

**MR. JAMES**

Written by

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INT. STORAGE FACILITY - CLEVELAND - DAY

Fluorescent lights buzz over a crowd of BARGAIN HUNTERS. A strip mall in decay. American flags faded to pink.

AUCTIONEER (50s, seen it all) works through units. Mattresses. Christmas decorations. The detritus of lives interrupted.

Three people stand apart from the crowd, not together, not quite strangers:

MARCUS CHEN (30), in hospital scrubs, checks his phone obsessively. Dark circles under his eyes. A man who hasn't stopped moving in years.

DELIA SANTIAGO (30), hides behind oversized sunglasses. Comedy club t-shirt, rumpled. She's here but doesn't want to be seen.

TERRANCE WILLIAMS (30), rigid posture, worn army jacket. Eyes scanning constantly. Assessing threats that aren't there.

None of them acknowledge each other.

AUCTIONEER  
Unit forty-seven. Last unit of the day. No minimum.

The rolling door RISES.

Inside: a child's treasure trove frozen in time. Hand-painted wooden sign reads "THE SANCTUARY." Moth-eaten costumes. A dented telescope. Leather journals. A tarnished compass.

All three FREEZE. Recognition floods their faces.

Marcus's phone slips in his hand.

Delia removes her sunglasses.

Terrence stops breathing.

Twenty years since they've seen these things. Twenty years since they've seen each other.

The auctioneer doesn't notice the shift.

AUCTIONEER (CONT'D)  
Do I have fifty? Fifty dollars for the lot?

VOICE (O.S.)  
Stop.

The crowd parts. MRS. PATTERSON (80s), elegant despite age, pushes through. She's BLACK, dignified, carrying a lifetime of stories.

She spots the three adults. Stops. Studies them.

MRS. PATTERSON  
Marcus. Delia. Terrence.

They don't respond. Can't.

MRS. PATTERSON (CONT'D)  
James always said you three would find your way back when the work needed doing.

She produces a yellowed ENVELOPE from her purse.

MRS. PATTERSON (CONT'D)  
He left this for you. Said the compass would know.

She presses the envelope into Marcus's resistant hands.

MRS. PATTERSON (CONT'D)  
He also said--and I never understood this--"Watch out for minos. The labyrinth is always of your own making."

She turns, walks away without looking back.

The three finally look at each other. Twenty years of silence weighs between them.

MARCUS  
(barely audible)  
Delia.

DELIA  
Mars.

TERRENCE  
(a nod)  
Chen. Santiago.

The auctioneer waits.

AUCTIONEER  
So... do I have fifty?

MARCUS  
(finding his voice)  
Five hundred. For all of it.

DELIA  
What? Marcus--

MARCUS  
I said five hundred.

The gavel falls.

CUT TO:

EXT. STORAGE FACILITY - PARKING LOT - CONTINUOUS

The three stand by Marcus's sensible Honda. The ENVELOPE sits on the hood between them. Nobody touches it.

DELIA  
So. Twenty years.

TERRENCE  
Twenty-one.

DELIA  
You're counting?

TERRENCE  
I count everything.

MARCUS  
(to Delia)  
You look... different.

DELIA  
I look old.

MARCUS  
That's not what I--

DELIA  
Relax, Mars. It's fine. We all look old. Because we are.

Silence.

MARCUS  
The funeral. That was the last time.

TERRENCE  
We didn't talk then either.

More silence.

Marcus picks up the envelope. Turns it over. Mr. James's handwriting: "WHEN THE TIME COMES."

MARCUS  
I'm not opening this here.

DELIA  
Then where?

Marcus looks at both of them. A decision forming.

MARCUS

There's a diner. Off Lorain. Used to be good.

TERRENCE

It's still there?

MARCUS

Everything's still there. It just looks different.

CUT TO:

INT. DELIA'S APARTMENT - BROOKLYN - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

SUPER: "THREE DAYS EARLIER"

A cramped studio. Boxes everywhere. DELIA paces, phone to ear.

DELIA

(into phone)

I know I owe you, but I'm good for it. Next month. I swear. My agent says--

She listens. Closes her eyes.

DELIA (CONT'D)

Yeah. Okay. Thanks for nothing.

She hangs up. Looks around the apartment--bare walls, empty fridge visible through the kitchen doorway.

On her nightstand: a COMPASS. Old, tarnished. A single PHOTO tucked behind it--a man with kind eyes (her father, RAFAEL).

Her laptop open to a job site. "FUNERAL HOME RECEPTIONIST - MUST BE COMFORTABLE WITH DEATH."

DELIA (CONT'D)

Story of my life.

Her phone BUZZES. Unknown number. Cleveland area code.

She ignores it.

It buzzes again.

And again.

DELIA (CONT'D)  
(answering)  
If this is about my student loans,  
I'm already dead.

MRS. PATTERSON (V.O.)  
Is this Delia Santiago?

Delia sits up.

DELIA  
Who is this?

MRS. PATTERSON (V.O.)  
My name is Evelyn Patterson. My  
brother was James Washington.

Beat. Delia's entire body changes.

DELIA  
Mr. James.

MRS. PATTERSON (V.O.)  
There's a storage auction.  
Cleveland. Saturday. Unit  
forty-seven. He wanted you there.

DELIA  
He's been dead for five years.

MRS. PATTERSON (V.O.)  
He planned ahead.

Click. The line goes dead.

Delia stares at her phone. Then at the compass.

Then she starts to pack.

CUT TO:

INT. MARCUS'S APARTMENT - ATLANTA - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

Sterile. Organized. A place that's clean because no one  
lives in it.

MARCUS sits at a desk, laptop open, spreadsheets glowing.  
His phone has SIX missed calls. A COWORKER's name.

