

This is Andy.

You know, the guy who can see the countdowns?

The numbers on people's foreheads that show when they'll die.

I saw your countdown once, if you remember. When you came to see me. To ask me to spy on The Traveling Salesman. No, I mean... No. That's not what you asked. You never told me that exactly. You gave me a necklace made of blackstones, said if I wore it while I slept, I'd enter someone else's dreams. You said two people in particular would be in the dream. And that you needed to know their countdowns. I figured whatever you were asking must be important, otherwise you wouldn't have come to me like that. And you always help people, so why shouldn't I help you?

You didn't say who's dream I'd be in, who's countdowns I'd see. But I didn't ask any questions.

[beat]

Did you know The Traveling Salesman would take an interest in me when he figured out my ability? Or that he wouldn't let me go once he knew I could tell him when people will die? Or were you so desperate to gain some upper hand over him that my safety, that the safety of others The Traveling Salesman had me spy on, never occurred to you? I'm not sure which would be worse - you not caring or you not realizing.

The Traveling Salesman visited me after the last time I called you. Rang my doorbell and offered me a smile. It's a strange feeling to see someone in real life who you've only ever seen in your dreams. No, not my dreams. Someone else's. Who I invaded.

"You should commodify that gift of yours," he told me. He said that like he was giving me advice. But what he really meant was he wanted to use me. Like you used me. But so much worse.

I thought when I called you before - that would be the last time I'd leave a message for you. But I think there's a few things you should know.

I was in New Orleans not long ago. The Traveling Salesman sent me there to find someone, someone close to you, and get her countdown. I didn't want to do this. But I really didn't have much choice. He has power, to get inside your head - to convince you to do things you don't want. I don't mean to keep coming back to this, I don't, but the only reason I was helping him is because you put me on his path.

This woman The Traveling Salesman had me following, she always carried an umbrella even when there isn't a cloud in the sky. Her name's Charlotte Price, but I'm sure you know that. I've heard you say her name more than once on your show. You've said she's the best oneironaut of

her generation. I had to look that word up. Seems like it'd be easier if she called herself a Dream Traveler. But what do I know? I'm only a guy who sees weird descending numbers on people's foreheads. Is there a fancy Greek or Latin word for that?

For weeks I could never get close to Charlotte. It was like the world would conspire against me if I tried. One time we were both at an open market, I walked toward her and suddenly a crowd formed between us and she disappeared. Other times, she'd twirl her umbrella, open it up, and block me from seeing her face.

The last time I tried to get near her, there was no one else around. We were both walking on the river bank. She went there a lot. She liked being close to the Mississippi. I went up behind her, it was night, and I was only several feet away. Almost arm's length. Almost close enough where I could grab her by the shoulder, spin her around and see her countdown. But that didn't happen.

A cold metal cylinder pressed against the back of my skull.

"Don't take another step," A woman's voice said. "Let Charlotte move on her way."

We both stood in silence and watched Charlotte walk down the river bank while twirling her umbrella. I don't know if she'd even known we were there.

The woman behind me said: "There's a bar a few blocks from here called The Hierophant, walk in front of me. When we get there, go inside, and sit in an empty booth. I'm right behind you. If you do anything other than what I've said, I'll shoot you, Andy."

I didn't see what choice I had.

The Hierophant wasn't crowded. Almost empty. Kind of a dirty place. But there was a soft warm light that felt welcoming. After I slid into a booth, a woman in her thirties with dark brown hair wearing a red leather jacket sat across from me. She kept one hand under the table. Presumably holding a gun pointed in my direction.

The numbers on her forehead - her countdown - were all blurred out. Like someone had smeared a greasy rag across them. I'd never seen anything like it before.

"You can't read my death date," she said.

I told her she was right.

"Flesh and spirit, Andy. That's what your power's rooted in. If Malcolm had consulted me before he made his sojourn to you... Before he gave you one of our grandfather's priceless artifacts, he'd-"

"You're Amelia Ryder," I cut her off.

"I am," she said. A bartender came by with a bottle of Jack Daniels and two tumblers filled with ice. They hadn't asked us what we wanted, but the bartender nodded at your sister like he knew her.

When he left us alone, she poured whiskey into both glasses and slid one to me. She drank with one hand but kept the other under the table.

"Drink," she said. "We're in a bar. Act normal."

"This isn't a normal situation for me," I said.

"Pretend," she said and took another drink. "First order of business: do you still have the blackstone necklace Malcolm carelessly left in your possession?"

"I do," I said. "In my messenger bag. It seemed kind of valuable, so I don't like leaving it alone."

