not possibly know.

"Play the others," Cesare said.

I played them. Four more recordings, shorter, more fragmentary. The September "woman of sorrows" recording—the first utterance that had named Deirdre, though we hadn't known it then—landed differently now that he knew her, loved her, feared for her. A prophecy about a patient named Elmore, who had died three days after the words were spoken. A prophecy about a staff member whose marriage would end, which had come true within the month. A prophecy about weather, about politics, about the small futures that accumulate into the texture of ordinary life.

And woven through all of them, like a refrain, the planting verses. The soil and the seed. Those who plant and wait. The bees that may or may not come to pollinate the blossoms.

When the last recording ended, Cesare stood. He walked to the window of his room, looked out at the frozen grounds, the bare trees, the river moving sluggishly under its burden of cold.

"I understand now," he said. "Why Deirdre carries the sight the way she does. Why she's made peace with something that should be unbearable."

"Tell me."

"It's not about control. It's not about changing the future or preventing what's foreseen. It's about relationship." He turned to face me. "The prophecies are true, but they're not complete. They show what will happen without showing why, or how, or what it means. The meaning has to come from us. From how we respond to what we've seen or spoken. From how we choose to live inside the knowledge."

"The choice the prophecy promised Deirdre."

"Yes. But not just her. All of us. The prophecy said she would choose. But choice isn't something that happens once. It's something that happens continuously, moment by moment, in every response to every circumstance." He paused. "I've been afraid of the prophetic state because I couldn't control it. Because the words came through me without my permission. But control isn't the point. Relationship is the point. How I relate to what passes through me. How I

choose to carry it.”

“And how do you choose to carry it?”

Cesare was silent for a moment. The winter light through the window made his face look carved from pale stone.

“I choose to accept it,” he said finally. “Not surrender to it. Accept it. There’s a difference. Surrender means giving up, letting the prophecy determine everything. Acceptance means acknowledging what is while still acting, still choosing, still being present in my own life.”

“That sounds like something Deirdre would say.”

“She taught me. Not with words, but with how she lives. How she carries the sight. She doesn’t fight it, but she doesn’t let it define her either. She exists in relationship with it, the way you might exist in relationship with a difficult family member. You don’t choose your family, but you choose how you respond to them.”

I thought about my father. The silence he had carried. The burden he had not shared. He had existed in relationship with the farm, with the weather, with the uncertainty of planting. But he had not known how to exist in relationship with his own despair. He had carried it alone until it crushed him.

“My father couldn’t do that,” I said. “He couldn’t accept without surrendering. When the crop failed, when the future closed in on him, he didn’t know any way to carry it except to put it down permanently.”

Cesare nodded. “That’s the danger. Acceptance is hard. It requires holding two things at once: the knowledge of what’s coming and the commitment to keep living anyway. Most people can’t do it. They either deny the knowledge or let it destroy them.”

“But Deirdre can do it.”

“Deirdre has been practicing for nearly two years. She’s had time to learn. And she has something most people don’t have.” He paused. “She has me. She has you. She has people who share the weight, who witness what she carries, who help her hold the knowledge without being crushed by it.”

I thought about witnessing. About documentation. About the role I had taken on without fully understanding it.

“Is that enough?” I asked. “Sharing the weight? Witnessing?”

“I don’t know. Maybe not. Maybe in the end the weight is too heavy and the witnessing isn’t enough.” Cesare’s voice was quiet, thoughtful. “But it’s what we have. It’s what we can offer each other. And offering something is better than offering nothing. Trying to carry together is better than watching someone carry alone.”

I looked at this young man, this vessel for words he did not choose, this door through which futures passed. He had just listened to his own voice speaking prophecies he would never remember, and instead of being destroyed by the strangeness, he had found a way to understand it. To accept it. To choose how he

would carry it.

Maybe that was enough. Maybe that was all any of us could do.

"There's one more thing," I said. "Something on the October recording I haven't played for you. The last part."

"What does it say?"

I hesitated. The words had haunted me since I first heard them. The explicit prophecy about Deirdre's death, about my failure to prevent it, about the spring planting that would come too late.

"It says she will die before the spring planting. It says I will try to stop it and fail."

Cesare's face did not change. He had expected something like this. He had prepared himself.

"Play it."

I played the final section of the October recording. The voice that was his and not his spoke of the woman of sorrows dying by her own hand. Of the man who lost his wife trying to stop it. Of failure written into the prophecy itself.

*His failure is also written. The one who watches cannot save. The one who speaks cannot remember. The one who sees cannot change. These are the conditions of knowledge. These are the limits of love.*

The recording ended. Silence filled the room.

"The prophecy says I'll fail," I said. "But it also says she'll choose. Both can't be true. Either she has a choice, or the outcome is fixed. Either I fail because I couldn't have succeeded, or I fail because I didn't try hard enough."

"Or both are true in ways we don't understand," Cesare said. "The prophecy isn't a logical system. It doesn't have to be consistent. It speaks in fragments, in images, in partial truths that don't add up to a complete picture."

"That's not very comforting."

"It's not supposed to be comforting. It's supposed to be true." He moved away from the window, sat back down on the edge of the bed. "The prophecy says she'll choose. The prophecy says you'll fail. Maybe her choice is to accept what's coming, and your failure is failing to stop her from accepting it. Maybe your failure is actually her success. Maybe the categories don't map onto each other the way we want them to."

Deirdre's vision of herself old, gray-haired, standing in a garden. Her vision of spring, the trellis repaired, Cesare weeping.

"She's seen futures where she survives," I said. "The visions contradict each other."

"Then we're in the space between contradictions. The place where different futures are still possible, where the prophecy hasn't collapsed into a single outcome yet." Cesare looked at me with something like hope. "That's where choice lives, isn't it? In the space between contradictions. In the gap where more than

one thing might still be true.”

I did not know if he was right. I did not know if the space between contradictions was a real place or just a comforting illusion. But I wanted to believe it. I wanted to believe that the future was still being written, that prophecy was description rather than compulsion, that the words passing through sleeping men and dreaming women did not have the final say.

“What do we do?” I asked.

“We keep living. We keep choosing. We keep carrying the weight together.” Cesare stood again, moved to the door. “Thank you for bringing me the recordings, Francis. Thank you for letting me hear what passes through me.”

“Did it help?”

“I don’t know yet. Ask me again in the spring.”

He left. I remained in his room, the laptop still open, the secure session still connected.

The spring. The planting. The prophecy said she would die before it came.

But the prophecy also said she would choose.

I closed the laptop. I gathered my things. I walked out into the frozen corridor, into the institutional silence, into the long December that stretched between now and whatever spring would bring.

## The Winter

The winter passed in fragments. I remember it now as a series of images, moments frozen like the ground outside, disconnected from each other by the long silences that filled the spaces between.

December: Cesare and Deirdre walking together in the corridor, their shoulders almost touching, their voices low. Gari watching from his office doorway, making notes on a clipboard. The smell of institutional cooking mixing with the pine scent of decorations no one wanted.

January: Snow falling on the grounds, transforming Emain into something almost beautiful. Deirdre standing at her window, watching the flakes descend, her face unreadable. Cesare having an episode in the night, his voice echoing through the corridors, speaking of fire and water and endings. The recording captured it: *The thaw comes after the freeze. The seed waits beneath the snow. Patience is the virtue of things that will grow.*

February: The coldest month, pipes freezing in the older wings of the building, patients huddled in common areas for warmth. Deirdre and Cesare sitting together by the fire, their hands intertwined, speaking in whispers I could not hear. Gari presenting his research at a conference I did not attend, returning with funding and ambitions I did not trust.

March: The first signs of thaw. Water dripping from eaves. The river quickening, throwing off its winter sluggishness. Deirdre, who had begun speaking with me again in late February, telling me her visions had changed again, the death images almost gone, the old woman in the garden clearer than ever. "I can see the flowers now," she said. "Roses. Red and white. And something else, something climbing the trellis. Morning glories, maybe. I've never grown morning glories."

Through all of this, I documented. I filled notebooks with observations, transcripts, analysis. I recorded every episode Cesare had, catalogued every vision Deirdre reported, tracked the institutional rhythms of Emain as though mapping a foreign country. Gari read my reports and said nothing. He was waiting for something, I thought. Building toward something I could not see.

Conor did not return. His lawyers sent communications, formal documents establishing the terms of Deirdre's continued treatment, but the man himself stayed away. Deirdre said she knew why: he was afraid of her now, afraid of what she might reveal, afraid of the power she had discovered in herself. I was not so

sure. Conor did not strike me as a man who stayed away out of fear. He struck me as a man who bided his time.

The relationship between Cesare and Deirdre deepened in ways I could observe but not fully understand. They had developed a private language, a system of glances and gestures that communicated volumes without words. They touched constantly, small touches, a hand on an arm, a shoulder brushing against a shoulder. They existed in a space of intimacy that excluded everyone else, including me.

I did not resent this exclusion. I understood it. They were two people who had found each other in impossible circumstances, who shared a burden no one else could carry. Their bond was not about me. My role was to witness, to document, to stand at the edge of their story and record what I could see.

But witnessing is not the same as understanding. And as the winter deepened and the spring approached, I found myself increasingly uncertain about what I was seeing.

The night of February fourteenth, the coldest night of the year, I could not sleep. The radiator in my room clanked and hissed but produced little warmth. Ice had formed on the inside of my window, crystals spreading across the glass in patterns that looked, in the dim light, like the branching of nerves or the roots of trees.

I rose and walked the corridors of Emain, wrapped in a blanket like a patient in an old asylum. The building groaned around me, contracting in the cold, its joints and timbers protesting the temperature. The institutional lights, dimmed for nighttime, cast long shadows that seemed to move when I was not looking directly at them.