He ignores them. Opens another spreadsheet.

His hands are shaking slightly. He doesn't notice.

COWORKER (V.O.)  
(from phone speaker)  
Marcus, it's Linda again. Dr. Patel  
(MORE)

COWORKER (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
says if you don't take the leave,  
they're making it mandatory. You  
collapsed, Marcus. In the middle of  
the ER. Pick up your phone.

Marcus deletes the voicemail. Opens another spreadsheet.

His phone BUZZES. Unknown number. Cleveland.

MARCUS  
(answering)  
Marcus Chen.

MRS. PATTERSON (V.O.)  
Mr. Chen. I believe you knew my  
brother.

Marcus's pen stops moving.

CUT TO:

INT. TERRENCE'S APARTMENT - WASHINGTON D.C. - NIGHT -  
FLASHBACK

Bare. A mattress on the floor. Weights in the corner.  
Nothing personal except--

A PURPLE HEART in a drawer, hidden beneath socks.

TERRENCE does push-ups. 50. 60. 70. His form is perfect.  
His face shows nothing.

A phone RINGS. He ignores it, keeps counting.

80. 90. 100.

The phone keeps ringing.

He stops. Breathing controlled. Looks at the phone.

Cleveland area code.

He doesn't answer, but he doesn't look away either.

CUT TO:

INT. DINER - CLEVELAND - DAY - PRESENT

Vinyl booths. Coffee that's been warming since morning.  
The kind of place that's survived by not changing.

The three sit in a booth. The envelope in the center of  
the table like a bomb.

A WAITRESS (60s, NAME TAG: GLORIA) approaches.

GLORIA

You three need menus or you know  
what you want?

MARCUS

Just coffee.

DELIA

Make it Irish.

Gloria raises an eyebrow.

DELIA (CONT'D)

Kidding. Coffee's fine.

TERRENCE

Water.

Gloria leaves. They stare at the envelope.

DELIA

So someone's going to open it,  
right?

MARCUS

I'm thinking.

TERRENCE

What's there to think about?

MARCUS

He's been dead five years, Terrence.  
This is... orchestrated. He set this  
up before he died.

DELIA

That's very Mr. James.

TERRENCE

Open it.

Marcus hesitates. Then picks up the envelope. Slides his finger under the seal.

Inside: A HAND-DRAWN MAP. A KEY (old, brass). A LETTER.

Marcus unfolds the letter. Mr. James's handwriting, shaky but clear:

MARCUS

(reading)

"My dear children. If you're reading this, then Evelyn has done her part, and so has time. Twenty years is long enough to run. Twenty years is long enough to hide."

He pauses. Looks at the others. Continues.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

"The Sanctuary is not a place. It never was. You three ARE the Sanctuary now. But first, you must remember what you forgot. The map shows the way. The key opens what fear has locked."

DELIA

(quiet)

What the hell does that mean?

MARCUS

(reading)

"Start where we started. -J"

He sets down the letter. Unfolds the map.

Cleveland--but transformed. Landmarks renamed: "THE DRAGON'S GATE" over an old bridge. "THE WHISPERING ARCHIVE" over the library. "THE KEEPER'S GARDEN" over a cemetery.

An X marks a location across the river. Where the old recreation center stood.

DELIA

The rec center.

TERRENCE

That's where we met him.

MARCUS

It's been abandoned for years.

Marcus's phone RINGS. He looks at it. "GRADY MEMORIAL - EMERGENCY."

MARCUS (CONT'D)

I have to take this.

DELIA

Seriously?

He's already answering, sliding out of the booth.

MARCUS

(into phone)

Chen here. What's the situation?

Delia watches him go. Shakes her head.

DELIA

Twenty years. And he's still--

TERRENCE

The same? Yeah. So are you.

DELIA

What's that supposed to mean?

TERRENCE

You made four jokes in the last ten minutes. None of them were funny.

DELIA

Wow. Military life really softened you up.

TERRENCE

(ignoring her)

The map. Look at it.

She does. Really looks.

DELIA

These are... these are places he took us.

TERRENCE

Quest stops.

DELIA

God, we called them that. Quest stops. Like we were in a video game.

TERRENCE

The bridge at midnight. The library. The cemetery where his family--

DELIA

(cutting him off)

I remember.

Marcus returns. His face is tight.

MARCUS

I have to go back.

DELIA

Of course you do.

MARCUS

There's a situation. A patient I was--

DELIA

There's always a situation, Marcus. There's always a patient or a crisis or something more important than--

MARCUS

Than what? A scavenger hunt from a  
dead man?

DELIA

Than US.

That lands. Marcus has no response.

TERRENCE

(standing)

Let him go.

DELIA

Terrence--

TERRENCE

He's not ready. Maybe he won't be.  
That's his choice.

Marcus looks at Terrence. Something passes between  
them--not understanding, but recognition.

MARCUS

Keep the map. And the key.

He pulls out his wallet, drops cash on the table.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

I'll... I'll call you.

He leaves. Delia and Terrence sit in silence.

DELIA

He won't call.

TERRENCE

No.

DELIA

So what do we do?

Terrence picks up the map. Studies it.

TERRENCE

We start where we started.

CUT TO:

-- FLASHBACK: THE FIRST SUMMER ==

INT. RECREATION CENTER - CLEVELAND - DAY - 1999

SUPER: "SUMMER, 1999"

The building was alive once. Now it's just surviving.  
Paint peeling, but clean. A hand-painted sign: "MR.  
JAMES'S SUMMER PROGRAM - ALL WELCOME."

Twenty CHILDREN between ages 8-12 gather on a worn basketball court. Some from the neighborhood, some dropped off by desperate parents, all wearing the armor of kids who've learned the world doesn't care about them.

