

## **FRINGE: WHEN WORLDS SHATTER**

### **PART 1: THE PATH THROUGH THE STORM**

#### **Chapter 1: Infection and the Delusion**

It was 8:00am when Peter arose in the morning and pushed the brown curtains apart to let the Sunday morning sun in through the windows of his second-story room. As the light poured in, he squinted painfully as his head throbbed in tune with his beating heart. *Maybe I had a little too much to drink last night*, he thought. *When does that ever happen?* He never had any problem drinking before, usually never got to the drunk stage, but the way his stomach felt now and how the light effected his head, he assumed it was just a typical hangover. Standing next to the window as the morning light washed over him, he cleared his throat, trying to ignore the scratchy feeling. It was just dry in the house.

Then again, this was always how it started, catching a cold. It always began with a sore throat, and then the runny nose and sneezing would be next. Maybe if he denied it hard enough and long enough, he wouldn't get sick and it would just go away. Then again, ignoring a problem never solves it.

"Just great," he said to himself as he pulled the curtains closed again. He turned around and debated simply going back to sleep. It was Sunday, after all, the only day he could sleep in if he wanted. Yet, the rolling feeling in his stomach killed that thought right there. No, Walter would be worried if he did that. It was just a hangover, nothing to worry about. Besides, someone had to look after Walter. If he didn't, who would? Walter was his responsibility and he wasn't about to go back on his word now.

Rather than wrapping himself in the comfort of his blankets for the rest of the day, he stepped wearily to his bedroom door and quietly opened it, careful not to wake Walter downstairs in case he was still sleeping. With a hand on the railing, he slowly stepped down the flight of stairs, every inch of him aching. He peeked his head around the corner into Walter's "room" but he was no longer there. The only other possible place he could be was in the kitchen, that is, if he hadn't "stepped out for a walk in the brisk, morning air" again. He ended up clear across town the last time, although, thankfully Peter was able to hunt him down without needing to call the police for assistance.

And that's when the hint of cooking bacon nearly bent him in half. Normally, it would have been a pleasant smell, but not today. Walter could have been grilling tar for all he knew as waves of nausea swept through him. Clearing his throat again, he continued his way into the kitchen.

Sure enough, there was Walter, working his magic over a hot stove. He was wearing a ridiculous chef's hat that could have been two feet tall. It easily brushed against the top awning over the stove when he looked down at his masterpiece bacon sizzling in gobs of jumping oil. But the hat alone was not what caught Peter's attention, it was the apron he wore, if in fact it was an apron. It was pink and fluffy like a bathroom rug. The strings he used to tie whatever-it-was around him looked like an old, worn out winter scarf. No, strike that. It was a pair of his black long johns.

*Ah, yes. This is my father.*

Peter swallowed hard and coughed, stealing Walter's attention away from the stovetop, as he reached up to retrieve a glass from the overhead cabinet off to the left of the stove. "Ah, Peter! You're up 'n at 'em early today. I thought I would make you a healthy breakfast this morning. You must be tired after last night, right?"

He ignored Walter's never waning innuendos, although not without a slight bend in the corner of his mouth. Peter filled his glass with tap water from the sink while glancing at the bacon swimming in the frying pan. "How can cooking bacon in all that oil be healthy, Walter?"

"It's meat, isn't it? Protein: Does a body good!"

"Don't you mean 'milk'? It's—"

"—Blueberry pancakes!" he said ecstatically, holding a plate with a stack of five pancakes out to Peter. When he responded with little more than an apologetic tilt of his head, Walter added, "They were your favorite."

"Sorry, Walter. I think I'm going to skip breakfast this morning."

"Oh? Had a little too much to drink? You know, I never heard you come in last night..."

Peter grinned. Walter was obviously referring to the so-called "date" he had with Olivia. It had been an odd night, one of awkward pauses and glances, but once they downed a few drinks, things seemed to go better. "We weren't out that late," Peter said, but nothing he could say could tear the giddy 'there *is* a god!' smile from his father's face. "Before she left, Astrid said you managed to fall asleep in the middle of playing Monopoly? Now, why can't that ever happen to me?"

"Because I value your company much more than hers," he said honestly. "Oh, I'm sorry. That must have sounded a little inconsiderate. Please don't tell her."

“That’s okay, Walter,” Peter grinned again. “I’m sure everyone already knows.” Stiffly walking over to the kitchen table, Peter sat himself down with a loud sigh. “Did Olivia seem strange to you last night? Before we went out?”