I found myself in the garden, though I had not intended to go there. The cold was brutal, the kind that burns the lungs and makes the eyes water. The ground was frozen solid, the soil that would receive seeds in spring now hard as stone. The plum tree stood skeletal against the sky, its branches bare, its potential invisible.

My father had stood in fields like this, waiting for the thaw that would let him plant. The patience required to farm, the faith that spring would come, that the ground would soften, that the seeds would grow. He had possessed that patience, year after year, until the year he lost it.

The prophecy said Deirdre would die before the spring planting. Standing in that frozen garden, spring felt impossibly distant. The ground was locked in ice. The trees were bare. The river moved sluggishly, half-frozen at its edges. Nothing could grow here. Nothing could change.

But the earth was turning, as it always turned. The days were growing longer, minute by minute. Somewhere beneath the frozen soil, roots were waiting. Somewhere in the bare branches of the plum tree, buds were forming, invisible,

patient, ready.

I said nothing. I waited.

I stood in the garden until my feet went numb, until the cold became a kind of presence rather than an absence of warmth. Then I went back inside, back to my room, back to my notebooks and my documentation and my endless attempt to record what I could not understand.

The winter would end. The spring would come. And then we would see.

In late February, Deirdre asked to speak with me alone. It was the first time she had sought me out since December, since the medication and the betrayal. We met in the garden, wrapped in heavy coats against the cold, our breath visible in the air. The trellis was bare, its frame stark against the gray sky, waiting for the growth that would come.

"I want to tell you something," she said. "Something I haven't told anyone, not even Cesare." She paused, then added: "I shouldn't be telling you this, after what you did. But you're the witness. You're the one who writes it down. And I need someone to know."

"I'm listening."

She looked at the river, the water dark and fast with snowmelt from upstream.

"The death visions haven't stopped completely. They've faded, but they're still there. I still see myself dying, still see the multiple endings. But there's one vision that's different from the others. One that I keep coming back to."

"Tell me."

"I see myself choosing. Not the death itself, but the moment before. The moment of decision." She paused. "In the vision, I'm standing somewhere, I can't tell where, and I'm holding something in my hand. A bottle, I think. Pills, maybe. And I'm looking at it, and I'm about to make a choice."

I felt the weight of what she was trusting me with. After what I had done in December—the report, the medication, the betrayal—she was choosing to confide in me again. I would not betray her twice.

"A choice to die?"

"A choice. The vision doesn't show what I choose. It shows me choosing. The moment of agency, not the outcome." She turned to face me. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I think so. You're saying the death visions have transformed into a vision of choice. The prophecy said you would choose, and now you're seeing the choice itself, not the result."

"Yes. But that raises a question, doesn't it? If I'm seeing myself about to choose, then the choice hasn't been made yet. The future is still open. The death isn't inevitable."

"That's hopeful."

"Is it?" Her voice was flat, neither hopeful nor despairing. "If the choice hasn't been made, then I have to make it. If the future is open, then I'm responsible for closing it. The vision shows me holding the bottle, looking at the pills. That means the pills exist. That means the situation exists. The openness of the future includes the possibility of choosing death."

I felt a chill that had nothing to do with the February cold.

"Are you thinking about it? About choosing death?"

"I'm thinking about the choice. That's not the same thing." She wrapped her arms around herself. "For eighteen months, I believed the death was inevitable. That gave me a kind of peace. I didn't have to decide anything. I just had to accept what was coming. But now, if the death is a choice rather than a fate, then I have to actually choose. I have to weigh the options. I have to decide whether to live or die."

"That's not really a decision. Living is obviously better than dying."

"Is it?" She looked at me with those river-colored eyes. "Is living obviously better than dying? Is a life of captivity, of surveillance, of being studied and managed and controlled, obviously better than death? Is a life haunted by visions, by futures I can't prevent, by knowledge I never asked for, obviously better than ending the sight forever?"

"Cesare loves you. I, in my way, care about you. You're not alone."

"I know I'm not alone. That makes the choice harder, not easier. If I choose death, I hurt the people who love me. If I choose life, I continue to suffer. Either way, someone is harmed." She shook her head. "The prophecy said I would choose. It didn't say the choice would be easy."

I did not know what to say. I had come to Emain hoping to find something, meaning or purpose or understanding, after my wife's death. I had found Cesare and Deirdre, had witnessed their love, had documented their impossible conditions. But I had not found answers. I had only found more questions.

"What do you want?" I asked finally. "Not what the visions show you, not what the prophecy predicts. What do you actually want?"

Deirdre was silent for a long moment. The wind off the river stirred her hair.

"I want to live," she said quietly. "I want to grow old, to see the garden in spring, to watch Cesare's face when he realizes I'm still here. I want to have a future, a real future, not a future seen in fragments and shadows." She paused. "But I also want the pain to stop. I want to sleep without visions, to wake without dread, to exist without the constant weight of knowing too much. I want peace. And sometimes death looks like peace."

"It's not. Death isn't peace. Death is nothing."

"How do you know? You've never died."

"I've watched people die. My father's face, when I found him, looked peaceful. But it was the peace of nothing left to fear. My wife was murdered in our home

and her face, in the dream I had the night before, was terrified. Whatever they were looking for, death didn't deliver it. Death just ended the search."

Deirdre nodded slowly. "It could be. Or what you saw was the threshold, not the destination. Beyond the threshold there's something else."

"That's faith, not knowledge."

"Everything about the future is faith, not knowledge. Even the sight. Even the prophecies." She smiled, a sad smile. "The sight shows me possibilities, not certainties. I've learned that now. The death visions might be possibilities I've moved past. The survival visions might be the true path. Or it might be the opposite. I can't know. I can only choose."

"Then choose life. Please."

"I haven't decided yet. The vision shows me about to choose. That means the choice is coming, but it hasn't arrived." She reached out, took my hand. "I'm telling you this because you're the witness. Because when the choice comes, whatever I choose, I want someone to understand why. I want someone to know that it wasn't madness, or despair, or giving up. It was a choice, made with full awareness, made by someone who weighed the options and decided."

"I don't want to be the witness to your death."

"I know. But you might be. That's the burden of witnessing, isn't it? You don't get to choose what you see."

She released my hand. She walked back toward the building, toward Cesare, toward whatever future was unfolding inside.

I remained in the garden, alone with the cold and the bare trellis and the river moving toward the sea.

March gave way to April. The snow melted. The ground softened. In the garden, the first green shoots appeared, pushing through the soil that had been frozen for months.

Deirdre and I did not speak again about her choice. She spent her days with Cesare, their intimacy deepening, their connection growing stronger even as the spring approached. I watched them walk the grounds, saw them sitting together in the common areas, heard fragments of their conversations through walls and windows.

They were happy, I thought. As happy as two people could be in their circumstances. They had found each other, had built something together, had created a space of love in the middle of institutional control. Whatever happened next, they had had that. They had had each other.

Gari continued his research. The hypnosis experiments had stopped, Cesare refusing further participation, but Gari found other ways to gather data. Monitoring. Observation. The slow accumulation of evidence that would, he hoped, make his name.

I continued my documentation. Notebooks filled and were replaced. Recordings accumulated on hard drives. The archive of Emain's strange inhabitants grew, a paper trail of the improbable, a record that might someday matter.

And the spring came on, inexorable, indifferent, as springs always do.

The plum tree in the garden, the one the prophecy had spoken of, began to bud. Small white flowers appeared on its branches, fragile and transient, waiting for the bees that might or might not come.

The prophecy had said Deirdre would die before the spring planting.

The planting had not yet begun.

We were in the space between, the gap where choice still lived, the moment before the moment of decision.

I watched. I waited. I wrote everything down.

Soon, very soon, we would all see.

## The Thaw

The thaw came in the second week of April, sudden and violent. Three days of warm rain that stripped the last snow from the grounds and turned the paths to mud. The river rose, swollen with meltwater, its current fast and dark. The air smelled of earth and growth and something else, something electric, as though the world itself were waking from a long sleep.

The plum tree bloomed. White flowers covered its branches, delicate against the gray sky, fragile in the wind that came off the river. I stood in the garden and watched them, thinking of the planting verses, of the bees that may or may not come, of those who plant and wait in silence.

Deirdre stood beside me. She had sought me out, finding me in the garden where I had taken to spending my mornings, watching the spring arrive.

"It's beautiful," she said. "The blossoms. I didn't think I'd see them."

"The prophecy said before the spring planting. The planting hasn't started yet."

"No. Not yet." She looked at the tree, her face calm. "The farmers wait for the ground to warm. Another week, maybe two. Then the planting begins."

"You've been studying farming?"

"I've been thinking about your father. About what you told me, the seeds in cold ground, the silence he kept." She paused. "He planted even when he knew the crop would fail. He went through the motions of hope even after hope was gone. I've been wondering if that was courage or despair."

"I don't know. I've asked myself the same question for twenty years."

"It was both. Courage and despair aren't opposites. They're two faces of the same thing, the thing that keeps us moving when movement seems pointless." She turned to face me. "I've made my decision, Francis."

My heart stopped. Or seemed to stop. The moment stretched, the plum blossoms swaying in the wind, the river moving south, everything suspended.

"Tell me."

"I'm going to live." She said it simply, without drama, the way you might announce a decision about what to have for dinner. "I'm going to choose life. Not because I'm sure it's the right choice, not because the suffering will stop, not because I can see a future that makes sense. I'm going to choose life because Cesare loves me, and you care about me, and because the plum tree is blooming, and because I want to see what happens next."

I let out a breath I had not known I was holding. "Thank God."