Among them:

YOUNG MARCUS (10), small for his age but carrying himself like he's older. He's organizing the younger kids into a line without being asked.

YOUNG DELIA (10), tall and gangly, pockets full of random objects--bottle caps, a marble, something shiny. She's talking to a younger kid, making them laugh.

YOUNG TERENCE (10), already big, standing apart from the others. Watching. Evaluating.

MR. JAMES WASHINGTON (67) enters.

He moves slowly--vitiligo patterns his dark skin like clouds, his hair is white as cotton--but his eyes hold galaxies. He wears work clothes, clean and pressed. A gold watch chain catches the light.

The children quiet. Not from fear. From something else.

MR. JAMES  
(his voice carries without shouting)  
Good morning.

CHILDREN  
(scattered)  
Good morning, Mr. James.

MR. JAMES  
I have a question. A serious one. I want honest answers.

He scans the faces. Young Marcus straightens. Young Delia clutches her treasures. Young Terrence crosses his arms.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
Who here believes in magic?

Some hands go up--the younger kids, the ones who haven't learned better yet.

Young Marcus's hand stays down.  
Young Delia's stays down.  
Young Terrence scoffs.

Mr. James smiles.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)

Good. The ones who don't believe are  
usually the ones who need it most.

He pulls something from his pocket. A COMPASS, tarnished  
but beautiful.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)

This compass is old. Older than me,  
which is saying something.

Small laughs.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)

It doesn't point north. It points  
toward what you need to find.

He holds it up. The needle spins lazily, then  
settles--pointing directly at Young Marcus, Young Delia,  
and Young Terrence.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)

But here's the secret--

He kneels, bringing himself to their level.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)

What you need to find is usually  
inside the thing you're most afraid  
of.

Young Marcus looks at his feet.

Young Delia stops fidgeting.

Young Terrence uncrosses his arms.

Something begins.

CUT TO:

INT. RECREATION CENTER - LATER - 1999

The kids break into groups. Activities, games, snacks.  
Normal summer program stuff.

But in the corner, Mr. James has gathered three specific  
children. Young Marcus. Young Delia. Young Terrence.

MR. JAMES

You three. Do you know why I brought  
you together?

YOUNG TERRENCE

(defensive)

We didn't do anything.

MR. JAMES  
No, you didn't. That's not why.

YOUNG MARCUS  
Are we in trouble?

MR. JAMES  
The opposite.

He studies them. Really sees them.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
Marcus. Your grandmother says you've  
been taking care of your sister all  
summer while your mother works.

YOUNG MARCUS  
(uncomfortable)  
Someone has to.

MR. JAMES  
How old is your sister?

YOUNG MARCUS  
Seven.

MR. JAMES  
And you're ten.

Young Marcus shrugs. This is just how life works.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
Delia. Your mother tells me you've  
been collecting things. Small  
things. Pretty things.

Young Delia's hand goes to her pocket.

YOUNG DELIA  
They're not stolen.

MR. JAMES  
I know they're not. When did you  
start collecting?

Young Delia looks away.

YOUNG DELIA  
After.

MR. JAMES  
After your father passed.

She nods. Mr. James's face softens with recognition.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
And Terrence. Your father's overseas  
again?

YOUNG TERRENCE  
He's always overseas.

MR. JAMES  
You've moved four times in three  
years.

YOUNG TERRENCE  
Five.

MR. JAMES  
What's the longest you've had a  
friend?

Young Terrence doesn't answer. Because the answer is: not long enough.

Mr. James looks at all three of them.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
I'm going to tell you something, and  
I want you to really hear it. Can  
you do that?

They nod.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
You three have something in common.  
You've all learned to protect  
yourselves. Marcus by being useful.  
Delia by collecting beautiful  
things. Terrence by not getting  
attached.

Each child's face registers recognition. Being seen.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
Those are smart strategies. The  
world is hard, and you found ways to  
survive it.

Beat.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
But survival isn't the same as  
living. And the things that  
protected you when you were small  
can become prisons when you're  
grown.

YOUNG MARCUS  
I don't understand.

MR. JAMES

You will.

He pulls out the compass again.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)

This summer, I'm going to teach you something. Not school things. Not useful things. Something important.

YOUNG DELIA

What?

MR. JAMES

How to escape the labyrinths you build around yourselves. Before you forget there's a world outside.

He stands.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)

Tomorrow. We start.

He walks away, leaving three confused children looking at each other.

YOUNG TERRENCE

He's weird.

YOUNG MARCUS

Yeah.

YOUNG DELIA

I like him.

They all smile. First connection forming.

CUT TO:

-- END FLASHBACK --

EXT. ABANDONED RECREATION CENTER - NIGHT - PRESENT

The building is a ghost. Windows boarded, graffiti faded, chain-link fence bent but standing.

Delia and Terrence approach from the parking lot. The city hums behind them, indifferent.

DELIA

Twenty years.

TERRENCE

Twenty-one.

DELIA

You said that already.

Terrence doesn't respond. He's looking at the building like it's a battlefield.

DELIA (CONT'D)

You okay?

TERRENCE

No.

His honesty surprises her.

TERRENCE (CONT'D)

I haven't been okay in a long time.

DELIA

(trying to joke)

Welcome to the club. We have jackets.

It doesn't land. She knows it.

DELIA (CONT'D)

Sorry. I do that.

TERRENCE

I know.

They reach the fence. A section is cut--someone's been here.

TERRENCE (CONT'D)

Someone's maintaining access.

DELIA

Or squatters.

TERRENCE

The cut is clean. Recent. And look--

He points. The lock on the main door isn't rusted.

DELIA

The key.

She pulls it out. They exchange a look, then slip through the fence.

