

[[Intro]]

You're standing on a branch, high off the ground, in a dark forest.
You have no idea how you got there.
But shadowy creatures with glowing eyes and bright fangs gather beneath you.

You need my help.

[[AVFD intro music fades in]]

This is A Voice From Darkness.

[[AVFD intro music fades out]].

Hello all, as always this is parapsychologist Dr. Malcolm Ryder - here to help you with your supernatural, paranormal, and otherworldly problems. And in just a little bit we'll open up the phone lines so I can take your calls and do just that. But first we'll go into our national alerts, which we have a few of tonight, so let's jump right into those:

[[National Alert music comes on]]

Our first national alert this evening is for Carol, West Virginia. I'm afraid to say that the Jack-o-Lantern Murderer has claimed four victims so far this season. The Harrison family of Carol, a family of four, have gone missing. Found in their home were pumpkins carved in their resemblances. As awful as this event was, let us hope it is the only one that occurs this season.

Our second national alert is for Laurel, Mississippi. It's been 92 years, and so it's time for the Goliath Cicadas to dig their way out of the earth, shed their skin, and devour much of the area, as they did nearly a century before. It's recommended all those within eighty miles of Laurel relocate for at least the next few months as the cicadas go through the above ground portion of their life cycle.

And our third national alert is for Lihue, Hawaii. Residents of the island town have noticed the ghostly presence of dozens of men dressed in civil war uniforms - both union and confederate. Now I probably shouldn't have to tell you this, but just as a reminder, no Civil War battle was fought in, what at the time, was the independent kingdom of Hawaii. But there was a reenactment society that traveled to Lihue in 1992 to give a demonstration of the battle of Shiloh. Afterwards, to celebrate, they drank moonshine made by the reenactor portraying General Albert Sidney Johnston. He'd made the beverage using, what he believed were historic methods common at battlefield camps. The tainted alcohol killed the entire reenactment society. So if you're a resident of Lihue, do not fear. Your island is not being taken over by Civil War ghosts. Merely haunted by 1990s re-enactors, which probably isn't anything to worry about. Though, please be advised: do not consume any beverages they might offer you.

All right, and that's it for national alerts tonight.

[[NA music fades out]]

Ryder: Phone lines are now open... and we have a caller. Hello, you're speaking with Dr. Malcolm Ryder. Why don't you tell us your name and what supernatural problem you're currently experiencing?

Rene: Hello Malcolm. Good to speak with you once again.

Ryder: I'm sorry, I'm not sure I recognize your voice. Who is this?

Rene: My name, as I've told you many times prior, is Rene Dupont. I exist with a rare condition where few people are able to retain memories of me.

Ryder: I've read of such cases before—

Rene: Yes, yes. Cutwell - who's town couldn't form new memories of him past the age of eight. And Pullman, who after disappearing one night, came back the next day and her family had completely forgotten her. Those are your go-to case studies on the matter.

Ryder: I take it from your perspective, I more or less give you the same conversation each time we talk?

Rene: Only during introductions. But that is quite common for me. I've grown used to it, in the same way chessmasters are used to playing the same opening moves at the beginning of any game - the Ruy Lopez, The Caro-Kann, The Queen's Gambit, and the like. Past the first several moves, any game of chess becomes its own uniquely played thing. As do my conversations, so do not worry - you are not a tedious conversation partner. We've spoken several times before - both on this very show, as well as in-person. And though you, and your listeners, will not remember me by the time this conversation ends, I usually find the experience worthwhile. But my time is limited. Before too long, you will forget me.

Ryder: Then please go on. Why have you called, Rene?

Rene: The last time we spoke, I told you The Traveling Salesman was searching for me.

Ryder: And did I offer you advice on how to avoid him?

Rene: No, quite the opposite in fact. You helped me realize I needed leverage when I went into a conversation with him, as he'd likely offer me a deal.

Ryder: That does not sound like advice I'd give.

Rene: Well that's how I remember the conversation, and seeing as I'm the only one who does...*(trails off)*

Ryder: And did you meet with him?

Rene: I did.

Ryder: How did that meeting go?

A beat.

Rene: Not as expected. I was working under the assumption that Julian Holloway was searching for me in his capacity as The Traveling Salesman. As a dealmaker.

Ryder: Please elaborate. How, or for what reason, was he searching for you?