“God has nothing to do with it. This is my choice. Mine.” She smiled, the first genuine smile I had seen from her in weeks. “The prophecy said I would choose. His voice, speaking from wherever prophecy comes from, said no fate binds my hands. I’m choosing to believe that. I’m choosing to act as though the future is open.”

“The death visions?”

“Still there. Faded, but present. I can see them if I look.” She shrugged. “I’m choosing not to look. I’m choosing to look at the survival vision instead. The old woman in the garden, gray-haired, surrounded by flowers. That’s the future I’m walking toward.”

“What changed? Why now?”

Deirdre was quiet for a moment. The wind stirred the plum blossoms, scattering a few petals onto the muddy ground.

“Last night, Cesare had an episode. The first one in weeks. He spoke in his sleep, the prophetic voice, the words that come from somewhere else.” She paused. “I was there. I heard it. I heard what he said.”

“What did he say?”

“He said: ‘The woman of sorrows puts down her sorrow. The cabinet closes. The somnambulist wakes. The spring comes, and she is in it.’” Her voice wavered, the first sign of emotion I had seen. “He said I would be in the spring, Francis. His voice, the voice that has never been wrong, said I would be here when the planting begins.”

I felt tears on my face. I did not try to stop them.

“Then it’s decided. The prophecy itself says you survive.”

“That’s possible. Or the prophecy is describing one possibility among many. It’s showing what can happen, not what will happen.” She took my hand. “But I’m choosing to believe it. I’m choosing to trust the voice that comes through Cesare, even though he doesn’t remember it, even though none of us understand where it comes from. I’m choosing hope.”

“That’s all any of us can do.”

“Yes. That’s all.” She squeezed my hand. “Will you tell Cesare? He doesn’t remember what he said. He woke confused, as always. I want him to know. I want him to understand that his voice, the voice he’s so afraid of, saved me. That the words passing through him gave me permission to live.”

“I’ll tell him.”

“Thank you.” She released my hand. She looked at the plum tree one more time, the white blossoms bright against the gray sky. “I’m going inside. I’m going to find Cesare and hold him and tell him I love him and that I’m staying. That I’m choosing to stay.”

She walked toward the building. I watched her go, this woman of sorrows who had decided to put down her sorrow, this vessel for visions who had chosen to

trust one vision over others.

The plum blossoms swayed in the wind. A bee appeared, the first I had seen that spring, circling the flowers, beginning its work.

The bees had come.

I found Cesare in the library, sitting in his usual chair, staring at nothing. His face was pale, drawn, the aftermath of the episode still visible in the shadows under his eyes.

"Deirdre told me," I said. "About last night. About what you said."

He looked up. "I don't remember. I never remember."

"You said she would be in the spring. You said she puts down her sorrow and the spring comes and she is in it."

Cesare's face did not change. He had heard summaries of his prophecies before. He knew the words passed through him without his participation.

"Did she believe it?"

"She chose to believe it. She decided to live, Cesare. She told me in the garden. She's choosing life."

Something shifted in his expression. A crack in the mask of exhaustion, something bright and desperate showing through.

"She's staying?"

"She's staying."

He stood abruptly, knocking the chair back. He moved toward the door, then stopped, turned back to me.

"The prophecy. The one from October. It said she would die before the spring planting."

"I know."

"But last night, the voice said she would be in the spring. Both can't be true."

"They can. Prophecy isn't consistent. It describes multiple possibilities, and the one that becomes real depends on choices that haven't been made yet."

Cesare shook his head. "That's not how it works. The prophecies always come true. Every prediction I've made, every future I've spoken, has happened. Elmore died. The staff member's marriage ended. The weather turned when I said it would turn."

"But those were single prophecies about single outcomes. This is different. This is two prophecies about the same person, contradicting each other."

"Which means one of them is wrong. Which means for the first time, my voice has spoken something that won't come true." He looked at me with something like fear. "What if the wrong one is last night's? What if the death prophecy is the true one, and the survival prophecy is just... noise? A glitch? Something that came through the door that wasn't really prophecy at all?"

"Then we'll know when the spring planting comes. Either she's here or she's not. Either she chose life and lived, or she chose life and died anyway."

“That’s not comforting.”

“It’s not supposed to be comforting. It’s supposed to be true.” I echoed his own words back to him. “You told me once that prophecy isn’t a logical system. That it speaks in fragments and partial truths. Maybe this is what that looks like: two fragments that don’t fit together, two truths that can’t both be true.”

Cesare was silent for a long moment. The library was quiet around us, the books watching from their shelves, the weight of other people’s words pressing in.

“I need to see her,” he said finally. “I need to hold her and know she’s real and here and alive.”

“Then go. She’s waiting for you.”

He went. I remained in the library, alone with the books and the silence.

That evening, I walked the grounds of Emain as the sun set. The thaw had transformed everything. The paths were muddy, the lawns soft, the river high and fast. The plum tree stood in the garden, its blossoms glowing in the last light, the bees gone to wherever bees go when darkness comes.

I thought about prophecy. About the voice that came through Cesare, the visions that came to Deirdre, the knowledge that passed through them without their consent. I thought about the contradiction between the October prophecy and the April prophecy, between death before the planting and survival into spring.

Maybe both were true in some sense I could not understand. Maybe prophecy described all possibilities, and the one that became real was determined by factors beyond prediction. Maybe the voice that spoke through Cesare was not omniscient but something stranger, something that saw multiple futures and reported them without distinguishing between them.

Or maybe I was rationalizing. Maybe I was looking for hope where none existed, constructing theories to explain away the simple truth: that Deirdre had been doomed since October, that the recent prophecy was an error or an illusion, that her choice to live was a brave gesture that would change nothing.

I did not know. I could not know. Knowledge of the future was not given to me.

But Deirdre had chosen. She had looked at the contradictory visions, heard the contradictory prophecies, weighed the options with the clear-eyed intelligence she brought to everything. And she had decided to live. Not because she was certain of survival, but because she wanted to find out what happened next.

Maybe that was what choice meant. Not certainty about outcomes, but commitment to a path. Not knowledge of the future, but willingness to walk toward it.

The sun sank below the horizon. The sky turned red, then purple, then black. Stars appeared, indifferent to human concerns, burning their ancient light.

The spring planting would begin soon. A week, maybe two. The ground was warming. The farmers would put their seeds in the earth, trusting the weather,

trusting the bees, trusting the accumulated wisdom of generations who had planted and harvested and planted again.

We would all see soon enough.

## The Planting

The planting began on the twenty-third of April. I know the date because I wrote it in my notebook, underlined it twice, circled it with ink that bled through the page. The date the prophecy's deadline passed. The date Deirdre was supposed to be dead.

She was not dead. She was standing beside me in the garden, watching the groundskeeper turn the soil in the small plot behind the kitchen where Emain grew vegetables for the institutional meals. The earth was dark and damp, steaming slightly in the morning sun, ready to receive the seeds that would become food by summer's end.

"It's happening," she said. "The planting. It's actually happening, and I'm still here."

"You are. You're here."

"I thought I would feel different. I thought when the moment came, when I crossed the line the prophecy drew, I would feel transformed. Saved. Free." She shook her head. "I just feel like myself. The same person I was yesterday, with the same visions, the same fears. Just on the other side of a date."

"Maybe that's what survival feels like. Not transformation, just continuation. One day following another."

"Maybe." She watched the groundskeeper work, his hands practiced, his movements economical. "He doesn't know. He doesn't know he's planting seeds on the day a woman was supposed to die. He's just doing his job, putting things in the ground, trusting they'll grow."

"That's what planting is. Trust without certainty. Faith expressed in action."

"Your father planted like that. Even at the end, even when he knew the crop would fail." She looked at me. "Do you understand him better now? Now that you've watched me choose?"

The question caught me off guard. I had been so focused on Deirdre, on her survival, on the prophecy and its deadline, that I had not thought about my father in weeks.

"I don't know," I said honestly. "He chose differently than you. He looked at the same uncertainty and decided not to continue. I don't know if I understand that better or worse."

"There's nothing to understand. Some people choose life and some choose death, and the reasons don't matter as much as we think they do. Choice is just

choice, inexplicable, unreduceable to causes.”

“That’s a bleak philosophy.”

“Or a liberating one. If choice can’t be explained, then it can’t be judged. My choice to live isn’t better than his choice to die. They’re just different choices made by different people in different circumstances.”

“I want your choice to be better. I want to believe that choosing life is the right thing to do.”

“Then believe it. That’s your choice.” She smiled, the sad wise smile I had come to know. “We all choose what to believe about each other’s choices. That’s another layer of choice, another freedom we can’t escape.”

The groundskeeper finished turning the soil. He began to plant, his hand dipping into the bag of seeds, scattering them in patterns only he could see.

The spring planting had begun. Deirdre was alive. The prophecy had been wrong.

Or had it?

I found Cesare in the common room, sitting alone, staring out the window at the garden where the groundskeeper worked. His face was pale, his eyes shadowed. He had not slept well since the April prophecy, the one that said Deirdre would be in the spring.

“She survived,” I said. “The planting has begun. She’s still here.”

“I know.” His voice was flat, exhausted. “I’ve been watching from the window. I’ve been counting the minutes, waiting for something to happen. Waiting for the prophecy to come true.”

“Which prophecy? The October one said she would die. The April one said she would live. They can’t both be true.”

“They were both spoken through me. They both came from wherever prophecy comes from.” He turned to face me. “I’ve been thinking about that all night. Trying to understand how I could speak two contradictory futures about the same person.”

“Prophecy isn’t what we thought it was. It shows possibilities rather than certainties. Multiple futures that could happen, depending on choices that haven’t been made.”

“Then what’s the point of it? If prophecy just shows possibilities, it’s no different from imagination. Anyone can imagine multiple futures. The power of prophecy is supposed to be knowing which one is real.”