"Kind of valuable..." She laughed. "Our grandfather stole that relic from the Nazis, and then again from the Butcher-Lyon Corporation. Malcolm had no right giving our inheritance away like that, especially without talking to me first. Give the necklace back to me."

I unbuckled the clasps on my bag, took the jewelry out, and passed it to her.

She spent a moment letting the soft light above us shine against the blackstones, and then let the necklace disappear in some hidden pocket of her jacket.

"Good. Now you've established some credibility with me."

"How're you hiding your countdown from me?" I asked.

"Magic," she said and took another drink. She said the word like she'd told me the weather. "*Why's it raining today?*" "*Magic.*"

"How do you do that sort of magic?" I asked. She didn't answer me right away. She took another drink and indicated I should too.

"You're what? Twenty two? Twenty three?" She asked. "Why'd you wait this long to let anyone know about your gift?"

"I told my parents when I was young. They didn't believe me," I said.

"What? You didn't have any friends in high school?" She said. "College? Girlfriends? Boyfriends? You could've talked to any of them. But you didn't. Why?"

I finished my whiskey before answering her question.

"Let's say they believe me. I convince them I'm not lying. Not crazy. What would their next question be?" I asked. She thought for a moment.

"When will I die?" She answered. I poured more whiskey into both our tumblers.

"I'd never be able to have a normal relationship with anyone. Ever. And think what that'd do to them - the person I told. They'd have to carry that information the rest of their lives. It'd make them wonder if they could change the number - die sooner. If they can, then they have free will. But they're dead. If not... What would that do to them? Maybe, maybe it'd give them some *carpe diem* - live their best, fullest life motivation. Maybe not. Maybe it'd make it impossible for them to ever feel happy - be constantly preoccupied with the knowledge of their own death."

"Preoccupied like you are with your own death?" She said.

"That's right," I answered.

"What if I could help you with that? I know how to change memories. Remove them. I don't have a gift like yours, but it's something I can do. Would you be interested in my help?"

"It wouldn't do any good. The moment I looked in a mirror again - I'd still see my own countdown."

"You listened to Malcolm's show before you left a message," she said. "Maybe even for a while, trying to work up the courage to call, right?"

I nodded.

"He talks about Ravenswood. Where he studied. Where I teach. It's a school of - *and for* - the supernatural, Andy. We can help you. Come back there with me, and we can help you."

"Help me how?" I asked.

"I'll show you how to turn your gift off," She said. "Forever if you want. Temporarily - turn it back on anytime you like - whatever you want. We just want you with us. Besides, had you not fallen through the cracks, you would've been accepted there as a student years ago. Anyone with an ability like yours - we try to help. You kept your gift so secret though, we didn't even know you existed until you called Malcolm. And then he threw you at The Salesman."

We both sat in silence and sipped our drinks. I'd heard you talk about Ravenswood before, of course I had. The thought of going there had occurred to me before. If there was anyone who could help me with the countdowns, they had to be at the best school of supernatural

scholarship in the country, right? Everything Dr. Ryder, the other Dr. Ryder, said sounded so right.

[BEAT]

But how could I trust her?

“I need to think about it,” I said.

“What’s there to-” she started but I cut her off.

“Your brother lied to me. Or at least he misled me. Used me. For all I know you’re doing the same.”

“The Traveling Salesman is using you now,” she said.

“At least he’s honest about it,” I said. I don’t know why I said it. I didn’t mean it. This is why I don’t like drinking. It makes me short with people. Knowing there was a gun pointed at me didn’t help either.

“That’s not fair,” she started. “I’m being completely-”

But I cut her off again.

“If I get up and leave now, will you shoot me?”

I couldn’t tell if she was offended or hurt by the question, but it clearly struck a nerve.

“You can leave freely,” she said. “If that’s what you want. But consider my offer. I’m not my brother. I’m trying to help you.”

From her jacket she pulled out a train ticket. A one way trip from New Orleans to Chicago. She said from there I could find my way to Mackinac Island and Ravenswood if I wanted.

I don’t know if it was because I was a little drunk or if I really didn’t trust her or if The Traveling Salesman had burrowed himself into my head, but I stumbled out of the booth, a little drunker than I realized. I picked up the ticket, thanked your sister, and left the bar. I couldn’t let myself make a big decision in that moment. That’s how I ended up in someone else’s dream, that’s how I ended up in New Orleans, that’s how I ended up in a bar with a gun pointed at me. I couldn’t keep doing this.

[BEAT]

I didn't go back to my motel. Instead I walked near the water and tried to sober myself up. And think about everything while I did. I had the chance to go to Ravenswood, to learn more about *this thing* I'd been born with. Ability, gift, curse, whatever. What if I really could learn to turn it off? And your sister created some counter magic to what I could do. She showed she knew enough about my power already that she had some mastery over it herself. Why shouldn't I go with her?