CUT TO:

INT. ABANDONED RECREATION CENTER - CONTINUOUS

They push open the door. Darkness.

Terrence produces a flashlight from his pocket.

DELIA

You just carry a flashlight?

TERRENCE

You don't?

He sweeps the beam across the room.

The basketball court, warped and dusty. Old banners hanging torn. Debris in corners.

But also--

Candles. Dozens of them, recently burned, wax pooled beneath.

Fresh flowers in a corner, wilting but not dead.

And on the wall, in fresh paint that catches the light:

"THE WORK CONTINUES. REMEMBER."

Delia's breath catches.

DELIA

Someone's been here.

TERRENCE

Someone's BEEN here. Regularly.

They move deeper into the space. Their footsteps echo.

And then--

Carved into the wooden paneling near the old stage:

MARCUS. DELIA. TERRENCE.

Their names. From twenty years ago.

DELIA

(touching the letters)

I forgot we did this.

TERRENCE

I didn't.

His voice is strange. Thick.

DELIA

Terrence?

TERRENCE

I dreamed about this place. For years. After I got out, after... I dreamed about standing right here.

She's never heard him talk like this.

TERRENCE (CONT'D)

This is the last place I remember  
being... me. Before my father  
shipped us away. Before everything.

A sound. Footsteps.

Both spin. Terrence's body shifts, ready for threat.

A FIGURE emerges from the shadows.

HOPE WASHINGTON (28), Black, natural hair, intelligent eyes that hold both suspicion and hope. She carries herself like someone who's always prepared to be disappointed.

HOPE

You're here.

Beat.

HOPE (CONT'D)

I wondered if you'd come.

DELIA

Who are you?

HOPE

Hope Washington. James Washington  
was my great-uncle.

She steps into the light fully. Young, but carrying old weight.

HOPE (CONT'D)

He talked about you three  
constantly. Said you were his  
greatest success.

She looks at the carved names.

HOPE (CONT'D)

And his greatest failure.

CUT TO:

INT. ABANDONED RECREATION CENTER - CONTINUOUS

Hope leads them to what was once Mr. James's office. It's been transformed into a kind of shrine.

Photographs on the walls--decades of children who came through the program. Articles about the neighborhood. A map that matches the one in the envelope.

And in the center: MR. JAMES'S JOURNAL. Leather-bound, worn with use.

HOPE

I found this after he died. There  
are entries going back forty years.

She hands the journal to Delia, who opens it reverently.

MR. JAMES (V.O.)

(Delia reading)

"Summer, 1976. The first year. I  
don't know if this will work. I  
don't know if I have anything to  
offer these children except my own  
scars. But I have to try. Delilah  
would want me to try."

DELIA

Delilah?

HOPE

His wife. She died in '72, along  
with their daughter. House fire.

The weight of that settles.

HOPE (CONT'D)

He spent three years in a hospital  
after. Then he started this.

She gestures to the room, the building, all of it.

HOPE (CONT'D)

Thirty years. Thousands of children.  
He transformed his grief into...  
this.

TERRENCE

Why are you here?

HOPE

Someone had to be. He didn't have  
anyone else at the end. His  
sister--my grandmother's sister--she  
tried, but she has her own life. I  
was...

She trails off.

HOPE (CONT'D)

I was running from things too. He  
gave me somewhere to run to.

DELIA

He saved you.

HOPE

He saved a lot of people.

Beat.

HOPE (CONT'D)

He said you'd come. He knew exactly when Aunt Evelyn should call. He planned all of this before he died.

TERRENCE

Why?

HOPE

The work isn't finished. That's what he said. And the three of you are the only ones who can finish it.

CUT TO:

EXT. DETROIT-SUPERIOR BRIDGE - MIDNIGHT - LATER

"THE DRAGON'S GATE" on the map.

The old bridge spans the Cuyahoga River. Industrial ghosts on either side--steel mills, factories, monuments to what Cleveland used to be.

Marcus is there. Surprise on Delia and Terrence's faces.

MARCUS

Don't.

DELIA

Don't what?

MARCUS

Don't make a thing of it. I'm here.  
That's enough.

TERRENCE

What changed your mind?

Marcus is silent for a long moment. Then:

MARCUS

I passed out again. At work. In front of everyone. They put me on mandatory leave.

DELIA

Jesus, Marcus--

MARCUS

I'm fine.

TERRENCE

You're not fine. None of us are fine.

The bridge stretches before them. Fog off the river.

DELIA

The map says midnight. It's  
midnight.

MARCUS

So what are we looking for?

Hope steps forward. She's been lingering behind.

HOPE

There.

She points. A section of the bridge's ironwork has a  
HIDDEN COMPARTMENT--invisible unless you know where to  
look.

Inside: three ENVELOPES. Names on each.

They take their own. Open them.

MARCUS'S ENVELOPE:

A PHOTOGRAPH. Young Marcus, maybe seven, crying. The day  
his father left. A note in Mr. James's handwriting: "You  
learned to carry everything alone that day. The dragon you  
fear is need. The treasure is letting someone else hold  
the weight."

DELIA'S ENVELOPE:

A PRESSED FLOWER. From her mother's funeral. A note: "You  
learned to run that day. The dragon you fear is stillness.  
The treasure is being present for the pain."

TERRENCE'S ENVELOPE:

DOG TAGS. His father's. A note: "You learned to lock away  
that day. The dragon you fear is feeling. The treasure is  
letting the wall come down."

They stand in silence. The river moves beneath them.

DELIA

(finally)

He knew. He knew exactly what was  
wrong with each of us.

MARCUS

He always knew.

TERRENCE

(staring at the dog tags)

How did he get these?

HOPE

He kept in touch with your father.  
Until the end.