“There is no ‘which one is real’ until the choices are made. The future doesn’t exist until we create it, and prophecy can only show what might be created, not what will be.”

Cesare shook his head. “That contradicts everything I’ve experienced. Every clear prophecy I’ve spoken has come true. Elmore died when I said he would die. The weather changed when I said it would change. The patterns were exact,

reliable, consistent—at least, the ones specific enough to verify.”

“Until now.”

“Until now.” He was quiet for a moment. “I could be losing it. The ability, whatever it is. The April prophecy could be the first sign of decay, the first false note in a system that’s breaking down.”

“Or maybe the October prophecy was wrong, and the April one was right, and Deirdre surviving proves that the recent prophecy is the accurate one.”

“We can’t know which. We can’t test it. We can only live forward and see what happens.” He stood, moved to the window, pressed his hand against the glass. “She’s alive. That’s what matters. Whatever the prophecies mean, whatever’s happening to my ability, Deirdre is alive. I’ll take that. I’ll accept not understanding if the price of understanding is losing her.”

I thought about my wife. The dream I had the night before she died. The knowledge I had not acted on, the words I had not spoken. I had failed to understand then, too. I had failed to know which future was real until it was too late.

“Sometimes not understanding is all we get,” I said. “Sometimes we have to live with questions that don’t have answers.”

“Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows.”

“Yes. And now we’ve seen. The planting has begun. Deirdre is alive. Whatever else is uncertain, that much is clear.”

Cesare nodded slowly. His hand remained pressed against the window, reaching toward something he could not touch.

That evening, there was a celebration. Nothing official, nothing organized by the staff. Just the patients gathering in the common room, sharing food smuggled from the kitchen, marking the occasion in the quiet way of people who have learned not to draw attention to their joys.

Deirdre sat at the center, Cesare beside her, their hands intertwined. She looked different, I thought. Not transformed, as she had said, but lighter somehow. As though a weight she had carried for years had finally been set down.

I sat at the edge of the gathering, watching, documenting in my mind what I would later write in my notebook. The witness at the margins, recording a happiness I could observe but not fully share.

Gari appeared in the doorway. He watched the gathering for a moment, his face unreadable, then withdrew. I wondered what he was thinking. Whether he saw the survival of his most interesting subject as a victory or a disappointment. Whether his research would continue or whether Deirdre’s choice to live had ended something he had been building toward.

I did not trust Gari. I had never trusted him. But tonight, that distrust felt distant, irrelevant. Tonight was about survival. About Deirdre’s choice and its vindication. About the prophecy that had been wrong, or incomplete, or

misunderstood.

The celebration continued into the night. Someone found a bottle of wine, smuggled in by a visitor weeks ago, saved for an occasion that finally arrived. Glasses were raised. Toasts were made. Deirdre laughed, a genuine laugh, the sound of someone who had not expected to hear her own laughter again.

I slipped away before the wine ran out. I walked to the garden, to the spot where the groundskeeper had planted that morning. The soil was dark and undisturbed, the seeds invisible beneath the surface, beginning their slow work of becoming.

The plum tree stood nearby, its blossoms mostly fallen now, the petals scattered on the ground like snow that had forgotten how to be cold. The fruit was forming, tiny green nubs where the flowers had been, the promise of summer already taking shape.

The bees had come. The pollination had occurred. The plum would bear fruit, and the fruit would ripen, and the cycle would continue as it always had, indifferent to prophecy, indifferent to human fear and hope.

I thought about my father, planting seeds in cold ground, knowing the crop would fail. I thought about my wife, walking out the door on the morning of her death, trusting a future that would not arrive.

I thought about Deirdre, choosing life when death had seemed certain, trusting a future she could not see.

Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows.

I had seen. And what I had seen was this: a woman alive when prophecy said she would be dead. A future that had not happened. A choice that had mattered.

Maybe that was enough. Maybe that was all any of us could hope for.

The night deepened around me. The stars emerged, cold and distant, marking their ancient patterns across the sky. Inside the building, the celebration continued, sounds of laughter filtering through the windows, the music of survival.

I remained in the garden, alone with the planted seeds and the forming fruit and the memory of everything that had led to this moment.

The prophecy had said she would die before the spring planting.

The spring planting had come.

She had not died.

I saw. And I said nothing. And in the silence, something grew.

## The Final Episode

Three nights after the planting began, Cesare had his final episode.

I was not there when it happened. I learned of it the next morning, from Deirdre, who came to my room with shadows under her eyes and a stillness in her face that I had not seen since before her choice.

“He spoke last night,” she said. “The prophetic voice. I was there. I heard everything.”

“What did he say?”

Deirdre moved to the window of my room, looked out at the garden where the plum tree stood, its fruit beginning to form. She did not answer immediately.

“He spoke for a long time. Longer than any episode I’ve witnessed. The words came through him like water through a broken dam, rushing, relentless.” She paused. “Most of it was fragments. Images. Things I couldn’t connect to anything I recognized. Futures of people I don’t know, places I’ve never seen.”

“But some of it you recognized.”

“Some of it.” She turned to face me. “He spoke about you, Francis. About your future. About what you’ll do after you leave Emain.”

“After I leave?”

“You won’t stay forever. The prophecy was clear about that. You’ll leave this place, and you’ll write about what happened here. Not for publication, not for anyone else to read. Just for yourself. A record of everything you witnessed.” She smiled faintly. “The prophecy called it ‘the document of the witness.’ It said you would spend years writing it, refining it, trying to understand what you saw.”

I thought about my notebooks, my transcripts, my endless documentation. The idea that I would continue writing, that the witness would become the author of his own witnessing, felt both inevitable and strange.

“Did it say what I would understand?”

“No. Only that you would try. That the trying would be the point, not the understanding.”

“What else?”

Deirdre was quiet for a moment. The morning light through the window made her look older, or perhaps just clearer, the softness of illness replaced by the definition of survival.

“He spoke about us. About Cesare and me. About what happens next.”

“Tell me.”

"We leave Emain. Not escaping this time, but released. Gari's research reaches a conclusion, or runs out of funding, or simply loses interest. Conor signs the papers that free me from commitment. We walk out the front door, legally, officially, together."

"That's good. That's hopeful."

"It is." But her voice carried something other than hope. Something more complicated. "The prophecy showed us in a house somewhere. Small, modest. A garden in the back, like the one here, but ours. Morning glories on a trellis. Roses, red and white. The garden I saw in my visions, Francis. The garden where I saw myself old."

"Then the survival visions were true. You'll live. You'll have the future you chose."

"Maybe." She wrapped her arms around herself. "But the prophecy also said something else. Something I don't know how to interpret."

"What?"

"It said: 'The somnambulist speaks his last. The cabinet closes and does not open again. The door through which futures passed becomes a door through which nothing passes. He wakes, and does not walk in sleep again.'"

I felt something cold move through me. "His last episode. Last night was his final prophecy."

"That's what it seems to say. The prophetic voice will stop. The trance states will end. Cesare will become..." She searched for words. "Ordinary. Just a man, without the gift or the curse. Without the words that come from somewhere else."

"Isn't that what he wanted? He hated the episodes. He hated speaking futures he couldn't remember."

"Yes. He hated it." Deirdre's voice was soft, uncertain. "But it was also who he was. The somnambulist, the speaker, the door. If that stops, if the prophecies end, who does he become? What's left when the thing that defined you disappears?"

I thought about my own losses. The wife who had defined my happiness. The father who had defined my understanding of strength. The identities that had been stripped away, leaving only the witness, the recorder, the man who watched and wrote things down.

"What's left is what chooses what's left," I said. "He'll become whoever he decides to become. That's what you did. That's what any of us do when the defining thing ends."

"I hope so. I hope he can find himself in the silence, after so many years of speaking without meaning to."

"He has you. He has the future you'll build together. The garden, the house, the life beyond Emain."

Deirdre nodded slowly. "The prophecy showed that too. Years of ordinary life. Growing vegetables, reading books, aging together. The things everyone hopes for

and most people take for granted.” She paused. “It felt like a gift, Francis. Not the prophecy itself, but what it showed. A future so mundane it would be boring to anyone who hadn’t spent years expecting to die.”

“Mundane isn’t boring when you’ve earned it.”

“No. It’s not.”

She moved toward the door, then stopped.

“There’s one more thing. One thing the prophecy said that I haven’t told you.”

“Tell me.”

“At the end, after all the fragments and images, after the visions of you and us and the futures spreading out from this moment, Cesare’s voice said something strange. Something I can’t explain.”

“What?”

“He said: ‘The strong have said nothing until they saw. Now they have seen. Now they may speak. But what they speak will not be prophecy. It will be something else. It will be the thing that comes after prophecy. The thing that makes prophecy unnecessary.’”

I turned the words over in my mind, looking for meaning. “What comes after prophecy?”

“I don’t know. The voice didn’t explain. It just said the words and then stopped. Cesare woke up, confused as always, not remembering anything.”

“It could mean that once you’ve seen the future clearly, you don’t need prophecy anymore. You can just live it. Act it. Be in it without needing to see beyond it.”

“Perhaps.” Deirdre opened the door. “Or it means something else entirely. Something we won’t understand until we’re living it.”

She left. I remained in my room, looking out at the garden, the plum tree, the forming fruit.

The strong have said nothing until they saw. Now they have seen. Now they may speak.

What would I speak? What words would come from me, now that I had seen so much?

I picked up my notebook. This time, I wrote.

I found Cesare in the garden that afternoon, sitting on the bench beneath the plum tree. His face was calm, clearer than I had seen it since we met. The shadows of sleepless nights and prophetic exhaustion had faded, replaced by something that looked almost like peace.

