

CLOUD CITY

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One day a cloud formed over the city.

This was not a normal cloud, but a storm cloud, dark, and menacing. Yet, 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 breeze the other day, shouldn't that have blown it somewhere else? Anywhere else?*

Scientists started to get curious. The public started to panic. *Could it be toxic dust particles? Chemtrails? Terrorist cloaking technology? A sign of the end times?* 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 inconclusive). The city put out a campaign.

Cloud City: Leave your Sunscreen 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 a vacation destination where it was always grey and slightly chilly wasn't much of a getaway, 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 over 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 as they shuffled along, staring at their feet, occupied with their own gloomy thoughts—but they didn't know why. People had stopped looking up.

And so, some time passed before anybody noticed that the cloud had turned from grey to purple. Seven minutes and thirty-seven seconds, to be precise. Shockingly long for such a thing not to be perceived. 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. Jetsetters and spring-breakers 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. They also did not 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 ignore those curiosities because they weren't hanging in plain sight as purple question marks over their heads.

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Amethyst cursed at the car in front of her. A cloud tourist, driving slowly and erratically as they stole glances from the road—*that they should be paying attention to*—up at the sky. Didn't these purpholes realize that the Tyrian Resort receptionist had to get her kids to school before she clocked in? That the janitor at the Lilac Lounge had to mop their purple puke from the floor before another night under the violet strobe lights? That

the barista that made their fucking 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 fifteen minutes later than she'd wanted to be.

Dave was already waiting outside.

"Hiya, Dave. How's everything?"

"Hi-ya, Amethyst. Everything is tolerable."

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

She unlocked the door. The purple door.

Purple had been forced upon Amethyst her entire life: purple blazers as part of her school uniform, purple sparkles and purple nails and purple highlights to trend with the popular kids, 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."

Her mother was a 'Visitor Experience Specialist' at the Cloud City Chamber of Commerce Visitor's Center. She was a purpthusiast through and through. But Amethyst—she couldn't stand the sight of the color she was named after.

She flipped the switch and sign. Held the door for Dave. Cloud City Coffee was open for business.

Dave settled himself in his spot in the corner furthest from the door while Amethyst continued to open shop.

"Just gonna grab something," she called out to Dave with a nod towards the storeroom door (a door that also led to the alleyway). "If anyone comes in, tell them I'll be right back?"

She didn't wait for Dave to agree. Another reason she had wanted to come early, now she only had time for a quick hit.

Amethyst slipped out back, lit up between the brick wall and the dumpster. She inhaled as deeply and fully as she could, held it for a 'see how long I can hold my breath' breath, and exhaled with a coughing fit. *Cough to get off!*

She'd maybe gotten a little too high, Amethyst realized, as she started making Dave's usual: ube latte with sweet pea flower foam. She took an extra moment to design the foam into the shape of a cloud—a Cloud City Coffee signature—but then added her own touch; a sun peeking out. This was an act of rebellion against cloud fanaticism, not dissimilar to a stone carver sneaking an obscene carving onto some hidden nook of a cathedral. When she walked it over to him, Dave was staring off into space, which meant that he was already working. He'd come to at some point and realize that he had a cold latte in front of him. At least he always remembered to pay before end of day. And his math was always spot on. Dave was a physicist or something. Writing his dissertation on the "violet spectral condensation phenomenon." If she was smart enough to be getting a PhD, she'd be learning about the cloud too, but only so she could figure out how to get rid of it. She'd

asked him once to elaborate on his work, and the answer had reminded Amethyst how her biggest achievement in life was mastering the shop espresso machine. She never asked again, only saying, “Big thinking day?” and not listening for the answer.

Dave was always there. And sometimes Amethyst wondered if he was actually writing a dissertation or just unemployed. He sure looked scruffy around the edges, but didn’t all sciency types? And he was certainly an odd duck. Odd Duck Dave. He’d do strange things like itch himself with his elbow or dip his pen into the coffee to stir it and clean his teeth on his napkin after every sip. And strangest of all, squeeze his eyes shut after every time he blinked, which was eerily infrequent.

For those of you who have already guessed that Dave is an alien, congratulations. Reward yourself with a treat. Perhaps a grape jelly donut, such as those displayed in the bakery case beside the coffee shop register. And, yes, his kind are behind the cloud. And no, Dave is not thinking about the violet spectral condensation phenomenon while sitting in the corner of the coffee shop, gazing into space. He is observing: the patrons, and, in particular, one human female by the name of Amethyst Beck. Of course, unsuspecting Amethyst is not yet wise to any of this, so, dear reader, we must wait patiently for her to find out for herself. But fret not! There is still plenty of intrigue for you. Bet a box of jelly donuts you haven’t guessed why the aliens are there (and if you have, no disrespect, but you’re wrong), so you and your favorite Cloud City Coffee barista get to find that out together.

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Dave walked Amethyst out at the end of the day. She might have thought he was a creep, but the moment she closed the door—“Goodbye,” Dave said. He turned and walked away before the latch had clicked.

