

Excerpt from *Messenger 93*
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SEVEN DAYS UNTIL THE FALL

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HOW DO I EXPLAIN how it started? Putting it into words is like looking at the sky and saying it's blue. *Blue* doesn't account for gradations of color, or shifts in weather, or my eye seeing differently than yours. *Blue* is basic. It doesn't reveal the truth.

On Wednesday, April 11, after another day of incognito drifting between classes and my locker — Nobody Here, Nothing To See — then playing the part at home of diligent student — an act as much for me as for my parents — I went to bed and fell asleep like I always do. Exhausted from the effort. Not daring to hope for a better day. Pen in hand, sketchbook perched on my stomach.

It was the middle of the night when I woke up and saw it. It was absolutely clear. Not a waking dream. Not a hazy sort of what-is-it. No. It was distinct and real. It was *there*. Materializing through the sooty skeins of darkness above my head.

A crow.

It was hovering over my bed, directly underneath my starburst-glass-and-bronze ceiling light. Its wings were spread, the feathers glossy black. Its eyes, black and red-rimmed, stared at me. I stared back, intensely aware of the physical world. How a million tiny goosebumps fanned over my skin. How my breath huffed out and in, rhythmic and locomotive. How the nighttime shadows erased everything in my room but the crow.

My body had turned into a block of ice. I could feel the weight of my sheet and blanket over me, the slight added pressure on my abdomen of the sketchbook.

The crow drifted closer, as smooth and stealthy as a military hovercraft. It was maybe three feet away now. Touching distance.

“You are Messenger 93.” A voice in the dark.

My amazement reeled and multiplied. Goosebumps and breath-

lessness.

“You must find her.”

Its pointed little beak didn’t move, didn’t snap open and shut or have superimposed lips like in those CG-phony movies. But I was certain it was the crow speaking.

“She will fall in seven days.”

It didn’t sound male. It didn’t sound female.

“As she falls, so do we all.”

My mind didn’t search to understand. I didn’t try to talk back.

“Only you can save her.” The crow flapped its wings one time — I could feel a whoosh of warm air against my cheek. It said, “Save her, save us all.” And then it folded itself inside its feathers and sank into the darkness like a corpse on water.

The paralysis ended instantly. I sat up and took stock: I was awake; there had been a crow in my room; it had spoken to me.

I flicked on my bedside lamp. Its light glowed orange over the walls and ceiling, into every charcoal corner, and I checked around for traces of the crow. It was just my usual room. Bed underneath me, desk on the opposite wall, above it my fake-painting of a highway disappearing into the distance. My window was closed and the three glass shelves that were slung across it were still intact. So were the ten air-plants lined up along the shelves in their little glass terrarium jars. Underneath, on the windowsill, my flock of waving cat figurines waved without movement.

Had I imagined the crow? Dreamed it?

It hadn’t felt like a fantasy or a dream.

You are Messenger 93.

Why had the crow called me that? Why not my actual name? Which was as plain and simple as me. As thin and white and unremarkable. As hunched into itself as a question mark.

You must find her.

Find who?

She will fall in seven days.

Seven days? The exactness, the precision of the number, was like a sword in a rock.

As she falls, so do we all.

Fall rang in my ears like a bell. Its terrible meaning rippled through me.

Only you can save her. Save her, save us all.

That was hilarious. I was sixteen. What power did I have to save anyone?

Besides, there was no one I cared about enough to save. In fact, as a general rule, I hated all people. Except my family, I guess. And none of them needed my help.

A small metallic *tunnk* on the floor startled me, and I nearly whiplashed my head into the wall. I peered over the edge of my bed and saw it was just my pen, dropped out of my grip as it always did after I fell asleep, rolling lazily in a semi-circle. I cleared the ache from my throat and reached for it.

My sketchbook was still open and propped on the blanket over my lap. The storyboard for the imaginary series I was never going to film was still there. A scrawl of stick figures inside rows of panels across *heavyweight ultra-smooth superior-contrast* paper.

Unrecognized, unheralded superhero. *Infinity Girl*. A walking infinity mirror, *Infinity Girl* travels the world reflecting back to people what they want to see. But her power is that when the person is ready, the reflection morphs into who they really are.

Her target in that night's storyboard was a guy who sees himself as a brave warrior. But when he coaxes his best friend into a street fight with a rival gang and the friend dies, the warrior loses it. *Infinity Girl* finds him, and this time he recognizes himself as the tyrant he's always been.

No one ever sees Infinity Girl. All she has to do is stand there.

Pages and pages of scribbled panels — misguided losers, exotic locales, epic struggles. Infinity Girl's quest repeating over and over. And I still hadn't figured out how to make it cool enough to film. According to story rules, no one will care about a girl-hero if she isn't beautiful enough and if she refuses to fall in love. And there was no way I was falling into that trap.

You are Messenger 93.

Only you can save her.

I stabbed my pen into the page and sketched out a square for the next panel. I had to come up with a final act for the Tyrant's story. What would he do now that he knew the truth about himself?

She will fall in seven days.

I grabbed my headphones from the bedside table and clamped the padded ear cushions around my head. It was soft and comforting, like the best little-kid plush toy. I plugged into my phone and scrolled through my favorite artists — Tandem Acorns, Deleese Felicia, Last Sunny Day. I tapped into the Tandem Acorns playlist and chose their most intense song, dialed up the volume. *Boom, steady, boom. Boom, boom, steady, boom.*

But the memory of the crow's voice played over it like a counterbeat.

As she falls, so do we all.

You must find her. You must find her. You must find her.