“Deirdre told me what happened,” I said. “The final episode. The prophecy that said there wouldn’t be any more.”

“Yes.” He did not look at me, kept his eyes on the river moving south. “I felt it when I woke. A silence inside me that wasn’t there before. A door that had been open my whole life, and now it’s closed.”

"How do you feel about it?"

"I don't know yet. It's too strange. Too new." He paused. "For two years, I've lived with the knowledge that words would come through me without warning. That I would speak futures I couldn't control or remember. Now that's over. The words have stopped. I'm just... me."

"That sounds like a relief."

"It is. And it isn't." He turned to look at me. "The prophecies were a burden, Francis. A curse I never asked for. But they were also a connection to something larger than myself. Something that moved through me, used me, spoke through me. Without that, I'm just a man sitting on a bench, looking at a river."

"That's what most of us are. Most of us never have anything larger moving through us. We just live our lives, make our choices, try to understand what we can."

"I know. And I know I should be grateful. The episodes are over. Deirdre is alive. We have a future together, a real future, with gardens and houses and all the ordinary things." He smiled faintly. "But I can't help wondering what I've lost. What the silence means. Whether the door closed because it was finished speaking, or because I failed somehow, or because the things it needed to say have all been said."

"Does it matter why?"

"Perhaps not. The why is another form of prophecy, another attempt to see beyond the moment into causes and meanings that don't exist." He stood, brushed dirt from his clothes. "Deirdre chose to live without knowing whether the choice would work. I have to choose to be silent without knowing what the silence means. That could be what the prophecy meant by 'the thing that comes after prophecy.' Not understanding, but acceptance. Not seeing, but being."

"That sounds like wisdom."

"It sounds like giving up. But maybe giving up the need to understand is a form of wisdom." He began to walk toward the building, then stopped. "Thank you, Francis. For witnessing. For writing things down. For being here."

"I didn't do anything."

"You did everything that could be done. You watched. You recorded. You cared." He met my eyes. "That's not nothing. That's what love looks like when it can't change anything. Presence. Attention. The willingness to see."

He walked away, toward Deirdre, toward the future the prophecy had shown, toward the ordinary life that waited beyond the walls of Emain.

I remained on the bench, beneath the plum tree, looking at the river.

The strong have said nothing until they saw.

I had seen. I had said nothing while I saw. Now the seeing was over, or this part of it was over, and something else would begin.

What would I speak, now that I could speak?

I did not know yet. But I would find out. I would write it down. I would make a record of the thing that comes after prophecy, the thing that makes prophecy unnecessary.

Whatever that was.

## The Departure

May arrived with warmth and birdsong and the smell of things growing. The grounds of Emain transformed, the bare branches filling with leaves, the garden erupting in color, the river softening from the dark rush of snowmelt to something slower, gentler, almost friendly.

The plum tree bore fruit. Small green plums clustered on its branches, hard and unripe, months away from harvest. But they were there. The bees had done their work. The pollination had succeeded. Something would grow.

Gari called me to his office on the third of May. The Expressionist painting still hung behind his desk, the distorted figure still reaching for something it could not grasp. But Gari himself looked different. Older, perhaps. Tired in a way that went beyond sleeplessness.

"The research is concluding," he said. "The funding has been reallocated. The institutional review board has raised concerns about continued observation of subjects who no longer exhibit the phenomena we were studying."

"Cesare's episodes have stopped."

"Yes. And Ms. Lavery's commitment papers are being reviewed. Her husband has indicated he no longer wishes to maintain her involuntary status." Gari's mouth twisted, something between a smile and a grimace. "It seems Mr. Lavery has other concerns occupying his attention. Legal concerns. Financial concerns. The kind of concerns that make a troublesome wife the least of one's problems."

Deirdre's bluff in the service entrance. The secrets she had implied she knew. Perhaps she had known more than she realized. Perhaps Conor's fear had been well-founded.

"What happens now?"

"Now we wind down. The subjects who can be discharged will be discharged. The staff who are no longer needed will be reassigned. The Institute will continue in some form, but not as a research facility. Just another psychiatric hospital in the Hudson Valley, treating ordinary patients with ordinary conditions."

"And me?"

Gari looked at me for a long moment. The light through the windows caught his face, revealing lines I had not noticed before, the erosion of ambition by time.

"You were never really staff, Dr. Morrow. You came here looking for something. Did you find it?"

I thought about the question. I thought about my wife, dead in our apartment, her blood on the sheets I had dreamed about the night before. I thought about my father, hanging in the barn, the seeds rotting in the cold ground. I thought about Cesare speaking prophecies he could not remember, about Deirdre seeing futures she could not change, about the long months of witnessing and documenting and trying to understand.

"I don't know," I said honestly. "I found something. I'm not sure it's what I was looking for."

"That's usually how it works." Gari leaned back in his chair, steeping his fingers. "The Lavery case is particularly frustrating from a research perspective. The prophetic utterances clearly predicted her death before the spring planting. The spring planting has occurred. She is alive. The prophecy was wrong."

"Or the prophecy described a possibility that her choice foreclosed."

Gari waved a hand dismissively. "Metaphysics. The data shows a clear prediction that failed to materialize. In statistical terms, it's an outlier. An anomaly. It happens in any dataset of sufficient size. Some predictions will fail simply by chance." But as he spoke, his eyes flicked to the Expressionist painting behind his desk—the distorted figure, the grasping hands—and his jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. I remembered his trembling hands after the induced prophecy, the terror beneath his triumph. He remembered too. He was choosing not to go there. He shook his head. "I had hoped for something more definitive. Something publishable. Instead, we have a patient who recovered spontaneously and a somnambulist whose episodes ceased without explanation. Neither outcome advances our understanding of the underlying mechanisms."

I said nothing. Gari was looking at the data, at the statistics, at the research outcomes. He was not seeing what I had seen: a woman who had chosen to live, a man who had found love, a future that had been made rather than received. He was looking for mechanisms when he should have been looking for meaning.

But perhaps that was the difference between us. Perhaps that was why I had come to Emain as a researcher and would leave as something else.

Gari stood, extended his hand. "Thank you for your contributions, Dr. Morrow. Your documentation has been thorough and valuable. Perhaps someday you'll publish something. A case study. A memoir. Something that makes sense of what happened here."

I shook his hand. "Perhaps."

"Or perhaps not. Perhaps some things resist being made sense of. Perhaps the best we can do is record them and let others draw their own conclusions."

I left his office for the last time. The Expressionist painting watched me go, its distorted figure still reaching, still grasping, still failing to hold whatever it sought.

I found Cesare and Deirdre in the garden, sitting on the bench beneath the plum tree. They were holding hands, their shoulders touching, their faces calm.

They looked like what they were: two people in love, waiting for their life together to begin.

"Gari told me," I said. "The research is ending. You'll be released."

"We know." Deirdre smiled. "The lawyers came this morning. Conor has signed the papers. I'm no longer committed. I'm free to go wherever I want, with whoever I want."

"What happened to him? Gari mentioned legal troubles."

"The things I claimed to know that night in the service entrance." Deirdre's voice was thoughtful. "I was bluffing, or I thought I was. But the sight doesn't always announce itself. Sometimes it speaks through guesses that turn out to be true. I implied I knew about financial irregularities, about disappeared associates. I was extrapolating from fragments, from glimpses I hadn't fully understood." She paused. "It turns out I knew more than I realized. Or the sight knew, and used my bluff to speak the truth."

"So it was prophecy after all."

"It was both. A bluff that was also true. A guess that was also knowledge. The sight works that way sometimes. It doesn't always feel like seeing. Sometimes it feels like lying until the lie becomes the truth."

"And Cesare?"

"My status was always voluntary," he said. "I came here for treatment. The treatment is over. The episodes have stopped. There's nothing left to treat."

"Where will you go?"

They looked at each other, a private glance that carried years of conversation in a single moment.

"We found a place," Deirdre said. "A small house, upstate, near the Catskills. There's a garden in the back. Room for vegetables, for flowers. A trellis that needs repair." She laughed softly. "I've already bought morning glory seeds. And rose bushes. Red and white."

The vision. The garden she had seen herself standing in, old and gray-haired. She was going to build it. She was going to make the vision real.

"The prophecy showed you there," I said.

"The prophecy showed a possibility. We're going to turn it into reality." Cesare squeezed Deirdre's hand. "That's what the thing after prophecy looks like, isn't it? Not seeing futures, but making them. Not speaking what will happen, but doing what we choose."

"I hope you're right. I hope the future is as ordinary and peaceful as the prophecy showed."

"It won't be. No future is ordinary or peaceful, not really. There will be difficulties, disappointments, sorrows we can't foresee." Deirdre's voice was calm, accepting. "But we'll face them together. That's the difference. Not the absence of suffering, but the presence of someone to suffer with."

I thought about my wife. The loneliness of her death, the isolation of my grief. If I had spoken, if I had told her about the dream, would it have changed anything? Probably not. She would have died anyway. But she would have known she was loved. She would have known I had tried.

"I should have told her," I said. The words came out before I could stop them. "My wife. The dream I had before she died. I should have told her, even if it wouldn't have changed anything."

Deirdre looked at me with those river-colored eyes. "Yes. You should have."

"I know."

"But you didn't. And you've carried that silence for more than two years, letting it grow heavier and heavier." She stood, moved toward me. "The question isn't whether you should have spoken. The question is what you do now. How you carry what you carry. Whether you let the silence crush you or learn to live with its weight."

"I don't know how to do that."

"No one does, until they do it." She reached out, touched my arm. "You witnessed us, Francis. You watched Cesare struggle with words he couldn't control, watched me struggle with visions I couldn't change. You saw how we learned to carry what we carry. Now it's your turn."

