

Chapter 1:

To Sleep,

Perchance to Dream

I woke up in a hospital room, sweat-stained sheets clinging to me. I tried to drift back into sleep, but rest slipped further away with every second. I pushed the covers off and swung my legs over the bed, wincing at the coolness of the tile floor.

Sunlight crept in through the blue curtains, casting a soft, surreal glow across the room. The medicine cabinet, door, and TV all reflected a shade of blue that felt heavy, pressing in on me while somehow calming me at the same time. My gaze landed on the sheets beside me, where sweat marks traced out faint patterns from the night.

"Another bad dream," I muttered. I had this habit of reading before bed, so often my dreams borrowed from whatever I'd read. But this time, I couldn't recall a single detail.

On my bedside table sat a worn journal. It was where I usually scribbled down my dreams, random thoughts, and little sketches—anything that caught my mind. Today, though, I just stared at the blank page, fingers hovering over it, with nothing to write.

"Aha, I—"

Knock, knock, knock.

"Asher, I'm coming in," a voice called from the door before it swung open.

Doctor Josiah entered, looking oddly put-together for this hour. He wore a fitted white sweater paired with black dress pants and shoes so polished they caught the daylight from the curtains. Dark hair meticulously styled, blue contact lenses glinting in the sunlight—he looked almost staged. They were purely decorative, not prescription, and it struck me as strange that he'd go through the trouble of layering them under his glasses.

Most notable, though, was how he wore his lab coat draped over his shoulders like a cape. I heard it amused the kid patients, but seeing a grown man swish in like that... yeah, it made me cringe.

"Did you get plenty of rest?" he asked, making his way to the medicine cabinet to grab a clipboard.

"Define rest," I shot back.

The look he gave me warned me he was ready to dissect whatever sarcasm I threw at him.

"Well, rest is the state of repose after exertion," he answered with a smirk, plopping down at the edge of my bed. He glanced at the sweat-stained sheets and promptly hopped up, dusting himself off with a mock shudder. "In this case, I mean if you went through all the cycles of sleep: light, deep, REM..." He began to drone on.

I tuned him out, realizing I was far too drowsy for a sleep cycle lecture. I should've known better than to try sarcasm.

Snap, snap, snap.

"Asher? Are you there? Hellooo?" Josiah was snapping his fingers right in my face.

"Oh, yeah." I brushed my hair back, trying to look alert.

Josiah did the same, his posture relaxing. "How have the dreams been?" he asked, pulling out a pen and holding it over his clipboard.

"Better, I think." My mind drifted back to the dream I'd been trying to remember earlier. He gave me a concerned look and looked back at his clipboard.

"I think, therefore I am," he said, jotting down a note. His attempt at philosophical flair was probably meant to bond with me, though I doubted he was well-versed.

"Cogito ergo sum," I said with a faint smirk, feeling instantly awkward for saying it. Sure enough, silence filled the room, the kind that lingers too long.

Doctor Josiah quickly recovered and set his clipboard down beside my journal with a sudden burst of enthusiasm.

"Well! I have a surprise for you, Asher!" he said, grinning.

"Really?" My curiosity piqued. Surprises were a rarity here, I spent most of my day reading, with the occasional nurse checking my vitals and wheeling me off for relentless scans.

Josiah blinked, momentarily lost, then shook his head. "Oh, no, nothing like that. You've got visitors."

I pointed to myself, eyebrows raised. "Me?"

He nodded.

"Who?" I asked, feeling a bit giddy. Visitors weren't exactly a regular occurrence, and I had no close family nearby. My aunt wasn't the doting type, and my uncle was a bit of a pushover. As for my parents... well, that thought wasn't one I wanted to unpack right now.

Doctor Josiah's grin only widened. "Guess!" he exclaimed, his arms spread like a game show host unveiling a prize.

"Junji Ito?"

"No."

"Stephen King?"

"No!"

"Publius Vergilius Maro?"

"What?" Josiah shot me a baffled look. "Who is that?"

"A Roman poet from 70 BCE."

He blinked. "And why, exactly, would a poet from before Christ be visiting you?"

"A miracle, I guess." We paused, locked in a stare, and then, as if on cue, both burst into laughter.