TERRENCE

(sharp)

My father doesn't keep in touch with  
anyone.

HOPE

Your father wrote him letters. Every  
year. Asking about you. Mr. James  
never told you because...

She hesitates.

HOPE (CONT'D)

Because your father asked him not  
to. He was ashamed. Of how he raised  
you. Of what he made you become.

Terrence's face is unreadable. His hands are shaking.

MARCUS

(to Hope)

What else is there? On the map?

HOPE

Two more stops. The library. The  
cemetery.

DELIA

Then what?

HOPE

I don't know. He said you'd know  
when you got there.

CUT TO:

-- FLASHBACK: THE DRAGON'S GATE --

EXT. DETROIT-SUPERIOR BRIDGE - NIGHT - 1999

SUPER: "SUMMER, 1999"

Three children walk with Mr. James along the bridge. It's  
late--past when they should be out--but this is one of the  
"quest stops."

Young Marcus has been withdrawn all day. The others have  
noticed.

MR. JAMES

This bridge is called the  
Detroit-Superior. But I call it  
something else.

YOUNG DELIA  
What do you call it?

MR. JAMES  
The Dragon's Gate.

YOUNG TERRENCE  
Why? There's no dragons.

MR. JAMES  
Aren't there?

He stops at the center of the bridge. The city lights flicker below.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
In the old stories, dragons guard treasure. Everyone wants to slay the dragon and take the gold. But here's what the stories get wrong.

He looks at Marcus. Really looks.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
Sometimes the dragon IS the treasure. The thing we fear most is often the thing we need most.

YOUNG MARCUS  
That doesn't make sense.

MR. JAMES  
No?

Young Marcus looks away. Mr. James kneels to his level.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
Your father left. Three days ago.

Young Marcus's face crumbles, then hardens. Ten years old and already armoring.

YOUNG MARCUS  
I don't want to talk about it.

MR. JAMES  
I know. That's the dragon, Marcus.  
Not your father. The silence.

Beat.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
What are you most afraid of right now?

Long pause. Young Delia and Young Terrence wait.

YOUNG MARCUS  
(barely audible)  
That if I need people... they'll  
leave. Like he did.

MR. JAMES  
So you've decided never to need  
anyone.

Marcus doesn't answer. Because that's exactly what he's  
decided.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
That's not strength, Marcus. That's  
a cage.

He puts a hand on the boy's shoulder.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
The bravest thing a person can do is  
ask for help. That's crossing the  
Dragon's Gate. Can you do that?

YOUNG MARCUS  
I don't know.

MR. JAMES  
That's honest. Honest is a start.

He stands.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
Someday, you'll need to ask. And  
these two will be there. Won't you?

Young Delia takes Marcus's hand.

YOUNG DELIA  
Obviously.

Young Terrence punches his shoulder gently.

YOUNG TERRENCE  
We've got you.

For a moment, Young Marcus looks like he might cry. Then  
he smiles instead.

CUT TO:

== END FLASHBACK ==

INT. CLEVELAND PUBLIC LIBRARY - DAY - PRESENT

"THE WHISPERING ARCHIVE."

The main branch. Cathedral ceilings. The smell of old books.

Hope leads them to the AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY ARCHIVES. Restricted section.

HOPE

I work here part-time. That's how I found the files.

She pulls a BOX from the shelves. "JAMES WASHINGTON - PERSONAL PAPERS."

Inside: documents, photographs, newspaper clippings.

DELIA

(reading a clipping)

"Local Activist Hospitalized After Breakdown." This is from 1973.

MARCUS

(another document)

"Washington, James. Patient records. Cleveland State Hospital. 1973-1975."

They look at each other.

HOPE

He spent two years in a psychiatric hospital after his wife and daughter died. He never hid it, but he never talked about it either.

TERRENCE

(a photograph)

This is him. At a civil rights march.

The photo shows a younger Mr. James, intense and alive, marching alongside hundreds of others.

HOPE

Before the fire, he was an organizer. After... he became something else.

DELIA

(finding a journal entry)

Listen to this.

She reads.

MR. JAMES (V.O.)

"I built my minos from grief. I fed it for three years. Then I found the  
(MORE)

MR. JAMES (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
thread: purpose. Helping others was  
how I helped myself. The work is not  
IN SPITE of the wound. The work IS  
the wound, transformed."

Silence.

MARCUS

His labyrinth was grief. And he  
spent thirty years helping kids  
escape theirs.

DELIA

While still carrying his own.

TERRENCE

Did he ever escape?

HOPE

I don't know. I don't think he  
thought of it that way. I think he  
thought the labyrinth was... home.  
Once you learn to navigate it, you  
can guide others through.

She pulls out another document. A MAP identical to theirs.

HOPE (CONT'D)

He drew this map in 1976. The year  
he started the program. He's been  
planning this journey for fifty  
years.

CUT TO:

-- FLASHBACK: THE WHISPERING ARCHIVE --

INT. CLEVELAND PUBLIC LIBRARY - DAY - 1999

SUPER: "SUMMER, 1999"

Young Marcus, Young Delia, and Young Terrence sit at a  
table surrounded by BOOKS. Mr. James has given them their  
first "quest."

MR. JAMES

Research is magic.

YOUNG TERRENCE

That's the nerdiest thing you've  
ever said.

MR. JAMES

(smiling)

Perhaps. But consider: every book is  
(MORE)

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
 a door. Every story is a life  
 someone lived. When you read, you're  
 not alone. You're connected to  
 everyone who ever read these words.

He spreads his hands over the books.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
 Knowledge is the first weapon  
 against the dark. The second is  
 imagination. The third is community.

Young Delia hasn't been paying attention. She's staring at  
 a book of MYTHOLOGY. Her finger rests on an illustration:  
 the MINOTAUR in its labyrinth.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
 (noticing)  
 Do you know that story, Delia?