"To carry the silence?"

"To transform it. To make it into something other than weight." She glanced at Cesare, then back at me. "You're going to write about what happened here. The prophecy said so. 'The document of the witness.' That's how you transform silence into something else. Not by speaking it aloud, but by writing it down. Making a record. Giving the silence a shape that others can see."

I thought about my notebooks. The transcripts. The endless pages of observation and analysis. All of it raw material for something I had not yet written, something that had not yet taken shape.

"I don't know if I can."

"You can. You've been preparing for it all along." Cesare stood, joined Deirdre beside me. "Everything you've witnessed, everything you've documented, it's all been leading to this. The story you'll tell. The meaning you'll make from what you saw."

"What if I can't make meaning from it? What if there is no meaning, only events, only things that happened without pattern or purpose?"

"Then you'll write that. You'll make a record of meaninglessness, and that will be its own kind of meaning." Cesare smiled, the first unguarded smile I had seen from him. "Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows. You've seen, Francis. Now you can say something. Now you can speak."

They left Emain on the seventh of May. A taxi came for them, an ordinary yellow cab that looked absurdly mundane against the backdrop of the Institute's

Georgian facade. They had few possessions: a suitcase each, a box of books, the remnants of their months at Emain.

I stood in the driveway, watching them load their things into the trunk. The morning was bright and warm, the kind of spring day that made it hard to believe in tragedy, in prophecy, in anything but the simple goodness of being alive.

Deirdre embraced me before she got in the cab. A long embrace, longer than I expected, her arms tight around me.

"Thank you," she said into my ear. "For seeing. For writing. For not looking away."

"Thank you for surviving."

She pulled back, looked at me. "I didn't do it for you. I didn't do it for anyone but myself. But I'm glad you were there. I'm glad someone will remember."

Cesare shook my hand. His grip was firm, steady, the grip of a man who no longer trembled at the prospect of speaking things he could not control.

"Write it down," he said. "All of it. The prophecies, the visions, the choices. Don't let it disappear."

"I won't."

"And when you're finished, when the document is complete, find us. Come to the house in the Catskills. See the garden Deirdre is building. See what the prophecy looks like when it becomes real."

"I will."

They got in the cab. The doors closed. The engine started.

I watched the taxi drive away, down the long driveway, through the gates, onto the road that led south toward the city and then north toward the mountains. I watched until it disappeared around a curve, until the sound of the engine faded, until there was nothing left but the morning light and the birdsong and the smell of growing things.

The plum tree stood in the garden, its fruit forming, its branches heavy with promise. The river moved south, as it always had, as it always would. The building rose behind me, its mismatched wings reaching toward a sky that offered no answers.

Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows.

I had seen. I had said nothing while I saw. Now the seeing was over.

Now the speaking could begin.

I walked back inside. I went to my room. I opened my notebook to a fresh page.

I began to write.

## The Garden

I finished writing this document in the autumn after my departure from Emain. Three years have passed since then. Three years of ordinary life, of teaching and reading and trying to understand what I witnessed during those strange months in the house on the hill.

I did not publish the document. The prophecy said I would write it for myself, not for others, and that proved accurate. I have shown it to no one. I have kept it in a drawer in my desk, taking it out occasionally to read, to revise, to add details I remembered or correct errors I discovered. It has grown and changed over the years, becoming something different from what I first set down in my notebook on the day Cesare and Deirdre left.

Whether it makes sense of what happened, I cannot say. I have tried to record faithfully what I saw, what I heard, what I understood and failed to understand. I have tried to let the events speak for themselves, without imposing meanings they may not possess. If there is a lesson in this story, I have not found it. If there is a pattern, it remains hidden from me.

But I have found something else. Something I did not expect when I began.

I have found a way to carry what I carry.

The silence I kept about my wife's death, the dream I did not speak of, the guilt I bore for eighteen months before arriving at Emain and for years afterward: it has not disappeared. I still wake sometimes in the night, remembering her face, remembering the blood on the sheets, remembering the words I did not say. But the weight has changed. It has become something I can hold rather than something that holds me.

Writing helped. The act of putting words on paper, of giving shape to what had been shapeless, transformed the silence into something external, something I could look at rather than drown in. The document of the witness became, in a way I did not anticipate, a document of my own witnessing. Not just Cesare and Deirdre, but myself. Not just their story, but mine.

That is what the strong do, I think, after they have seen. They find a way to speak. Not prophecy, not prediction, not claims about futures they cannot know. Just the honest record of what they saw and felt and tried to understand. The thing that comes after prophecy. The thing that makes prophecy unnecessary.

I visited Cesare and Deirdre last month, as Cesare had asked me to do. The house in the Catskills is small, modest, exactly as the prophecy described. A

wooden structure, painted white, with a porch that looks out over a valley where mist gathers in the mornings and disperses as the sun rises.

The garden is in the back.

I stood at the edge of it, looking at what they had built. Morning glories climbed the trellis, their blue flowers open to the afternoon light. Rose bushes lined the fence, red and white, their blooms heavy and fragrant. Vegetables grew in neat rows: tomatoes, peppers, squash, the harvest of their fourth summer in this place.

Deirdre was kneeling among the tomatoes, her hands in the dirt, her hair gray now, grayer than when I knew her at Emain. The graying had come early, she would tell me later—a gift from her mother's side, accelerated perhaps by the years of visions and the weight of knowledge no one should have to carry. She looked up when she heard me approach, and she smiled, and the smile was the same smile I remembered, the sad wise smile of a woman who has seen too much and chosen to live anyway.

"Francis. You came."

"I said I would."

She stood, brushed dirt from her knees. "The document. Did you finish it?"

"Years ago. I've been revising it ever since."

"Will you let us read it?"

"If you want. Though you lived it. You know what happened better than I do."

"We know what happened to us. We don't know what happened to you. We don't know how it looked from the outside, from the witness's perspective." She moved toward me, took my hands in hers. Her hands were rough now, calloused from gardening, from the ordinary labor of building a life. "That's what I want to read. Not our story. Yours."

Cesare emerged from the house, carrying a tray with glasses and a pitcher of something cold. He looked different too: older, heavier, more substantial. The ethereal quality he had possessed at Emain, the sense that he might dissolve into mist at any moment, was gone. He looked solid. Real. Present.

"Francis." He set down the tray, embraced me. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you both."

We sat on the porch, drinking lemonade, looking out at the valley. The late afternoon light was golden, warm, the kind of light that makes everything look like a memory even while it's happening.

"Lavinia sends her regards," Deirdre said. "She couldn't visit this year. Her sister in Mayo is ill."

"Lavinia." I had not spoken her name in years. "I wondered what happened to her. After the escape."

"The charges were dropped. Conor's legal troubles made it difficult for him to pursue anyone else's. She went back to Ireland, found work at a hospital in

Galway." Deirdre smiled. "She writes to us. Christmas cards, mostly. She's happy, I think. Or as happy as someone can be who has seen what she saw."

"Do you still have the visions?" I asked Deirdre.

"Sometimes. Less often than before. And they're different now. Smaller. Glimpses of tomorrow, not years from now. Whether it will rain. Whether the tomatoes are ready to pick." She smiled. "Useful visions. Domestic visions. The sight has become practical rather than prophetic."

"And you?" I asked Cesare. "Any episodes?"

"None. Not since the last one at Emain. The door closed and stayed closed." He was quiet for a moment. "I don't miss it. I thought I might, but I don't. The silence inside me where the prophecies used to gather, it's peaceful now. Empty in a good way. Like a room that's been cleaned out, ready for something new."

"What's the something new?"

"This." He gestured at the house, the garden, Deirdre beside him. "Ordinary life. The thing I never thought I'd have. The thing the prophecy promised but I didn't dare believe."

I thought about the September recording, the first prophecy I had heard at Emain. The woman of sorrows will die by her own hand before the spring planting. It had not come true. The prophecy had been wrong, or incomplete, or describing a possibility that Deirdre's choice had foreclosed.

I thought about the April recording, the final prophecy. The woman of sorrows puts down her sorrow. The spring comes, and she is in it. It had come true. Deirdre was in the spring, in all the springs that followed, building her garden, growing her vegetables, living the ordinary life the prophecy had promised.

Two prophecies, contradictory, both spoken through the same voice, both claiming authority over the same future. One had proved false. One had proved true. And I still did not understand why.

"Did you ever figure it out?" I asked. "Why the prophecies contradicted each other? Why one came true and the other didn't?"

Cesare and Deirdre exchanged a glance. The private glance of people who have discussed something many times and reached a conclusion they're not sure how to share.

"We have a theory," Deirdre said. "Not an explanation. Just a way of thinking about it that makes sense to us."

"Tell me."

"The prophecies were both true," Cesare said. "Both futures were real, in some sense. They existed as possibilities, as paths the world could take. The October prophecy described one path. The April prophecy described another."

"But only one could happen."

"Only one did happen. But both could have happened. Both were genuine futures, not illusions or errors." He leaned forward. "The difference was the

choice. Deirdre's choice. When she decided to live, she collapsed the possibilities. She made one path real and the other unreal. The prophecy that came true was the one that matched her choice."

"So the prophecies didn't determine the future. The choice determined which prophecy came true."

"Perhaps. Or the prophecies and the choice were part of the same thing. The April prophecy was speaking Deirdre's choice before she made it, describing the future she was going to create rather than the future that was going to happen to her."

I turned this over in my mind. It was not an explanation. It did not resolve the contradiction or explain how prophecy worked. But it was a way of thinking about what had happened, a framework that honored both the reality of the prophecies and the reality of the choice.

"The thing that comes after prophecy," I said. "That's what the final prophecy called it. The thing that makes prophecy unnecessary."