Walter hesitated. “Strange? No, why do you ask?”

It didn’t make any sense to him, her sudden look of despair. That night, when Peter opened the door to welcome Olivia into their house briefly before they went out for drinks, she looked so happy, her hair stylishly hanging low over her shoulders that seemed to complement her tight fitting leather jacket. The air about her suggested only excitement and possibly a little anticipation, but just as she stepped over the threshold and into the living room, something shattered in her eyes.

Peter didn’t notice it right away, maybe because of his own anticipation of the evening out, but the moment they stepped out and began the short walk down the road to the restaurant, the awkwardness between them seemed to scream bloody murder at him. Olivia was quiet, and she avoided looking at him altogether. After the hellish day both of them went through, it could have simply been exhaustion getting the best of her. Or, as Peter feared, it was that tense, close moment they shared together.

What was the real reason she pulled away? He hoped it was the urgency of an entire building full of innocent people vanishing, ripped from this world to slam at full force into the other, but what if she didn’t feel the same? He wasn’t even sure what he was feeling; he had never so intensely felt the tingly sensation prickle across his skin, or feel the sudden dryness in his mouth as though nervous about something. But that sad look in her eyes faded as the night went on, much to Peter’s relief. Maybe she was just felling awkward about going out on a semi-date, maybe something reminded her of John even.

Peter shook his head. “It’s nothing.” He could feel the pain in his head slosh back and forth at the motion like a water balloon was loose in his head.

Ignoring the question altogether, Walter placed the plate of pancakes on the table in front of Peter before he turned to drain the excess oil from the bacon.

Peter starred down at the pancakes and noticed that Walter tried to make a smiley face with the blueberries. It was so childish, it was cute, and Peter couldn’t hold back a grin even though he had just gotten finished saying he was going to skip breakfast. It was such a waste, he thought.

Then the next moment the kitchen phone hanging on the wall next to the sink rang.

Flinching at the high pitched ringing sound, Peter looked down as he placed a hand over his forehead. “Can you get that?”

Walter didn't notice Peter's reaction to the phone when he stepped over to answer it on his own. Picking up the receiver, he said, glowing, "Good Sunday morning, whomever you are."

*What a way to answer the phone, Peter thought.*

"Ah, Agent Farnsworth. Let me first tell you how much I appreciate you coming over to play games with me last night. From the look of it, both Peter and Olivia enjoyed the night thoroughly."

"Walter..." Peter said, knowing he ought to take the phone away from his father and find the reason for Astrid to call; he just couldn't get himself to stand.

"What may I do for you this fine morning?" Walter continued on with the conversation. He was quiet for a while and seemed to be thinking hard because his eyes turned up and nearly out of his head. "I could do better than that, Agent Farnsworth. I can show you exactly where I stumbled upon them; that is, if I can manage to get lost again." Another pause and a couple dance steps later, Walter turned to Peter and asked, "Peter, Agent Farnsworth wishes to locate that place for the most delicious apple fritters that I found before. Could I go with her to find it? I could bring you back some."

What perfect timing, Peter thought. Anything to get some peace and quiet in the house. Maybe then he could kick this sick feeling he had. "Sure, Walter," he said. "You don't need to hurry, either. As long as you stay with Astrid and do as she says, maybe you could go out shopping afterward or something."

Before turning away from Peter, he began another embarrassing dance as he talked into the phone. "He said OK!" When can you be here? Excellent. I'll get dressed. Bye-bye." In one swift motion, Walter hung up the receiver and bounced his way out of the room. He stopped short when he noticed a flushed look on Peter's face. "Are you feeling well, son?"

"Just a slight hangover, Walter," Peter smiled at the old man, thinking how ridiculous it sounded. He hadn't verbally said the word "hangover" to refer to himself since he was a teenager. "I'll just sleep it off while you're out."

Walter nodded in understanding and continued out of the room.

Only thing was Peter was beginning to doubt that this was an actual hangover. The scratchy feeling in his throat was hot and irritating, painful to swallow even. He coughed a few times to get rid of the feeling, ignoring the tight feeling in his chest. Of all times, he could not get sick now.

Sullenly sitting at the table, the stack of hot-off-the-skillet pancakes smiled up at him with the putrid scent of cooked bacon churning his stomach by just breathing it in,

Peter decided he couldn't sit there any more. Standing to his feet, he took a couple steps out of the kitchen to head back upstairs, but his head started pounding like miniature bombs were exploding inside so severely that he lost his footing on the first few steps on the staircase. If he hadn't grabbed the railing in time he would have easily toppled backward. Self-consciously, he peered back toward Walter's "room" to be sure he hadn't seen him lose his balance. When he couldn't spot his father, Peter shook his head to clear the confusion from billowing round and round in his eyes.