YOUNG DELIA  
 The minotaur. My dad used to... he  
 used to read me the Greek myths.

Beat. Her father has been dead for six months.

YOUNG DELIA (CONT'D)  
 Why do sad things happen?

The other children go quiet. Mr. James's eyes go distant.

MR. JAMES  
 Because the world is broken, Delia.  
 And it stays broken unless people  
 decide to fix it.

YOUNG DELIA  
 Can we fix it?

MR. JAMES  
 (tears in his eyes,  
 smiling)  
 That's the only question that  
 matters.

CUT TO:

== END FLASHBACK ==

EXT. LAKE VIEW CEMETERY - DAY - PRESENT

"THE KEEPER'S GARDEN."

The final stop before whatever comes next.

They stand before three headstones:

DELILAH WASHINGTON. 1940-1972. "Beloved Wife and Mother."  
GRACE WASHINGTON. 1965-1972. "Our Little Light."  
JAMES WASHINGTON. 1932-2014. "The Work Continues."

Buried together. A family reunited in death.

DELIA

He spent forty years visiting them.  
Then going out to help other  
people's children.

MARCUS

That's not strength. That's...

TERRENCE

Transformation. It's transformation.

Marcus is crying. He doesn't notice at first. Then he does--wipes his face roughly.

MARCUS

(breaking)

He called me. Three weeks before he died. I didn't answer. I didn't call back.

DELIA

Marcus--

MARCUS

I was too busy. Too important. He was dying and I was too busy to pick up the phone.

TERRENCE

(quietly)

I was in Afghanistan when he died. They offered me leave. I didn't take it.

DELIA

I was in rehab. I told the nurses not to give me any messages.

They stand in their separate grief. United by shame.

MARCUS

We abandoned him. The man who saved us. We left him to die alone.

HOPE

(from behind them)

He knew you would.

They turn.

HOPE (CONT'D)  
He wrote about it. In the journal.

She opens to a marked page.

HOPE (CONT'D)  
(reading)  
"They won't come. Not in time.  
That's not their fault. The  
labyrinths I helped them build  
became too strong. They forgot there  
was a world outside."

DELIA  
He knew we wouldn't be there?

HOPE  
(continuing)  
"But they'll come back. When they're  
ready. When the walls start to  
crack. The work was never about me.  
It was about them finding their way  
back to themselves. And each other."

Terrence takes the journal. Reads the final entries  
himself.

TERRENCE  
(reading)  
"I'm scared. I don't want to die  
alone. I called Marcus today. He  
didn't answer."

His voice breaks.

TERRENCE (CONT'D)  
"I understand. The work isn't done.  
It's never done."

Page turn.

TERRENCE (CONT'D)  
"Forgive yourselves, children. I  
already have."

The cemetery is silent except for birdsong. Three adults,  
broken open at last.

CUT TO:

INT. ABANDONED RECREATION CENTER - NIGHT

They've returned. Sitting in the darkness. Not speaking.

Hours pass. The city outside grows quiet.

Finally:

DELIA

My mother died asking for me.

The others wait.

DELIA (CONT'D)

I was in the hospital cafeteria.  
Getting coffee. I couldn't sit with  
her anymore. I couldn't watch her  
go.

Beat.

DELIA (CONT'D)

So I wasn't there. She died calling  
my name, and I was getting coffee.

She laughs. It's not funny.

DELIA (CONT'D)

I've been running ever since. Making  
jokes so no one asks why I'm sad.  
Moving so fast the grief can't catch  
me.

Beat.

DELIA (CONT'D)

It caught me anyway. It always does.

Silence.

TERRENCE

(finally)

There was this kid in my unit.  
Rodriguez. He asked me to talk the  
night before a patrol. Said he had a  
bad feeling. I told him to shake it  
off.

He stares at nothing.

TERRENCE (CONT'D)

He was dead by noon.

MARCUS

Terrence...

TERRENCE

I don't cry. I don't feel. That's  
what keeps you alive over there. But  
Rodriguez... he was twenty-two. He  
just wanted someone to listen.

His voice is barely above a whisper.

TERRENCE (CONT'D)

I've spent six years not feeling anything because if I start, I don't know if I can stop.

MARCUS

(long pause)

My grandmother raised me. After my mom fell apart. After my father left. She worked three jobs to keep me fed.

He takes a shaky breath.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

She got sick last year. I visited twice. Twice. Because I was "too busy." She died in a nursing home surrounded by strangers. Because her grandson was too important to be there.

The darkness holds them.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

I've spent my whole life helping other people so I don't have to look at my own shit. And the one person who actually needed me...

He can't finish.

DELIA

(quietly)

So we're all running. From the same thing. From being present for the people we love.

TERRENCE

For the people we failed.

MARCUS

For ourselves.

They sit with that. The labyrinth laid bare.

-- FLASHBACK: THE THREAD --

INT. RECREATION CENTER - DAY - 1999

SUPER: "LAST DAY OF SUMMER, 1999"

The program is ending. Children saying goodbye. Parents picking up kids.

But in the corner, Mr. James has gathered his three.

MR. JAMES  
 Summer ends. Magic fades. That's  
 what people believe.

He pulls out three objects:

The COMPASS (to Terrence).  
 A small MIRROR (to Delia).  
 A worn book of GREEK MYTHS (to Marcus).

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
 The compass points toward what you  
 need. The mirror shows what's really  
 there--not what you fear. The book  
 reminds you that these stories are  
 old, and people have survived them.

YOUNG MARCUS  
 Will we see you again?

MR. JAMES  
 You'll see me every time you choose  
 wonder over fear. Every time you  
 reach out instead of pulling in.  
 Every time you hold the thread for  
 someone lost in the dark.