"Choice," Deirdre said. "That's what we think it means. Choice makes prophecy unnecessary. Once you truly choose, once you commit to a path with your whole self, you don't need to see the future anymore. You're creating it. You're living it. The prophecy becomes irrelevant because you're the one making it real."

"That's a hopeful interpretation."

"It's the interpretation we've chosen to believe." She smiled, the sad wise smile. "That's another choice, isn't it? What to believe about what happened. What meaning to find in the meaningless. We chose to believe that our choices matter, that the future is open, that prophecy describes possibilities rather than certainties. Maybe we're wrong. Maybe the October prophecy was always false and we got lucky. But we choose to believe otherwise."

The sun was setting, the golden light turning red, the valley filling with shadow. Somewhere in the garden, a bird sang, its voice clear and bright against the gathering dusk.

"Will you stay the night?" Cesare asked. "We have a spare room. You could see the garden in the morning, when the light is best."

I thought about my apartment in the city, my teaching job, my ordinary life. I thought about the document in my desk drawer, the story I had been telling myself for years, the record of witnessing that had become its own form of witness.

"Yes," I said. "I'll stay."

I woke early the next morning and walked to the garden before the others were up. The mist lay heavy in the valley, white and soft, muffling sound and blurring edges. The garden emerged from the mist like something from a dream, the morning glories on the trellis, the roses along the fence, the vegetables in their neat rows.

I stood where Deirdre had stood in her visions, where the prophecy had shown her standing, old and gray-haired, surrounded by flowers. She was not old yet, not truly. But she was here. She had made it to this place. She had built this garden with her own hands.

Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows.

I had seen. I had written it down. I had carried the silence and transformed it into something I could hold.

And now I was standing in a garden that a prophecy had described, that a choice had created, that two people in love had built from nothing but hope and labor and the willingness to believe in a future they could not know.

The mist began to lift. The sun emerged, pale and golden, touching the flowers with light. Somewhere in the house, a door opened, footsteps on wood, the sounds of morning beginning.

I did not know what the future held. I had never known. The prophecies were silent now, the visions faded, the voices that spoke through sleeping men and dreaming women gone quiet. But that was all right. That was how it should be.

The thing that comes after prophecy is life. Ordinary, uncertain, unforeseeable life. The kind of life everyone lives, whether they have the sight or the voice or nothing at all. The kind of life that can only be lived forward, one choice at a time, one day at a time, until the days run out.

I walked back toward the house. Deirdre was on the porch, holding a cup of coffee, watching the mist lift from the valley. She raised a hand in greeting.

“Good morning, Francis.”

“Good morning.”

“Did you see the garden?”

“I saw it. It’s beautiful.”

“It’s ordinary. That’s what makes it beautiful.” She smiled, the smile I would remember for the rest of my life. “Do you want coffee? Cesare is making breakfast. Eggs from our chickens. Vegetables from our garden. Ordinary food for an ordinary morning.”

“That sounds perfect.”

I climbed the steps to the porch. I took the coffee she offered. I sat beside her, looking out at the valley, at the mist dissolving in the sun, at the world waking into another ordinary day.

Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows.

I had seen. I had spoken. And now I was here, in the garden the prophecy had promised, drinking coffee on a porch with a woman who was supposed to be dead.

Maybe that was the meaning. Maybe that was enough.

The sun rose higher. The mist burned away. The garden waited, patient and green, for whatever the day would bring.

# About the Author

**David Boles** is a multidisciplinary creative professional whose work spans authorship, dramatic literature, publishing, and education. He holds an MFA from Columbia University and has taught at institutions including CUNY, NYU, Rutgers, NJIT, and Fordham, covering subjects from Dramatic Literature to American Sign Language.

Boles founded David Boles Books Writing & Publishing in 1975, establishing one of the longest-running independent publishing operations in American literary history. His commitment to editorial independence and high production standards has shaped nearly five decades of publishing practice.

His web constellation includes Boles.com, BolesBooks.com, BolesBlogs.com, UnitedStage.com, Boles.ai, PrairieVoice.com, HumanMeme.com, and ScriptProfessor.com. Through these platforms, he explores the intersections of technology, creativity, philosophy, and human connection.

Boles is a member of the Dramatists Guild, Authors Guild, and PEN America. He operates under the philosophy that authorship requires full responsibility across writing, directing, and producing—a commitment to creative integrity that informs all his work.

*The Somnambulist's Prophecy* is the sixth novel in his Fractional Fiction series. He lives and works in New York City.

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# On the Source Materials

This novel synthesizes three classic literary source texts, weaving them together to create something new while honoring what each original work was trying to say.

**J.M. Synge, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1910)** — Synge’s final play retells the legend of Deirdre from the Ulster Cycle of Irish mythology. His Deirdre knows what awaits her, has heard the prophecies, and chooses to return to Ireland anyway, preferring brief happiness followed by death to a long life of exile and decay. The play’s central question—whether foreknowledge of doom obligates us to flee it or frees us to walk toward it with open eyes—provides the philosophical foundation for this novel.

**Inspired by Robert Frost, “The Strong Are Saying Nothing” (1936)** — Frost’s poem describes farmers planting seeds in spring, working alone, saying nothing about what they hope or fear. The poem captures an epistemological stance: the refusal to speak of outcomes that remain uncertain, the discipline of waiting for evidence before making claims. In this novel, original verses inspired by Frost’s themes function as refrain and thematic anchor. Francis Morrow’s father spoke of planting and silence while working the fields. Francis carries these words as inherited wisdom and inherited wound. The recurring line “Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows” is an original paraphrase honoring Frost’s vision.

**The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920)** — The foundational work of German Expressionist cinema tells of a hypnotist who displays a somnambulist named Cesare at a carnival sideshow. Cesare can predict the future but cannot remember what he says. The film’s destabilization of reality—the uncertainty about who is sane, who is in control, who is telling the truth—defines Expressionist cinema’s contribution to narrative art. This novel borrows character names (Francis, Cesare), the central image of the somnambulist who speaks prophecy, and the Expressionist atmosphere of institutional uncertainty.

These three source texts converge on a single question: What do we owe to knowledge of the future?

# The Fractional Fiction Series

The Fractional Fiction series synthesizes classic literary source texts with original narrative, contemporary research, and the author's interpretive vision. Each novel weaves multiple sources together, allowing each to illuminate the others, discovering resonances and tensions the original authors could not have anticipated.

The methodology requires fidelity to source (honoring what the original works were trying to say), contemporary grounding (incorporating current research that connects source material to present concerns), and original vision (creating something new that exceeds the sum of its parts).

Previous novels in the series:

- *The Held Land*
- *The Dying Grove*
- *The Inheritance*
- *The Kinship of Strangers*
- *The Corollary*

*The Somnambulist's Prophecy* is the sixth novel in the series.

# Author's Note

I began writing *The Somnambulist's Prophecy* in the winter of 2025, during a period when questions of fate and agency felt unusually urgent. The sense that we could see what was coming but could not stop it—that foreknowledge brought responsibility without power—haunted the cultural moment.

By synthesizing Synge's Irish tragedy, Frost's American stoicism, and Weimar Germany's cinematic anxiety, I could explore the question of prophetic knowledge without reducing it to allegory or polemic. The three source texts, separated by decades and oceans, shared a preoccupation with what we owe to the future we can see approaching.

The neuroscience research incorporated into the novel is real. Studies have documented distinctive patterns of brain connectivity in somnambulistic and hypnotic states. The phenomenology of speaking without remembering, of acting without conscious control, is documented clinical reality. The novel extrapolates from this research into speculative territory—prophetic content in somnambulistic speech—but the foundation is empirical.

The Irish mythology is also real, though transformed. The Deirdre legend exists in multiple versions across more than a millennium of storytelling. Synge's 1910 adaptation was itself a synthesis, combining medieval sources with the concerns of the Irish Literary Revival. My Deirdre carries this layered history, even as she becomes something new.

I have tried to honor my sources while making them my own. The reader familiar with Synge, Frost, and *Caligari* will recognize echoes and transformations. The reader unfamiliar with these works will, I hope, find a story that stands on its own.

*David Boles New York City January 2026*

# Discussion Questions

The following questions are designed for book clubs, classroom discussion, and individual reflection. They address the novel's themes, techniques, and philosophical concerns without presuming single correct answers.

### **On Prophecy and Fate**

1. The novel presents two contradictory prophecies about Deirdre's fate—one predicting her death before the spring planting, another predicting her survival. How do you interpret this contradiction? Does the novel suggest that prophecy describes possibilities rather than certainties, or does it leave the question unresolved?

2. Cesare speaks prophecy but cannot remember what he says. Deirdre sees futures but cannot change what she sees. Francis witnesses both but struggles to act on what he knows. Which of these positions do you find most sympathetic? Most troubling?

3. The novel suggests that “the thing that comes after prophecy” is choice—the capacity to act without needing to see the outcome. Do you agree with this interpretation? What other meanings might the phrase carry?

### **On Silence and Speech**

4. The line “Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows” (inspired by Robert Frost) functions as a refrain throughout the novel. Francis's father embodied this silence; so does Francis himself, until the novel's later chapters. When is silence strength, and when is it failure? Does the novel offer a clear answer?

5. Francis kept silent about his dream of his wife's death. Deirdre eventually speaks the truth about Conor's secrets to secure her escape. Cesare speaks prophecy involuntarily, without control or memory. How does the novel treat the ethics of speech and silence?

6. The novel ends with Francis finally writing the “document of the witness.” Is writing a form of speech or a form of silence? Does documentation change anything, or is it merely record-keeping?