Rene: I was in Cincinnati when last I called you. In your country, it's one of my favorite cities.

Ryder: Really? *Cincinnati*?

Rene: Oh yes. It's completely indistinct. Has no real character at all. Forgettable in almost every way. As a result, it breeds a certain sort of folk. The type who can retain small memories quite easily. Cincinnati, Ohio is one of the few places in the world where I can go into a cafe, have a short conversation with a barista, come back the next day, and though they might not remember my name, they recall my drink order. To even have such a small memory of me retained by someone is a rare treasure.

Ryder: I had no idea. I'm not sure any of the memorists at Ravenswood had ever thought to study the city from that perspective.

Rene: And it's a shame you won't remember this conversation to encourage them to do so. But let me continue. While in the Indistinct City, I was out for dinner one night, alone. A man in a black suit, without asking, sat across from me. I inquired who he was, and he put his left hand on the table. I made a comment. Something like: "I heard you favor wearing another color."

Julian Holloway, up to this point, had kept some distance from me. I've heard those like him have their own abilities - not only with dreams - but memories. Still, I imagine he spent some time preparing what he needed to not only approach me, but *know* me.

"Do not be alarmed, Mr. Dupont" he said and produced something from his pocket. A black-bladed knife. Carved from stone. Obsidian perhaps. Its age impossible to know. But the blade was sharp enough to sever the heavens from the earth.

Ryder: I've seen such a weapon before.

Rene: You're in possession of one now, if I'm not mistaken.

Ryder: Our time is limited, go on with your story.

Rene: Holloway said: "You were born with a misalignment of memory in relation to the rest of your metaphysical being — Your memory, dreams, shadow, echo, spirit, and flesh. I've been observing you, as I'm sure you've noticed, and I've come to offer my services, Mr. Dupont. To perform a sort of... ritual. A metaphysical surgery, if you will, that would perhaps allow you to live a normal life. Again, I'm not here in my capacity as a Salesman. I'm not offering you a deal."

"And why are you offering me this charity then?" I asked.

"I have my reasons for being here," he answered. "But the sooner we begin, the better."

"So I'm clear," I said, "You propose that you'd... cut into... not my physical body, but some other aspect of me? Reshape this element so that it is more like the average person's. And then afterwards, people would recall my name? My face? Be capable of forming lasting relationships with me?"

He smiled.

"Yes, that is exactly what I offer you."

"Then I'm sorry you've wasted your time, Mr. Holloway. And I am grateful you thought of me in your charity, but I will decline your offer. I have lived a long life this way, and have learned not only how to survive, but to appreciate the strange way life reveals itself to me. I am not looking to change so late in the game."

He leaned back in his chair.

"I was worried that might be your answer, Mr. Dupont. Due to your work behind the iron curtain, I thought perhaps you might wish to stay unremembered, for your safety if nothing else. But I'm afraid to inform you, what I offer is compulsory. I repeat myself: I am not making you a deal—"

As he said those words I lunged at him — pierced his shoulder with a fountain pen. A pen I'd carried with me since my days in Berlin. Needless to say, it was not filled with only ink. For years of my life, even with my rare condition, this was the only weapon I could carry across some borders.

I did not wait to see what effect the poison had or did not, but instead rushed out the door.

But as soon as I was outside, far down the street, in a crowd of people, I saw him - Julian Holloway. In his black suit, now holding a cloth napkin to his shoulder where I'd stabbed him. He took a single step forward and closed half the distance between us.

I ran down a back alley and emerged into another street, though this one less crowded. And there he was again. Closer to me still.

Down another street, I fled, and where I came out, of course, there he was. He took one more step, and was little more than an arm's length away. But I continued to run.

Chaotically I scrambled from one back alley to another and another. For several blocks I did this so I might become lost; in hopes of becoming forgotten in the Indistinct City.

My lungs were on fire. I had not had to run like that in years. Decades. But it was all for naught. Julian Holloway stood next to me, still with cloth napkin pressed against his shoulder with one hand, and in the other, he gripped the black-bladed knife.

"Cyanide, Sarin, and Anthrax," he said with a cheerfulness, as if listing the ingredients of a birthday cake. "Poisons have little effect on me."

I caught my breath and stood up, back straight — not wanting to face my possible death doubled-over.

"I know what you are," I said. "In East Berlin, we called a man much like you, who dressed in a oxblood-colored suit, missing the same finger, *Der Herr aus Farboshia*."