He hugs each of them. Holds on a moment too long.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
 The work isn't magic. The work IS  
 magic. Do you understand?

They nod. They don't understand. Not yet.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
 (softly)  
 You will.

CUT TO:

-- END FLASHBACK --

INT. ABANDONED RECREATION CENTER - DAWN - PRESENT

Light seeps through the boarded windows. A new day.

They've been there all night. Exhausted. Emptied. Changed.

Marcus stands. Looks at the others.

MARCUS  
 He forgave us. In the journal.  
 Before we even knew we needed  
 forgiving.

DELIA

That's not the same as forgiving  
ourselves.

MARCUS

No. It's not.

Beat.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

But it's a start.

He does something radical. Something that costs him everything.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

I can't do this alone. I've never  
been able to. I need you both.

Delia stares at him. Twenty years and she's never heard him say those words.

DELIA

(taking his hand)

I know.

Terrence takes his other hand.

TERRENCE

We've got you.

The thread, reconnected.

DELIA

The final location. It isn't on the  
map.

TERRENCE

Because it isn't a place.

MARCUS

It's what we do now. With what he  
gave us.

They stand in a circle. The compass between them. The mirror. The book.

HOPE

(from the doorway)

So what do you do now?

Marcus looks at the others. They nod.

MARCUS

The work continues.

CUT TO:

INT. COFFEE SHOP - CLEVELAND - DAY

Hope, Marcus, Delia, and Terrence around a table. The journal open between them.

HOPE

He left the Sanctuary to you three in his will. The property, the building, everything. It's been in legal limbo because no one claimed it.

MARCUS

We can claim it?

HOPE

If you want. But there's a problem.

She pulls out official documents.

HOPE (CONT'D)

The city wants to demolish it. Urban development. The building's condemned.

DELIA

They can't just demolish it.

HOPE

They can. There's a city council vote in two weeks.

TERRENCE

Then we fight it.

MARCUS

How? We're three people. Against city hall.

HOPE

(studying him)

You're three people who know a lot of other people. Mr. James helped hundreds of kids over thirty years. Where are they now?

That lands.

DELIA

We find them. The other Sanctuary kids.

TERRENCE

And we ask them to help.

MARCUS  
(struggling)  
I don't... I don't know how to ask  
for help.

HOPE  
You just did. Ten minutes ago.

Beat.

HOPE (CONT'D)  
That's the whole thing, isn't it?  
The work isn't about being strong  
enough to do it alone. It's about  
being brave enough to do it  
together.

Marcus looks at the journal. At his friends. At Hope.

MARCUS  
Okay. Let's get to work.

CUT TO:

-- MONTAGE: GATHERING THE TEAM --

INT. HOSPITAL - CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

Marcus at his laptop, sending messages. Hundreds of them.  
To every former Sanctuary kid he can find.

Each message ends the same way: "We need your help."

Each send is a small death of his old self. Each response  
is a resurrection.

INT. COMEDY CLUB - NIGHT

Delia on stage. But this time, no jokes. She tells the  
truth.

DELIA  
(into mic)  
I'm supposed to be funny. That's my  
thing. Make them laugh so they don't  
see you cry.

The crowd is quiet.

DELIA (CONT'D)  
There was this man. Mr. James. He  
ran a summer program for kids who  
had nowhere else to go. Kids like  
me.

Beat.

DELIA (CONT'D)

He taught us that the thing you're most afraid of is usually the thing you need most. I was afraid of being sad. So I made everyone laugh instead.

A tear on her cheek.

DELIA (CONT'D)

He died alone. Because I was too scared to be there. And I've been running from that ever since.

She takes a breath.

DELIA (CONT'D)

I'm done running. There's a place that matters. A building that saved my life. And it's about to be torn down. If you've ever felt lost, if you've ever needed someone to hold a thread for you in the dark...

She looks directly at the audience.

DELIA (CONT'D)

We could use your help.

Silence. Then applause. Then people standing.

INT. VA CENTER - DAY

Terrence in a group session. But instead of sitting silently, he speaks.

TERRENCE

My name is Terrence. I served two tours. I lost three members of my team. And I haven't let myself feel anything about it.

He looks around at the other veterans.

TERRENCE (CONT'D)

I'm trying to change that. And I need your help.

For the first time, he lets himself be vulnerable. And the walls don't fall. The room holds him.

CUT TO:

== END MONTAGE ==

INT. CITY COUNCIL CHAMBERS - NIGHT

The room is PACKED. Standing room only.

At the front table: COUNCIL MEMBERS, looking overwhelmed.

In the audience: HUNDREDS of former Sanctuary kids. Now adults. Teachers, doctors, social workers, parents, artists. All shaped by Mr. James.

Marcus, Delia, and Terrence sit together. Hope beside them.

COUNCIL CHAIR

The matter before us is the disposition of the property at 4215 Clark Avenue. The building has been condemned and is slated for demolition under the Urban Renewal Initiative.

He looks at the crowd.

COUNCIL CHAIR (CONT'D)

I understand there are...  
stakeholders who wish to speak.

One by one, people stand. They tell their stories.

A TEACHER talks about how Mr. James taught her to believe in herself when no one else did.

A FIREFIGHTER tells how the Sanctuary gave him purpose after his father's death.

A YOUNG MOTHER shares how Mr. James's lessons helped her break a cycle of abuse.

The council listens. Their faces shift.

But it's not enough. You can see it. Sentiment versus economics. The city needs revenue.

COUNCIL CHAIR (CONT'D)

Thank you all for your... testimony.  
But the financial realities--

MARCUS

(standing)

May I?

The room turns.