### **On Choice and Agency**

7. Deirdre chooses to return to Emain rather than be captured. She insists that walking is different from being dragged, even if the destination is the same. Do you agree? Is the manner of our actions as important as the actions themselves?

8. Cesare distinguishes between acceptance and surrender. Acceptance acknowledges what is while continuing to act; surrender gives up on action entirely. How does this distinction apply to Deirdre's situation? To Francis's?

9. The novel suggests that Deirdre's choice to live may have determined which prophecy came true. If so, was the prophecy ever really fixed? Or was the “choice” itself predetermined, merely another element of fate?

## On Witnessing and Documentation

10. Francis describes himself as “the witness.” What does witnessing mean in the context of this novel? Is the witness a passive observer, or does witnessing itself constitute a form of action?

11. Gari wants to study Cesare and Deirdre; Francis wants to document them. How does the novel distinguish between these two approaches? Is documentation more ethical than experimentation, or are they equally problematic?

12. The novel is structured as Francis’s retrospective document, written years after the events it describes. How does this frame affect your reading? Do you trust Francis as a narrator?

## On the Source Materials

13. The novel synthesizes Synge’s *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, Frost’s “The Strong Are Saying Nothing,” and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. If you’re familiar with these sources, how do you see them transformed in the novel? If you’re not, does the novel work without knowledge of its sources?

14. The Expressionist techniques of *Caligari*—distorted spaces, unreliable narration, institutional ambiguity—shape the novel’s atmosphere. How does the setting of Emain Institute reflect or extend these techniques?

15. Synge’s Deirdre chooses death rather than submission. This novel’s Deirdre chooses life. How do you understand this transformation? Is the novel revising Synge’s tragedy or extending it?

## On Love and Connection

16. Cesare and Deirdre’s relationship develops under conditions of surveillance, institutional control, and prophetic doom. How does this context shape their love? Is their bond stronger or more fragile because of the circumstances?

17. Francis remains outside the central love story, watching and documenting but not participating. How does his loneliness—his dead wife, his silent father—affect his role as narrator?

18. The novel ends with Deirdre offering Francis coffee on the porch of the house she and Cesare have built. What does this moment represent? Has Francis found something, or is he still searching?

## Broader Themes

19. The novel was written during a period of political uncertainty, when questions of fate and agency felt urgent. Do you read the novel as speaking to contemporary concerns? If so, how?

20. Deirdre says that “mundane isn’t boring when you’ve earned it.” The novel ends with ordinary domestic life—gardens, chickens, breakfast. Is this ending satisfying? What does the novel suggest about the value of ordinary existence?

## A Note on Prophecy and Neuroscience

The neuroscience incorporated into *The Somnambulist’s Prophecy* is grounded in real research, though the novel extrapolates into speculative territory.

### **Somnambulism and Consciousness**

Somnambulism (sleepwalking) and related parasomnias involve complex behaviors performed during sleep without conscious awareness or subsequent memory. Research at institutions including the University of Zurich has documented distinctive patterns of brain connectivity during these states. The sleepwalking brain shows partial activation of motor and sensory regions while areas associated with self-awareness and memory consolidation remain dormant.

This creates the phenomenology Cesare experiences: action without agency, speech without memory, the sense of being a “door” through which something passes rather than an author of one’s own behavior.

### **Hypnosis and Suggestibility**

Hypnotic states share some features with somnambulism, including altered connectivity between brain regions and increased responsiveness to suggestion. The novel’s depiction of Gari’s hypnosis experiments draws on real protocols used in consciousness research, though the prophetic content of Cesare’s trance speech is fictional.

### **Precognition and the Scientific Consensus**

The scientific consensus does not support the existence of precognition—accurate knowledge of future events obtained through non-inferential means. The novel does not argue against this consensus. It treats prophecy as a literary and philosophical device rather than a claim about reality.

However, the novel does engage with the phenomenology of feeling that one knows what will happen. Anxiety, pattern recognition, and unconscious processing can create compelling subjective experiences of foreknowledge. Whether these

experiences reflect genuine perception of the future or retrospective construction of memory is a question the novel leaves open.

### **Further Reading in Neuroscience**

- Bassetti, C.L., et al. "Parasomnias—A Modern Perspective." *Sleep Medicine Reviews*, 2000.
- Bègue, I., et al. "Neural correlates of hypnotic suggestion." *NeuroImage*, 2023.
- Zadra, A., and Desautels, A. "Parasomnias and Other Sleep-Related Movement Disorders." *Handbook of Clinical Neurology*, 2011.

# The Deirdre Legend: A Brief History

The legend of Deirdre is one of the oldest and most frequently retold stories in Irish mythology. Its evolution across more than a millennium of storytelling reveals changing attitudes toward fate, gender, and agency.

## The Earliest Sources

The oldest surviving version of the Deirdre legend appears in *Longes mac n-Uislenn* (“The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu”), preserved in the twelfth-century Book of Leinster though composed centuries earlier. In this version, Deirdre is a “wild woman” figure—fierce, sexually aggressive, and associated with nature. She forces Naoise to elope with her by threatening his honor if he refuses.

The ninth-century tale places Deirdre firmly within the Ulster Cycle, the body of mythology centered on the warriors of Ulster and their king, Conchubar mac Nessa. The druid Cathbad prophesies before Deirdre’s birth that she will bring destruction upon the kingdom. Conchubar, rather than killing the child, raises her in isolation, intending to marry her himself.

## Medieval and Early Modern Versions

Later medieval versions soften Deirdre’s character, transforming her from a commanding figure who shapes her own fate into a more passive object of male desire and competition. The seventeenth-century redactions emphasize her beauty and sorrow while reducing her agency.

This transformation reflects broader cultural shifts in the representation of women in Irish literature, as Gaelic society came under increasing English influence and absorbed continental European literary conventions.

## The Irish Literary Revival

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw renewed interest in Irish mythology as part of the Irish Literary Revival. Writers including Lady Gregory, W.B. Yeats, and J.M. Synge produced new versions of the Deirdre legend that sought to recover its emotional power while adapting it for modern audiences.

Synge’s *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1910) is widely considered the finest dramatic treatment of the legend. Synge restored Deirdre’s agency while emphasizing her foreknowledge and acceptance of fate. His Deirdre chooses to return to Ireland knowing she will die, preferring a brief happiness followed by death to a long life

of exile and decay.

### **Contemporary Relevance**

The Deirdre legend continues to resonate because it addresses questions that remain urgent: What do we owe to knowledge of our own mortality? How do we balance love against self-preservation? When does acceptance of fate become surrender?

*The Somnambulist's Prophecy* extends this tradition, placing Deirdre's dilemma in a contemporary setting while preserving the essential tension between foreknowledge and choice.

### **Further Reading on the Deirdre Legend**

- Gantz, Jeffrey. *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*. Penguin Classics, 1981.
- Gregory, Lady Augusta. *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. John Murray, 1902.
- Synge, J.M. *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. Maunsel and Company, 1910.

# Further Reading

## The Source Texts

### J.M. Synge

- *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1910) - The primary Irish source for this novel
- *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) - Synge's most famous play
- *Riders to the Sea* (1904) - A one-act tragedy of fate and the sea

### Robert Frost

- *A Further Range* (1936) - Contains "The Strong Are Saying Nothing"
- *Collected Poems* - The complete poetry

### The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari

- Available in restored editions on home video and streaming platforms
- Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947) - A controversial but influential study of Weimar cinema

### Related Fiction

- Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2005) - On fate, acceptance, and institutional control
- José Saramago, *Blindness* (1995) - On institutional breakdown and human resilience
- Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) - On unreliable perception and architectural unease

### On Irish Mythology

- Thomas Kinsella, trans., *The Táin* (1969) - The central epic of the Ulster Cycle
- Marie Heaney, *Over Nine Waves: A Book of Irish Legends* (1994) - Accessible retellings

### On German Expressionism

- Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen* (1952) - Classic study of Expressionist cinema
- Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (2009)

### **On Consciousness and Neuroscience**

- Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985)
- Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens* (1999)

## **Also by David Boles**

## The Fractional Fiction Series

- *The Held Land*
- *The Dying Grove*
- *The Inheritance*
- *The Kinship of Strangers*
- *The Corollary*
- *The Somnambulist's Prophecy*

## Other Works

- *Arm Angles in American Sign Language* (with Janna Sweenie)
- Works of dramatic literature, essays, and criticism available at [BolesBooks.com](http://BolesBooks.com)

## Podcasts and Digital Content

- **Human Meme** - Philosophical podcast blending scientific research with narrative storytelling ([HumanMeme.com](http://HumanMeme.com))
- **Prairie Voice** - Literary journalism examining rural American life ([PrairieVoice.com](http://PrairieVoice.com))

# Acknowledgments

Every book is a collaboration, even when only one name appears on the cover.

I am grateful to the scholars and translators who have preserved the Deirdre legend across centuries, making it available for contemporary reimagining. I am grateful to the estate of Robert Frost for maintaining his poetry in the public consciousness, and to the archivists who have preserved *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* for audiences a century after its creation.

I am grateful to the neuroscientists whose research on somnambulism, hypnosis, and consciousness provided the empirical foundation for this novel's speculative elements. Science fiction and literary fiction both benefit from engagement with real science; I have tried to honor that principle.

I am grateful to the readers of my earlier Fractional Fiction novels, whose responses have shaped my understanding of what this methodology can accomplish. Writing is communication; communication requires listeners as well

as speakers.

I am grateful, as always, to New York City—the place where I live, work, and find the energy that drives my writing. The Hudson River runs south through this novel as it runs south through my daily life, a constant reminder that time moves in one direction and we must make of it what we can.

Those who plant in silence wait to see what grows.

I have seen. I have written. The seeing and writing continue.

*David Boles New York City 2026*