Amethyst worked seven to three-thirty. Most staff chose open *or* close shift, but she’d taken on extra hours recently. Kept her distracted from the feeling of freefalling. Also, Amethyst didn’t want to be home. Home for her now was *home* home. Breakup dumped her back in her childhood bedroom with purple curtained canopy and stuffies that looked like they’d been drowned in a vat of grape cool aid. He’d been a sky-diving instructor who she’d had a relationship-ending argument with upon informing him that she had absolutely no interest in going up into the cloud, not now, not ever. Her mother was the one who’d found him the instructor job through her Visitor Center connections. They’d been perfectly happy when he bagged groceries at Plum Market.

Amethyst was saving up for her own place—in another city. According to her search history, Yuma, Arizona was the sunniest place in the country. She’d take cacti and dry skin over cloud tourists any day.

Losing her footing with every step, Amethyst walked to her car. Long as she could remember, she’d felt like she was tripping through life. But now it was like she’d tripped and fallen. Only she just kept falling... and falling... no ground in sight. She just couldn’t catch herself this time. Even faceplanting would be a relief. The sensation only intensified as she sat at the steering wheel of the parked car. She wanted to do what any newly single gal wants to do: go out with friends to get hammered on Jello shots (even if they are grape flavored).

Maybe find someone to fool around with. But the clubs, the dive bars, the late-night pizza joints, the bowling alley, the fucking supermarket, all were filled with cloud tourists and purps. She wasn't about to invite people over to her childhood home (she could see her mother beaming as she brought out a smorgasbord of snacks, all her favorite color, of course. Even her baby carrots had to be fucking purple). And Amethyst was actively trying to ignore the fact that she hadn't been invited over to anyone else's. Had she lost her friends in this relationship? Or had she lost them before, even? As her life stood still waiting to start, while theirs took off like purple private jets? Or maybe they were just sick of her bitching about the cloud.

Amethyst closed her bedroom door.

"I'll be in the living room if you need me," her mom said from the other side of it.

Amethyst lit up then lay in bed staring at the poster of Arizona she'd pinned to the ceiling above it. Orange earth, sky so blue it looked fake. Her lungs burned as her joint became a roach—she imagined she was breathing in desert dust.

"Hiya, Dave. How's everything?"

"Hi-ya, Amethyst. I am defending my research tomorrow."

Amethyst stopped with her key half-turned in the latch. "Really?"

"Yes." Dave stood there with his arms loose by his sides and offered no more information.

She shook her head and turned her attention back to the lock. "Nervous?"

"Ner-vous." He seemed to be trying the word out in his mouth. "No."

Amethyst laughed to herself as she held the door open for Dave and flipped the sign.

Amethyst flipped the sign as she followed Dave out at the end of the day. She closed the door and turned the key until the latch clicked shut. Dave was still there beside her. Just standing there with his arms loose by his sides.

"Well, see ya!" she said in a tone that was meant to sound cheerful, not manic.

"Will you come to my defense tomorrow?" Dave looked at her. The look was not expectant. Nor was it nervous. Not proud. Not excited. Not any emotion at all.

Dave's kind show emotion through chemicals secreted through their sweat glands, much like humans, only they can smell them. They find human's emotions difficult to read because of the deodorants and body sprays which they are inexplicably fond of dousing themselves with. Whereas Amethyst found Dave's blank expression extremely unnerving. She couldn't get a read on him. Was he a psychopath? Was he stalking her?

One of those two things was true.

"Well, tomorrow is my day off..."

“Then you can come,” Dave erroneously concluded. “I will convene with you at the main lecture hall in the Cloud City University physics building at high noon.”

Was Dave really that clueless? Yes. Yes, he was. Amethyst suddenly felt a surge of pity for the odd duck. What if no one came to his important thing? What if he had no one else to ask?

“High noon, right.”

At 11:59, Amythest ground her roach into the wall of the physics building.

She’d already scouted out the lecture hall (as one does when one knows they will be required to retrace their steps in an altered state of mind) and it was, conveniently, directly up the steps and through the prominently elevated main entrance. But when Amythest floated her way back in on a high, she found the double purple doors to the lecture hall locked.

The defense must have started. She tried them again out of frustration, not really expecting different results.

Stupid purple doors. Just because the university was in Cloud City didn’t mean they had to buy bulk of their namesake paint chip.

Amethyst paced in front of the locked lecture hall. Should she wait there to congratulate Dave when he came out? Head home and tell him she got a flat? (She’d end up with more than a flat, if she tried to drive now.)

“Hi-ya, Amethyst.”

Amethyst jumped. Dave did not. Neither did the man standing next to him. A man that looked like he could be Dave’s twin. Of course, with your insider knowledge that Dave is an alien, it is safe to surmise that this look-alike is one as well. But at this point in our story, poor, unsuspecting, Amethyst had no reason to conclude anything other than that this must, in fact, be Dave’s identical twin come to his important day.

“What— what are you doing out here?”

“I am here to take you to my defense.”

“It’s not in the lecture hall?” Amethyst asked, finding her heart clobbering her ribs rather distracting.

“No.”

Amethyst couldn’t help but stare at Dave’s twin.

Dave must have noticed. “My colleague, David.”

“Your... colleague?” She’d smoked a Sour Deisel pre-roll—the live resin shit—reasoning it would help her not care about being too dumb to understand a single word of the defense. In retrospect— “Listen, I don’t know...” Amythest edged away.

“I have observed that you do not like the cloud,” Dave pointed out. “Most people do.”

“Well, I’m not most people.” She gestured to her distinctly non-purple attire.

“If you come with me, we can make the cloud go away.”