Marcus walks to the podium. His hands are shaking. He lets them shake.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

My name is Marcus Chen. And James Washington saved my life.

He takes a breath.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

When I was ten, my father left. My mother worked three jobs. My grandmother raised me. I learned that the only person I could depend on was myself.

Beat.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Mr. James taught me different. He said the bravest thing a person can do is ask for help. I didn't believe him then. I'm not sure I believed him until a week ago.

He looks at Delia and Terrence.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

He died alone. Because I was too proud to answer a phone call. I will carry that for the rest of my life.

His voice breaks. He lets it.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

But he wouldn't want me to carry it alone. He'd want me to transform it. That's what he taught us. The wound becomes the work.

COUNCIL MEMBER

Mr. Chen, the building is structurally unsound--

MARCUS

Then we rebuild it. We're not asking for money. We're not asking you to believe in magic.

He straightens.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

We're asking you to believe in work. In purpose. In the possibility that broken people can become whole by helping others become whole.

The room is silent.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Every person in this room was one of his kids. Every person in this room is living proof that what happened in that building matters.

He turns to the crowd.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

We're not here to ask. We're here to tell you. The Sanctuary will survive. Whether you help us or not. But it would be a lot easier if you did.

Delia stands next to him.

DELIA

The work continues.

Terrence stands.

TERRENCE

With or without you.

Then Hope. Then, one by one, everyone in the room. Hundreds of people.

ALL

The work continues.

The council members look at each other. The vote is obvious now.

COUNCIL CHAIR

(moved despite himself)

All in favor of preserving the property and granting historical landmark status...

Every hand rises.

COUNCIL CHAIR (CONT'D)

The motion carries. Unanimously.

The room erupts.

CUT TO:

== EPILOGUE: SIX MONTHS LATER ==

EXT. THE SANCTUARY - DAY

The building is transformed. Fresh paint. New windows. A garden out front.

A banner: "THE SANCTUARY - SUMMER PROGRAM 2020"

Children stream through the doors. New children. Same need.

INT. THE SANCTUARY - CONTINUOUS

Marcus in an office, surrounded by volunteers, coordinating schedules. On his desk: the BOOK OF GREEK MYTHS.

Delia in a circle of kids, teaching creative expression. She's funny, but real now. On her desk: the MIRROR.

Terrence leading kids in outdoor activities. Still disciplined, but warm now. Around his neck: the COMPASS.

Hope coordinates between all of them. The bridge to the future.

INT. THE SANCTUARY - MAIN HALL - CONTINUOUS

The first day of the new program.

Children gather. Nervous. Skeptical. Armored the way kids from hard places always are.

Marcus, Delia, and Terrence stand before them. Exactly where Mr. James stood twenty years ago.

Marcus kneels. Bringing himself to their level.

MARCUS  
Good morning.

CHILDREN  
(scattered)  
Good morning.

MARCUS  
I have a question. A serious one. I want honest answers.

The children wait.

MARCUS (CONT'D)  
Who here believes in magic?

Some hands go up. Most don't.

Marcus smiles. The same smile Mr. James had.

MARCUS (CONT'D)  
Good. The ones who don't believe are usually the ones who need it most.

He produces the COMPASS. Old, tarnished, beautiful.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

This compass is old. It doesn't point north. It points toward what you need to find.

The needle spins. Settles. Points at the children.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Magic isn't tricks. Magic is seeing what's really there.

He looks at each small face.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

And I see... extraordinary things.

The children lean in. Skepticism giving way to something else. Wonder.

WIDE SHOT of the room. The banner on the wall: "THE WORK CONTINUES."

And below it, in smaller letters:

"WATCH OUT FOR MINOS."

-- FLASHBACK: THE PASSING --

INT. RECREATION CENTER - 1999

Mr. James alone after the children have gone. He sits at his desk. Writes in his journal.

MR. JAMES (V.O.)

Three children came to me this summer carrying labyrinths bigger than themselves. They didn't leave with answers. They left with questions.

He looks up. Smiles.

MR. JAMES (V.O.) (CONT'D)

That's better. Answers close doors. Questions open them.

He closes the journal. Looks around the room. At the names carved in wood. At the future.

MR. JAMES (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I don't know if they'll remember. I don't know if it will matter.

He stands. Walks to the window. Looks out at the city.

MR. JAMES (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
 But today, for a moment, they saw  
 the magic. They held the thread.  
 They chose wonder.

He turns. Looks directly at us. Through time.

MR. JAMES  
 (spoken, to us, to them,  
 to everyone)  
 When you're ready, you'll know what  
 to do. And when you do it, I'll be  
 there.

Beat.

MR. JAMES (CONT'D)  
 The work continues.

He smiles. The smile of a man who has transformed his  
 grief into gardens.

CUT TO:

-- END FLASHBACK --

EXT. THE SANCTUARY - MAGIC HOUR

The sun sets over Cleveland. The building glows.

Through the windows, we see children learning, laughing,  
 being seen.

On the front porch, Marcus, Delia, and Terrence sit  
 together. The first time in twenty years they've been  
 still in each other's presence.

DELIA  
 He'd like this.

TERRENCE  
 He'd say we're doing it wrong.

MARCUS  
 He'd be right.

They laugh. Real laughter. Connected.

DELIA  
 So what now?

MARCUS  
 We keep going. We find more  
 buildings. More programs. More kids.

TERRENCE  
 We build more threads.

DELIA

We fight more dragons.

MARCUS

We remember what we forgot.

Pause.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

That we're not alone. That we never  
were.

The compass sits between them. The needle spins. Settles.

Points straight up. At the sky. At whatever comes next.

FADE TO BLACK.

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TITLE CARD: "In memory of every Mr. James. And every child  
who needed one."

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THE END