The night had gotten dark, and I hadn't paid attention to where I was walking. I was still following the river, but I was further down than I'd ever gone before. There was tall grass here, crickets jumpings all over, and less of a trail to follow. I hadn't checked the weather report earlier, and without warning: a heavy rain came down.

At first I ran back the way I'd come, but slowed when I realized I was already soaked and I was miles away from my motel.

So I walked next to the river in the rain back to the city proper.

I didn't see or hear her approach, but with as little warning as the storm had given, an umbrella appeared over my head. Holding it was Charlotte Price. I'd spent weeks chasing after her and here she was. I laughed when I finally got a chance to see her face.

"You don't even have a countdown," I told her.

"You don't have an umbrella," she replied.

"How do you not have one?" I asked.

"Does the Mississippi River have one? Do you know when it'll die?" She asked.

"That's impossible," I said.

"You're right but not for the reasons you think," she said. "Rivers are creatures made of dreams. Your gift only gives you insight into beings that fall within your purview. Those of flesh and spirit. Didn't Amelia tell you all this? I thought you two were finally going to meet tonight?"

"We meet," I said. "And she did tell me some of that."

We walked a little ways in silence. I didn't know this person at all. I mean, I did by reputation. And it was weird, I'd been searching for her, in a way, to turn over some intimate weakness of hers, some information about her to someone who meant her harm. I could tell she knew too. Knew everything. And she didn't care. She was still holding an umbrella over my head.

"Can I ask you a question?" I said.

“Of course,” she said.

“Should I trust Amelia Ryder or is she like her brother?”

Charlotte thought about this and didn’t answer me right away.

“Amelia is like her brother *and* you can trust her,” she said. I think she could tell her answer didn’t give me much, so she went on: “The Ryder siblings for as long as I’ve known them have worked hard towards an end that they believe is good. They act differently, but ultimately that’s what they’re both attempting. Malcolm has sacrificed much in the name of the good, and he expects others to do the same. His greatest flaw is that he holds others to the same standard that he holds himself.”

“What if I don’t want to hold myself to his standards?” I asked. “What if I just want to live my life?”

“You have a power, Andy. You can do with that what you want, but some of us with such gifts chose to use them in ways that help others,” she said.

“You can travel through dreams. You use that to help others?” I asked. She nodded.

“It’s why I’m here in New Orleans actually. It’s where the river’s dreams are the loudest,” she said. “The more pleasant I can make them, the less likely it is to wake again.”

“But all I can do is see when people will die,” I said. “It’s just depressing. I can’t enter a river’s dreams or whatever.”

“Before going to Ravenswood all I could do was stumble into one of my sisters’ dreams sometimes by accident. You have no idea what potential is dormant inside of you.”

“So you think I should go to Ravenswood?” I asked.

“Only if you want to risk discovering you’re capable of being more than who you are today,” she said.

Charlotte raised her umbrella and we were in front of my motel door. I had no idea how we got there, I could’ve sworn we were still walking through mud and tall grass, but there we were.

“So I should go to Ravenswood, right?” I asked and Charlotte laughed.

“Andy,” she said. “You were so concerned with people manipulating you - Malcolm when he asked for your help, Julian when he brought you here, Amelia when she pointed a gun at you... And here I am trying to give you a free choice and you don’t want to make it.”

She turned away from me and went back out into the rain.

I had a million other questions I wanted to ask her, but I let her walk away.

Before midnight I was on the train for Chicago. Late the next day, I was on Mackinac Island. Somehow your sister had beat me there and was waiting for me at the harbor.

“Didn’t take you long to make the choice to come here,” she said.

“I just needed to go for a walk,” I said.

[Beat]

I won’t bore you with all the other details - your sister took me to Ravenswood, helped me with admissions, register for classes. She even set aside time for an independent study with her. And that was going great... Only...

Now we’re getting to why I’m really calling.

I’m concerned about your sister. About Amelia...

A little over a month ago, something changed. I don’t know what, but she’s been more erratic. Distracted. She’s disappearing off the island for days or weeks at a time. And she’s evasive about why. I heard her on your show about a month ago. I believe everything she told you is true, but I also don’t think she said the full truth.

I would’ve contacted Charlotte Price if I could’ve - to ask for her help instead of yours, but I don’t know how to get ahold of her. And you’re Amelia’s brother, and I didn’t want to call you again... but your sister needs help.

So if you’re really as good as Charlotte says you are, then please help her. Figure out what’s wrong with your sister, and help her.