

CLOUD CITY

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Prologue

One day a cloud formed over the city. This was not a normal cloud, but a storm cloud, dark, and menacing. But it never stormed. People began to wonder; what is that cloud doing just hanging up there? Why hasn't the sun burned it away? There was a strong breeze the other day, shouldn't it have blown somewhere else? Anywhere else. Scientist started to get curious. The public started to panic. Could it be toxic dust particles? An alien ship hiding in the water vapor? A bad omen? Old gods returned? End of the world? But it was none of these things, or if it was, no one could prove it. The scientists eventually went away. Only so many papers could be written on tests that came back negative. The city put out a campaign.

Cloud City: Leave your Umbrella at Home!

Shops made T-shirts. There were bumper stickers, ice cream flavors, even a Cloud City water park. But eventually the novelty wore off. People realized that vacationing in a spot that was gray and always slightly chilly wasn't much of a vacation destination after all. The water park closed. T-shirts showed up at rummage sales. Bumper stickers faded and peeled. But still the cloud remained. Dark and menacing and hanging low above the city.

Before long, in the grand scheme of things, there wasn't a person alive who could remember the city before the cloudy sky. Everyone who lived below it was cranky, but they didn't know why as they shuffled along, looking at their feet, occupied with their own gloomy thoughts.

People had stopped looking up.

And so, some time passed before somebody noticed that the cloud had turned from grey to purple. 7 minutes and 37 seconds, to be precise. Shockingly long for such a thing not to be noticed. And it wasn't just a grayish purple, a soft purple, a suggestion of purple... It was vivid, royal, electric purple.

The scientists returned. As did the extraterrestrial seekers and conspiracy theorists and doomsday preachers. Spring-breakers and jetsetters partied on rooftops. People drank purple cocktails and toasted to the end of the world as they knew it. The air was said to have restorative effects on the skin. Skydivers parachuted down through the purple haze. The cloud was named the

8th wonder of the world. But wonder as people might, they still did not know why it was there or why it was suddenly turned purple. They also didn't know a lot of other things, such as what the purpose of life is and why fish don't freeze solid in winter, but they could avoid answering those because they weren't hanging persistently in plain sight as purple question marks over their heads.

CH 1. Purpthusiast

Amethyst cursed at the car in front of her. A fucking cloud tourist, driving slowly and erratically as they stole glances from the road that they *should fucking be paying attention to*, up at the sky. People lived here, jackass. Didn't they realize that the Purple Palace receptionist had to get her kids to school before she clocked in? That the janitor at the Purple People Eater had to mop their spilled drinks and purple puke from the floor before another night? That the barista that made their lavender foam latte the next morning had to get to work somehow?

The car in front of her nearly swerved into the other lane and Amethyst unapologetically laid on the horn.

She was right on time, but still 15 minutes later than she'd wanted to be.

Dave was already waiting outside.

"Hiya, Dave. How's everything?"

"Everything's tolerable."

"Sometimes you just gotta settle for tolerable," Amethyst said jovially. God it was early for small talk. She hadn't even started the IV drip of black coffee. *Black.*

She unlocked the door. The purple door. Just because the coffee shop was in Cloud City didn't mean they had to buy bulk of their namesake paint chip.

Purple had been forced upon Amethyst her whole life: purple dresses as part of her school uniform, purple blazers, purple graduation robes, purple hats and purple tassels, purple highlights to trend with the popular kids, purple sparkles and purple nails, purple birthday cakes and purple candles, purple pillowcases, and purple stuffed animals. If she ever showed interest in another color her mother would say, "Well... I just don't think that will match the rest of your things, sweetie."

Her mom was a Cloud City travel agent. She was a purpthusiast through and through. But Amethyst couldn't stand the sight of the color she was named after.

She flipped the light switch and the sign and held the door open for Dave.

'Cloud City Coffee' was open for business...