As Peter continued up the stairs with angry footfalls, he thought, *This is NOT a hangover...*

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Around 11:00am, Peter awoke with his skin on fire and sweat rolling down his face. He was lying on his bed with all the blankets kicked to the floor. As he tried to prop himself up, something erupted in his stomach and pushed its way up into his mouth. Holding the urge to vomit right there in bed, he jumped to his feet while ignoring his blurred vision, and let himself go as he hugged the toilet. After three or four consistent rounds of vomiting, he sat up to catch his breath, wishing that was the end of it.

It was then did he realize that he was shaking, shivering as though the air conditioning was on full blast in the house even though his skin was burning up. If he needed further proof, this was it. This was SO not a hangover...

Reaching up to the handle on the side of the toilet, he flushed the putridness away. The moment he tried to get to his feet, however, another wave of heat passed over him as he doubled over the side of the toilet again, emptying all contents from his stomach, even if nothing was there.

It was so disgusting and the after taste it left in his mouth was sickening. He thought that alone would cause him to puke his life away. Spitting the last bit of nastiness from his mouth, he again flushed the toilet, this time praying that would be the end.

Maybe he caught the flu or something from someone. He was with Olivia, Walter and everyone the day before, but none of them were sick. Where could he have picked it up? And why so sudden? He felt fine last night. He only started feeling crappy this morning, only a couple hours ago. Still shivering uncontrollably, he tried standing a second time, his muscles aching painfully as he made his way down the hallway back to his room. His bed and warm blankets strewn on the floor called out for him, beckoned him to wrap himself in them like a caterpillar making a cocoon. He reached down and picked up the blankets off the floor and buried himself under them while propping himself up on the bed with multiple pillows behind him. As he started to settle down, back to sleep, he felt an uncomfortable weight on his chest.

But he was too tired to think or worry about it more. Within ten minutes, he was gone from this world again.

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Walter didn't return home until after 3:00pm, thoroughly stuffed with apple fritters. He entered the house almost as giddy as he had left, bouncing from room to room in search for Peter so he could tell him every last detail of his exciting day out.

When he walked into the kitchen and saw the smiley pancakes still out on the table, he frowned sadly. *Had he not eaten all day?* Walter thought. He picked up the plate and wrapped it with plastic before placing them in the refrigerator.

Next, he took off up the flight of stairs and proceeded down the hallway to Peter's room. Quietly pushing it open, he stepped into the dark room, noticing a strange and very unpleasant smell. Without turning on the light, he noticed there was a lump of someone sleeping in the bed and he suddenly had a flashback—the image of a young Peter in bed, the little boy whom he had kidnapped 25 years ago.

Stepping closer to the bed, Walter looked down at his grown son. His heart skipped a beat when he could not see Peter breathing. He quickly reached over to the lamp next to the bed and turned it on to get a better look at him. The sight of Peter's sweat soaked face and hair dashed his happy spirits. He put a hand on Peter's forehead. His skin was very hot, easily running a temperature—a high one. How long had he been like this? If he couldn't lower the fever soon...

"Peter?" Walter said, tapping the side of Peter's face to try and awaken him. "Peter, wake up. Can you hear me? Wake up, son."

Gradually, Peter began to come around, blinking his lazy eyes many times before he could see. "Daddy...? Is that you?"

The name cut through Walter. Peter hadn't called him "daddy" in years—not since...

"Yes, Peter. It's me. Now, Peter, you have to think for me. You need to tell me exactly how you feel."

Peter crunched up his face, seemingly not understanding why Walter couldn't know how he felt just by looking at him, or maybe thinking at all hurt his head. "It's the plague, daddy. I caught it from someone. I don't know who... Maybe that building..."

The building that came from the other universe that carried the people inside along with it... That couldn't have any connection. Peter was from the other side...he wouldn't get sick because—

But what if it was fate? Walter's true son Peter died of a rare disease called Hepea, much like the bird flu. What if this was fate's way of correcting the anomaly of having two Peter's in the same reality. It gave Peter 25 years to live his life as he saw fit before demanding it back.

Frightened, hands shaking, Walter ran from the room, leaving a delirious Peter behind calling for him. "Daddy...?"