The moment was interrupted by the quiet creak of the door opening. A girl peeked in, her eyes scanning the room before landing on me. Her deep blue eyes shimmered with a hint of warmth, and golden hair spilled over her shoulders, catching the soft light in a way that made the room brighter, warmer. She wore a skirt and leggings with a long-sleeved dress shirt under a half-zipped hoodie, a style far more appealing than Josiah's caped crusader look.

"Good morning," she said softly, her voice tentative as she slid off her headphones.

Doctor Josiah and I exchanged glances before looking back at her.

"Morning, Fleur!" I said, slipping on my slippers. "What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be in school?"

"Oh, Doctor Josiah told me to come." She turned slightly pink.



"Did he?" I raised a brow at Josiah, who suddenly looked anywhere but at me. He, a doctor, asking a college student to skip class for a visit? Irresponsible, to say the least.

"I did let my professor know, so it's technically excused," she added hastily. "I told them it was a family emergency."

"A family emergency?" I raised an eyebrow, amused at her stretch of the truth.

"What about your mom?" I asked. "Would she be okay with you skipping?"

"She... doesn't know," Fleur mumbled.

I was impressed. Fleur was usually so well-behaved, and sneaking out of class was wildly out of character for her. Not that I was complaining.

Turning to Doctor Josiah, I adopted a mock-serious tone. "You, sir, are a terrible influence on young academia."

He huffed, pushing up his glasses. "And you, sir, are not my father, but yes, I am aware." Fleur's giggle joined our exchange.

Despite his quirks, Josiah and I had known each other since I'd arrived here two years ago. Our conversations had a rhythm that alternated between easy camaraderie and awkward pauses. Fleur here balanced things in a way that made everything feel lighter, less clinical.

Josiah took out an alcohol wipe, cleaning his glasses with meticulous care. "Well, there's actually one more person waiting to see you in the lobby."

CRASH BANG CRASH!

A voice from the hallway screamed in a fatalistic shriek, "MY CHAIR! SOMEONE HELP ME—I GOT PUSHED OUT OF MY CHAIR!"

A loud commotion erupted on the other side of the door. It sounded like a war zone. Just as Doctor Josiah was about to clean his frames, his glasses slipped from his hands and shattered on the ground.

"Gah! I thought I told him to stay in the lobby!" Doctor Josiah shouted, exasperated.

"Trying to control him is like herding cats on caffeine." His eyes narrowed in frustration—he really should've invested in some prescription contacts; those colored lenses weren't doing him any favors.

Curious, I walked over to the doorway to see who was behind all the noise. Fleur tucked herself into a corner, trying to stay out of sight like a meerkat, while Doctor Josiah fumbled around, bumping into a cabinet, a chair, another chair, a bedside table... another chair.

Just as I reached for the door, it flung open, and a human projectile slammed into me, sending me sprawling across the room.

"ASHERRRRR!" a familiar voice shouted.

I landed face-first on the carpet, gasping for air. For a moment, I just lay there, winded, with what felt like a hyperactive octopus clinging to me. Eventually, they let go, giving me a chance to roll onto my back and catch my breath.

"Are you okay?" Fleur leaned over me, her face swimming in my vision. Wait—two of her? No, three. There couldn't possibly be three Fleurs. One... two... three—

"EARTH TO ASHER! You good down there?" the familiar voice shouted.

I blinked hard, realizing it wasn't three Fleurs after all—just one Fleur, Doctor Josiah, and... Takashi, who had decided that tackling me was the best way to start the morning.

I let out a groan. "Be honest with me—how many shots of espresso did you down before getting here?"

"Three... times two," he replied wittily.

I pressed my hand against my forehead, exhausted. "Turning it into an equation doesn't make it any better, you know."

"I know. That's why I do it," he shot back with a grin.

Takashi propped his walking cane against the bed—ah, right. I didn't mention it: Takashi was blind. Not that it stopped him from crashing into me at every opportunity. He had this natural ability to mimic the homing capabilities of a ballistic missile.

He offered me his hand, and I could've left him hanging, but honestly, I needed the assist.

"Has anyone seen my glasses?" Josiah asked, squinting as he patted the floor where I'd just been lying.