Holloway gave a small smile as he tossed the napkin to the ground. His shoulder no longer bleeding.

"A man who's distinguished himself in the Wilderness of Mirrors such as you have," he said. "Why, I'd be disappointed if you didn't know exactly what I was."

I did not run from him but took a step forward.

"There are many people with strange...supernatural ailments," I said. "Prophetic dreams, dark reflections, skin-shapers. Why seek out a man who is forgotten? Why memory?"

He stood perfectly still, but his eyes roamed over me, trying to see if I had some other trick - something to try and stab him with again. But all he saw was an old man - empty handed and out of breath.

"I'll be honest with you, Mr. Dupont—I have no reason not to. I need to cut your memory from you. To practice. Some time ago, I was forced to perform a surgery, with this very knife, unprepared and in haste. Despite that, everything went almost perfectly. But almost doesn't

count in such matters. What good is saving someone's life if they have no memory of who they are? If they become a completely different person? Do you understand why then, I need you in particular, Mr...."

He looked lost for a moment.

"Mr...." he hesitated. My name ran from him, as I had through the Cincinnati back streets.

"What is my name?" I asked. Holloway grimaced, his mind struggling for the answer.

His foot stumbled back.

When listing poisons before, he only mentioned mundane ones. The sort that harms and kills the common man. But the poison I used on him was anything but common. In our last conversation, Malcolm, I told you I would try to gain leverage over him. And I believe, in a way, I did. Or perhaps, if not that, a backup plan. He'd found a way to retain my name, to know and remember me. And I, in turn, found a poison that would cause even one of his kind to forget me.

I'm curious, does Ravenswood teach the making of metaphysical poisons? Ones that might kill dreams, alter reflections, or weaken the spirit?

Ryder: No, of course not.

Rene: A shame. What's the point of a school that focuses on the dark metaphysics if it does not journey into the darkest arts of that area? But we are nearly running out of time, I imagine. Let me continue:

Holloway's eyes filled with fog, as he was forgetting more and more of me. The poison taking its effect, though who knew how long it would be for him to completely forget, or if he even would. *Der Herren aus Farboshia*, are resilient after all.

Still, I seized my chance and ran once again, despite my lungs and legs begging me not to. I moved quickly past Holloway.

This time, not down back alleys, but dodging cars through the traffic of a major intersection. I was near downtown and close to my hotel. I travel with a firearm, though I do not carry it on me to dinner typically. I did not think a gun would do much good against Julian Holloway, but in that panicked moment, getting to it was all that made sense. If I was to die this night, it would only be after putting eight rounds in *The Traveling Salesman*. If he didn't forget me, I'd make sure he'd have good reason to remember me.

I sprinted through the hotel lobby. When I made it into the elevator, I was relieved not to see the black-suited gentleman behind me.

And when I got to my room and took the Walther from my luggage, I waited. I hoped Holloway had lost enough memories of me to not find me again. But I have not survived this long by being optimistic.

I waited, gun pointed at the door the rest of the night. Near dawn, I hastily packed all my things and fled Cincinnati. Leaving behind only the smallest memories of me in the Indistinct City, and once again, more or less forgotten by Julian Holloway.

Ryder: And he hasn't come after you since?

Rene: I'm no longer in your country, and despite Holloway's ability to travel quite far, quite fast, I've never heard of them using his gift outside your nation's borders — Well there, or the shadows and dreams that reflect off it.

Ryder: If you're not in America, you're likely safe. At least from Julian.

A beat.

Ryder: This is completely unprofessional of me: I remember you called in about The Traveling Salesman. I believe you're calling from Columbus, Ohio... but I'm having trouble recalling your name.

Rene: Do not worry about it. I believe in some sense, some people I deal with remember me, though perhaps only subconsciously. And I believe you are one of those people. Goodbye for now, Malcolm.

Dial tone.

A beat.

Ryder: Hmm... That's unprofessionally of me. I let the time completely skip by. I know we had a few national alerts this evening... and a... caller from Columbus... who had a leaky fountain pen? The details are lost on me now. I didn't think their call was all that long. But I'm afraid we're out of time.

Once again, I'm Dr. Malcolm Ryder, parapsychologist. And if you're experiencing anything supernatural, paranormal, or otherworldly please call in next time on A Voice From Darkness.

[[AVFD Outro music]]