"Nope, I haven't seen anything," Takashi replied without missing a beat.

I slugged him in the arm. "Ha. Ha. Ha. Very funny, Takashi."

Josiah sighed dramatically, waving Fleur over. "Would you be a dear and ask one of the nurses to grab a backup pair from my office?"

She nodded and went out into the hallway.

Curious, I asked, "What brings you out here? Shouldn't you be at the café?"

This early in the morning, his family's place was usually packed. Takashi helped his mom with everything—taking orders, clearing tables, doing dishes. It was rare for him to get away.

"We recently started closing on Fridays," he replied, picking up his cane leaning against the bed. "We're trying to save some money by cutting weekends, and it lined up perfectly with coming to see you."

It was just Takashi and his mom running the café, and I could hardly imagine it being easy. He'd told me his mom was nearing her 60s, and he wanted to do everything he could to make sure she wasn't running the place alone. Even though Takashi's blindness could've made things difficult, he never let it stop him—he had memorized every corner of the café and could take orders faster than most.

"How's the coffee going?" I asked. Takashi flinched a little, then responded.

"Um, better?"

"What's that mean?" I asked.

"I made a mess yesterday when I was tamping the coffee basket."

"Oh, that's when you shave off the excess grounds, right?"

"Yeah, I spilled them all over the floor and didn't realize it until my mom started shouting like crazy." He clenched his fist and snapped out of his moping. "But I've got it now! I'm now 6-1 on the espresso machine."

"You mean three times two, right?"

He slugged me in the arm. "Ha. Ha. Ha. Very funny, Asher. NOT."

For a brief moment, I watched Doctor Josiah continue to search the floor like he was the brains of the *Mystery Gang*. I had to admire his tenacity; I probably would've given up and waited for Fleur by now.

"Doctor! We found a pair!" Fleur ran back into the room, not noticing the doctor still searching the floor. I was about to warn her right before she tripped over him. The glasses in her hands flew right out, about to hit the Fleur—I mean floor.

"Oh no!" Fleur shouted.

I swooped in to try and grab the glasses, but my hand instead launched them further in the air. With Doctor Josiah, Fleur, and I on the ground, the only one left to catch them was...

Uh-oh.

"What's going on, guys?" Takashi stood there unfazed as the glasses spun in the air, then fell perfectly onto his face. "Oh-ho-oh-ho-oh-hooo. How do I look?"

I sighed in relief. "You look like you 'look.'"

I glanced over at Doctor Josiah, who seemed about ready to start fuming.

"Can somebody just hand me my glasses already?!" he demanded.

"Right, yessir," I said, snatching the glasses from Takashi's face. He pouted as I handed them back to Doctor Josiah.

"Thank you—OH WOW." Doctor Josiah looked at Takashi in shock. "You're surprisingly well-dressed, Takashi."

Fleur and I looked, and, well... I hate to say it, but I agreed. Takashi usually had terrible fashion sense, but this time he looked sharp—a white t-shirt with a gray overshirt and a nice pair of pants buckled up neatly with a brown belt.

"Thanks, Ma picked it out for me."

"Ah, that explains it," Doctor Josiah said, sounding underwhelmed.

He should be the last person to criticize someone's fashion. I couldn't help but cringe at the mental image of Doctor Josiah striking a superhero pose with that coat cape.

"Well, anyways," the doctor continued. "Now that everyone is here, I guess I can share the news."

I was a little confused. "What news?"

Doctor Josiah pulled a piece of paper out of his coat pocket and started reading.

"Asher Nephesh, born October 31st, age 17, Medical Record Number 43-45-14-34-13-45, Blood Type: AB, Emergency Contact..."

I was surprised he was reading my medical record aloud in front of two other people.

"You were admitted to this hospital regarding a case of selective amnesia. More specifically, that of a rather complex and emotionally charged incident."

My stomach churned. I never liked talking about this. Nonetheless, Doctor Josiah continued.

"After several studies and thorough investigation, we have found..."

Takashi started a drum roll on the guest table.

Why are you hyping up my medical diagnosis?

Finally, Doctor Josiah finished his sentence.

"That there is nothing wrong with you."

I just stood there.

Flabbergasted.